
JESUS AND THE SINFUL WOMAN

A Sermon on Luke 7:36-50

Christi-An Clifford Bennett

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As far as anyone knew Simon had always been a good man. He had studied the Scriptures and the rabbinical writings carefully. He had attended synagogue every Sabbath and had gone to Jerusalem to present sacrifices every festival day. Simon had meticulously tithed his produce to the Lord, right down to the smallest herbs in his garden. He had been careful to maintain a good public image, to model a life of law-keeping to the community. Simon sat on the synagogue board and gave moral leadership to his community. Simon was proud of his efforts. Surely God was proud of him, too. Simon felt no shame; he could hold his head high in any company.

When this new prophet, Jesus, came to town, He intrigued Simon. Jesus seemed so common, and yet He spoke with such authority. He was a simple carpenter's son, and yet He taught like the most learned rabbi. Simon was intrigued, but not humbled. So Simon invited this prophet, this Jesus, to his home for a meal. This sort of meal was a public affair. Anyone could wander in and observe the proceedings. Jesus was technically the guest of honor. This was a chance for Simon to examine this strange rabbi a little more closely. But Jesus was still just a commoner, just a carpenter's son. Simon would feed Him, but he would not go overboard in honoring Him. He would not take the role of a servant and wash Jesus' feet. He would not treat Jesus as an honored celebrity by anointing His head with oil. Simon would feed

Jesus and converse with Him; that is all. Simon felt no need to humble himself in the presence of Jesus. After all, Simon was a Pharisee. He was Jesus' social equal, if not His superior.

As far as anyone knew, she had always been a sinful woman. "Sinful" is the polite word for what she was. "Shame" is the word for what she felt. Everyone knew she was shameful and worthless, and she knew it best of all. So she lived out her shame the best she could, dressed it up in fancy clothes and rich ornaments and tried to make a living out of it. Some kind of living. Every day she felt more dirty and worthless than the day before. No matter how many ornaments she wore, she still felt naked and shamed. Respectable people crossed the street to get away from her. She wished she could cross the street to get away from herself. But shame was her lot in life and she could not get away from it.

Then Jesus came to town, a respectable man who was not afraid of sinners. He preached words of hope. He told people to "Go and sin no more," and suddenly they were set free from their shame and bondage. One time when He was preaching, Jesus looked her right in the eye. It was not an accusing look. It was not a look that undressed her. It was a look that said, "I love you, I value you and I want to give you life." That was the day she gave her shame away and began a new life of purity and dignity. She put her faith in the love of Jesus and her life was forever changed. For the first time in her life she felt dressed and dignified. Oh, the respectable people still thought of her as "that sinful woman" and they still crossed the street to avoid her. But that was okay. Jesus had looked at her with love and respect and whatever other people thought, she knew her shame was gone.

When the woman heard that Jesus was having dinner at Simon's house, she determined to find a way to thank Him and honor Him. She knew how the other guests would stare and whisper, but she was determined to honor Jesus anyway. She reached up on the shelf and pulled down her precious, very expensive jar of perfumed oil, tucked

it into her cloak, and hurried down to Simon's house. There was Jesus, leaning on the table as was the custom, His legs stretched out beside Him on the floor. She would not disturb His meal; she would not be so bold as to anoint His head. No, she would take the servant's place and feel honored to do so. And so she approached Jesus' feet with the perfume. She was so overwhelmed with gratitude as she drew near Him that she began to weep and her tears spilled onto His feet. She unpinned her hair, something a proper Jewish woman would never do in public, and carefully wiped the tears away. She had no thought for herself, no concern about the spectacle she was making. All she could see was Jesus. All she could think of was how He had clothed her with dignity and holiness, how He had freed her from the chains of shame. Nothing was too good for Him, no expression of love too rich. She kissed those precious feet and anointed them with perfume.

