

The Greatest Life Ever Lived

A Study in the Incarnate Life of Jesus Christ and An Exposition of the Four Gospels

LESSON II : JESUS' FEET ANOINTED BY THE SINFUL WOMAN / THE PARABLE OF TWO DEBTORS

Matthew	Mark	Luke	John	related passages
		7:36-50		

The identity of this woman is unknown, although two suggested names have been Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene. If this was Mary of Bethany, parallel passages would be Matt 26:6-13 || Mk 14:3-9 || Jn 12:1-8. If this was Mary Magdalene, she is mentioned immediately following this passage by Luke. Comments by others:

- “There is no ground whatever for the prevalent notion that this woman was Mary Magdalene; nor do we know what her name was.” [Brown, *JFB Commentary*]
- “Must the woman of this story be identified with Mary of Bethany? ... The answer is *No*. Neither is there any reason whatever for identifying her with Mary Magdalene.” [Hendriksen, *Luke*]
- “Many suppose this person to be the same as Mary Magdalene, but of this there is no solid proof.” [Clarke, *Commentary*]
- “A great number of interpreters agree that this incident is the same as that we have just been considering in Luke. They rely on the similarity of the act, on the circumstance that Luke does not relate the anointing at Bethany; and that, on the other hand, the three other evangelists do not mention this in Galilee; and lastly on the fact that in both cases the owner of the house where the repast is given bears the name of Simon. These reasons, doubtless, have their weight; but they are not decisive. The act of anointing was associated with such a common usage on festive occasions that there can be no difficulty in supposing that it was repeated. The causes of the omission of a narrative in one or two of the evangelists are too accidental for us to be able to base any solid conclusion upon it. We need only refer to the omission in Matthew of the healing of the possessed at Capernaum, and of the healing of the centurion’s servant in Mark, omissions which it is impossible to account for. As to the name Simon, it was so common that out of the small number of persons designated by name in the NT, there are no less than fifteen Simons! The reasons in favor of the difference of the two incidents are the following: (1) The difference of place — Galilee in Luke, in the other three Judea. This reason is of secondary value, it is true, because in chap 10 Luke appears to place the visit of Jesus to Martha and Mary in the midst of the Galilean ministry. (2) The difference of time. (3) The difference of persons: the woman that was a sinner in Luke is a stranger in the house of the host, and Simon himself regards her as such, and as altogether unknown to Jesus; Mary on the contrary belongs to a beloved family which habitually received Jesus under their roof. Besides, we must always feel a repugnance to identify Mary the sister of Lazarus, as we know her in Jn 11 and Lk 10 with a woman of ill fame. (4) The most important difference respects what was said: at Bethany a complaint from Judas on behalf of the poor, and a reply from Jesus announcing His approaching death; in Galilee the great evangelical declaration that love is the fruit of forgiveness, which is bestowed on the simple condition of faith.” [Godet, *Luke*]

7:36 And one of the Pharisees desired Him that he would eat with him. And He went into the Pharisee’s house, and sat down to meat. : Exactly when and where this was is not given although it probably followed close after last couple week’s lessons (Jesus’ commendation of John the Baptist and His prayer of thanksgiving / invitation to repent). Jesus has been comparing the self-righteous Pharisees with people of bad reputation, and this week’s lesson follows that thought.

The Pharisee who invited Jesus was named Simon (see vs 40; not to be confused with Simon Peter, Simon the Zealot, Simon the father of Judas Iscariot, Simon of Cyrene, Simon the tanner nor Simon the leper). Other information concerning this man is unknown. Why he asked Jesus to his house is also unknown but some indications might be picked up from the narrative itself. We see from vs 44-46 it was not out of great love or high regard for Jesus. He may have only wanted opportunity to bring an accusation against Jesus. **I would like to think however Simon was interested and truly curious as to whether Jesus was a prophet as the people were saying.** If so, he quickly comes to the wrong conclusion concerning Him when Jesus fails to condemn the “sinner”. “This Pharisee seems to have been in a state of mind regarding Jesus intermediate between that of the few who, like Nicodemus, were led to believe on Him, and of the overwhelming majority who regarded Him with suspicion from the first, which soon grew into deadly dislike. We shall see that, though not free from cold suspicion, he was desirous of a closer acquaintance with our Lord, under the impression that He might perhaps at least be a prophet.” [Brown, *JFB Commentary*]

