

**In the Name of the Father, and of the + Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen**

It's a meal that really isn't about the meal at all. It's about power and status and measuring the other. Simon is a Pharisee, a man committed to the belief that he is worthy of God's love because of his good works and careful keeping of the Law. He lives by a strict code, and judges others by the same rules. That's why he's invited Jesus to be his guest that day: he's heard about this teacher, and he wants to know more. He wants to eat with this teacher, hear what He says and see what He does-see if this Jesus is up to the task of keeping the law and living the life of the Pharisee.

So while Jesus eats, He's under the magnifying glass of Simon and his fellow, Pharisaical friends. Simon's got a pretty high opinion of himself: He's arrogant enough to believe that he's worthy of Jesus' presence, but he doesn't stop there. No, he's wondering if Jesus is worthy to be in his presence. So far, his treatment of Jesus is decidedly neutral, because his dinner guest sits at the table without the courtesies of a kiss of greeting, a customary anointing of oil, or the courtesy of having the dirt of the road washed from His feet. As Simon measures Jesus, he's sending a message: This is a meeting of equals; and if they're not equal, then Simon (as the host) is the one who is superior.

How the woman gets into the house, we'll never know. But there she is at Jesus' feet, with all of her shameful reputation intact. This woman is not about power lunches and proving her worth. Instead, she's openly weeping, and she directs her tears onto Jesus' feet. Once they're washed, she humbly dries them with her hair; then she opens an alabaster of fragrant oil and anoints His feet.

For Simon, the unhappy intrusion is one to use to his advantage, for he can use Jesus' response to this woman to judge his worthiness. He quickly decides, *"This man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner."* Simon wouldn't go near a woman like this, lest some of her sinful past rub off on him and make him unclean. Therefore, he has made his decision about Jesus: Jesus isn't much of a prophet or a teacher if He's ignorant enough to let a woman like this touch him. He's certainly not Savior-material. At this rate, Simon's going to go to bed feeling pretty good about himself; he had the smug kindness to invite this Jesus to his home for food, and it turns out that he's better than this upstart teacher.

But Simon has got it all wrong, and Jesus isn't one to leave him in his ignorance and sin; so He tells a short parable: *"There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more?"* (Lk. 7:41-42). Simon isn't stupid, so he says, *"I suppose the one whom he forgave more."* To which Jesus responds, *"You have rightly judged."*

Then He turns to the woman and says to Simon, *"Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has washed My feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head. You gave Me no kiss, but this woman has not ceased to kiss My feet since the time I came in. You did not*

*anoint My head with oil, but this woman has anointed My feet with fragrant oil. Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little."* (Lk. 7:44-47).

This turns Simon's world completely on its head, because Simon's world is all about self-righteousness. The one who sins the least is the most worthy. Of the three in the text, he puts the woman at the bottom of the list, because everyone knows she hasn't even tried to live a righteous life. Jesus takes a distant second; because while He may not have the same scandalous reputation, He's willing to associate with the woman. That puts Simon at the top of the list, because he's the one who's staying farthest away from public sin and public sinners.

But Jesus speaks a different measure, one of repentance. Because, as the Scriptures declare, there is no one righteous and all have sinned, it isn't about self-righteousness. It's about *repentance*. It's about contrition for sin and trust in the Savior, because those who are repentant are forgiven-and those who are forgiven are made righteous by God. This alters things completely. Jesus, of course, is the most righteous of them all, because He is the sinless Son of God, become flesh to die for the sins of the world; and yet He will become the least righteous, for God will make Him to be sin so that we might be delivered. Much to the Pharisee's horror, Jesus declares that the woman is righteous and forgiven, because she is truly repentant of her sin. According to Jesus, Simon is the least righteous of the three: Simon sees no need for forgiveness, because he's thinking he's righteous on his own; that puts him at the bottom, impenitent and unforgiven. He's proud enough to wonder if Jesus is worthy to sit at his table, and he's decided that the Lord of heaven and earth just doesn't measure up.

Thus the Lord provides us with this text to warn us of self-righteousness, to call us to repentance and trust in Him. Be careful, though, for many have tried to twist this passage to say that Jesus was teaching salvation by works and self-righteousness. The argument goes like this: Simon remains sinful because he fails to serve Jesus. On the other hand, Jesus forgives the woman because she washes His feet with her tears, dries them with her hair and anoints them with oil. Because of these good works, it is said, she earns the Savior's forgiveness.

But the text won't let you get away with that: Remember the parable Jesus has told Simon about the two debtors. He doesn't say that the debtor who owes much loves the creditor so that the creditor will forgive the debt. The debtor loves the creditor because his great debt is already forgiven. So it is with this woman: She doesn't weep and wash Jesus' feet in the hopes that He might be the forgiving Savior, but because she already trusts that He is! She is not seeking to earn forgiveness, but acting as one who has already been forgiven. We conclude that she has heard Jesus speak before; otherwise, how would she be drawn to Him? So, when Jesus says, *"her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much"*, He is not saying that her acts of love have earned forgiveness. Rather, He declares that she loves much because she has been forgiven. When He says to her, *"Your sins are forgiven,"* He declares that she remains in His grace. When He says, *"Your faith has saved you. Go in peace"*, He declares that the faith which He gave her by His Word has come with forgiveness, and she departs as His beloved child.

With this Gospel lesson, our Lord calls upon us to shun all self-righteousness, confess our sins, and trust in Him. And as He does so, He gives us some important Law by which to examine ourselves: But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little.

*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also* (Matt. 6:21), says the Lord. You pursue those things that you need-or think you need, or at least want. If you need forgiveness, you will love forgiveness-and the Savior who freely offers it to you.

And so our Lord speaks to us this painful point of Law: If we do not earnestly desire and love the forgiveness He has won, we demonstrate that we don't need that forgiveness-or at least we don't think we do. This lack of love indicates a self-righteousness on our part; for the more we understand our debt of sin, the more we will crave the forgiveness Christ has won.

To whom little is forgiven, the same loves little.

This Law clearly and poignantly demonstrates our sinfulness and unworthiness before God. Our lack of love for God's grace puts us in the camp of Simon the Pharisee, apparently believing that we've little need for forgiveness.

But, dear friends, rejoice: The purpose of this Law is to show us our need for forgiveness, and the Savior doesn't stop there. He goes on to announce the sweetness of His Gospel.

If our lack of love is a sin, then Christ has died for it. He has suffered man's lack of love toward Him on the cross; more to the point, He has suffered His Father's lack of love as He was judged in our place for our sin. He has paid that debt, died and risen again. And now, He offers forgiveness to you.

*"A Savior Who Lacks No Love"*

**St. Luke 7:36-50**

**September 16, 2010**