SHE LOVED MUCH

Luke 7:36–50

Key Verse: 7:47

“Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little, loves little.”

Is love a part of your life? Many people wish it were. Others, after being disappointed, wonder whether there really is such a thing as love. Some people seem to naturally have a loving temperament, while others seem emotionally unavailable, maybe even crippled. Where does love come from? The event in today’s passage is unusual. Not only does it tell us love’s origin; it’s also telling us that at the core of every Christian’s life there’s supposed to be great love. Why is that? Why is this woman who “loved much” held up as our ideal? How can we genuinely, authentically “love much” instead of “love little”? And why should we? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

Earlier Jesus visited a town called Nain (7:11). It may be that after he raised the widow’s son from the dead, John’s disciples came there to ask their question of Jesus (18–35). Now, with no distinction given in time or place, we find Jesus at a dinner party. And where is it? Look at verse 36. To our surprise, Jesus has been invited over by a Pharisee. In the first two verses of this passage the word “Pharisee” is repeated three times. We’ve already seen that Pharisees who were strict about religious laws were not fond of Jesus. As they encountered him, they were so critical, so offended, so filled with fury, they were looking for a reason to accuse him, even plotting what they might do to him (6:7,11). This Pharisee, however, is different. He invites Jesus over to his house for dinner. It breaks our prejudices. To a Pharisee, to welcome a questionable person into his own home for a meal was just not possible. It was a matter of keeping religious purity, of not allowing oneself to be influenced badly. In our diverse world this may seem like too ancient an issue. But surprisingly, some religious people today are still trying to have such purity.

We also notice that Jesus accepts this Pharisee’s invitation. He usually goes only with those who are open and receptive. So this Pharisee was probably such a person. What made him open to Jesus? Maybe it was the undeniable event of Jesus raising the widow’s son to life. Maybe it was the many other miracles he was doing that were fulfilling each and every one of the prophecies of the Messiah (7:21–22; cf. Isa61:1–2; 35:5–6). This Pharisee has a house and enough money to serve a meal not only for Jesus and his disciples but also for other guests (49). In their culture, tables were made low to the floor, and people reclined at them on floor cushions, with their feet pointed away from the table. In larger homes, the table would be U-shaped, so that servants could come into the middle to serve the food and drinks. Townspeople loved to be invited, to see and be seen, and to engage in invigorating conversation. Along the walls of the room the poorer people of the town could gather to listen and hope for some leftovers. With Jesus there, the room must be crowded.

Look at verse 37. Talk about drama! This woman could not have been more different from the homeowner. Three times the passage points out that she was a sinner (37,39,47). Here she’s called “a woman of the city.” Most likely she was a town prostitute. In that town, like it or not, everybody knew her. An alabaster flask of ointment was a high ticket item, no doubt earned with her despicable income. Whatever her material wealth, of course she’s not welcome here. In that culture she may have been forced into her trade by extreme circumstances, or even sold into it by her own parents. She fits into the category of “the poor” on whom Jesus has been focusing.

Just her appearance in the room already has shock value, but what she starts doing is even more unsettling. Read verse 38. Only gradually do people probably start noticing her. Those who have a habit of objectifying women see what she’s doing suspiciously. As Titus 1:15 says, “To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled.” Several details stand out here. First is her weeping. Her tears are so profuse, they’re enough to wet his feet. What could it mean? So often, tears say what words can’t. They seem to express her broken and contrite heart (Ps51:17), real repentance over her sin. Next is her hair. She uses it to wipe his dirty feet. In their time, a woman’s long hair was her glory (1Co11:15). But she uses hers to give Jesus her highest honor. She goes on by kissing his feet, an act of adoration. And finally comes the ointment from that alabaster flask. She’s pouring out this treasure to somehow show her thanks.

And what happens? Look at verse 39. Here we get a glimpse into this man’s thoughts. He’s invited Jesus and been open until now, but this is just too much. He’s been thinking Jesus is a prophet, but, no more. A holy prophet would surely know in advance who such a woman was and would never let her touch him. Watching all this is pushing the Pharisee out of his comfort zone. In life we, too, experience people or events that are so hard to digest or accept.

How does Jesus help him? Look at verse 40. Jesus calls him by his name, Simon. He knows both his name and his thoughts. The man is too polite in front of his guests to directly confront Jesus, so Jesus speaks to him gently, in parable form. Look at verses 41–42. It’s a story easy to relate to, especially to Pharisees, who, Luke will tell us later, tended to be lovers of money (16:14). A denarius was a day’s wages, so the one man owed about two months’ salary, but the other, two whole years’ worth. So often people get into debt and can’t pay it back as they hoped. And here, the moneylender decides to just cancel both debts. Seems pretty straightforward. But the Greek word for “cancel” sheds light on what’s going on here. It has the same root as the word “grace.” It’s saying both debtors were forgiven. Jesus asks, “Now which of them will love him more?” It’s a surprising twist: a debt story suddenly turns into a love story. What kind of love is this? It’s a love rooted in gratitude, in real appreciation. And Jesus is highlighting how it’s a love of degrees. How does Simon answer? “The one, I suppose, for whom he canceled the larger debt.” In light of this shocking scene it’s a pretty standoffish and reluctant answer, but perhaps Simon is beginning to grasp what Jesus means.