Note the tender compassion of our Lord, not only going to those we would deem as the lowly in our society but to all regardless of their stature in life.

sat down to meat: or, *reclined at the table*. **The well-accepted practice of that time was that those eating were reclined on low couches arranged around the table.** Each guest would be facing the table lying slantwise with his feet stretched out backward. He would be leaning on his left arm to allow his right hand free to handle the food. “Not all agree with this very generally accepted representation. On the basis of such OT passages as Jud 19:6; 1 Sam 20:5; 1 Kings 13:20, all of which speak of

sitting at table, and of his own observations in the Near East, where he lived and taught for several years, Dr. H. Mulder arrives at the conclusion that ‘just like the other guests so Jesus sat in kneeled position, His feet extended backward with the underside turned upward.’ He calls attention to the fact that lying down to eat was a ‘western’ (Greek and Roman) custom, and he states that this eating style had not been universally adopted in Palestine and the surrounding regions. The matter is probably not as important as it may seem, for whether Jesus was reclining or sitting at the table, in either case His feet were in a position that made it possible for the woman to stand behind them.” [Hendriksen, *Luke*]

7:37,38 And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster box of ointment, and stood at His feet behind Him weeping, and began to wash His feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed His feet, and anointed them with the ointment. : behold: or, look!

indicating Luke wishes to call our special attention to the incident about to occur.

a woman in the city: in this particular town there was a woman who had a well-known bad reputation. Many commentators call her a harlot while Hendriksen states this is not demanded. “Many suppose that this woman had been a notorious public prostitute but this is taking the subject by the very worst handle. My own opinion is that she had been a mere heathen who dwelt in this city (probably Capernaum) who, through the ministry of Christ, had been before this converted to God, and came now to give this public testimony of her gratitude to her gracious deliverer from the darkness and guilt of sin.” [Clarke, *Commentary*] Whatever she was, it is evident from the rest of the story that it was a thing of the past. She undoubtedly knew and heard Jesus on previous occasion(s) and had at least began to be consciously aware of her own forgiveness. How else could we explain her coming to the house with ointment?

alabaster box of ointment: a vase of white or perhaps delicately tinted fine-grain gypsum with a long neck. To pour out the contents its neck had to be broken. The contents which were used to anoint Jesus’ feet was not merely olive oil but rather perfume, costly and fragrant (see vs 46). **If the woman was a harlot, this would have added significance since it would typify the results of a life of sin being surrendered to the Lord.**

“Her presence there is explained by the Oriental custom of strangers passing in and out of a house during a meal to see and converse with the guests. Trench cites a description of a dinner at a consul’s house in Damietta. ‘Many came in and took their places on the side-seats, uninvited and yet unchallenged. They spoke to those at table on business or the news of the day, and our host spoke freely to them’. Bernard beautifully says: ‘Thanks to thee, most blessed sinner: thou hast shown the world a safe enough place for sinners — the feet of Jesus, which spurn none, reject none, repel none, and receive and admit all.’ “[Vincent, *Word Studies*] “That she was permitted to enter this home at all is, *in a way*, not so strange. It was not at all unusual for uninvited persons to enter a home in which a dinner was being given. They would generally seat themselves along the wall, observe everything that was happening and even engage some of the invited guests in conversation. Nevertheless, that this particular woman, widely known as a ‘sinner’ had the courage to enter the home of a *strict Pharisee*, that was something else. **The only way we can explain it is by assuming that the urge within her to express gratitude to Jesus was so irresistible that nothing could stop her from doing what she wanted to do.**” [Hendriksen, *Luke*]

