HER GREAT LOVE

Luke 7:36–8:3

Key Verse: 7:47

“Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”

In last week's passage the ordinary people, even the tax collectors, could see God’s way of salvation through John the Baptist and Jesus. It was because they’d repented. But the religious experts were critical of both John and Jesus; they missed God’s salvation and purpose for their lives. It was because they hadn’t repented. Without repentance, despite all their knowledge, they remained spiritually blind. In today’s passage Luke develops this contrast further, through the story of Simon the Pharisee and a sinful woman. This woman is not to be confused with Mary of Bethany, a socially prominent young woman who anointed Jesus just before his death in Jerusalem (Jn11:1–2,18–19,31,45; 12:3,7; cf. Mt26:6–7; Mk14:3). No, this happened a few years earlier, in Galilee, before Jesus made his long final journey to Jerusalem. The woman in our passage today remains nameless, and the meaning is much more developed here. In fact, it’s a masterpiece of Luke’s Gospel. And at the start of chapter 8, there’s a unique name list of women who served Jesus out of their own means. Luke, more than any of the other Gospels, emphasizes the importance of women in ministry. Today we want to find out why all these women were serving Jesus. We especially want to learn how to appreciate God’s forgiveness, and how this affects how we serve him. May God speak to us through his word.

Look at verse 36. A Pharisee invited Jesus to dinner. At first it doesn’t seem like such a big deal. But it’s surprising, because until now the Pharisees really didn’t like Jesus. Pharisees were super-strict and wanted everybody to obey God’s Law absolutely. It was kind of good. The problem was, they’d lost the spirit of the Law (10:26–28); they had no real love for God or for people. So they saw everyone with critical eyes. They were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else (18:9). They even looked at Jesus like this. When he told a paralytic, “Friend, your sins are forgiven,” they thought, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (5:21). When he called Levi, they complained to the disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and ‘sinners’?” (5:30). When he and his disciples were eating and drinking at Levi’s house, they criticized him for not teaching his disciples to fast and pray (5:31). When they caught them picking and eating heads of grain on a Sabbath, they condemned him (6:2). When he healed a man with a shriveled hand on a Sabbath, in direct defiance of *them*, they were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to him (6:6–11). In light of all this, it’s pretty surprising that a Pharisee would invite Jesus to dinner. We don’t know why. Though he was a Pharisee, maybe Jesus’ ministry intrigued him. Or maybe he was hoping Jesus would cut loose at dinner, eating and drinking; then he could catch him doing something wrong. It’s also pretty surprising that Jesus accepted his invitation.

Look at verses 37–38. A very unusual woman came to that dinner. Luke says she’d lived a sinful life. It probably means she’d been a town prostitute, or at least a well-known loose woman. In modern terms, she was like a woman who’d had a lot of work done to her face, teeth and body and starred in sleazy films. She certainly wasn’t the kind of lady a Pharisee would invite to dinner. So how did she come? Luke says she learned that Jesus was having dinner there, so she invited herself. It’s said that at that time, when they hosted large meals, well-off people were supposed to allow the poor to come to their homes. But this woman didn’t come because of the free food. Why *did* she come? She wanted to get close to Jesus. But why? Maybe she’d heard of his reputation as a friend of sinners and that he forgave sins, and having lived a sinful life, she wanted his forgiveness. But in light of the whole story, it’s more likely that after hearing him speak somewhere or encountering him or his disciples she’d already received his forgiveness. She came because she really wanted to thank him for his amazing forgiveness. But appearing at a Pharisee’s house, in front of everyone, must have been so hard! She knew those people would never in a million years welcome her. But she came there by faith, believing Jesus would accept her.

Look at verse 37b. She brought an alabaster jar of perfume. It was a long-necked bottle, containing, most likely, strongly scented oil. It was kind of weird to bring this to a dinner. But she wasn’t bringing it for herself; she had a plan to anoint Jesus. We’re not sure how she got into the house—maybe disguised, incognito. As soon as Jesus entered, she followed him to the lit dinner table. In their culture, dinner tables were low to the ground, and people lay on cushions with their feet pointing away from the table. The woman couldn’t dare sit at the table; she just stood behind Jesus, in the shadows, at his feet. She wanted to anoint him, but before she could do it, she found herself crying uncontrollably.

