

THE WOMAN WHO WAS A SINNER

Luke 7:36-50

Lights began to glow in the house of Simon the Pharisee. Servants were rushing to and fro in the kitchen and the dining hall, for Simon was giving a great supper on that night. Through the streets of the town men could be seen making their way towards Simon's house. In front of them walked servants holding torches in their hands to light the way for their masters. Outside the entrance to the house of Simon a group of the common people had gathered to watch the notables arrive. As each passed by on his way to the door, quite likely the people made comment, sometimes favorable, sometimes unfavorable. Thus the guests assembled for the banquet to which they had been invited.

As the guests entered the atrium, or principal room, of Simon's house, a servant stationed there motioned each one to a stool and, when the guest had seated himself, brought a basin and towel, removed his sandals, laid them aside, and washed his feet. The guests then in bare feet proceeded to the banqueting hall. On the way another servant stopped them and from a vessel in his hand touched their heads with sweet-smelling oil. At the doorway of the hall stood Simon, handsomely arrayed in the blue and white robes of his office, with one phylactery bound to his left arm and another to his brow. As each guest approached him, Simon stepped forward and kissed him on the cheek, and then motioned him to his place at the banqueting table. Immediately back of this long table were the backless couches strewn with tapestries and pillows upon which the guests reclined at ease as they reached for the things on the table which pleased their fancy. Between the couches and the wall was a space sufficient for the servants who waited on the table to pass back and forth.

The last guest to arrive was none other than Jesus Christ. Just why Simon invited Him is not quite clear. Perhaps he wanted to question Him on His attitude toward some portion of the Mosaic law or the Hebrew traditions. Perhaps it was just a matter of curiosity to see at close range one whose fame was beginning to spread throughout the land. Perhaps it was due to that trait in human nature, which is often the motive back of invitations, that makes a person desire to be in the companionship of some notable person. But whatever his motive, Christ, who ate with publicans and sinners, accepted his invitation and went to the banquet. He accepted Simon's invitation in spite of His certain knowledge of the man and his attitude.

In compliance with Simon's wishes, the servant at the first entrance did not ask Jesus to be seated so that he might wash His feet in the basin. The other servant also let Him pass without anointing His head with oil, and Simon himself omitted the customary kiss of salutation and merely proffered his hand and waved Jesus to His seat. The omission of these common courtesies was evidence that Simon did not regard Jesus as a social equal. To say the least, his actions proved that he was lacking in cordiality. But Jesus was not affronted by the incivility of Simon.

When Jesus had entered, and had taken His place at the table, without the water, without the perfume, without the oil, and without the kiss, Simon took his place, the seat of the host at one end of the table where he could survey all the guests and the whole situation.

In the Orient, on the occasion of a feast, the law of hospitality required that houses be left open, so that even uninvited strangers might come in through the open courtyard, up the steps, through an antechamber into the festive dining hall, and look on and listen. On this occasion there occurred a violent breach of those customs when a poor, dissolute woman, notorious for her life of shame, made her way into the throng and, presently, stationed herself at the feet of Jesus. Standing behind Him, she began to weep. At once the hum of conversation ceased as Simon and his guests stared at the woman. He was offended at the woman for coming in so obtrusively and without apology, and at Jesus for allowing her to touch Him, because of the manner of woman she was.

This woman was a sinner by profession. Sin was her occupation, and probably her livelihood. The name in her case involved shame and dishonor of the worst kind. She was a well-known sinner. Ill fame branded her. Her way of life was common town talk. Persons of good character did not associate with her. She was cut off from respectable society, and, like a leper, put outside the camp of social life.

Grace is here glorified in its object. She was 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, who enticed others to sin also.

Note her humility. She had once possessed a brazen face, and knew no bashfulness, but now we see her standing behind the Saviour. She did not push herself in before His face, but was content to have the lowliest standing place. If she might but do service to His feet, she blushed as she accepted the honor.

Yet she was courageous. She must have needed much courage to enter the house of a Pharisee. Those Pharisees had an insufferable contempt of everybody who was not of their own clique, who did not fast twice a week, and tithe their mint, anise, and cummin. By their every gesture they said, "Stand by, I am holier than thou." To a person of infamous character, the pompous Pharisee would be doubly contemptuous.