Note the **evidence of genuine repentance:** although she originally came to anoint the feet of Jesus with something precious and expensive (a commendable action in itself), she hesitates and is overcome with emotion. Trusting the simplicity of the narrative we can assume what happens next was totally unexpected since tears are not something which come at will. “Over-whelming sorrow for past sin is mingled with profound gratitude for the present sense of forgiveness. Her heart is full to overflowing with love and reverence for the One who has opened her eyes and has brought about a radical change in her life. Result: she bursts into tears. This ‘heart water’ (Luther) drops down on the feet of Jesus. Impulsively she does what in those days no woman was supposed to do in public: she loosens her tresses. Then, bending down with her hair thus let down, she, while continually weeping, keeps on wiping Jesus’ feet, kissing them, and from the already broken jar pouring perfume upon them.” [Hendriksen, *Luke*]

wash His feet with her tears: “More literally and better, as Rev., *wet*, as with rain.” [Vincent, *Word Studies*]. “She began to water his feet — to let a shower of tears fall on them. As the Jews wore nothing like our shoes (theirs being a mere sole, bound about the foot and ankle with thongs), their feet being so much exposed had frequent need of washing, and this they ordinarily did before taking their meals.” [Clarke, *Commentary*]

wipe His feet with her hair: “In order to duly appreciate this act we must remember that among the Jews it was one of the greatest humiliations for a woman to be seen in public with her hair down.” [Godet, *Luke*]

kissed His feet: *to caress, to kiss tenderly and repeatedly, to kiss with affectionate tenderness.* “The kiss was used in ancient times as the emblem of love, religious reverence, subjection, and supplication. It has the meaning of supplication, in the way of adoration, accompanied with subjection, in 1 Kings 19:18, *Whose mouths have not kissed Baal*; and in Job 31:27, *My mouth hath not kissed my hand; I have paid no sort of adoration to false gods*; and in Psalm 2:12, *Kiss the Son lest he be angry, — close in with him, embrace affectionately, the offers of mercy made unto you through Christ Jesus, lest He (the Lord) be angry with you, and ye perish*: which commandment this woman seems to have obeyed, both in the literal and spiritual sense. Kissing the feet was practiced also among the heathens, to express subjection of spirit, and earnest supplication.... Kissing the feet is a farther proof that this person had been educated a heathen. This was no part of a Jew’s practice.” [Clarke, *Commentary*]

7:39 Now when the Pharisee which had bidden Him saw it, he spake within himself, saying, This man, if He were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth Him: for she is a sinner. : being a typical Pharisee,

Simon is greatly offended at such action. Limited by his own self-righteousness, he immediately forms the wrong conclusion concerning the situation and assumes his wondering whether Jesus was a prophet to have been answered. “The form of expression here employed is to this effect — ‘If He were a prophet — but that cannot be.’” [Brown, *JFB Commentary*] **Many delight in their own misconceptions concerning Jesus because it is easier to continue with the erroneous thoughts than to look inward to self and deal with our own sinfulness.** Unfortunately this is often as applicable to the saved as well as the lost.

7:40-43 And Jesus answering said unto him, Simon, I have somewhat to say unto thee. And he saith, Master, say on. There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most? Simon answered and said, I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most. And He said unto him, Thou hast rightly judged. : “ ‘I have now discovered this man: if he were what he gives himself forth to be, he would not have suffered a wretch like this to come near him; but plainly he knows nothing about her, and therefore he can be no prophet.’ Not so fast, Simon; thou hast not seen through thy Guest yet, but He hath seen through thee. Too courteous to expose him nakedly at his own table, He couches His home-thrusts, like Nathan with David, in the first instance under the veil of a parable, and makes him pronounce both the woman’s vindication and his own condemnation; and then He lifts the veil.” [Brown, *JFB Commentary*] The errors Jesus’ corrects by way of parable are as follows:

- Jesus is fully aware of her past history and her present condition
- Jesus even knows what Simon has been thinking within himself
- Jesus therefore vindicates Himself as a prophet that Simon now believes He is not
- Jesus is more than a prophet: by His ability to discern the hearts and minds of others shows Jesus to be divine and therefore has the authority to forgive sins

The parable is straightforward: two men were in debt to a moneylender. One debtor owed him the equivalent to almost a year and 2/3 wages, the other owed him the equivalent to two month’s wages (a denarii was typically a day’s wages; one owed 500 denarii and the other 50). Neither had any to pay and the moneylender graciously canceled the debt of both. Jesus then asked Simon who would love him more and Simon correctly answered the debtor who owed him more.

