

Forgiven Much
Luke 7:36-50
Pastor John Miller

There are three miracles recorded in Luke 7. The first miracle was a great miracle of the healing of the Centurion's servant. The second miracle was a greater miracle—the raising of the widow's son of Nain. The boy had died, and Jesus had stopped the procession and raised him from the dead. Today we have what I call the greatest miracle of all—the forgiving and restoring of a sinful woman.

You say, “Pastor John, why is forgiving a person's sins a greater miracle than raising someone from the dead or healing them from sickness?” I will give you three reasons. Number one, it meets the greatest need. Your greatest need today is not for a new job, for a new wife, for a new husband, for new kids, for a new home, for a new car or for a new body—which would be nice—but your greatest need is for the forgiveness of your sins.

What good would it do to have your body healed but to die in your sins and be separated from God for all eternity? Jesus said, “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?” (Mark 8:36). So the greatest blessing or miracle that God could ever perform is the forgiving of our sins and the restoration of our life.

Number two, it produces the greatest results, which are transformed lives for the glory of God. Lives are changed by the forgiveness we experience.

And number three, it requires the greatest price. God had to send His Son, Jesus, to die on the Cross to pay for our sins, that we might be forgiven. It cost God the life of His own dear Son.

The idea that God can and will forgive us freely of our sins surely is the greatest news ever made known to mankind, yet sadly many are ignorant of this truth, or they consider it irrelevant. You may already be saying, “Well, this sermon's not for me. I'm not a sinner!” But the Bible says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). It also says, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).

So the question is, how can I be forgiven of my sins? How can I be assured of eternal life and know that when I die, I'll go to heaven to be with the Lord? That's so important.

In our text, we will learn some important facts about forgiveness. This beautiful passage has three movements, which we'll look at one at a time. First, there is the party; second, there is the parable; and third, the point.

First, we'll look at the party, in verses 36-39. “Then one of the Pharisees asked Him to eat with him. And He went to the Pharisee's house, and sat down to eat.” If that were me, I wouldn't go to the Pharisees' house, because I would know he was going to try to trap me or get me into some kind of situation and be antagonistic. But Jesus agreed to go to his house for dinner.

Now in verse 37, we have the party crasher. “And behold, a woman in the city who was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at the table in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster flask of fragrant oil...” of spikenard or ointment or frankincense “...and stood at His feet behind Him weeping; and she began to wash His feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head; and she kissed His feet and anointed them with the fragrant oil. Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he spoke to himself, saying, ‘This man...” referring to Jesus “...if He were a prophet...” and he concludes He was not “...would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner.” So he was thinking that if Jesus was a prophet, He wouldn’t let this woman touch Him.

I want to set the stage for this party that was going on that was set by the Pharisee. A Pharisee was a sect of the Jews that were very strict, religious observers. The word “Pharisee” means “separated one.” So during the inter-Testament period they came into existence in which they devoted themselves to keeping every jot and title of the law. They became synonymous with hypocrisy. Not all of them were hypocrites, but because they were legalists, they became self-righteous and looked down their noses at everybody else and were antagonistic toward Jesus. “No one is as good, as holy, as religious, as separate as us!” They were common hypocrites. Every one of the Pharisees mentioned in the Gospel of Luke was antagonistic toward Jesus.

Now why the Pharisee invited Jesus to dinner, we don’t know. And we don’t know where they went to dinner. Some say at Capernaum early on in the ministry of Jesus in the Galilee region. But the Pharisee was probably being antagonistic and wanted to trap Jesus or do something to get Him. So he invited Jesus over for this meal. The Pharisee’s name is mentioned in verse 40. His name was Simon, Simon the Pharisee.

There is a lot of confusion about this story we are reading. This story is only found in Luke’s Gospel. It’s not the same story that is found in Matthew 26, Mark 14 or John 12. In these other Gospels, there is a story that takes place just before Jesus is crucified, and it takes place in Bethany by Jerusalem. Luke’s story takes place in Galilee.

And the story in John 12 has a clear reference to Martha, who is the sister of Lazarus and a friend of Jesus, and it takes place in her home. She anoints Jesus’ head and His feet with ointment. Then Judas says, “Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?” Jesus replied, “Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial” (John 12:5-7).

So these two stories are different. Don’t get them confused.

