

The Debt of Love I Owe

Luke Series #22

Luke 7:36-50

David Sunday

June 9, 2013

The passage we are going to examine could be called Luke's 'Mona Lisa.' It is a portrait of a woman who says nothing but whose actions are so strikingly eloquent they command our most profound meditations. Let the Word of God captivate your heart.

³⁶ One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. ³⁷ And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, ³⁸ and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. ³⁹ Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." ⁴⁰ And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher."

⁴¹ "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" ⁴³ Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." ⁴⁴ Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷ Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." ⁴⁸ And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." ⁴⁹ Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" ⁵⁰ And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (Luke 7:36-50).

Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we want to leave with those words ringing in our ears: "Your faith has saved you" (verse 50). We want to go in the peace of knowing we have been justified by faith and have had every debt removed. Lord, there is no greater blessing this side of Heaven than to know we have been made right with You and our sins have been forgiven. We pray You would show us ourselves as You see us so we might love our Savior more and understand to a greater degree the debt of love we owe to Him.

Thank you especially for our missionary families who are back from the mission field—for Steve and Marlayna, Josh and Natalie, Laura and Keith and all their children. We pray that as others come in the next few weeks there would be a palpable sense of Your reviving presence in our midst through the gospel. May all these families with whom we delight to partner be renewed in their faith and encouraged by the love of this congregation. As a church, may we be fully ablaze for You and fully advancing Your mission here and around the world. We ask this in the worthy, lovely, holy, gracious name of Jesus. All God's people said: Amen.

There are two facts about this unnamed woman that provide an interpretive key to the passage.

1. She was a notorious sinner (verse 37). In the way this is stated, Luke is giving us a thinly veiled reference to the type of lifestyle that would have been scandalous to even mention in polite society. Let's just say her reputation preceded her.
2. She had already been forgiven before she entered Simon's house. We need to understand that fact and verse 47 makes it clear: "*Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven...*" That phrase is in the 'perfect' tense, meaning something that has already happened and has ongoing implications for the present. Her sins have been forgiven. She was already living in the knowledge and awareness of having had her sins forgiven before she came into the Simon's home. It is for this reason she loved much.

When the Bible says, "*Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much,*" you should not think of the clause "*...for she loved much*" as being the cause of the forgiveness of her sins. If we were to say, "It's raining outside, for the windows are wet" we would not imagine the wetness of the windows was causing the rain. Instead, we would realize the wetness of the windows is evidence of the fact that it is raining. Likewise, the love of this woman is the evidence of the fact she has experienced a great forgiveness of sins from Jesus.

We don't know exactly when this took place. It is probable she was among the crowds referred to by Luke who were following Jesus all over and listening to His teachings. As she heard the gospel being ministered from Jesus—the One Who is the Gospel—the Holy Spirit opened her eyes to her need of forgiveness of sins and gave her faith and repentance. At some point along the way, she trusted in Jesus and experienced the beginning of the joy of her salvation. Knowing she was now right with God through faith in Jesus Christ, she goes looking for Him and hears He is in the neighborhood. He is in Simon's house and she wants to express her gratitude to the One Who has already begun transforming her life. She was a notorious sinner who had already been forgiven before she entered Simon's house.

Keep that in mind as we imagine the scene: a dinner is taking place in Simon the Pharisee's home. We need to give Simon some credit, for unlike some of the Pharisees he had at least invited Jesus into his home. Simon is interested in Jesus. Jesus—the Man Who knows no partiality—gladly goes and has

dinner in the house of this Pharisee. Just as He ate with tax collectors and sinners, He will eat with anyone who welcomes Him into their home.

The setting for this dinner is probably an open courtyard and the guests are reclining in Middle Eastern style at the table. They would sit on couches, lean on one arm and use the other to reach the food in the middle of the table. One of the objects of this seating arrangement was to get the feet as far away from the table and food as possible because dirty feet were a contaminant in that society. I don't think we like feet close to our food in America either, but it was a particular concern in Jesus' day.

