

The Two Debtors, the Sinful Woman, and the Paralytic

Ministry · August 1, 2010

Luke 7 — A Pharisee's House, and a Woman Who Was a Sinner

Luke 7:36–50 places the Lord Jesus in the house of a Pharisee named Simon. He had been invited to eat with him. A woman in the city who was a sinner learned that He was there, came in with an alabaster box of ointment, stood behind Him weeping, and began to wash His feet with her tears, wiping them with her hair, kissing His feet, and anointing them with the ointment. The Pharisee watched and said within himself: if this man were a prophet, he would know who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him, for she is a sinner. His conclusion was that the Lord's acceptance of the woman proved He did not know what she was.

The Lord answered him with a parable of two debtors. One owed five hundred pence, the other fifty. When they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Which will love him most? Simon answered: I suppose he to whom he forgave most. Thou hast rightly judged.

The parable is precise in its construction. Five hundred to fifty — a factor of ten. One owed much, one owed little. But the verse that matters most is verse 42: when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. There is no difference there. One owed much and had nothing to pay. One owed little and had nothing to pay. Having nothing to pay is having nothing to pay, regardless of whether the debt is large or small. The man who runs to the end of the dock and jumps as far as he can gets as wet as the man who simply steps off the edge into the water beside it. There is no difference before God among sinners on the

ground of the debt being larger or smaller. All have sinned. All come short. All have nothing to pay.

Nothing to Pay — and What That Means

This is the truth about every sinner before God. Men like to reason as though the smaller debt puts them in a better position. They say: yes, I have sinned, but not as badly as that man over there. Surely I am better placed before God than he is. But having nothing to pay is the same whether the debt is 50 or 500. The question before God is not the size of the debt but the ability to meet it. And the answer for every sinner is the same: nothing to pay.

In the Law of Moses, when a trespass was committed and someone suffered a loss, the sinner was to make it good and add a fifth — twenty per cent on top. If he stole five and had to pay it back, he paid five and then one more. But suppose he had nothing — not the five, not the extra one. Then what? The creditor in the parable made the only possible move: he frankly forgave them both. Freely. Without reservation. Not because they had managed to scrape together a partial payment. But because they had nothing, and the creditor had everything, and he simply cancelled the debt.

When they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. — Luke 7:42

The Woman's Love — the Evidence of What She Had Already Received

Having established the parable, the Lord turns to the woman. Simon had given Him no water for His feet. She had washed them with her tears. Simon had given Him no kiss of greeting. She had not ceased to kiss His feet since He came in. Simon had given Him no oil for His head. She had anointed His feet with costly ointment. The Lord's conclusion is not that her love earned the forgiveness — that would reverse the order of the parable entirely. The parable says the

forgiveness came first: he frankly forgave them. The love came after, as its fruit.

A woman's long hair in Scripture is her glory and a picture of the principle of submission. She took that glory and wiped the Lord's feet with it. Her tears were not theatrical — it would take a long time to cry enough tears to wash a foot, even when they fall fast. This was real. The love was real. But it was the fruit of forgiveness already known, not the condition of forgiveness yet to be received.

Then the Lord says to her: thy sins are forgiven. Her sins were already forgiven. So why does He say it again? Because it was the most wonderful thing He could say to her. It was exactly what her need had been. Nothing could be better. It is like the second address to the fathers in 1 John 2 — which repeats the same thing as the first, because there is nothing higher to say to them. They already had what cannot be surpassed. So He says it again: thy sins are forgiven. And then: thy faith hath saved thee. Go in peace. The love that the woman showed toward Christ, the honour and respect and worship at His feet, flowed from a soul that had already known forgiveness. And that is the love He looks for from us.

Luke 5 — The Paralytic, and What the Pharisees Could Not See

Luke 5:17–26 gives a companion scene. The Lord was teaching, and Pharisees and doctors of the law had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was present to heal them. That phrase is remarkable — it includes the Pharisees in those who needed healing, though they would have denied it completely. Four men carried a paralysed man to the Lord, and when they could not get through the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down through the tiles into the midst before Jesus.

Seeing their faith, the Lord said: Man, thy sins are forgiven thee. The scribes and Pharisees immediately reasoned within themselves: who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone? They were half right. Only God can forgive sins. No priest, no ceremony, no human institution has that

prerogative. But they completed their reasoning with the wrong conclusion: this man is not God, therefore what He says is blasphemy. They had started with an assumption — that the one before them was not God — and built their whole theology on it.

The Lord's answer was a question: which is easier to say, thy sins are forgiven thee, or rise up and walk? Neither was easier to speak in terms of the words. But the rising up and walking was visible proof that the forgiveness was real. He said thy sins are forgiven so that when the man rose up and walked, the testimony would be complete: the first statement was true. The man rose, took his couch, and went to his house glorifying God. And the people were filled with fear, saying: we have seen strange things today. That is the saddest line in the passage. Israel's God was working in their midst, and the power of God was a strange thing to them. Unbelief had so pervaded their lives that the very power of God to heal had become foreign. May it not be so with us.