Another mistake people make is that the sinful woman in our text, a prostitute or harlot until she met Jesus, is not Mary Magdalene; there is no reference in the Bible that Mary Magdalene was a sexually immoral woman. The woman in our text was called “a woman in the city who was a sinner,” which clearly implies she was a harlot or prostitute.

Now the Pharisee threw a party and a prostitute crashes it. You couldn’t get two, more unlikely

people together. So he is freaking out. How was it that she could come to a dinner party when she was obviously not invited? In that culture, whenever a rabbi was invited for dinner at the home of a wealthy person, they would have it at an outdoor patio. Cushions or pads would be provided around the dinner table for people in the town to come to sit around the perimeter and listen to the conversation. So uninvited guests could come.

How would you like to have a dinner party with all these freaky people hanging around your table listening to your conversation?! But that was the picture.

You also have to picture that the table they ate off of was probably only inches off the ground. They didn't sit in chairs like we do and put their legs under the table. So the woman didn't have to crawl under the table to weep on Jesus' feet. The table would be in the shape of a horseshoe, and the outer, round band of the table would have a bed all the way around the table. The guests would lay on their left side on the dinner bed with the table at their head. They would reach their right hand onto the table, grab their food with their hand—they ate with their hands—roll back and drop the food into their mouth.

I think this is awesome. I think we should revive the dinner bed. When you eat, you don't have to go to bed; you're already in bed. When you wake up, you're already eating, you roll over and go back to sleep.

So Jesus would be laying on His left side, eating with His right hand and His feet would be extended outside the bed. This woman could approach from the outside, Christ's feet would be right there and she knelt down. She probably came with the intention of breaking the alabaster jar of costly perfume and pouring it on His feet. But when she got to His feet, she began to sob and weep with gratitude. Her tears are tears of gratitude for being forgiven. This woman is doing what she is doing, because she has already been forgiven. She is not doing it to be forgiven; she is doing it because she has been forgiven.

When we are forgiven, it leads to gratitude, and gratitude leads to love and love leads to worship of Jesus Christ and service to others.

So she was coming with a grateful heart and gratitude for being forgiven. She began to weep over His feet, which were extended outside the bed and her tears were washing His feet.

In verse 38, where it says, "She began to wash His feet with her tears," and every time they are mentioned in the story, she continually cried, was weeping and sobbing and was washing His feet. Then she took down her hair, which no dignified woman would ever do in public, and began to dry His feet with her hair. She broke the top off the alabaster jar and poured the oil on His feet while repeatedly kissing them.

In this culture, no one would ever touch another person's feet unless you were the lowest slave. So this is very humbly, her kissing His feet.

It's interesting that there are only two places in the Bible where it is mentioned that anyone ever

kissed Jesus. The first time was this incident in which a prostitute kissed His feet out of gratitude for forgiveness. The second incident was Judas Iscariot; he betrayed Jesus with a kiss.

So this was a very moving picture. This “woman in the city” was a harlot. She wept and washed His feet with her tears. She wiped them with her hair, kissed His feet and then anointed them by pouring the ointment on Jesus’ feet.

Then notice verse 39: “Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he spoke to himself...” not speaking audibly but thinking this “...saying, ‘This man...” which is a derogatory statement “...if He were a prophet...” inferring that He’s not “...would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner.” This Pharisee was appalled that Jesus let her touch Him.

Jesus knew quite well who she was. And I believe she had encountered Christ before this story takes place. She had already been forgiven. So she is using this as an opportunity to show her gratitude and her love. There are all kinds of beautiful lessons about worship here. Worship is the outgrowth of our gratitude as a result of being forgiven. It is our desire to worship God and glorify Him for His blessing of forgiving our sins.

Now the fact that Jesus would go to dinner with this Pharisee is amazing. Jesus never turned down a dinner invitation. Neither do I; it’s Biblical. Jesus even invited Himself over for dinner in Revelation 3:20. “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him and he with Me.” So invited yourself over for dinner.

So this is the scene at the party. It has been crashed by this harlot, and the Pharisee is appalled. He concludes that Jesus is not really a prophet. If He were, He would not let this woman touch Him.

Earlier in our story, we learn that Jesus is the friend of sinners, publicans and prostitutes. That is one of the central themes of Luke’s Gospel. Jesus came “to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10).

Luke is also the Gospel of women. There are more stories of Christ and women in Luke than in any of the other Gospels put together.

