



Catalog No. 1923

Luke 7:36–50

23rd Message

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March 17, 2013

# EXTRAVAGANT LOVE

*SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE*

How deep is our sin? How wide is God's forgiveness? How high is our love for Jesus? These are the questions that we encounter today in Luke 7, a beautiful story of God's grace for sinners and the love shown by a dubious woman towards Jesus. But it also provides a warning to those who see little need for God's grace and put themselves above others. The account can stimulate delight and wonder in the way we react to *Les Miserable* but it can also arouse conviction for judgmental attitudes and cold hearts. I trust the Spirit will work accordingly with whatever we need to hear.

The text is a literary gem told in seven scenes of inverted step parallelism:

- Introduction – the Pharisee, Jesus, the woman
- A The Woman Acts —outpouring of love in action
- B Dialogue 1 – Simon judges wrongly
- X A Parable
- B' Dialogue 2 – Simon judges rightly
- A' The Woman Acts – outpouring of love in retrospect
- Conclusion – the Pharisee, Jesus, the woman<sup>1</sup>

An encased parable is in the center of the story. A dialogue with Simon brackets the parable and the dialogues are bracketed by a woman's actions. The story begins with an introduction and ends with a conclusion.

## The Pharisee, Jesus, and The Woman

**One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house brought an alabaster flask of ointment. (Luke 7:36–37 ESV)**

The introduction presents us with the three characters in the story. A Pharisee by the name of Simon invites Jesus to his house for a meal. We do not get an indication that he is hostile to Jesus or that he wants to trap Jesus in some way like we have seen in other accounts. Perhaps Simon is still open to Jesus and wants to hear more. However, we notice that Jesus simply enters the house and reclines at the table without any indication of hospitality by Simon – no water to clean his feet, no kiss of hospitality, and no olive oil for his head. Simon's neglect would be like us answering the door to a guest and then walking away without a handshake or a hug, an offer to take a coat or to get something to drink. Hospitality is a key component in the story as we shall see.

The woman in the story is a known sinner in the city. Once again we see an unlikely character in Luke's gospel, another woman, who is highlighted by the word "behold." Women play a prominent role in the gospels. We encountered a widow a couple of weeks ago and in the next section we will find women who are disciples of Jesus.

Some claim that the woman is Mary Magdalene but this is unlikely. Mary is not introduced until the next chapter. Some claim

that the woman is a prostitute, but we are not told this directly. Whatever her sin or lifestyle she is a person with a scarlet letter on her chest whom the Pharisees would have avoided. We find out that she has embraced Jesus' message for sinners and by faith received the forgiveness that Jesus offered to her. She has heard that Jesus would be at Simon's house and has come to show her gratitude and appreciation.

The meal at Simon's house is a formal meal. This is indicated by the word "recline at table" and also by the fact that the woman is there. At a formal meal, people from the town could enter the house and stand around the outside of the room to hear the conversation. Perhaps it is a Sabbath meal or perhaps Simon has heard Jesus speak and has invited him to engage in religious conversation.

The charge that the Pharisees had leveled against Jesus was that he ate with tax collectors and sinners. We saw this reaction when Jesus went to dinner at Levi's house in chapter 5: "Why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?" (Luke 5:30) And then last week we saw that Jesus brought up the same accusation in verse 34: "The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" (Luke 7:34) Following that statement by Jesus, Luke now provides this vivid illustration.

The word "sinner" appears more often in Luke than in Mark and Matthew combined. Jesus came to save sinners but this troubled the Pharisees and lawyers greatly and caused them to reject him. Jesus wasn't playing by their rules and so they refused to dance to his music.

## An Outpouring of Love

**when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. (Luke: 37–38)**

The woman never speaks in the story, but her actions are dramatic. Jesus was reclining at the table, meaning that he was lying on his side with his feet stretched out behind him. She has come with an alabaster flask of expensive perfume so that she can anoint Jesus' feet. But when she approaches Jesus from behind, she breaks out in tears. The amount of tears is significant because the word "wet" used here is the same word used for rain showers. We know that this was not planned because she did not bring water or a towel. Perhaps she feels the pain of Simon's rudeness towards Jesus.

