

“Faith of an Anointer”

Devotional Reading: Romans 8:1-16 **Background Scripture:** Luke 7:36-50

Luke 7:36–39, 44–50 (NIV)

³⁶ When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table. ³⁷ A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. ³⁸ As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

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.”

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⁴⁴ Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. ⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.” ⁴⁸ Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” ⁴⁹ The other guests began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” ⁵⁰ Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Fact:** To summarize a sinful woman’s encounter with Jesus.
- **Biblical Principle:** To compare and contrast the mindsets of Jesus, the Pharisee, and the woman.
- **Daily Application:** To evaluate your own mindset in light of those three.

INTRODUCTION/LESSON CONTEXT

A Person’s Value

Jesus not only accepted hospitality from the publicans (tax collectors) and sinners but also from the Pharisees. They needed the Word of God too, whether they realized it or not. We trust that Simon’s invitation was a sincere one and that he did not have some ulterior motive for having Jesus in his home. If he did, his plan backfired, because he ended up learning more about himself than he cared to know!

The text features Simon, a Pharisee, and a sinful woman who both met the merciful Savior. Jesus’ interaction with them reveals an important link between forgiveness and love.

Three People: Luke 7:36–39

This is one of three times in Luke that Jesus was invited to a meal at the home of a Pharisee (see Luke 11:37; 14:1). Upon this occasion Jesus was invited to eat in the home of Simon, a Pharisee. It was customary in that day for outsiders to hover around during banquets so they could watch the “important people” and hear the conversation (see v. 49 of today’s). Since everything was open, they could even enter the banquet hall and speak to a guest. This explains how this woman (v. 37) had access to Jesus. He was not behind locked doors.

1. Where was Jesus invited? Who else showed up? (Luke 7:36-37)

This woman is not named, but we get the impression she was a woman known in the *town* for her bad reputation. The scandal factor was multiplied by the fact that she *lived a sinful life*. Such a reputation probably suggests (but does not require) that the woman was a prostitute.

When this woman learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought *an alabaster jar of perfume*-like oil which could be rubbed into the hair or onto the skin. Mark 14:3–5 establishes both the nature and value of the oil. But no such specifics are noted in the scene before us. Even so, this may be at great expense on her part.

2. What do we know about this woman? What did she bring with her? (Luke 7:37)

What happened must have surprised everyone. With no spoken word recorded, the woman went from a posture of standing to one of kneeling near Jesus—that's the only way for her to have been able to be in a position to wash *his feet*. It was customary to take off one's sandals during a meal, and people would sit around the low table on their knees with their feet behind them. The text says nothing about why she was *weeping*. We can only speculate that her tears come out of a repentant heart. If you check a harmony of the Gospels, you will discover that just before this event, Jesus had given the gracious invitation, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28-30). Perhaps that was when the woman turned from her sin and trusted the Saviour. Her tears, her humble attitude, and her expensive gift all spoke of a changed heart. There's more than meets the eye here as the woman used *her hair* as a washcloth. Women's hair in this era was typically bound up. Therefore this woman's letting her hair down was a departure from propriety. This act further suggests that she was lost in the moment with Jesus. She did not consider what anyone else might see or think.

3. What happened when the woman encountered Jesus? (Luke 7:38)

What Do You Think?

When have you been reduced to tears in Jesus' presence?

Digging Deeper

What blessing did you experience after being vulnerable at Jesus' feet?

The Pharisee's unspoken thoughts condemned both the woman and Jesus. Simon knew that the people had been saying that Jesus was a great Prophet (Luke 7:16), but He certainly was not exhibiting much prophetic discernment if He allowed a sinful woman to anoint His feet! He must be a fraud. If Jesus doesn't fit the Pharisee's idea of how a prophet should conduct himself, then Jesus can't be one. Jesus was thought to have carelessly allowed the woman's touch. The Jews' understanding of what made them unclean was often tied to touching (example: Numbers 9:6; 19:11). In general, touching anything considered unclean made the toucher unclean as well (see Isaiah 52:11; Haggai 2:13). Pharisees were obsessed with the avoidance of anything unclean or violations of the Law of Moses. This woman was the living embodiment of everything they warned against. The contrast between the woman, who expresses her love for Jesus, and the Pharisee, who views her with disdain, could hardly be sharper.