Now we move from the party to the parable that grew out of this episode at the Pharisee’s house. “And Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Simon, I have something to say to you.’ So he said, ‘Teacher, say it.’”

This parable starts in verse 41. A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. “‘There was a certain creditor...” or “money lender” “...who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii...” one denarius was the usual salary of a day laborer “...and the other fifty. And when they had nothing with which to repay...” neither could pay his debt “...he freely forgave them

both. Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more?’ Simon [reluctantly] answered and said, ‘I suppose the one whom he forgave more.’ And He said to him, ‘You have rightly judged.’”

Jesus gave this parable to describe the contrast between Simon and this sinful woman. The amount of the debt owed in this parable wasn’t the issue. The amount of the debt was an indication of whether or not we are aware of or sense our greatest need for forgiveness. Both were debtors, both owed, both were insolvent, both had no way to pay their debt. So he freely forgave them both.

The question, “Which of them will love him more?” was aimed at Simon. This is why this woman showered her love upon Jesus; she love Him much. She anointed His feet and kissed them with her lips.

So Simon said, “I suppose the one whom he forgave more,” which was correct.

The point is to whom much is forgiven, loveth much. When you see someone who is very grateful and thankful for their forgiveness, they show that by worshipping God and serving God. When you see someone who is not grateful and thankful, they’re not aware of their debt. They’re not aware of their sin or their need. They’re not conscious of their sinful state or that they’ve been forgiven. There’s no gratitude toward God. It’s almost like they feel, “God’s lucky to have me, because I’m so amazing!” Not so.

From this parable we get the point, in verses 44-50. “Then He turned to the woman....” Notice how this sets up. Jesus looks at the woman directly. She is down at His feet weeping, kissing them and anointing them. He looks at the woman, but He is talking to Simon. “...and said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman?’” The point is that Simon doesn’t really see her or know her. “‘I entered your house...’ speaking to Simon “...you gave Me no water for My feet...” which was customary “...but she has washed My feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head. You gave Me no kiss...” which was a customary greeting “...but this woman has not ceased to kiss My feet since the time I came in. You did not anoint My head with oil, but this woman has anointed My feet with fragrant oil.”

Now here is the application. ““Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much.”” I like these verses. ““But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little.”” So up to this point, Jesus is looking at the woman while speaking to Simon. And now He is looking at the woman and speaking to her. “Then He said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ And those who sat at the table with Him...” this is the company at the dinner party “...began to say to themselves, ‘Who is this who even forgives sins?’ Then He said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.’”

So they said, “Who does He think He is?!” Simon said Jesus wasn’t a prophet, or He wouldn’t have let this woman touch Him. He’s going to get cooties, become unclean. That’s what Pharisees did: they wouldn’t let anyone touch them, because they’d become unclean. And “Who does He think He is that He can forgive sins?!”

Jesus could read their thoughts, could forgive their sins, because He is God. He knows our hearts and can forgive our sins. That is only God's prerogative.

I want to give you five facts that we learn about forgiveness. Number one, we all need forgiveness. We all need to be forgiven. Simon the Pharisee and the sinful prostitute had something in common. Simon didn't think so. You may not think so. But we all have something in common. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). The Bible says, "There is no one righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10).

We all have a common debt. Verse 41 of our story says that the creditor "had two debtors." The point is that they both had debt. Granted, one had a greater debt, but we've all sinned. We all "fall short of the glory of God." We are all sinners. Simon the Pharisee and the prostitute both were sinners.

And there are different kinds of sins. There are action sins and attitude sins. This is important for you to understand. Action sins are sins of the flesh. They are open sins that are understood by others. Sins of the spirit, or attitude sins, are hidden; only God can see and know them.

In the story of the prodigal son, he had an older brother. The younger son took the inheritance he received from his father and wasted it on riotous living. That's where we get our word "prodigal," for "riotous living." He partied hard. He went crazy partying. Then he came to his senses, repented and went back to his father and was forgiven and given a party. While the party was going on, his older brother, who had faithfully served his father all these years, heard the celebrating and went back to see what it was about. A servant told him it was for his younger brother, who had come home, so his father had killed the fatted calf and celebrated.

And what did the older brother do? He sulked. He griped and complained. He said that he had served his father faithfully all these years but never once was given a party with his friends. He never did this for him. So he sat outside pouting, angry and upset. He was guilty of the sins of the spirit, attitude sins.