Both debtors were equally unable to pay their debt, indicative of the fact **all sinners are equally unable to satisfy the just demands of a holy God.** There are those who in our eyes are “moral” while others seem to be the incarnation of sin itself. *To the Lord however all are equally incapable of paying for their sins.* “Simon, the religious Pharisee, could no more pay his fifty to God than this poor heathen her five hundred; and, if both be not freely forgiven by the Divine mercy, both must finally perish. Having NOTHING to PAY, he kindly FORGAVE them both.” [Clarke, *Commentary*]

As sinners are portrayed as debtors, the Lord is portrayed as the One to whom the debt is owed. Our sins have violated the holiness of God and He alone is our Creditor.

Note Simon’s spirit of indifference, real or feigned. Perhaps wondering what Jesus was trying to prove, he says “*I take it, I suppose, I assume...*”. **While Simon called Jesus “Master” with his lips, in his heart Simon was still the master.**

7:44-46 And He turned to the woman, and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest Me no water for My feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head. Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet. My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment. : Jesus’ compassion shines forth here as always. Jesus does not condemn Simon although every action he has taken has been motivated by typical Pharisee self-righteousness. Rather than speaking outrightly against Simon’s thoughts Jesus attempts to *teach* Simon the error of his way. Rather than magnifying the incidence, Jesus speaks gently to win Simon rather than to drive him away (note Jesus omits that He was invited when He came to Simon’s house). **God welcomes all sinners to Himself.**

Normal Oriental custom would have demanded the host provide water to wash the feet of Jesus (Gen 18:4; Jud 19:21), would have welcomed Jesus with a kiss (Gen 29:13; 45:15; Ex 18:7), and would have anointed his head even if it were with cheap olive oil (Ps 23:5; 141:5). This would have been especially true of an invited and honored guest, yet the reception Jesus received was cold, patronizing and discourteous. “Anointing the head with oil was as common among the Jews as washing the face with water is among us. See Ruth 3:3; 2 Sam 12:20; 14:2; 2 Kings 4:2; and Ps 23:5, where the author alludes to the Jewish manner of receiving and entertaining a guest.” [Clarke, *Commentary*] **Note the practice of Christianity does not exclude social graces. Professing believers can at times be rude and often use scripture to justify their rudeness.**

Jesus shows that in every respect the repentant “sinful woman” gave Him the treatment expected of by Simon:

- **repentance:** instead of water for Jesus’ feet, the woman wiped the feet of Jesus with her tears
- **gratitude:** instead of a kiss on the cheek, the woman repeatedly kissed the feet of Jesus
- **sacrifice:** instead of cheap olive oil, the woman anointed precious and fragrant perfume

Is the implication that Simon was saved as well? While the parable indicated both debtors were forgiven, Jesus’ comments here makes it evident Simon was not the true counter-part of his parable representative. The emphasis of the entire narrative is *true forgiven faith shows forth by our love of the Lord:* where was the love when Simon failed to wash the feet of Jesus? Where was

the love when Simon did not greet his honored guest with the customary kiss on the cheek? Where was the love then Simon refused even the common olive oil to anoint the head of Christ? “What evidence did the one afford of any feeling which forgiveness prompts? But what beautiful evidence of this did the other furnish! ... The inference is plain — only one of the debtors was really forgiven, though ... the forgiveness of both is supposed in the parable.” [Brown, *JFB Commentary*] “From the words of Christ, therefore, we are not at liberty to infer, that Simon had been a debtor to a small amount, or that he was absolved from guilt. It is more probable that, as he was a blind hypocrite, he was still plunged in the filth of his sins.” [Calvin, *Harmony*]

since the time I came in: “Jesus thereby reminds Simon of the moment when He came under his roof, and when He had a right to expect those marks of respect and affection which had been neglected. The woman had followed Jesus so closely that she had all but entered with Him; there she was, the moment He was set at the table, to pay Him homage.” [Godet, *Luke*]

ceased: “Only here in New Testament. Common in medical language, meaning *to be intermittent, and to discontinue giving remedies for a time.*” [Vincent, *Word Studies*]

7:47 Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little. : Jesus turns the situation around. Simon regarded himself as righteous, forgiven (if there was a need of forgiveness), and looked upon the woman as a sinner, unforgiven. Jesus shows that by his lack of love is proof of him never having been forgiven (the inference behind “little is forgiven”). **Genuine humble love for Christ (and therefore to God) is evidence of true forgiveness.** The outpouring of love results from the sense of having been forgiven.