This woman has heard Jesus is in the neighborhood. Imagine her running to her house to find the most precious treasure she had—an alabaster flask of perfume. She races to Simon the Pharisee's house, presses her way through the crowds of people and maneuvers her way into the dining room area before anyone can stop her. The word 'behold' in verse 37 indicates her presence is a great surprise. "Whoa. What is that woman doing here?" She comes into the place where they are eating and finds Jesus. He is the Friend of Sinners Who loved her before she knew Him, drew her with the cords of love and tightly bound her to Him¹. He is the Son of Man Who came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10) and the Lover of her soul.

She looks down and sees His feet soiled with dirt and His head still covered with dust. For thousands of years in the Middle East, the customary way of welcoming a guest into your home was to wash their feet and to anoint their head with common oil when they came in because the roads were so dusty. It was a way of saying, "You are welcome here. Thank you for coming to my home." Jesus has not received that customary honor but He shows no hint of being offended at the dishonor He has been shown.

All this woman had intended to do was get into the house and pour the ointment on Him to express her love and gratitude. But when she sees Him so meek, wise, tender and mighty to save and recognizes she is now in the presence of the One Who has lifted the burden of her sin and guilt, profuse tears pour from her eyes and an emotion of cascading love, joy and the awareness of sins forgiven starts to take over her spirit. She weeps uncontrollably and her presence in the room can no longer go unnoticed. I imagine the conversation coming to a screeching halt as every eye stabs this sobbing woman with indignant scorn. "What is she doing in here? Who let her in?"

Her tears flood His feet, dirt streams to the ground and the guests gasp at the scandal unfolding before them as this woman does what no proper woman would do in that society, especially in the company of men. She undoes her hair. The Talmud gave permission for a man to divorce his wife if she showed her hair in public. With no concern for what people around her are thinking—only thinking about

¹ Borrowed from "His Forever" Lyrics by Sovereign Grace Music

the love she has for Jesus—she lets her hair down in public and begins to wipe His feet with it. She is cleaning His feet after Simon failed to do so.

I don't know if she had ever heard Isaiah but I think of the passage:

*How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of him who brings good news,
who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness,
who publishes salvation,
who says to Zion, "Your God reigns" (Isaiah 52:7).*

Here is the One bringing the Kingdom of God to earth and releasing people from the bondage of their sins. His feet are dusty from travelling the roads of villages and countrysides. Because this One has freed this woman from her great guilt and shame, His dusty feet are lovely in her sight. She washes them with her tears, wipes them with her hair, kisses them with her redeemed lips and anoints them with her precious perfume.

There are only two people at this dinner who appreciate what is happening; only two not seething with scorn and contempt: Jesus, Who calmly and approvingly receives this woman's extravagant devotion and worship and this woman, who is so captivated by the love of Christ that she does not care a whit what anyone else thinks of her.

I know you know this story well. I heard Mike Bullmore say there are basically three ways we can respond to this story. I wonder how you respond?

1. Distaste and disapproval. This was Simon's response—a 'religious' response. Is it appropriate for this woman to be touching Him like that? The word for 'touch' that Simon uses insinuates something inappropriate, though there was none of that in this perfectly pure touch. Simon—who knows his Old Testament, probably has many portions memorized and is theologically astute—has the Messiah eating in his house and doesn't get it. He is not happy or amazed with Jesus and is appalled at what this woman is doing.
2. Tepid admiration. This is the way many Christians respond to this story. For example: "That's nice. I'm glad that story is in the Bible but I don't want to get too close. I hope I never have to worship like that." I wonder what would happen if we suddenly heard the back doors slam open and some people came into our worship service who—from their appearance—was obviously not like one of us. Maybe they smell bad. What if as we read the Word, worshipped, prayed and preached the Word they began sobbing uncontrollably and looking for the closest physical object to represent the presence of Christ? They might see the communion tables, come running up here and fall on their face, crying out in worship to Jesus. Would we be embarrassed or try to get them to stop?
3. Magnetic interest and approval. I believe this is Luke's intent for us in reading this story. We should be drawn in, looking at this woman and saying, "Oh Lord, that I might love You the way this woman loves You and learn what it was that so captivated her heart so I might worship You with this kind of extravagant, devoted love."