The woman now does three things to Jesus' feet – wipe, kiss, and anoint. First, she lets down her hair, and using her hair as a towel, wipes Jesus' feet. This would have been unthinkable because a woman was never to let down her hair in public. A husband could divorce his wife for doing this.

For the rabbis “when a woman uncovered her hair in public she was offending God, because a woman’s hair was considered sexually provocative. . . . In traditional Middle East society, a bride on her wedding night lets down her hair and allows it to be seen by her husband for the first time. . . . By unloosing her hair she is making some form of an ultimate pledge of loyalty to Jesus.”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the woman sees herself now as the bride of Christ.

Second, she kisses his feet, since to kiss him on the cheek would have been greatly misunderstood. This act was a sign of respect, reverence, and honor. And third, she anoints Jesus feet with the expensive perfume that she has brought in an alabaster vial. If the woman was a prostitute she would have worn it around her neck and one can imagine how important this would have been in her trade. But now she no longer needs it. She anoints the feet because anointing the head would have been unthinkable. Again, this is a sign of great honor for a noble person.

Imagine the kind of tension that must have filled the room. Imagine every pair of eyes glued to this dramatic scene. What this woman did would have taken a great deal of courage in a room full of men. But the woman was not put off by decorum. There was something much more important than what people thought. Her focus was entirely on Jesus. She showered Jesus with love without any sense of inhibition or embarrassment. Can you imagine us worshipping God in the same way?

### Simon Judges Wrongly

Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.” And Jesus answering said to him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” And he answered, “Say it, Teacher.” (Luke 7:39–40)

As expected we see a strong reaction from Simon. He is repulsed and offended by the woman touching Jesus. And this is not just any woman, but a sinner, perhaps a hooker. He thinks to himself, “If Jesus were a prophet he would have known what kind of woman she was and would not have allowed her to touch him.”

Well, Jesus is a prophet, for not only does he know who the woman is, but he also knows what Simon is thinking. And that isn’t good for Simon, because “when Jesus reads minds, a rebuke often follows.”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus addresses Simon by name and tells him that he has something to say to him. And this isn’t good for Simon either, because Jesus uses a “classical Middle Eastern idiom that introduces blunt speech that the listener may not want to hear.”<sup>4</sup> Simon responds with respect by calling Jesus “Teacher,” a term that Luke uses instead of “Rabbi.” There is tension but there is also a bit of cordialness.

### A Parable

**A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. (Luke 7:41–42)**

Jesus unmaskes Simon by using a parable, reminiscent of Nathan’s approach to David. A moneylender had two debtors. One owed fifty denarii, the other ten times what the first debtor owed. A denarius was a day’s wage for a soldier or common laborer. In today’s economy one debtor owed about two months wages, the other about a year

and three fourths (assuming a six-day workweek). Neither debtor had the ability to pay back the debt.

The moneylender did something completely unexpected and absolutely extraordinary. Can you imagine a bank cancelling the mortgage on a house in foreclosure? The word for “cancelled the debt” was a common business term for remitting a debt. The word means “to grace.” The moneylender freely forgave what was owed and acted out of complete grace. It isn’t hard to identify the parable with the characters in the story. The moneylender is God and also Jesus. The debt is sin. The one who owes the large debt is the woman. Simon is like the one who owes a smaller debt.

### Simon Judges Rightly

**Now which of them will love him more?” Simon answered, “The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.” And he said to him, “You have judged rightly.” (Luke 7:42–43)**

Now Jesus springs his trap by asking Simon, “which one of them will love him more?” Simon reluctantly, cautiously, and probably grudgingly responds—well, “I suppose” the one with the larger debt. Jesus tells Simon, “good answer.” If Simon had been intending to trap Jesus, Jesus has turned the tables and makes it clear to Simon he is in control of the situation.

### An Outpouring of Love Described

**Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. (Luke 7:44–46)**

Jesus now returns to the actions of the woman. He speaks to Simon, but faces the woman. One might expect a harsh tone for Simon, but since he is looking at the woman we imagine that his eyes were soft and his manner kind and gentle. Jesus reviews the actions of the woman in the same order as we saw previously and uses the same words—wet, wipe, kiss, and anoint. He is publicly defending the woman in Simon’s house.