Look at verse 38 again. She was crying so much, her tears poured from her eyes down her face, and dripping off, began to wet his feet. The tears kept coming, so she started using them to wash his feet. What was she crying so much about? It isn’t immediately obvious. But it’s clear it’s because of his forgiveness. When she thought about his grace to forgive all her sins, she couldn’t stop crying. At that time, decent women kept their hair covered with some sort of fabric. But this woman unveiled her hair, let it down and began to use it as a towel to wipe his feet clean. In their culture that was outright scandalous. But to her, even her greatest glory as a woman—her hair (1Co11: 15)—was nothing but a towel for Jesus’ feet. After his feet were washed by her tears and wiped with her hair, she began to kiss them. Kissing his feet was an act of utmost reverence and love. Then she poured the perfumed oil on them. No words were spoken, but by her actions this woman said so much.

Look at verse 39. The Pharisee saw what she was doing; no doubt everyone else did too. To him, allowing such a woman to touch him would be disgusting. To him, it proved Jesus wasn’t a prophet. A prophet would know the kind of life she’d lived and would never let her do this. These thoughts exposed his way of thinking. All he could see was that she was a sinner. He couldn’t understand what her actions meant or why Jesus would allow it. He couldn’t understand her heart, or the heart of Jesus. Yes, Jesus let this woman touch him, wet his feet with her tears, wipe them with her hair, kiss them and pour her perfume on them. He didn’t judge her based on outward things; he understood her deeply. And he accepted her in front of everyone, even though it was pretty embarrassing. To do it, he didn’t mind being misunderstood.

Look at verses 40–43. Jesus immediately sensed the man’s thoughts. What did he do? To help him and everyone else there, Jesus taught a parable of two debtors. One man had a big debt canceled; the other, a small debt. Jesus asked, “Which man would love the moneylender more?” Simon the Pharisee said, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.” Jesus spoke to him on his level and said to him humbly, “You have judged correctly.”

“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. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet” (44–46). Jesus publicly contrasted the woman and Simon. And he said this woman was way better than Simon! Simon had invited Jesus to dinner, but in light of Jesus’ words, his attitude toward Jesus was all wrong. He'd done only the bare minimum, whereas this woman went all out. What he did was like Cain’s offering, and what she did was like Abel’s (Ge4). This woman had no means and no social position to invite Jesus to a big dinner party. Some may have been scowling or laughing at her, but regardless of what they thought, she did it out of real love.

Read verse 47. This is the punch line for his parable. It contains what he really wanted to teach, and it’s the climax of the passage. Jesus said this woman had “great love” for him. Hers wasn’t just an emotional love—though her emotions were obviously involved. Hers was a “great love” expressed with tears, humility, affection, the utmost respect and personal sacrifice. Why did she, of all the people there, have such great love for Jesus? Jesus said it clearly: it was because “her many sins **have been forgiven**.” Interesting. Her great love came from her experiencing great forgiveness.

Who gave her such great forgiveness? Jesus did. When she turned to him in faith, he forgave all her sins, because he has authority to do it (5:24a). It’s because he’s the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn1:29). He still gives people his great forgiveness. This is what the gospel is really all about: it’s the good news of the kingdom (8:1). The Bible repeatedly says Jesus is full of grace for sinners (Jn1:14,16; Lk7:34; 15:2; Ro5:8). We “all are justified freely by his grace” (Ro3:24). When we experience his grace, we can’t ***but*** love him back (1Jn4:19). Read verse 47 again. The woman’s great love for Jesus was a sign of the forgiveness she’d received. Likewise, those who’ve experienced his forgiveness more deeply love him more. Their service is more wholehearted, more genuine, more beautiful. Actually, things done out of true love for him are the only things that really last (1Co13).