“How should we understand the words, ‘for she loved much’? **Is love, according to Jesus, the cause of forgiveness?** Catholic interpreters and even many Protestants understand the words in this sense: God forgives us much when we love much; little, if we love little. But,

- In this case there is no coherence whatever between the parable and its application. On this principle, Jesus should not have asked, v42, ‘Which of them *will* love Him most’? but, ‘Which then *loved* Him most’? The remission of the two debts of such different amounts *would result* from the different degrees of love in the two debtors; while, on the contrary, it is the difference between the debts remitted which produces the different amount of gratitude.
- There would be, if possible, a more striking incoherence still between the first part of the application, v47a, and the second, v47b: ‘To whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.’ To be logical, Jesus should have said precisely the contrary: ‘Who loves little, to him little is forgiven.’
- The words, *Thy faith hath saved thee* (v50), clearly shows what, in Jesus’ view, was the principle on which forgiveness was granted to this woman; it was faith, not love.

We must not forget that *hoti* (ὅτι), because, frequently expresses, just as our *for* does, not the relation of the effect to its cause, but the relation (purely logical) of the proof to the thing proved. We may say, It is light, for the sun is risen; but we may also say, The sun is risen, for (I say this because) it is light. So in this passage the *because*, *for* may, and according to what precedes and follows, *must* mean: ‘I say unto thee that her many sins are forgiven, *as thou must infer from this*, that she loved much.’ “ [Godet, *Luke*] “The ‘for’ here is plainly *evidential* and means ‘*inasmuch as*’ or ‘*seeing that*’. Her love was not the *cause* but the *proof* of her forgiveness.” [Brown, *JFB Commentary*]

Is it necessary to have sinned deeply to love much? The emphasis which could be lost here if we are not careful is the depth of depravity of all men; therefore **what is missing from the best of us is not sin but the knowledge of our sins.** “Loved much — loveth little: that is, **a man’s love to God will be in proportion to the obligations he feels himself under to the bounty of his Maker.**” [Clarke, *Commentary*]

7:48-50 And He said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven. And they that sat at meat with Him began to say within themselves, Who is this that forgiveth sins also? And He said to the woman, Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace. : “What the woman already knew in principle is now reaffirmed. In view of her past life in sin she probably needed this reassurance, so that what she already sensed is true — hence, her great outpouring of love — might become even more firmly established in her heart, namely, that once for all and completely her sins had been and were now blotted out.” [Hendriksen, *Luke*]

Note the importance of the word of God: emotion is not enough for full assurance. **We might subjectively feel forgiven yet ultimately our confidence rests objectively upon the words of Christ for our eternal deliverance from sin.**

Jesus’ statement provoked resentment from those at the table, undoubtedly mostly Pharisees. They were shocked at Jesus’ presumption to assume to be able to forgive sins. Jesus’ statement was therefore not only for the sake of the woman but for the Pharisees as well. **“While the Pharisee murmured, the poor penitent rejoiced.”** [Clarke, *Commentary*]

Whether this was merely thought or spoken is not clear from the narrative since *within themselves* could also be translated *among themselves*. “Within themselves: better, *among themselves*, as Rev., in margin.” [Vincent, *Word Studies*] “But so far from receding from this claim, or softening it down, our Lord only repeats it with two precious additions: one, announcing what was the secret of the ‘forgiveness’ she had experienced and which carried ‘salvation’ in its bosom — her ‘faith’; the other, a glorious dismissal of her in that ‘peace’ which she had already felt but is now assured she has His full warrant to enjoy!” [Brown, *JFB Commentary*]

her faith saved her: “Is it not marvelous that Jesus, in addressing this woman, says nothing about His own power and love, the root cause of her present state of salvation, but makes mention of that which apart from Him she would neither have possessed nor have been able to exercise?” [Hendriksen, *Luke*]

go in peace: literally go into peace, go into the assured and abiding enjoyment of the peace of a pardoned state, go in peace and to enjoy peace.