When and where this woman, who was a sinner, repented of her sins and was saved we are not told. But she had come to know Christ in the free pardon of her sins. Consequently, with a true earnestness that broke through every barrier, she came to Christ. She came thankfully. She came to show her grateful love to him for what He had done for her.

When she came to the house of the Pharisee, she was a forgiven sinner. She carried an alabaster box in her hand, intending to anoint Him with its contents as an expression of gratitude for what He had done for her. She brought her choicest treasure to give to Him because He had bestowed on her the choicest of all gifts, namely, the forgiveness of sin. She knelt behind Jesus and a flood of tears pouring from her eyes fell upon His feet, those feet so soon to be pierced with nails upon the cruel cross. In those tears were the mingled condiments of womanly shame, contrition, gratitude, and devotion. After her tears had rained down upon His feet, she stooped and dried His feet with the hair of her head. Moreover, bending over, she kissed those feet, or as the Greek word has it, kissed them much. In our English language we can correctly convey the idea of that word by saying that she smothered them with kisses. Then she poured the costly ointment on them.

She came to show her grateful love. She brought her precious ointment, her tears, her kisses, her reverence, her thanks -- thanks not the less true and warm because uttered not in words, but in deeds. She washed His feet with her tears; she kissed His feet in token of her reverent gratitude; she anointed His feet with costly ointment, not daring to anoint His head. Forgiven much and forgiven all, she loved much. Her abundant forgiveness provoked her abundant love.

With compassionate tenderness, Christ fixed His attention upon the crouching penitent 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 found a Saviour. She excelled in love. The Bible says, "She loved much." This love of hers led her to personal service. Her hand was the servant of her heart. She performed the anointing of her hand, the washing with her own tears, and the wiping with her own hair. Love cannot be put off with proxy service. Her service was rendered to the Lord Himself. She never said a word. And why not? Because it was all act and all heart with her.

Observe that her service was rendered to the Lord Himself. And what she did was done very earnestly. She was too occupied with her Lord and too absorbed in her work to care for scowling Pharisees. She washed His feet because He had washed her soul, she wept because she believed, and she loved because she trusted. Her service showed that her love was fervent. There was so much affection in it--nothing conventional; no following chilly propriety, no hesitating inquiry for precedents. Why did she kiss Christ's feet? Did it not look sentimental, affected, indelicate? Little did she care how it looked; she knew what she meant. Her whole soul went out in love to Him. Her love was the result of her forgiveness.

It was a tender love. It was an active love. It said not a word, but it did all that it could. She deemed no sacrifice too great, so that it honored Christ; no service mean, that He would accept. Joyfully would she have forsaken all the world for Him, and followed Him as His servant all the days of her life. And that delightful love which she had for Him made her happy.

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. These invaluable blessings, which this woman received, are available at the hands of Christ, and nowhere else, for all penitent sinners.

Our Lord knew her sin. He quietly accepted what she brought, permitted her the fond familiarity of kissing His feet again and again, and to bedew them with her tears--permitted and accepted all that, and thereby made His grace to shine most brightly. His grace is further displayed when He became her defender. Everywhere grace is the object of human cavil. Men snap at it like ravening wolves. Some attack it at the fountain. They cannot endure the doctrine of election. And yet it is God's truth. On this occasion, Simon cavilled at grace in its object, its condescension, its generosity, and its tenderness.

God's grace is seen in the bestowal of yet richer favors. Great grace saved her, rich grace encouraged her, unbounded grace gave her a divine assurance of forgiveness. It was proved that she was forgiven, for she loved much, but she had never received the full assurance of it until the Master said, "Thy sins are forgiven thee." And then He gave her that choice benediction, "Go into peace." Henceforth, the peace of God which passeth all understanding kept her mind. Beloved, you do not know what all God's grace can do for you. He is not stinted in His grace. If He has lifted you up out of the miry clay, He can do more for you. He can set your feet upon a rock. If on the rock you already stand, He can do more for you. He can put a new song into your mouth. And, if already you lift the joyous hymn, He can do more yet. He can establish your goings. Unfathomable is His grace and goodness. Arise and enjoy them.