Granted, each of our emotional bandwidths and ways of expressing our emotions are different. But we should read a story like this and say, “Oh Jesus, I need to love You more. You are worthy of more expressions of love from me—something even beyond what I think is normal.” Do you find this story having that kind of effect on your spirit? How do you react? It is searching.

This week, I had two instances where I felt my experiences with people were intersecting with my experience in this text of Scripture.

1. I was having lunch with a friend and asking him for counsel and advice about fatherhood. I was hearing great wisdom. In the process, my friend said something about the importance of cultivating an atmosphere of grace in the home. He said to me, “I am a grace man...” Then his voice cracked and he struggled to say the rest of the sentence as tears filled his eyes. He said, “Because I have been shown so much grace. I’ve been forgiven so much.” As he expressed his emotion, I felt it in me as well and thought, “That is something of what this sinful woman was experiencing.”
2. The other experience was the opposite for me. I was driving up Route 31 along a beautiful section near the Fox River. I saw in front of me a car that had something on the back of it (I won’t go into detail because it would not be appropriate) brazenly advertising the driver’s sinful lifestyle. I was talking to my friend Jeff on the phone as I drove behind this car and said to him, “You won’t believe what I just saw on the back of this woman’s car.” My first response was one of indignation and scorn, thinking, “What is this culture coming to? Why do we advertise this kind of stuff? What’s happening?” My friend said, “David, she needs to be saved.” Those words lobbed into my heart and I couldn’t stop thinking about them the rest of the evening. I thought, “Why is it that my first response was indignation rather than: ‘Oh God, I am no different than this woman. Thank You for saving me. Touch her.’ Why was that not my response? Is Simon the Pharisee lurking in my heart?”

Two people are at a feast with Jesus. One is a religious leader, one a known sinner. One is a saint in the eyes of men, the other a reprobate. But only one of them is commended by Jesus in this story; only one is said to have been saved through faith and loves Jesus. It is not the one you would expect.

I heard someone say, “Many of our churches are full of nice, kind, respectable people who have never known the despair of guilt or the breathless wonder of forgiveness.” Only the woman in this story knows the despair of guilt and breathless wonder of forgiveness. Because of that, she cannot help but express her love for the One Who has forgiven her and taken her breath away even as He has removed her shame.

We too are coming to a feast with Jesus. The Lord’s Supper is the closest we will come to a feast with Jesus before the marriage supper of the Lamb. We call these the *hors d’oeuvres* of our future bliss—our appetizers for that great feast. Jesus is present with His people and meets us at His table. I wonder if anyone would dare come to this feast with hearts that are cool and detached—maybe a little bit interested in Jesus but without love for Him. Would anyone dare partake of this meal simply because they are here at

church and guess they should just take it, then walk out and not think the rest of the week a single loving thought for the Savior? That is how Simon feasted with Jesus.

We would not dare approach this table that way, would we? I was thinking about some piercing words the Apostle Paul spoke in 1 Corinthians 16:22. If they were not in the Bible, I would hesitate to say anything like this to dear people like you. Hear what Paul said: *“If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed.”* It’s a terrible thing and a terrible, damning sin to have no love for the Lord Jesus. Yet Paul also says at the end of Ephesians, *“Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible”* (Ephesians 6:24). May that be our experience. Listen. No matter how much you know about the Bible and God—and no matter how moral, religious and respectable you are in the eyes of men—a lack of love for Jesus reveals a lack of experience of the forgiveness of God.