The crux of the story is the contrast between what the woman did and what Simon didn’t do. Simon had invited Jesus to his house for dinner and therefore would have been expected to show appropriate hospitality. When a guest entered a home he would have taken off his shoes at the door. Servants would be standing by to wash the feet of the guest. Simon provided no water. The woman on the other hand washed Jesus’ feet with her tears.

A host would greet his guests with a kiss. If they were equals the host would kiss the guest on the cheek; a student/disciple would kiss the rabbi’s hands. Simon didn’t kiss either the cheek or the hand. The woman on the other hand had not stopped kissing Jesus’ feet beginning the moment Jesus entered the house. A guest would also be anointed with oil on the head. Olive oil was plentiful and inexpensive. Simon offered no oil for Jesus’ head, but the woman anointed Jesus’ feet with expensive perfume.

Simon calls Jesus “Teacher” or “Rabbi.” He speculates that Jesus might be a prophet. However, he completely ignores common hospitality. His neglect was rude and insulting. The woman on the other hand did everything that Simon should have done.

**Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.” And he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” (Luke 7:47–48)**

While hospitality was a duty ignored by Simon the woman was not motivated by duty but by love and gratitude. It might appear that her actions resulted in forgiveness, but the grammar makes it clear that her extravagant love was the result of receiving God’s forgiveness for her sins. So, for an example, the statement: “it is raining because the windows are wet” does not mean that the water on the windows is the cause of the rain. Rather, the water on the windows evidences the presence of rain.”<sup>5</sup> The woman’s actions are evidence of what she had received.

The woman had a huge debt of sin. Jesus offered to cancel the debt, to freely forgive her. She has been forgiven much, she is filled to overflowing with gratitude, and so she pours out extravagant love towards Jesus. Jesus reassures the woman in Simon’s presence that she is forgiven. Simon also has a debt but it is much smaller and therefore he loves little. He can’t even give ordinary hospitality. The principle is clear: love of God stems from his grace towards us and the magnitude of our love is a function of our grasp of the magnitude of our debt.

### **The Pharisee, Jesus, and The Woman**

**Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this, who even forgives sins?” And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” (Luke 7:49)**

Instead of being thrilled by the tender scene they had witnessed between Jesus and the woman, the onlookers attack Jesus in private for his statement of forgiveness and acceptance of the woman. This was the same reaction we saw when Jesus healed the paralytic in chapter 5 and the Pharisees said: “Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Luke 5:21) Jesus is not unnerved but coolly commends the woman for receiving his life-changing message and sends her out to live a life of peace.

Pharisees were good, clean, upright citizens. But their attitudes towards people ran counter to Jesus’ perspective and mission. Any one of us can easily fall into these same attitudes. As we have learned in Luke, a Pharisee is someone who puts people in categories of “us” and “them,” stays clear of the undesirable and unclean, loves only those who love them, lends money only to those who can lend in return, and sees the speck in a brother’s eye but ignores the log in their own eye. Pharisees are quick to condemn and slow to forgive.

Are we more like Simon or the woman? Is our relationship with Jesus intellectual or does it bring us to tears? Has Jesus stimulated our mind or melted our hearts? Are we quick to forgive those who hurt us or do we keep score? Are we judgmental of sinners or do we reach out in love and humility? Are we moved to worship Jesus with extravagant love or do we complain that the music is too loud and there aren’t enough hymns? In order to guard ourselves from becoming Simon-like, let me leave you with three thoughts.

### **All of us owe a debt we cannot pay.**

Simon sees the woman as a sinner. But what he does not realize is that he is a sinner as well. All of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. There is nothing we can do to solve the debt crisis in our lives. We are like the U.S. government. The debt/sin language in the text covers both the good we should have done and also the evil

we have done. The size of the debt is immaterial because no matter the amount, we are still in a state of indebtedness and like Simon and the woman we are unable to pay back what we owe, even if our debt is only one penny.

The essence of sin is not just breaking the rules. Our debt is not the accumulation of sins we have committed. The essence of sin is fundamentally going in the wrong direction. An illustration I heard gets the point across: you and your friend are caravanning in separate cars from Denver to SF. One keeps all the traffic rules and the other doesn’t. But instead of going west, you both go east. Breaking the rules or keeping the rules doesn’t matter because you are both going in the wrong direction.

