

MUCH FORGIVENESS, MUCH LOVE

Luke 7:36-50

This is truly a beautiful story. It is one of those passages which we never tire of reading, and it is as full of meaning as it is of beauty.

Several things about an Oriental dinner such as this are of interest. After walking over dusty paths or roads in warm weather, with the feet clad in sandals only, the feet of the guests naturally were soiled upon their arrival at their destination. As the invited and honored guests entered the house of their host, a servant motioned each one to a stool and, when the guest seated himself, brought a basin of water and a towel, knelt at his feet, removed his sandals, laid them aside and washed his feet. On bare feet the guests proceeded toward the area in which the banquet was to be served. As they proceeded another servant stopped them and anointed their heads with sweet-smelling oil. At the doorway stood the host and, as each guest approached him, he stepped forward and kissed him on the cheek, and then motioned him to his place at the banquet table. Immediately behind the long tables were the backless couches strewn with tapestries and pillows upon which the guests reclined at ease, resting on the left elbow, leaving the right arm free to reach for the things on the table which pleased the fancy of the individual, and their feet were stretched out behind them. Between the couches and the wall was a space sufficient for those who were serving the meal to pass back and forth.

In the Orient, on the occasion of a banquet, the law of hospitality required that the dining area be left open, so that uninvited friends and strangers might enter, look on and listen to the conversations.

With these facts in mind, we shall now let these verses direct our attention to the following trio, and seek to derive therefrom some helpful lessons.

I. A Proud Pharisee.

The Pharisees composed the most popular, patriotic and powerful party in that era. They were proud, exclusive, boastful of their good deeds, strict adherents to tradition and precise in their religious worship.

God's Word does not tell us what Simon's station or rank was among the Pharisees. Neither does it inform us as to the specific motive which prompted Simon to invite Christ to dine with him. Obviously it was not because of admiration for or sympathy with the Lord Jesus. If that had been his motive, he certainly would have been courteous to Him. It may have been due in part to the fact that Christ had become something of a sensation, and had acquired quite a following. Many were talking about what He said and what He did. Therefore, Simon may have decided to invite Him to dinner in order that he might observe Him closely and see for himself what manner of man He was.

Perhaps Simon was an entertainer of celebrities. If so, it would have gratified his pride to have been able to make it known that he had entertained such a notable person as Christ. One is safe in saying that Simon did not have any conception or vision of the Lordship of Christ, and that he did not have any thought of entertaining Deity when he invited Him to be a guest at his table.

It seems quite clear that hostility was one thing that prompted the invitation. Simon wanted to get Christ where he could listen carefully to His words and observe closely His actions, with a view to discovering some flaw in His teachings or in His behavior, and then using that discovery as the basis of a charge against Him.

Regardless of what may have been the motive or motives which prompted Simon to extend the invitation, Christ accepted it and joined the other guests in the designated place at the appointed time.

When Christ entered the house of Simon, the servant at the entrance, in compliance with the wishes of his master, did not ask Christ to be seated in order that he might wash His feet in a basin. A second servant also let Him pass by without anointing His head with sweet-smelling oil. Proud and self-righteous Simon withheld the customary kiss of salutation and welcome and merely proffered his hand and pointed to the seat which Christ was to occupy at the table. Simon's omission of these three courtesies of Eastern hospitality was a revelation of his character. His discourteous attitude was really a studied and intentional insult. He wanted Christ to know that he did not share the enthusiasm of the populace for Him, but our Lord refused to be affronted by Simon's incivility. As soon as Christ took His place at the table, Simon occupied the seat of the host at one end of the table, from which vantage point he could survey all the guests and the whole situation.

II. A Prostrate Penitent.

Upon hearing that Christ was in the house of Simon, an unnamed woman, who had been notorious for her life of sin and shame, came uninvited and stationed herself behind Christ and at His feet. She had been a sinner in the blacker, filthier and more obnoxious sense. She had sinned against the laws of purity, and had made herself one of the scarlet sinners. She had enticed others to indulge in degradation and sin also. The sinful life of this woman of the streets was common talk. Her life had been so unchaste, sordid, immoral and disreputable that she had been cut off from respectable society. People of good character had refused to associate with her because she was a prostitute.

In the meantime, perhaps from the edge of a crowd somewhere, this outcast woman had listened to the tender and gracious words of our wonderful Saviour as He preached to all who would listen to Him. Evidently she had paid careful attention to His preaching, and through it was led to deep conviction of sin and to genuine repentance toward God and a personal faith in Christ as Saviour. She had experienced the forgiveness of sin, whereupon her soul was saved and filled with peace and joy.

The purpose of this woman in coming into Simon's house was to express to Christ her sincere gratitude for the forgiveness of her sins. Her heart was simply overflowing with genuine love for Him, Who had done so much for her. She wanted to express her love to Him and to prove her love for Him by rendering some service for Him.