In the verses not included in the lesson (Luke 7:40–43), Jesus told Simon a parable about a money lender pardoning the debts of two people, one of which owed 10 times more the other (2 months salary, the other 2 years salary). While Jesus turns to the woman, He still speaks to Simon, but He is getting ready to make the parable a reality.

4. What happened when the Pharisee who invited Jesus saw this? (Luke 7:39)

Different Actions: Luke 7:44–50

An awkward situation ensued: Jesus *turned toward to the woman*, but His words were for the Pharisee.

Foot-washing was a centuries-old cultural practice (Genesis 18:4; 19:2; 43:24; etc.). It was an act of hospitality for guests in one's house. Footwear of the era did not keep dust and dirt out. Walking on unpaved roads resulted in feet getting filthy quickly, thus the expedience of the foot-washing courtesy—or at least providing water and a towel for the guest to do the foot-washing himself. Yet Simon had not even provided those to Jesus! Simon's actions were cold and calculated; both he and Jesus knew it. What a contrast to the woman, whose actions were those of spontaneous gratitude.

Furthermore, the missing *kiss* at issue here would have been an expression of greeting and welcome, customarily offered by a host to his guest (see Luke 15:20; compare Romans 16:16; contrast Luke 22:47–48). As with the absence of foot-washing water, the lack of a kiss indicates something less than full acceptance by the host.

Whereas the woman's kissing of Jesus *feet* shows her humility and her desire to serve Jesus.

5. What did Jesus tell Simon right after His parable? (Luke 7:44-45)

Feet Worth Kissing

You will be hard-pressed to find a culture where kissing someone's feet in public is a normal, everyday expectation! It's a universal truth that feet stink, especially when people wear open sandals and walk on streets also used by animals. Most kissing aims for the face, cheek, or hand for a variety of reasons. And surely one of those reasons is that if we want to put our lips on something, clean is better.

To kiss feet eagerly indicates total devotion. The one whose feet are worthy of being kissed is special. It's uncomfortable to display affection in a way that breaks cultural norms unless the esteem of the object of one's love requires it. When was the last time your level of devotion to Jesus caused you to exceed your "embarrassment threshold" in an act of loving service to him?

—D. D.

To offer one's *head* to be anointed *with oil* also seems strange to us, something we would never expect when visiting a friend's home. But this, too, was a gesture of hospitality in first-century Palestine. The practice communicated favor (see Psalm 23:5; Ecclesiastes 9:8). Simon had withheld this level of courtesy as well from Jesus.

The oil to which Jesus referred was olive oil, the multipurpose liquid used for cooking, fueling lamps, and medicinal purposes. By contrast, the woman anointed the *feet* of Jesus with *perfume* from her alabaster container. This might have been nard oil, which was highly prized and expensive in Palestine—much more so than household olive oil (compare Mark 14:3; John 12:3). The contrast of anointing the feet rather than the head demonstrated the great humility of the woman. Her actions were unsolicited.

6. How else did Jesus compare the actions of Simon with that of the woman? (Luke 7:46)

What Do You Think?

When do you practice hospitality? Note: this is not limited to hosting dinners.

Digging Deeper

How does your hospitality honor Jesus?

Simon's real problem was blindness: he could not see himself, the woman, or the Lord Jesus. Simon had doubted Jesus' credentials as a prophet. But at this point, Jesus spoke with prophetic insight. The moral status of the woman as "a sinner" is uncontested—it is a given. But the scene depicted here illustrates the astonishing power and magnitude of God's forgiveness and its realization by the recipient. The woman's great love demonstrated that she knew she had much to be forgiven (see Luke 7:42–43, not in our printed text).

