

The Parables

Part 7 – The Two Debtors

Luke 7:36-50

The parable in this passage is quite short and used to illustrate the connection between forgiveness and gratitude. It is a simple parable. Two men were in debt to a moneylender. One owed the sum of fifty denarii, the other owed five hundred. When it became clear that neither debtor could pay, the moneylender chose to forgive the debt of both men. Jesus then asked the Pharisee a question the answer to which seemed obvious: “Which of them will love him more?”



It was clear that the Pharisee was not able to see what this woman had become because of her love for Jesus. All he could see was what the woman once was. To make the point even clearer Jesus pronounced the woman forgiven. It is important to understand that the woman was not forgiven because she loved Jesus. Rather, in keeping with the parable he just told, the woman loved Jesus because she was forgiven.

Well before the Apostle Paul so powerfully articulated justification by faith Jesus declared to the woman: “Your faith has saved you.” This is how God has always saved his people. From Adam and Eve who believed the promise of Genesis 3:15 to Abraham who believed the covenant promise of God to this sinful woman who believed and was saved.

Main Idea: We are all sinners who cannot pay the debt that our sins require. Our only hope is the forgiveness that only Jesus has the authority to grant.

- Vs. 36 – Not all the Pharisees were overtly hostile to the Lord. In fact to the very end there would be a few who would be among his followers. At this point some were still curious if not positively drawn to him on account of his teaching and his miracles.
- Vs. 37 – By identifying this woman as “a sinner” Luke probably means us to understand that she was a prostitute. She had obviously had some previous contact with Jesus – whether personal contact or simply as a member of the crowds that heard his teaching – and she obviously felt she owed some great debt to him. The “ointment” was liquid perfume, contained in a globe fitted with a long neck that was broken off when the contents were needed.
- Vs. 38 – Formal meals were taken with the host and guests reclining on low couches, leaning on the left arm, with the head toward the table and the body stretched out away from it. Sandals were removed beforehand, so the Lord’s feet were accessible to the woman. The description of her behavior is meant to indicate that she was oblivious to decorum or to anyone else in the room. Jewish women did not unbind their hair in public, much less use it as a towel in front of other people. Kissing feet was not unheard of, but it was hardly common.
- Vs. 39 – At this point it becomes clear why the Pharisee wanted Jesus as a guest in his home. He thought he might be a prophet of God which is what many were saying he was. After all, he had raised the dead as had Elijah and Elisha. Jesus also preached with the authority of a prophet. But Simon the Pharisee could not conceive of a prophet who would allow himself close contact with a woman such as this. This idea however did not come from the Bible. Elijah and Elisha frequently ministered to outsiders and to the sort of people Israelites in their day considered unwashed. This is a subtle but powerful indication of how different the worldview of the Pharisee was from the worldview actually taught in the Word of God.

- Vs. 41 – The *denarius* was the daily wage of a typical laborer.
- Vs. 42 – The reason the debt was cancelled was that the debtors couldn't pay. He was facing prison for non-payment and the lender simply cancelled the debt. Lenders don't usually do that!
- Vs. 43 – Simon's "I suppose" seems to be grudging acknowledgment. He realizes what the Lord is getting at.
- Vs. 46 – It is likely that these were things that might have been done but were by no means *expected* to be done for a guest. So, the contrast is between Simon's ordinary courtesy in inviting Jesus to dinner and the actions of this woman who went far beyond the norm to demonstrate her devotion to Jesus.
- Vs. 47 – The Lord is not minimizing the woman's sins – "they are many" he says – but says that they are forgiven. He doesn't mean that they are forgiven **because** she loved much, but, following the point of his little parable, her love demonstrates that she knows her many sins **had been** forgiven. Her great debt had been cancelled. She loved much because she had been forgiven much. The perfect tense of the verb "forgiven" also indicates that she was already in a state of forgiveness.
- On the other hand, "he who is forgiven little..." should not be pressed to mean that there are people so righteous that there is little for which they need forgiveness. Just as Simon was among those who didn't need a physician – that is, didn't **think** he needed a physician –, just as he was among the 99 sheep that weren't lost – that is, didn't **think himself lost** – so Simon didn't imagine he needed much in the way of forgiveness either.
- Vs. 48 – Again, the perfect tense of the Greek verb translated "are forgiven" indicates that the woman is not receiving forgiveness for the first time, but has it already. That the state of forgiveness began for her at some point in the past and continues into the present is the idea.
- Vs. 49 – Jesus' claim to have authority to forgive sins brought accusations of blasphemy from the Pharisees at the time of the healing of the paralyzed man in chapter 5. Here, he doesn't explicitly **say** that he forgave the woman's sins, but she obviously thought that he was the source of her blessing.
- Vs. 50 – The verb "has saved" is again a perfect: it is not at this moment that she was saved; she was saved before. He is reassuring her.

What we learn about repentance from the woman's example:

1. True repentance is expressed in sorrow for the offense committed.

2. True repentance is expressed in love for the one offended.

3. True repentance offers restitution for damage done.

4. True repentance is willing to believe in grace.