But wait a minute. Does Jesus give more forgiveness to certain people, and less to others? No—his grace is universal. God gives his grace to all who repent and turn to Jesus in faith. In Acts 2:38–39 Peter said, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call” (cf. Ac10:43; 13:30; 15:11). The Bible says God’s forgiveness comes from the riches of his glorious grace that he lavishes on us (Eph1:6–8a; 2:7–8). God’s grace for each person is so great. It can cleanse and restore even the most sinful. Romans 5:20b says, “…but where sin increased, grace increased all the more.” When we live in this abounding grace, we thank and glorify God (2Co4: 15; cf. Gal1:6). Look at verse 47 again. The issue isn’t the amount of forgiveness God gives, but the depth of our appreciation of it. The more we appreciate his grace, the more we love him. The less we appreciate it, the less we love him.

But how can we appreciate God’s grace? Is it only for people who’ve wrecked their lives with immoral, destructive behavior? After all, Simon had lived a strict religious life, and this woman had lived a sinful life. But we don’t have to live a profligate life to appreciate God’s grace (Ro6:1,15). We just need to know the depth of our sin. It’s because sin isn’t just about outward actions or getting caught; sin starts in our hearts (Ge6:5). Some people try really hard to look their best—for a picture, at job interviews, on dates, meeting in-laws, or at important social or church functions. But God can see right through it all, because he knows our hearts. He knows us better than we know ourselves. We can’t hide anything from him. Our biggest problem in life isn’t a lack of money or friends or a bad situation, but that we really don’t know ourselves, and thus, we don’t really know God’s grace very well, either. How can we know ourselves? Often, we don’t even have a clue that what we’re thinking or saying, or how we’re behaving or living, is sinful. We need the light of God’s word to expose what’s in our hearts. We need the Holy Spirit to convict us. Most of all, we need to look long and hard at the cross of Jesus. There, we see the one who loved so much, he shed his blood and gave his life, even for ignorant and evil people, even for me, and it was my sins that drove him there. It’s ironic, but it's only as we come to see the blackness of the sin in our hearts that we can begin to see the light of God’s forgiveness. Paul wrote, “This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst” (1Ti1:15; cf. 1Co15:10). The most real Christians in history were people who were always striving to know the depth of their sin, yet the greatness of the grace of Jesus. In light of Jesus’ words here, it makes sense, because the more we appreciate his grace, the better we’ll serve him. So, honestly, how much are we appreciating his grace these days?

Today’s passage is also calling us all to examine how we’re serving him. We need to look at the facts and ask ourselves, “Am I serving him with ‘little love’?” When’s the last time I wept because of his forgiveness? When’s the last time I did something with all my heart for him, with a really thankful spirit, simply because he’s shown so much grace to me? This is what he’s really looking for.

Look at verses 48–50. Despite the critical atmosphere, Jesus told this woman publicly, “Your sins are forgiven.” Usually, those who’ve sinned a lot have a hard time being sure of God’s forgiveness. So Jesus gave this woman his word of promise: “Your sins are forgiven.” Though people began questioning him, he went on to tell her: “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” He recognized not only her love but also her faith. She had great faith to come in there and do what she did. It wasn’t her good deed that saved her, but her faith. Jesus wanted this woman not to live in guilt over her past, but to live with God’s peace in her soul.

Let’s read 8:1–3. There were more women who loved and served Jesus. Whether they’d been deeply disturbed, or empty and lonely, they’d experienced his forgiveness. So they started serving him, just like this woman, out of their own means, because they had hearts to really love him. These forgiven, loving women were most beautiful, and were at the core of his ministry. Many men think women are emotional and concerned with trivial things, and are pretty dismissive of them. But Jesus loved, respected and included women who knew his grace.

May God help us each grow in the awareness of his forgiveness, so that we can love and serve him wholeheartedly. May God also help us each learn to see others through Jesus’ eyes, based on his grace of forgiveness.