The prodigal was guilty of action sins; the older brother was guilty of attitude sins. They were both sinners before God.

You may feel very dignified, very good, very self-righteous, but God sees your heart. The Bible says that pride is a sin. "The proud He knows from afar" (Psalm 138:6). God hates the proud look, the independent spirit. So don't think that you're not a sinner just because you haven't wasted it on prostitutes and riotous living. There are sins of the spirit as well as sins of the flesh. Jesus knows the actions of the sins of the woman as well as the attitude of the sins of Simon the Pharisee.

There also are sins of omission and sins of commission. You can sin by not doing something. The Bible says, "To him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin" (James 4:17). So when you know to do good and don't do it, you've sinned by omitting something. You can

sin by doing nothing. You don't have to do something to sin; you can just not do what God wants you to do, and you've sinned by omission. It's so important.

Then Jesus said to Simon, in verse 44, "I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet." When you entered a home, the customary thing was that you washed the person's feet, but Simon didn't do that. Jesus said, "She has washed My feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head." Verse 45, "You gave Me no kiss, but this woman has not ceased to kiss My feet since the time I came in." Simon didn't even shake Jesus' hand or greet Him with a kiss. Verse 46, "You did not anoint My head with oil, but this woman has anointed My feet with fragrant oil." These are all sins of omission. Simon didn't do what he was supposed to do. He didn't show Jesus the common courtesies. It's very important.

Romans 3:23 says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." And Romans 3:10 says, "There is none righteous, no, not one."

Simon and the woman also had an insolvency in common. "And when they had nothing with which to repay..." Neither one of them had anything with which to pay their debt. Both Simon and the sinful woman had nothing with which to pay, and we "all who have sinned" and have nothing with which we can commend ourselves to God.

We sing,

"Could my tears forever flow,

These for sin could not atone.

Thou must save,

And Thou alone."

You can cry and weep, you can anoint Jesus' feet with oil, you can do service to others, but they can never atone for your sins. You have nothing by which you can commend yourself to God. We all need to see that we are sinners, that we all are spiritually bankrupt and there is nothing we can do to commend ourselves to God to earn, deserve or merit forgiveness.

"What about if I get baptized?" Go ahead. Baptism is only an outward showing of an inward work. If you haven't been forgiven, all you're going to be is wet. You're still a sinner. I've had people say to me, "Hold me down for a long time! I've got a lot to bury!" Water can't wash away your sin.

"What can wash away my sin?

Nothing but the blood of Jesus."

So religious deeds, confirmation, catechism, baptism, good deeds, service to others—none of

that will wash away my sins. Only Jesus can do that by His precious blood that He shed on the Cross.

What is important is having a sense of our sin. Contrast Simon the Pharisee and the prostitute. The Pharisee didn't realize he was a sinner; he had no awareness. The prostitute had an awareness of her sin and experienced forgiveness.

The second fact about forgiveness is that it is the gracious gift of God. This is basic but very important. We all need forgiveness and it is the gracious gift of God. Verse 42 says that the creditor "freely forgave them both." The word "freely," or "frankly" in the King James Bible, means "without a cause." Paul said, "By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). Romans 3: 24 says, "...being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." So we are freely forgiven.

Though forgiveness is free, it is not cheap. It cost God the Father the life of the Son of God. It cost Jesus being crucified on the Cross. It was very expensive. In Romans 3:25 it says that through His death on the Cross, "...whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness," He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

The third fact is that forgiveness is received by faith. We all need forgiveness, and forgiveness is by grace through faith. I like verse 50. "Then He said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.'" It wasn't her acts of kindness, her love, her tears or her kisses that saved her. It was her faith. We are not saved by loving God. We love God because He saved us. He loved us first, and we respond in love.

So her tears, her kisses, anointing His feet and wiping them with her hair was the fruit of forgiveness and not the root. Some people misinterpret this story. They think that Jesus is teaching here that she is forgiven because she loves much; that she is forgiven because of what she did. Not so. She did what she did because she was forgiven. Forgiveness brings love, and love brings worship and devotion. So her love was the fruit of having been forgiven. She was painfully aware of the enormity of her sin.