Friends, we are not saved by our love. In Luke 7:50 it is very clear that faith saved this woman. Her trust in the Lord Jesus brought her salvation. But it is impossible to be saved by Christ and not love the One Who saved us or to experience forgiveness and have no love for the One Who shed His blood on the cross to obtain that forgiveness. *“Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible”* (Ephesians 6:24).

Those who love Him know they do not love Him enough. We say with the old hymn writer:

Lord, it is my chief complaint
That my love is weak and faint;
Yet I love Thee, and adore:
O for grace to love Thee more!

(From Hark, My Soul, It is the Lord! By William Cowper, 1768)

That is the prayer every true believer prays.

How do you get this kind of love for Jesus? Jesus says two things in this passage.

1. Do an honest assessment of debt.
2. Trust that your debt has been forgiven and cleansed through the blood and love of Jesus.

When you know you have been forgiven a great debt, you will love much. That is the point of the parable Jesus told about the money lender. There were two debtors—one owed five hundred and the other owed fifty. Both sums of money are great and the point is neither of these men could pay their debt. When Jesus tells this story to Simon, He ends with a question: *“Now which of them will love him more?”* (Luke 7:42). You can see Simon squirming in his seat because he knows Jesus has him on this. He says, *“The one, I suppose, [I suppose] for whom he cancelled the larger debt.”* Jesus replies, *“You have judged rightly”* (verse 43). Those who are forgiven much love much but where little has been forgiven, little love is shown. Where do you get this kind of love? You assess your debt and trust in your Savior to forgive you that debt. The greater your awareness of debt, the deeper and greater will be your love.

Someone might think, “I guess I’ll never love Jesus very much because I’ve been a pretty good person. I’m not like that woman. Nuts! Why was I so moral? Why don’t I have a testimony like hers? I guess I’ll just love Him a little because I’ve only needed to be forgiven a little.” Do you think that is Jesus’ teaching? Do you think He is saying, “Hey Simon, sorry. You are condemned to go through life not loving God very much because you are a pretty good guy and don’t have much that needs forgiveness. You might have a debt of 50 but not 500.” Do you think Jesus is saying that? That is absurd and not at all what Jesus is teaching.

In case anyone imagines this, Jesus is also not saying, “Go and sin more so you can accumulate your debt. Then you will be forgiven much and really love God.” The Apostle Paul said, “*What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?*” (Romans 6:1). What is the answer? God forbid! May it never be!

What is Jesus saying to Simon? “Simon, you don’t have a clue how great your debt is. This woman who is a low-life prostitute in your eyes is superior to you because she understands her debt. You don’t get that sin is not just the things we do or do not do—that only scratches the surface. Sin is the condition of our hearts.” Like Simon, you need to realize your heart has failed to acknowledge God as God; you have put yourself in place of God and have not welcomed Him into your life or treated Him with the honor and respect He deserves. When He came into your life you did not wash His feet, anoint His head, kiss Him, greet Him or love Him. Your life has been lived for yourself and you have used your morality as an excuse to stand at a distance from God. When you realize that, you start to get a more accurate picture of your incalculable debt. Don’t measure your sin by comparing yourself to other people. Instead compare yourself to the holiness of God and you will realize there is no sea deep enough to contain the debt of your iniquity. But the blood of Jesus is sufficient to wipe away that debt and make you clean. Let the cross be the measure of the greatness of your sin and depth of your Savior’s forgiving love.

We are going to take a few minutes to pray before we come to the communion table. This passage is not meant for analysis or exposition as much as it is for adoration and contrition. It can help us recalibrate our hearts. I think too much talking about a passage like this is like taking cement, pouring it in the mixer and not adding water so it simply hardens. We know a lot about this story but need the water of the Spirit of God to show us more of how great our debt and sin are and more of the greatness of our Savior. We need more love for Jesus. I need more love for Jesus.

Do you love Him? Does He know it? Do you tell Him? Do you show it? Take a couple of minutes in quiet prayer before we come to this table to say, “Jesus, more love to You.”

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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