By contrast, Simon *loved little* because his scrupulous attention to the Law of Moses had resulted in few sins to be forgiven of. Simon was proud of his tidy lifestyle as a Pharisee. He believed that he was vindicated by his success in keeping the Law of Moses strictly and by his descent from Abraham (John 8:39). The Pharisee understood neither why he needed to love (and be loved by) Jesus nor how the woman's *many sins* could be forgiven, especially by Jesus (see Mark 2:7). In His encounters with sinners, Jesus walked the fine line between affirming the person while not condoning the sin (examples: John 4:17–18; 5:14; 8:10–11), and that's what we see Him do here.

Jesus then spoke directly to the woman, but His words were for everyone in the room to hear. No such declaration of *your sins are forgiven* is recorded for Simon the Pharisee.

7. How did Jesus' parable of *forgiveness of little and much* demonstrate the power of God's forgiveness of the woman? (Luke 7:47-48)

What Do You Think?

What danger is there in not acknowledging one's own sins as serious or many?

Digging Deeper

How do you guard against both excessive pride in your own efforts and debilitating awareness of your sin?

This is not the first time that Luke records controversy resulting from Jesus' forgiving *sins*. In the story of a paralyzed man (Luke 5:17-26), Jesus both healed the man and pronounced his sins to be forgiven (Luke 5:20; compare Matthew 9:2). The audience of scribes and Pharisees were outraged. But they spoke better than they knew with their rhetorical question, "Who can forgive sins, but God alone?" (Luke 5:21).

Similarly, Simon and his other guests in the current are startled by Jesus' declaration. The pronouncement of forgiveness of sins in both texts forces a choice on the religious leaders: if Jesus indeed had the power to forgive sins, then He is God-in-the-flesh. But if Jesus did not have such power, then He was guilty of blasphemy.

8. Why was Jesus' audience outraged at His forgiveness of sins? (Luke 7:49)

The episode is closed with a final two-part word from Jesus to the woman. First, He clarifies the underlying reason for her forgiveness: her *faith*, which is the source of her love. By devoting herself to Jesus, she has yielded her heart to Him in repentance.

Second, Jesus' telling her to *go in peace* reminds us of His words to a sinful woman caught in adultery. After that woman's accusers left the scene, Jesus said to her, "Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:11). Neither woman would have found peace if they had departed only to resume lives of sin.

9. What were Jesus' parting words to the woman? (Luke 7:50)

What Do You Think?

What circumstances make it difficult to experience peace in your salvation?

Digging Deeper

If Jesus told you to “go in peace,” how would that impact your daily activities?

POINTS TO PONDER

Jesus’ parable does not deal with the amount of sin in a person’s life but the awareness of that sin in his heart. How much sin must a person commit to be a sinner? Simon and the woman were both sinners. Simon was guilty of sins of the spirit, especially pride, while the woman was guilty of sins of the flesh (see 2 Cor. 7:1). Her sins were known, while Simon's sins were hidden to everyone except God. And both of them were bankrupt and could not pay their debt to God. Simon was just as spiritually bankrupt as the woman, only he did not realize it.

Christians are to flee from sin and obey God. We show our love for God when we keep His commandments (1 John 5:2-3). But does this justify us when we reject and condemn those who struggle with sin? Are sinners welcome in our fellowship if they are seeking to love Jesus? Or must they clean up their sinful lives before they enter the doors of our church? Jesus taught that even the vilest of sinners can be forgiven if they turn to Him in faith and love. Are we willing to follow Him in His love for sinners and help them as they strive to follow Jesus, however imperfectly?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, You have shown us Your willingness to forgive sinners. May we not keep that message to ourselves! And let us not be selective in pretending to know who will accept and who won't. Help us to love our neighbors as You love us by taking the good news of Your Son to them. In His name, Jesus, we pray. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

To have forgiveness, we must first realize that we need it.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week’s lesson is “**Faith of a Canaanite**” and summarizes the interaction between Jesus and a Canaanite woman. Study Matthew 15:21-28.