Simon was appalled. How could Jesus allow a woman with such a sinful past to come anywhere near him? Obviously Jesus was not the prophet people thought He was. But Jesus didn't worry over the woman's sinful past. He saw her loving heart. And so Jesus told a story of debt and love and gratitude. One man owed a money lender 500 days' wages; another owed the money lender 50 days' wages. The lender forgave both debts. Which one loved him most for that forgiveness? The lesson was clear; this woman who had been forgiven much for her many sins loved Jesus immensely more than Simon did. Simon, in fact, had not sought Jesus' forgiveness for any of his sins as far as we know. He had not even humbled himself so much as to wash Jesus' feet or anoint His head. Simon had very little, if any, love to spare for Jesus.

What's going on here? Did Simon not need forgiving? Only in Simon's own mind. Four chapters later, in Luke 11: 39, Jesus speaks these words, "Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness." Simon had a carefully groomed public image, while the woman had a hopelessly soiled public image. But the woman had a heart open to hear God's

voice, while Simon had a heart closed to God's voice. Inside Simon's heart, pride, greed, envy, and hateful anger seethed, but it could not be forgiven because he refused to humble himself. He refused to place his faith in Christ. Instead, Simon put his faith in his own so-called righteousness. That is what is called "self-righteousness."

The woman could not hide her sin and shame—it was too public, everyone knew about it. That is why she had no trouble admitting to it and submitting to Jesus for forgiveness. She had nothing to hide, no dignity to protect. But Simon's sin was hidden. Simon's shame was private. Simon had succeeded in covering his sin with a public mask of respectability. That made it very difficult for Simon to submit to Jesus for forgiveness or for anything else. He had too much pride at stake, too much dignity to lose. Simon's heart was so filled with self-righteousness that there was no room in it for love.

Simon the respectable Pharisee remained unforgiven. But hear the blessed words of Jesus to the woman, "Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

How wonderful it is to go in peace and leave all our sin and shame at Jesus' feet. We don't have to live in it anymore. It doesn't have to control us and drag us down. It doesn't have to eat away at our insides. It doesn't have to determine our identity for eternity. Jesus heals the broken; He clothes the naked. In the place of shame, He gives dignity. In the place of emptiness, He gives the fullness of love. Praise the Lord!

Statisticians in the US estimate that one out of every four women in my country was abused as a child. Other statistics estimate that there are over 50,000 child prostitutes in the county of the Philippines—both girls and boys, most of whom were forced into that shameful life-style. An adult life of prostitution too often begins with a child life of abuse and exploitation. I imagine our sinful woman's shame began in her childhood. That is Satan's way. He wants to

clothe people with shame as children, and then he wants to make them think that that is all they are worth as adults. Satan uses that shame to chain so many people—to chain them to alcohol and drugs, to chain them to pornography, to chain them to overspending or anger or illegitimate sexual relationships. Like the woman in this story, people desperately seek to dress up their shame, to find love and acceptance or at least escape and forgetfulness. But the more they fight to dress it up, the more that shame slaps them down. The harder we try to rewrite our own stories and clothe ourselves, the more the shame asserts itself. It seems inescapable. It leaves a person feeling so powerless.

Until we look Christ in the eye. It takes a while because we are practiced at avoiding direct eye contact. But He is there looking at us and waiting. And there is something remarkable about the way He looks at us. It is clear that He sees our shame, but that is not what He is looking at. His look is a look of love. It is a look that actually dresses us, a look that clothes us with dignity and holiness. And in that moment that our eyes meet His, we feel Him take our shame on Himself and give us dignity in return. That is what Jesus wants to do for us if we will only look Him in the eye.

