

GRACE AND WORSHIP

Luke 7v36-50

This episode started with a Pharisee publicly dishonouring Jesus by denying him the courtesies normally offered to a guest. A woman with a bad reputation was looking on. She was shocked and hurt on Jesus' behalf so she came out of the shadows and offered him the welcome the host had withheld. In so doing she exposed herself to humiliation and criticism. (We looked at this last week: 8. 'Sharing Christ's Shame.')

We are familiar with movie sequels but back in 1977 George Lucas introduced something different with 'Stars Wars' when we saw that it was Episode IV, 'A New Hope'. It was followed by two sequels, but sixteen years later came the *prequels*. We had known all along that there was a significant story in the background. It is likely that there had been a prequel to the incident in Luke 7 and Jesus had met this woman earlier. At several stages in the incident this would make sense of what happened. We cannot be sure, of course, but the suggestion is that Jesus had talked to her and she had received what he had to say about repentance and she had put her faith in him. So she was a brand new disciple! It was the first day of the rest of her life. That was why she was there.

In any event, her action gave the Pharisee more ammunition.³⁹**When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner."** Not much of a prophet! This was what Simon was thinking. And didn't Jesus realize that by letting himself be touched by this woman he was now ceremonially unclean? How could he even remain in Simon's house? But Jesus wasn't stupid, he knew all about the woman.

Everyone held their breath. What would Jesus do? This was a compromising situation. Word would soon get around that he was getting cosy with immoral women. Surely he must demonstrate how shocked he was and tell her to be off. He must apologise to Simon and excuse himself. If the woman really was in earnest about turning from her immoral life he should tell her to go the temple in Jerusalem to the Court of the Women and offer the appropriate sacrifices through the priests.

Instead Jesus turned to the Pharisee. ⁴⁰**"Simon, I have something to tell you."** This *"is a classic Middle Eastern idiom that introduces blunt speech that the listener may not want to hear."* (Bailey) **"Tell me, teacher," he said.** ⁴¹**"Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty.** ⁴²**Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he cancelled the debts of both.** This last phrase can equally be translated **he freely forgave them both.**" A simple illustration: two men in debt who were both shown mercy. The same grace was extended to each person. No matter how much they owed – they were both in debt, they were both unable to pay their debt and they were both in need of grace. Whether *you* consider yourself a great sinner or a not-so-great sinner – is irrelevant, you are still in need of grace.

But Jesus wanted to go beyond this to make a further point. He did this with a question to Simon. **"Now which of them will love him more?"** I wonder if Simon realised that he was walking into a knock-out punch. There is some hesitation as he replies: ⁴³**"I suppose the one who had the bigger debt cancelled."** **"You have judged correctly," Jesus said.** Perhaps Simon's chest puffed out slightly. Pharisees spent much of their time debating the law and giving rulings on how it applied; to hear another rabbi say "you have judged

correctly” was music to their ears. Maybe he dropped his guard slightly – just in time for the sucker punch!

44Then (Jesus) turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? Jesus was looking at the woman. He was addressing Simon but his words were meant as much *for her* so the tone must have been tender not harsh. **I came into your house.** The room went very quiet at this point. Jesus was starting to talk about “the elephant in the room” – the issue everyone knew about but no one dared mention – Simon’s extreme discourtesy.

I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet. In a house with servants this was a sign that the guest was of very inferior rank. However, Simon probably didn’t have servants. But look at Jesus words. He hadn’t expected anyone *to wash* his feet. He was happy to wash his own feet but Simon had not even provided him with water to do this. **You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.** This woman had more than moist eyes or a trickle down her cheek. She must have been weeping by the “bucket full” to wash his feet. This is one of my most vivid memories from a visit I made in the nineties to inland China and meeting with the underground church. When we worshipped many of the women wept. It was the weeping of passionate devotion.

45You did not give me a kiss. What’s all this about kissing? To receive a guest without a kiss of greeting was a mark of contempt or a claim to be of higher status. One western traveller in the Middle East in the nineteenth century records how he was being entertained in Tunis; in the middle of the banquet his servant whispered in his ear not to trust the host because he had not kissed him on entering. The servant’s warning proved “most timely” wrote the traveller. In Jewish culture in New Testament times “equals” kissed each on the cheek but a Rabbi would be greeted at the door and every male member of the family would kiss his hand as he entered.

You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. For this woman to kiss Jesus, even on the hand, was always going to be delicate – so she smothered his feet with kisses. This was a gesture of great humility, devotion and gratitude. One writer cites a Jewish source describing how a man accused of murder had kissed the feet of the lawyer who had got him acquitted and saved his life. The woman was kissing Jesus’ feet in the same spirit.

This is a classic expression of worship. In the Old Testament the main Hebrew word for worship is *shachah*; it means “*to bow down, to prostrate oneself*”. That is what this woman was doing. The Greek word used most often in the New Testament for worship is *proskuneo*; this is made up of two words *pros* = towards and *kuneo* = to kiss). It came to describe a loving act of homage or reverence to God. This woman was bowing down at Jesus feet and kissing his feet. It was an act of worship.

In 2004 Matt Redman released an album called ‘*Facedown*’; to coincide with this he wrote a wonderful little book on worship with the same title. He writes: “*When we face up to the glory of God, we soon find ourselves facedown in worship. To worship facedown is the ultimate outward sign of inner reverence. Every posture in worship says something of both the worshipper and the one being gloried in. The raising of hands tells of a soul stretched out high in praise and the worth of the one being exalted....In the very same way, facedown*”

worship is the overflow of a heart humbled and amazed by the glory of God. Facedown worship always begins with a posture of the heart. It's a person so desperate for the increase of Christ that they find themselves decreasing to the ground in an act of reverent submission. A soul so captivated by the Almighty that to bend low in true and total surrender seems the only appropriate response."