I hate debt. I hate owing anyone money and so I pay my bills immediately when received. But there is nothing I can do to pay the debt of sin. That is true for all of us. John Owen said: “he who has slight thoughts of sin never has great thoughts of God.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Forgiveness is at the heart of the gospel.**

The only one who can do anything about our debt is the moneylender and that is exactly what God does. No matter how large our debt, it is no match for the matchless grace and forgiveness of God. There are two words for “forgive” in our text. As I said, the word in verse 42 is from the word “grace.” It means to give cheerfully and freely. The basic idea is to make a gift, and here it means that the moneylender gave a gift of what was owed to pay off the debt. God himself assumes our debt through the cross. Paul puts it this way in Colossians:

**“And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.” (Colossians 2:13–14)**

Imagine an empty cross with a note nailed on the beam, “paid in full.” That is what Jesus did for us.

Jesus uses a different word for “forgive” in verse 48. This word means to release, let go, to cancel. Our sins are totally obliterated by the work of Christ. We might hold onto them, most of us do, but not a trace of them remains before a holy God. “As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.” (Psalms 103:12)

Jesus ate with sinners because they were open to receive God’s grace and forgiveness. Pharisees didn’t view themselves as sinners and therefore they had little need for grace. What we need to understand is that God delights in extending grace and forgiveness to sinners.

When my oldest daughter went to college she got into trouble. I was so angry that I couldn’t speak to her for several days. But God got my attention. He told me that if he could forgive my sins, which were great, then I could forgive Sara. And so I called her and told her that I would be with her, that I would not leave her or forsake her. Well that trouble brought her to the end of herself and she came back to God and began a relationship with him that she never had in high school. And as a result of my forgiveness towards her, our relationship grew closer and more intimate.

Now this is absolutely opposite of what we think. We think that by keeping all the rules we will have a closer, better relationship with God. But that isn’t necessarily true. Nothing we do or don’t do will change the way God feels about us. Receiving God’s grace is what brings us into a relationship with him and he even uses our sin to

create deeper intimacy. It isn't about being perfect. It is about having a broken and contrite heart. Pharisaical perfection actually keeps us from God. I am not saying that you should go out and sin your head off. What I am saying is that receiving the fullness of God's grace is the key to an intimate relationship with him.

**Understanding the magnitude of God's forgiveness produces a humble heart overflowing with love and gratitude.**

Love is a response to how deeply we are forgiven. Simon thinks he owes little, so he loves little. The woman gushes with love for Jesus. Her love is a crazy love. Have you ever fallen head over heels in love? What happens? You do irrational, crazy things. When I met Liz at a party I drove over to her house at 2:00 in the morning with no gas in my car hoping she would be outside looking for me. The next day I drove to her place of work at lunch hour and drove around the parking lot hoping she would come out of the building. But I never saw her. So later that afternoon I called her and asked her if she wanted to come over and play bridge. You need four people to play bridge. I didn't invite anyone else. When we are crazy with love we write poems, send cards every day, make a fool of ourselves in public, and spend lots of money. That is what the woman did. She showered Jesus with crazy love.

When we know the depth of our depravity and the immense gift of God's grace our heart will begin to overflow with love and gratitude. We can then love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We will worship God with our heart and our body without being self-conscious. And we will love our neighbor as ourselves. We will reach out to sinners with extravagant love and share a meal with them. Grace received becomes love in action. Mother Teresa said, "Do ordinary things with extraordinary love."<sup>7</sup>

May we go forth with the assurance that our sins are forgiven, that our debts are fully paid, and that faith in the work of the cross has saved us. Go in peace overflowing with love and gratitude.

1. Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, IVP*, (Downers Grove, IL, 2008), 240
2. Bailey, 248-249
3. Darrell Bock, *Luke Volume 1* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 698
4. Bailey, 251
5. Bock, 704
6. as cited in Josiah Hotchkiss Gilbert, *Dictionary of Burning Words of Brilliant Writers* (1895), 546
7. Scot McKnight, *The Jesus Creed* (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2004), 119

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