

Prayer

We praise You, Lord God. You have never let us down even though we have often failed You, and You have loved us even when we return after wandering far away from You. You know what is best for each one of us, and You have chosen us for glory despite our unworthiness. We praise You for the blessings You give us so generously, and we ask that You make us worthy of our great calling. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Write down a list of everything that is on your mind, perhaps those things that you need to do but keep forgetting, or cannot do because you do not have the time. This is a useful prayer list, let the Lord guide you through it!

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the ministry of God's people on TV:** *Pray for the organisations that manage Christian TV channels, and for churches that do the same; pray about how they are funded and for those who donate to them*
- *Give thanks to God for the assurance of sins forgiven and for the proof of God's love*
- *Pray for the continuing unrest in North Africa and for Egypt in particular*

Meditation

Jesus, speak to us and guide us;
We long to hear Your voice, to listen to Your Word,
and come to know the truth about Your amazing love for us.

Jesus, speak to us and guide us;
We seek to know Your will, to see Your work world-wide,
and face the crucial issues that You bring to our attention:

Jesus, speak to us and guide us;
We seek to honour the Church, to love our fellow believers,
and worship You 'in Spirit and truth' according to Your Word:

Jesus, speak to us and guide us;
We seek to give our time to You, to put effort into Your Kingdom,
and not lose sight of Your justice and mercy for all cry out to You.

Jesus, speak to us and guide us;
We seek to show real honesty, to demonstrate good faith,
and never fail to love our friends and even those who hate us:

Jesus, speak to us and guide us, and we will follow You.

Bible passage - Luke 7:36-50

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, so He went into the Pharisee's house and prepared to eat.

³⁷ Now there was a woman in the city who was a sinner, and when she learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of expensive perfume. ³⁸ She stood behind Him near His feet weeping, and began to wet His feet with her tears and dry them with her hair. She kissed His feet and anointed them with the perfume.

³⁹ When the Pharisee who had invited Jesus saw it, he said to himself,

'If this man were a prophet, He would know who is touching Him and what kind of woman she is, that she is a sinner.'

⁴⁰ Jesus replied to him,

'Simon, I have something to say to you.'

'Teacher,' he said, 'speak.'

⁴¹ 'Two people owed money to a certain moneylender; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² When they were unable to pay, he generously canceled both their debts. So which of them will love him more?'

⁴³ Simon answered,

'I suppose the one who was forgiven more.'

So Jesus said to him,

'You have judged rightly.'

⁴⁴ Then He turned towards the woman and said to Simon,

'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she washed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You did not greet me with a kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped embracing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with perfume. ⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven, so she has shown much love. But the one who is forgiven little, loves little.'

⁴⁸ Then He said to her,

'Your sins are forgiven.'

⁴⁹ But those who were at the table with Jesus began to say to themselves,

'Who is this who even forgives sins?'

⁵⁰ So He said to the woman,

'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'

Bible Study

Review

Luke chapter 7 ends with a beautiful story about a woman who showed her love for Jesus by anointing His feet with perfume. But this is not a simple story, because Luke has woven it together with one about a meal and a Pharisee. By challenging the Pharisee, Jesus brings out the meaning of the woman's show of affection and teaches an important lesson about the meaning of God's forgiveness. God is not a respecter of people; He is a God of grace who forgives the sins of those who come to Him with their sins, and He welcomes their love and affection.

As soon as you read this story, you may wonder whether it is the same incident as that recorded in Matthew 26 (6-13) and Mark 14 (3-9). These Gospel writers describe a meal towards the end of Jesus' ministry, in which a woman comes into the house of Simon the leper to where Jesus is eating, and anoints him with perfume. They discuss the value of the perfume, but tell us that Jesus accepts the woman's service as equivalent to anointing for burial.

The situation is complicated further if we look at a similar story in John's Gospel (12:1-8). John's account is like that of Matthew and Mark, but it includes an important detail. John says that the woman anointed Jesus' feet, and says the incident took place at the house of Lazarus. He also reveals the woman as Mary (not Mary Magdalene).