Too often, though, instead of putting our faith in Christ like the woman, too many of us follow Simon's example and mistakenly put our faith in our own efforts at righteousness. We see Christian holiness as a long list of do's and don't's. Do go to church every time the doors are open, attend all-night prayer meetings and read five chapters of the Bible every day. Do take five classes, pastor a church and report a 20 percent increase in membership every year. Do tithe, give to the missionary offering and dress respectably. Don't smoke, drink, use bad language, gamble or go to movies, and don't hang around with those who do. Those are all good enough things, but too often they become a badge of spiritual pride that we wear on the outside to prove that we are better Christians than the Presbyterians or

Methodists, better even than the Nazarene sitting next to us. Too often, instead of being the fruit of a deep inner faith in Christ, those do's and don't's become brave attempts to mask the shame we feel over our own spiritual failures. Like Simon, it becomes hard for us to lavish our love on the Lord, because we are too busy trying to prove to Him that we are worthy of His attention.

When we put on Pharisaical robes of self-righteousness, we have a hard time loving God. Instead we find ourselves holding back on God. We even find ourselves trying to control God by offering our pitiful attempts at holiness in exchange for His favor. See all I am doing for You, God? Now don't You think You should do something for me? Do we really think we can establish *utang na loob*^{*} with God? Is that what holiness is?

When we put on Pharisaical robes of self-righteousness, we have a hard time loving God. When we have a hard time loving God, we also have a hard time loving those lost ones that Christ loves so much. We demand that they earn our love the same way we are trying to earn God's love. We become the Accuser in other's lives, just as Simon became in that woman's life—making ourselves the judges of who does and does not deserve God's grace. Self-righteousness makes it difficult for us to reach out to those lost people whom Jesus loves. It makes it uncomfortable for us to share Jesus with those people who aren't quite respectable, those whose shame is very public. In fact, self-righteousness can make us judgmental even toward our own brothers and sisters in the faith, just as Simon was judgmental toward Jesus. That is when holiness becomes a legalism that shuts people out of the kingdom instead of drawing them into the kingdom.

^{*}A debt of obligation established when one person does a favor for another.

But that is not true holiness. True holiness is what Jesus gave to that sinful woman when she looked into His eyes. Holiness is what Jesus gave to that sinful woman when He said, “Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” That is the holiness I need, a holiness of grace. I look into my own heart and I see my own sins. I see the many times when I have complained and whined instead of thanking God for His great and gracious gifts. I see the bitterness I have often harbored in my heart against people Christ loves. I see the moments of craving for human applause. I see the people I have wounded with thoughtless words. I see it all. I see it more than anyone else could. Jesus sees it, too, but instead of exposing my failings to the world, He, in His great love for me, has buried it all in the sea of forgetfulness. He has forgiven all my debt and set me free to serve Him. He has clothed me with strength and dignity. He has clothed me with His own righteousness. How could I help but pour out my life in love for Him when He has been so kind to me?

True holiness is the deep love that rose up in the heart of that humble woman who interrupted Simon’s dinner. Holiness is what prompted her to pour her most precious perfume on Jesus’ feet. Holiness is not a list of do’s and don’t’s that proves to God that we are worthy of His love. Holiness is a response of grateful love from a soul that knows it is utterly unworthy of Christ’s kindness. If you want to be clothed in true holiness, do not follow the example of proud, legalistic Simon the Pharisee. Nazarene works-righteousness has no more saving power than Catholic works-righteousness or Pharisee works-righteousness. It will not do to exchange the works-righteousness of the confession box for a works-righteousness of the prayer mountain.

If you want to be clothed in true holiness, follow the example of the sinful woman with a heart full of loving gratitude. Confess your failure to reach Christ’s standard; look into His eyes and feel His forgiveness. Continually pour your grateful love on His feet. Don’t worry about being respectable. I can still picture old Brother Lowry, running around the tabernacle at campmeeting. He couldn’t sit still.

He would run, wave his handkerchief and shout, “Hallelujah!” Brother Lowry wasn’t worried about being respectable. Christ had forgiven Him, and he was too grateful to keep quiet and proper. Don’t worry about being respectable and dignified. Jesus is your dignity. He has taken your shame on Himself! Be outrageously extravagant in *your* response of love to Jesus. Humble *yourself*, love sinners, raise eyebrows—pour out your very best on Jesus’ feet. Hold nothing back. Love Him with all your heart, mind, soul, strength, and even with all your perfume.