⁴⁶**You did not put oil on my head** - Olive oil was very cheap and in plentiful supply, yet none had been supplied to express a blessing as Jesus entered; **but she has poured perfume on my feet.** Anointing with oil would normally be on a guest's head, never on the feet. But this woman was aware of her lowly status – it would be presumption to anoint Jesus' head; so she anointed his feet with her expensive perfume. It is likely that the perfume was carried in a flask around her neck until she needed to make herself desirable and arouse her lovers. Jesus had accepted all this from the woman fully realizing who she was and how the Pharisees could misunderstand or twist what they saw.

But in saying all this to Simon about his lack of courtesy Jesus had shocked everyone. To criticise a host's hospitality was a gross breach of etiquette. Simon would have relied on this. Yes, he had treated Jesus like an inferior but Jesus would not complain. It is an unwritten law in the Middle east. The host says how inadequate his welcome is for such an honoured guest and, no matter how meagre the hospitality, the guest always says how unworthy he is of the hospitality extended to him. Yet Jesus was criticising Simon's lack of hospitality in front of the other guests. And it was even more toe-curling than that. He had compared a Pharisee unfavourably to a prostitute. To compare a man unfavourably with a woman in that culture was bad enough – but to compare Simon unfavourably with a prostitute - it didn't get any worse than this! So much for *the Milky Bar Kid* image of Jesus!

⁴⁷**Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much.** On the surface you might understand this to mean that this woman's loving action caused Jesus to pronounce her forgiveness. But this begins to sound as if it was something good *that she did* that brought about forgiveness. That is at variance with the rest of the New Testament and Jesus' parable had said the opposite - we cannot pay our debt, we all need mercy. In fact this text can be translated differently, several translations now have **therefore she loved much.** Jesus was not talking about *the cause* of the woman's forgiveness but *the result.* She had already experienced mercy and her love was a response. It was not this incident that brought about forgiveness. Her loving action was a result of having already been forgiven.

Her many sins have been forgiven—therefore she loved much. This highlights something else. It suggests that the more you appreciate how serious your sin is – the more lavish will be your love for the One who shows you mercy. Those who realize how much they are in need of grace are not "inadequates"! The apostle Paul didn't speak of himself as "*the chief of sinners*" because he had a low self-image. He was someone who had grasped the terrible nature of sin and its consequences, and understood how great God's mercy is.

When you see how much grace you have received it results in passionate worship. This is how John Newton came to write "*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see*" He had been a hard-hearted slave trader infamous for his blasphemies, until he found mercy through faith in Jesus Christ. Newton knew how great his sin had been and it resulted in extravagant

worship. Charles Wesley' background was one of respectability and formal religion – but he too understood how he had needed grace. So he wrote his great hymn “*And can it be,*

*And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died He , for me, who caused his pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me!”*

...her many sins have been forgiven—therefore she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.” Who is Jesus talking about here? Yes, you guessed it! Simon thought that he was righteous and the woman was a sinner. But he was wrong. He was a sinner too. It was just that he didn't realize it. Jesus had not accepted the dinner invitation because Simon was an important Pharisee, but because he was a sinner, just like the tax collectors whose invitations Jesus accepted. Simon's sins were not as obvious as the woman's, but in this brief incident Jesus saw beneath the discourtesy to some root issues: pride, arrogance, hard-heartedness, hostility, a judgmental spirit, a warped view of purity, rejecting others, insensitivity, misrepresenting God. Simon couldn't see this – so he had not repented over any of this, therefore he had been forgiven little and loved little. So Jesus *was a prophet* after all - a prophet who could see right into Simon's heart!

⁴⁸**Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven"** (literally, “have been forgiven”). This is the first and only time Jesus speaks directly to the woman – incidentally another breach of etiquette. A man was not supposed to speak in public to any woman, even his wife. This was something Jesus consistently ignored. ⁴⁹**The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"** This was not the first time this had been said. “*Surely only God can forgive sins.*” (Luke 5v21) Jesus was diverting criticism from the woman and taking it on himself. The woman may have understood this to some extent. Jesus was defending her before this hard line religious enforcer. He was sure to suffer for this. Does that ring a bell? Jesus does that for us too – he takes our punishment, he is our substitute.

One more thing as I draw to a close and prepare to take bread and wine together: ⁵⁰**Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."** Jesus didn't say: “*Go to the temple in Jerusalem and make your peace with God.*” I mentioned earlier that this woman might have been told to go the temple in Jerusalem to the Court of the Women and offer the appropriate sacrifices. But she *chose Jesus over religious ritual*. This was a scandal to religious people like Simon but she was way ahead of the Pharisee in making this choice. *This woman chose Jesus above religious ritual*. This was exactly what Jesus wanted. He invited people to come *to him*. Jewish religious rituals, festivals and sacrifices were shadows and preparations; he *was the substance*. “*Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest..*”

This is where grace is to be found. Jesus is the living temple, the dwelling place of God. He is the perfect once-for-all sacrifice, the Lamb of God. He is the Great High Priest with access to the throne room of heaven. This woman didn't understand any of this but in choosing Jesus over ritual she found the grace she needed.

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