Why do the four Gospel writers tell us different stories? Luke's Gospel has the bones of the same story, but it contains so much more that is not found in the other Gospels. Is this a case of the early disciples having very different recollections of 'what happened when' in Jesus' life? We can just imagine this conversation:

'where was it that Jesus was anointed by that woman?' (questioner)

'I thought it was at the house of Simon the Pharisee' (Luke)

'No, it was surely at Lazarus' house ...' (John)

'And it was just before Jesus died, at Simon the Leper's, and Jesus spoke about His burial' (Mark)

'If I remember correctly, Jesus made a point about forgiveness' (Luke)

'No, that was on a different occasion; I thought we argued about the value of the perfume!' (Matthew)

Two thousand years later on, it may well be impossible to reconcile the four different accounts of Jesus' anointing by a woman. But this does not mean we cannot find much of value within each Gospel story. Here in Luke, the story is a clear demonstration of Luke's point made in the previous verse, that, *'wisdom is vindicated by her children'* (7:35). This is the story of a sinner who has repented, a child of wisdom, and as a consequence she not only demonstrates great love for Jesus but also shows up the hypocrisy of the Pharisees.

There are three parts to our text today, and each has an important part to play in Luke's overall story. To begin with, Luke describes what happened as the 'sinful' woman makes her way into the house of Simon the Pharisee (7:37-38) and anoints Jesus. As a result, Simon questions Jesus' judgment (7:39), thus exposing himself to Jesus' highly critical assessment, which comes next. Jesus challenges Simon using a parable with a simple conclusion, *'the one who has been forgiven more' will 'love more'* (7:42,43). This is a shortened version of the famous 'Parable of the King who wished to settle accounts' (Matthew 18:23-35), and both are highly effective and precise parables about people's response to God's forgiveness. Thirdly, Jesus challenges Simon directly by declaring His view of events (7:44f.) and He also pronounces the woman's forgiveness. Throughout, Jesus defends the forgiven woman against any hint of impropriety and against any unethical interpretation of what she has done. He only sees her pure love in response to God's pure love.

At the very end, Jesus says to the woman *'your faith has saved you, go in peace'* (7:50). It seems entirely logical that Jesus should say this at the conclusion of this important event, but this is in fact one of only three places in Scripture where we find these very important words (see also Luke 18:42 and Ephesians 2:8). A story of Jesus meeting a Pharisee and a sinner has established the spiritual truth that stands at the heart of Protestant faith!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- What was going on when the woman anointed Jesus' feet (7:35-38)?
- How does the parable of the moneylender help us understand what happened? (7:40-43)
- What did Jesus highlight from what happened, and why? (7:44-49)

Notes on the text and translation

V36 'and prepared to eat'

Other translations:

'and reclined at table' (NIV)

'and took His place at the table' (NRSV)

The single Greek word behind this phrase refers to reclining at table in preparation to eat, hence the many different ways in which the translators have interpreted it. There is no particular merit in any one of these translations, all of which inform the reader that Jesus was ready to eat and the meal was about to begin.

V37 'an alabaster jar of expensive perfume'

Other translations:

'an alabaster jar of perfume' (NIV)

'an alabaster jar of ointment' (NRSV)

The Greek word here is 'muron', referring to an ointment or perfume for cosmetic or funeral purposes, made up of oils from plants, not animal fats. Such ointments were undoubtedly expensive, and it is important for us to know this.

V43 'I suppose the one who was forgiven more'

Other translations:

'I suppose the one who had the bigger debt cancelled' (NIV)

'I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the bigger debt' (NRSV)

Reading the various translations, you would think that text does in fact describe the bigger debt as cancelled. However, the words are simply as I have translated them; *'I suppose the one who was forgiven more'*. While other translators think it right to try and 'contextualise' this phrase by saying that this meant the cancellation of the bigger debt, I do not think this is necessary. It seems to me that in the light of the whole passage, the plainer translation I have given is perhaps more helpful. It is clear what this sentence means here and it does not require further explanation.

V45 'You did not greet me with a kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped embracing my feet'

Other translations:

'You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet' (NIV)

'You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet.' (NRSV)

The problem with the translation of this sentence is all to do with the meaning of the word 'kiss'. The first word for kiss is the standard expression for a formal kiss of greeting. The second expression refers to an affectionate embrace. Translations that do not indicate the difference between the two are unhelpful, because Jesus' acceptance of a different kind of affection from the woman goes to the heart of the meaning of this passage.

Going Deeper

What was going on when the woman anointed Jesus' feet (7:35-38)?