John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." That's faith. This verse is so deeply profound. God loved everybody, so He gave His unique Son, Jesus, and whoever believes—there's the word—which means to trust in, rely on, clings to or puts their faith in, will have salvation. The Bible is absolutely clear: all have sinned, and salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Salvation is by no one else.

How are we saved? By faith. Faith is not just a feeling or emotion. It's not just feeling something is true. Faith is putting your trust in its object, Jesus Christ. Jesus is the object of our faith. Your faith is not in your church affiliation. You may say, "I'm a catholic...I'm a Baptist...I'm an Episcopalian...I'm a Presbyterian." Your faith is in Jesus Christ. If God were to ask you

why He should let you into heaven, your answer should be, “Because Your Son, Jesus, died for me and I’m trusting Him. I’ve taken His hand. And His righteousness has been imputed to me by faith. I stand in Him forgiven and righteous.”

Those are the basics. So it’s faith in Christ. By grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone: that’s how we are saved. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, “By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” And Romans 5:1 says, “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The fourth fact about forgiveness is that it is certain. I like that. Verse 47: “Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven.” Jesus is looking at the woman but talking to Simon. Jesus told her that her sins were forgiven.

Jesus mentions that the woman’s sins are forgiven, in verse 47, and then in verse 48, again Jesus says, looking directly at the woman, “Your sins are forgiven.” The grammar and the tense of the verb in “Your sins are forgiven” means that it is past tense, present experience, future reality. Past, present and future. Her sins have been, are and will always stand forgiven. That’s what the text is saying.

This is a marvelous statement. “Her sins, which are many...” we could say the same thing “...are forgiven.” That’s a hallelujah, praise the Lord, shouting verse! Our sins, through the blood of Jesus Christ, have been forgiven, if you trust Christ. And they always stand forgiven. Then Jesus turns to the woman and tells her, in verse 48, “Your sins are forgiven.” It’s not maybe, not hopefully, not if you’re lucky—they are forgiven.

I believe that the Bible teaches that we can be assured of forgiveness and salvation. You can be sure that you’re forgiven and going to heaven. Let me give you three ways to know: it’s based on God the Father’s word, it’s based on God the Son’s work and it’s based on God the Holy Spirit’s witness. So it’s based on the word of God the Father, the work of God the Son on the Cross and the inner witness of God the Holy Spirit that we are His children. Romans 8:16 says, “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”

So if you don’t have assurance, if you don’t know beyond any doubt that when you die you’d go to heaven, that you’re forgiven, that’s your greatest need. So trust Christ.

The fifth fact about forgiveness is that it results in a changed life. First, verse 47, the woman had a new love. She had been forgiven much, so “she loved much.” It was seen in her act of selfless, humble, abandoned worship. Martin Luther said, “Her tears were heart water.” I like that.

Second, we also know that she had a new peace, verse 50. “Then He said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.’” Not only did her faith save her, but she could go in peace. Literally in the Greek it would read, “Go into peace.”

When our sins are forgiven, we have peace with God. And when we walk with the Lord, we have the peace of God in our hearts. One of the reasons why you are in turmoil right now is because there is no peace between you and God. Your sins have separated you from God. You need to be forgiven of your sins.

And when you are forgiven, you have a transformed life. You have a new love, a new peace. And, third, she also had a new freedom. Jesus said, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). It is rest for your soul.

The Bible says that "'There is no peace,' says the Lord, 'for the wicked'" (Isaiah 48:22). They are like a troubled sea. There is no peace until you are forgiven, the guilt is lifted and your heart is clean. There is no greater need, no greater joy than knowing that my sins have been forgiven.

So God's grace forgave and transformed this sinful prostitute. Her faith had secured pardon, the pardon had awakened gratitude and her gratitude was expressed by her deeds of devoted love.

But poor Simon. He was self-righteous, proud, did not know who Jesus was, he rejected Christ, he rejected this dear woman and he rejected his only hope of salvation.

You might not have any assurance of forgiveness. But today you can be forgiven of all your sins. It is your greatest need. If you've never repented, if you've never believed in Jesus, if you've never trusted Him as your Savior, it is your greatest need. If you die in your unforgiven state, you would be separated from God for all eternity.

But if you trust Christ today, and you believe in Jesus Christ and received Him as your Savior, your sins can all be forgiven. You can have peace with God, you can have the peace of God and you can have assurance that when you die, you'll spend eternity in heaven.