To make it plain, Jesus applies it for him. Read verses 44–47. It’s an ironic reversal. It’s also pretty embarrassing. In front of everyone he’s saying Simon hasn’t exactly been the best host. Obviously he really is a prophet, because he knows exactly what Simon’s attitude has been. What’s more, he’s helping Simon, and everybody else there, see this woman in a new way. To Jesus, she’s not at all a vile person; she’s an example of genuine love. It’s interesting: People can keep basic formalities but without any genuine love. After all, Simon has opened his home and is paying for the meal. But he hasn’t offered Jesus even the basic hospitality of that time, of having his feet washed. If he were trying to honor him with this meal, he’s really missing the mark. No customary kiss of welcome. No anointing for an honorary guest. But this woman, the one everyone despises, is doing it all, and more. And she’s not at all trying to prove anything or compete with anyone—she’s just genuine. She’s so humble, so grateful to Jesus. Why? He says it’s because her many sins are forgiven. Obviously she’s already heard his message and accepted God’s grace through him. It’s why she’s come.

Jesus is teaching here the essence of the gospel. It’s the gospel of God’s grace (Ac20:24). It’s the good news not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son for our sins (1Jn4:10). Where does love come from? Not from us! Real love comes from God, because, the Bible says, God is love (1Jn4:8). And it tells us why every Christian has to be a man or woman of great love. Anyone who truly has been born of God and knows God is a person who has learned how to love (1Jn4:7–8). Without great love, our Christian life isn’t real yet. Since God has so loved us, we cannot **but** love (1Jn4:11). Receiving God’s forgiveness is not just agreeing to some theological statement. No, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son (Ro5:10). It’s totally undeserved grace. In the lyrics of the famous hymn, *Rock of Ages*, “Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to thy cross I cling.” It’s his amazing grace that leads us to such repentance, such a broken and contrite heart, such tears that never seem to be enough. This is no cerebral faith, but a real healing, a real transformation. It’s what’s happened to this notoriously sinful woman. It’s what can happen to anyone, even the worst of sinners (1Ti1:15). We all need to dive deeper and deeper into God’s forgiving grace to us in Jesus. It’s how God’s love changes us. Jesus is saying it’s the only way to truly love and serve him. It’s the only thing that really matters. In the words of a secular song, “Where is the **love**?” This love transforms and enlivens everything we do: why we go to church, why we try to serve in any way, why we give our whole hearts, our best, our greatest treasures—because Jesus has loved us, forgiven us, and we could never love him enough in return. It’s why we do it no matter what people may say or think. It’s all for Jesus. It gives us the boldness of this woman even to enter the most hostile, judgmental places and keep on loving him, without holding back, without anything to be ashamed of. It gives us that freshness, that tirelessness, that whole new perspective. Because of his grace, we’re free, free to love him.

Jesus’ words today are shining a light on the quality of our love for him. We need to take a close personal look at it. The Bible encourages us to undergo such a spiritual test (2Co13:5; 1Th2:4). He’s done so much for me; what have I really done for him? What am I doing now? To be healthy in life we all need checkups: dental checkups, vision checkups, medical checkups, even financial checkups. We also need a love checkup. When’s the last time I shed any tears because of his grace to me? When’s the last time I humbled myself to serve him? When’s the last time I gave him my best, really my utmost? When’s the last time I did it even while people were judging me? When’s the last time I actually risked anything for him? If we never have, we can always start now!

Look at verses 48–50. This woman has already been forgiven, Jesus said, so what’s going on here? He’s saying these things to her there in public. It’s to restore her socially. It’s to fully wipe away her bad reputation and all the negative thoughts people have about her. It shows us two of Luke’s favorite themes: Jesus defending repentant sinners, and Jesus defending women.

So, Christian community is based not just on common respect for each other as human beings, but also on uncommon grace. It’s a place where everybody has to check their worldly values at the door (e.g. Jas2:1–7). It’s a place where repentant sinners are most welcome, most at home. It’s not a formal place of hierarchy or judgment. It’s a place where visible things like appearance or status or reputation don’t matter, but invisible things like grace, repentance and real love matter most. Jesus is showing us all today how to view people, whether they’re like the sinful, repentant woman, or like Simon.

Read verse 47 again. May God deepen his forgiving grace in us, and give us such love for him. May we learn to see and welcome people like Jesus did.