It is difficult for us to imagine the scene of a formal meal conducted at the house of a Pharisee. Our understanding of a formal meal is that it would be private, but in ancient times, this was far from true. It would have been common for such a formal meal to take place in a courtyard of a larger complex of houses, and women would have waited on the men during the meal. Luke does not say who the woman in this story is (though John identifies her as Mary), but she can only have been allowed near to the table if she was part of the serving group of women.

In addition, a formal meal would have made necessary the presence of various jars containing spices, wine and perhaps food flavourings such as salt. The woman would not have caused any stir by being near the dining party carrying a jar. It was only when she took action and attended to Jesus that she would have been noticed, perhaps with cries of 'what is she doing!' Luke's description suggests that the woman had something of great expense for she was carrying an alabaster jar and costly perfume, but expense was not the issue here for Luke.

The impression given by our passage is that the woman was excessive not so much in pouring the oil of anointing, but in the general extravagance of her behaviour, in particular kissing Jesus' feet (7:38,45). We are entitled to ask whether such behaviour was in any way 'normal', even though it sounds odd or extreme to us. Was this action completely unique, or was any special meaning attached to it?

Various scholars have mentioned one particular possibility, and it sounds very plausible to modern ears. It assumes that there was no special meaning in what happened, and suggests the following sequence of events. The woman was attending to Jesus but was overcome with emotion, having met Jesus earlier and been blessed by Him in some way. She cried, but being near to Jesus' feet (the proper position of a servant), her tears fell on them. To cover her embarrassment, the woman took the only possible course of action to dry his feet by using her hair. In the custom of the day, people were anointed with oil when attending a meal, it was part of the normal preparation for such an event. So in order to 'put things right', the woman took an alabaster vial of perfume she possessed and used this to anoint Jesus' feet after cleaning them with her hair, completing the action with a possibly unintentional but affectionate kiss.

Each of us should make up our own minds about whether such a sequence of events is an adequate explanation of the passage.

How does the parable of the moneylender help us understand what happened? (7:40-43)

When Simon the Pharisee saw what happened, he was probably mortified that such a thing should happen to his own guest, such were the sensibilities of the day. But he was also astounded that Jesus had accepted the woman's attention and not withdrawn from them.

To begin with, Simon clearly does not understand the work of the Messiah and the fact that His mission was to forgive and save sinners. However, Jesus' parable of the moneylender does more than make the point about forgiveness. To begin with, Jesus drew Simon's attention, and the Pharisee then addressed Jesus as '*Teacher*' (7:40). In saying this, Simon used a form of address most commonly used by Pharisees when speaking to Jesus (see 19:39, 20:21,28,39); it was certainly not a form of address used by someone who believed he was speaking to the Messiah. The disciples and many of the crowd believed Jesus was the Messiah, and called Him '*Lord*' (5:8,12,17, 7:6, etc)!

The parable mentions two people, and it is apparent that Jesus is referring to the woman and Simon. So the one with the large debt is the woman, and the one with a small debt is Simon the Pharisee. On the one hand, Jesus is telling Simon that he has much less of a debt to God than the woman, which is a clear positive for the Pharisee. On the other hand, because God loves both equally and forgives the one much more than the other, Simon is left somewhat envious of the deeper connection between God and one who had been forgiven much. Certainly, he sounded a little peeved or reluctant in his reply to Jesus. When Jesus asked, '*which of them will love him more?*', he said, '*I suppose the one who was forgiven more*' (7:43).

Of course, Jesus dragged the right answer out of Simon, and forced him to recognise that his own response to Jesus was not as adequate as he might imagine.

What did Jesus highlight from what happened, and why? (7:44-49)

The longest speech in this story is that of Jesus in verses 44 to 47. Here, Jesus retells the story of what happened, and explains it to Simon, drawing out certain points along the way. In order to understand what Jesus is saying, we need to know something about the polite rules of hospitality of that day. Contrary to popular understanding, a host was not required to wash the feet of guests, merely to provide water for this. The washing of feet was a personal deed, done to show personal or familial affection. In addition, people did not always greet other people with a kiss. This was done amongst close friends, and we already know that Jesus and Simon were not close friends. Simon had invited Jesus to eat with him to discuss theology, and to find out more about this travelling preacher.