When this woman whom Christ had saved entered Simon's house, the invited guests were reclining on the couches with their heads toward the tables and their feet outward. Upon seeing Christ, she went straight to Him. As a token of her gratitude to Him for saving her soul and transforming her life, she fully intended to anoint His feet with the delicately scented ointment that she had carried with her. In His presence she was so overcome with emotion that she could not proceed with her task. Standing there and contrasting the woman she once was with the one she was then, she gave vent to her feelings of thankfulness and joy by shedding warm and copious tears. Her spontaneous tears rained down so abundantly that they moistened the Master's feet. For lack of a towel, she unloosened her long hair and wiped away the tears from His feet. Evidently without speaking a word, this penitent, trusting and forgiven sinner kissed His feet again and again as an expression of her gratitude to and affection for Him. Then, as an expression of her genuine faith, gratitude and love, she opened her flask of precious alabaster ointment and emptied its fragrant contents upon the feet of her blessed Lord and Master.

Love for Christ will be made manifest in every heart and life. In fact, it is not at all difficult to get people to do something for Christ if they really love Him. Instead of attempting to excuse themselves from service for Christ, those who have been forgiven and transformed by the Saviour will be ready to render humble service in His name. Some are glad to do the big things which the public will notice, but are not willing to serve in the insignificant places. Real love for Christ will produce willingness to serve where and when He desires that it be done.

III. A Penetrating Prophet.

Because Christ tolerated the attentions of a woman of such evil repute, Simon was greatly perplexed. Reasoning within himself, he thought that, if Christ were a real prophet, He would have known the character of this woman and would have withdrawn His feet from her or thrust her back with them. On the other hand, he reasoned that, if He knew her character, His tolerance of her conduct proved that He was not a good man. Simon imagined that Christ did not know what manner of woman she was; whereas, He actually knew far more than Simon, for Christ knew not only the past of her shame, but also the present of her forgiveness and the future of her hope. Simon was wrong in thinking the woman was unpardoned and unpardonable, in believing that the Master was undiscerning and therefore ignorant of the woman's character, and in concluding that he was nearer to God's kingdom than she was.

All the time Christ knew what Simon was thinking, even though he never uttered a word. He read all of his unspoken thoughts, which was a proof in itself that He was a prophet and far more than a prophet. Therefore, courteously addressing him, He said, "Simon, I have somewhat to say unto thee." The Pharisee replied, "Master, say on."

Christ then told the story of the man with two debtors, one of whom owed ten times as much as the other. Neither debtor could pay, so the creditor forgave both of them. Christ then asked Simon which debtor would love the creditor most, whereupon he replied the one who had been forgiven the largest amount, which was the correct answer. Thereby, He let Simon know that this woman had been forgiven and therefore loved Him devotedly.

Calling Simon's attention to what she had done in contrast to what he had done, Christ Jesus pointed out that she had lavished upon Him her affections and gifts, whereas he had failed to extend to Him even the common courtesies of a respectable guest.

Love is one of the proofs of pardon. We are not pardoned and saved because we love our Saviour, but we love Him because He has saved us. His statement to the woman, "Thy sins are forgiven," reveals the blessing which she had received. His additional remark, "Thy faith hath saved thee," reveals the reason why this wonderful blessing of salvation had come to her.

Note the humility of this woman. She did not try to attract attention, but was content to have the lowliest standing place. Thankfully she had come to show her grateful love to Him for what He had done for her. She brought her precious ointment, tears, kisses, reverence and thanks expressed in deeds. Forgiven much and forgiven all, she loved much. Her abundant forgiveness provoked abundant love.

With compassionate tenderness, Christ fixed His attention upon the crouching patient at His feet. At once He made a clear analysis of her conduct, the occasion for it, the motive that prompted it, and the experience that lay behind it. He interpreted her act as due to unspeakable gratitude and love, growing out of her consciousness of having been saved. She excelled in love. The Bible says, "She loved much." This love of hers led her to personal service. Love cannot be put off with proxy service. Her service was rendered to the Lord Himself. She never said a word. Why not? Because it was all act and all heart with her. Her whole soul went out in love to Him. Her love was the result of her forgiveness.

Having forgiven her sins and saved her soul, Christ commended her service, gave her peace of mind and heart, and sent her on her way rejoicing. His grace was displayed further when He became her defender. Everywhere and always grace is the object of human cavil. Men snap at it like ravening wolves. Some attack it at the fountain. Simon cavilled at grace in its object, its condescension, its generosity and its tenderness. Great grace saved her, rich grace encouraged her and unbounded grace gave her the assurance of divine forgiveness. Then He said, "Go into peace."