Set against this background, Jesus' comments in verses 44 to 47 do not suggest that Simon has done anything wrong as a host. He may well have provided Jesus with the appropriate water to clean his feet, and greeted him properly at the meal without kissing him as a close friend. What he had not done was to greet Jesus with the affection of one who knew who that He was the Messiah and accepted what He could do for him. Jesus' point was that the woman demonstrated genuine affection for Him because He had forgiven her sins, and she believed that he was the Messiah.

The point was made by Jesus very well and very sharply, and at the end of His small speech, He reiterated this by saying to the woman '*your sins are forgiven*' (7:48). Of course, this went straight to the heart of the big difference between Jesus and the Pharisees. From their point of view they knew that God forgave sins through the religious systems of Judaism, but they did not believe that He would do it through a travelling preacher from Galilee! This did not fit their picture of how God worked, and this is why they said '*who is this who even forgives sins?*' (7:49)

The Messiah came to do God's work in the world, not to fit religious expectations for the Jews. He came to bring forgiveness and the means of grace that would bring God together with people, and the Pharisees simply could not understand what Jesus said or did.

Application

The Gospel constantly asks God's people to remember that those most attractive to God are those who are least attractive to human society. Those who have sinned against God are often those who sin frequently against other people, because sin is precisely that which disrupts God's good order in the world and is contrary to His will. Throughout the history of the church, Christians have been saved from sin, and then sought to better themselves. Then, once bettered, they have tended to blend into the society in which they have been set, and it has proved very difficult for them to keep their contacts with 'sinners' and maintain an understanding of the destructive power of sin. Too often, those Christians who have lost touch with the primary call of the Gospel look far too much like the Pharisees of the New Testament, showing religious hypocrisy in their attitudes and actions. It is not fashionable to say this so bluntly, but I fear that this true.

Personally, I reckon that the best way for God's people to keep close to Jesus and His love for sinners is to keep moving. During His ministry, Jesus was constantly meeting new people and engaging with new situations, and out of each He was able to give fresh examples of God and His love. If we follow in His

footsteps, then we will not be affronted if a sinner comes into our midst with an extravagant show of love for God. If our minds are set on cynicism and we have no heart for sinners, then it is possible to dismiss the deeds of the woman in this story as being impure, perhaps sexually motivated. If our minds are set on the things of God, then we cannot fail to see how God loves the sinner who repents, and thus be motivated to love sinners ourselves, without pre-judgment.

To conclude, it is worth taking stock of what this passage says about forgiveness. It is easy to accept the truth of this story but not apply it, for it is only when we have confessed everything to God that we are in a position to understand the extraordinary extent of His love. If in our Christian lives we are only conscious of God forgiving us a little bit of life's rough and tumble, then we certainly have much more to discover. When we submit our fallen nature to the God who made us, then He can remake us and restore us in His love. This is what the Christian means by 'new birth', and it makes sense only to saints who know that they were once sinners.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What do you think was going on when a woman kissed Jesus' feet with affection and washed them with her tears? Was this intentional or the result of some accident (see study above)?
2. Discuss the meaning of the parable of the moneylender. What does it say about the nature of God's forgiveness?
3. Why did Jesus say to the woman 'your sins are forgiven' (7:48). Were they forgiven before she came to the meal or only afterwards?

Personal comments by author

Forgiveness is a difficult subject, because like love, it means so much. Each one of us has an extensive experience of forgiveness, from things we were forgiven as youngsters to our own response to people who have wronged us (that is, whether we have forgiven them or not). I remain convinced that the art of forgiveness is the art of real love in practice, and it certainly needs to be fostered and encouraged. It is too easy to avoid forgiving people little things, especially when life moves fast. But this can lead to pent up feelings and later bitter disputes. When something has gone wrong, it is always better to forgive, for the sake of the future.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *In the course of the next few days, keep a record of things that go wrong and the people you hold responsible. Make a point of dealing with your feelings about anything that hurts you by forgiving those involved, if possible, in person. After a period of time, assess whether the effort is worth it.*
 - *Pray for those who find it hard to forgive. Work out how you can best approach talking about forgiveness with those who find it impossible to forgive.*
-

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, You have forgiven us our most terrible sins, those we know about and those we do not. You have shown a love for us that is beyond all human capacity and beyond all understanding. We praise You and we worship You, Living Lord. Come amongst us in power to enable us to do what You require of us, and to forgive our brothers and sisters ourselves, just as You have forgiven us. So may we do Your perfect will. AMEN
