

Forgiven

We are back in the Words of Jesus from the Gospel of Luke, a series that we are calling *Church in the Red* since some Bibles print the Words of Jesus in red letters.



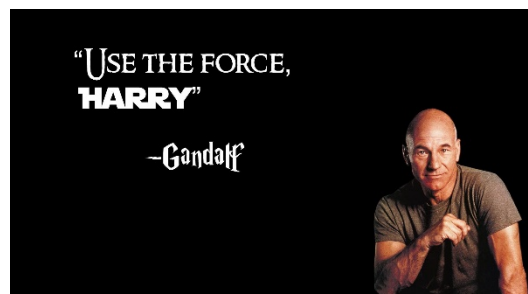
Nearly to chapter 8, if you have been with us, even on and off, since we started this series back in September, you will realize that we are well into the narrative. It is an intricate narrative with a number of layers of things going on.

Have you ever noticed that when you are into a story, whether history like this, or fiction... that if you are really paying attention the details can be shocking? If you are just breezing through the account, just staying on the surface, these kinds of things can be easy to miss. But if you are paying close attention, sometimes the details catch your attention in such a way that they might not even make sense at first.

There are people in my life who are *nerdy* about various, popular stories. It could be Star Wars or the Marvel Universe for example. I've seen all the Star Wars movies, and most of the Marvel movies... but I just watch them for superficial enjoyment (I like to see spaceships and watch stuff blow up... I know; I'm very deep).

I'm nerdy enough about this stuff to know why this is funny... but not too nerdy. (If you don't know why that is funny, ask your grandkids.)

But there are those who are *deep* into the stories and back stories and such. They watch carefully, and re-watch... on the lookout for things that seem out of the ordinary, things that might lead to deeper understanding.

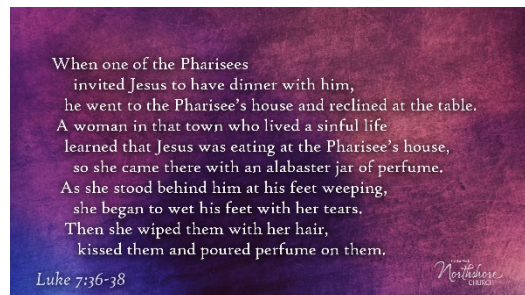


If we just read today's passage for superficial enjoyment, we might breeze through it quickly. But we won't, of course. I'm nerdy about the Bible. As we walk through this passage deliberately, we are going to see some things that are out of the ordinary... and might not even make sense at first. But as we notice these details, and think through them, I'm confident that we'll grasp deeper, more impactful, meaning.

So... here we go. We are starting with Luke 7:36 and we'll go through to the end of the chapter. It begins by saying:

³⁶ When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table.¹

First off... there is some *sweet irony* here. This is the sort of irony we might miss if we didn't consider the context.

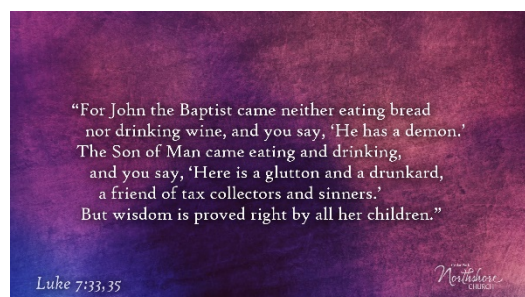


Going back to being nerdy about certain sagas... that is why, I guess, I don't get the full enjoyment out of a Marvel movie because I don't care much about how any one movie fits into the universe (blah, blah, blah...). But I am nerdy about the Bible, and I do remember to consider the context.

Check the preceding verses. Commenting on how Jesus was mischaracterized by many He said:

³⁴ [I] came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'²

So, the *Neary paraphrase* might read "And they thought it was a major problem that Jesus ate and drank with sinners, then He went to a dinner party at a Pharisee's house." It strikes me as funny... an irony that was likely lost on those present, but I wonder if Luke chuckled as he penned it.



Why **would** a Pharisee invite Jesus into His home for a meal? One answer: because there was nothing good on television. My tongue-in-cheek point is that this was a common expression of both hospitality and entertainment.

¹ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 7:36). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

² [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 7:34). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

This was likely a banquet in the style of a Greco-Roman symposium, along the same lines as the event Levi held for Jesus [as it is recorded at the end of Luke 5](#). (I had more to say about that then, check it out online.)

We tend to think of Pharisees as the enemy as we read the Gospels... but not all Pharisees are alike. Think of Nicodemus in the Gospel of John; he was a Pharisee. He was the one to whom Jesus said:

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.³

Nicodemus later defended Jesus among the Jewish leaders, and Nicodemus helped prepare the body of Jesus for burial. While Scripture does not record *conversion* details about Nicodemus, church tradition holds that he did believe, even calling him Saint Nicodemus.

There is hope for even a Pharisee, perhaps even hope for this Pharisee (a Pharisee like me, and the Pharisee in this account).

³⁷ A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume.⁴

Verse 37 raises a number of questions.

How could someone just invite themselves to dinner? Well, one could not invite themselves to the table, but this type of symposium was open to the public. There would be no place for the uninvited on center-stage, around the table (especially a woman, *even more* a woman like this), but anyone could be in the audience.

There would be a meal... but the main attraction was the discussion. Jesus was around the table, likely the focus of the discussion. This is akin to the sorts of panel discussions we might enjoy today, whether it be news or entertainment or a topical discussion. These days, we would put these sorts of symposiums on TV... or at least a Zoom conference.

While it wasn't unusual for someone to simply show up... there was *scandal* surrounding this woman.

What is up with the sinful life? The more straightforward translation of the word is simply *sinner*. Taking the context into account (an urban,

³ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jn 3:16). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁴ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 7:37). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

presumably single, woman); we can be pretty certain that she was a prostitute. (Like I said... scandal.)

While we don't know the details, it is likely that she was a victim of some sort of trafficking; she may have been sold into her trade, as a young girl, even by her family. These were the times in which she lived... times that are the reality by far too many yet today.

She was the lowest of the low, especially in the eyes of one like the day's host, a Pharisee. She was an outcast.

Why the alabaster jar of perfume? This was likely precious and expensive, a perfumed ointment for special occasions. It may have been all she had... but was likely evidence that she was making a living (if you can call it *living*).

I think the more important point is that she came ***prepared*** for something. It seemed that she had something in mind... intent on doing something special, that unfolds in the next verse.

³⁸ As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. ⁵

If that seems strange to you, it only gets ***stranger*** as we pause and consider the social context.

Jesus was essentially on a stage, a raised platform, with an audience, reclining at what was likely a u-shaped table with his feet behind him (keeping his feet as far away from the table as possible because feet are gross... especially in an era of sandals, dirt streets, and open sewers).

I tried to find a good artist's representation, but I did not find a great one. Many put Jesus on a chair. Few have nearly enough people around the table for such an event. So, we're just going to have to imagine.

There was nothing ordinary about what she was doing. This was not an occasion for tears; she must have been crying about something else, as if she was in her own world.

The whole business about wiping and kissing the feet of Jesus was scandalous. It would have been considered indecent by anyone who

⁵ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 7:38). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

noticed. Making matters worse (far worse), she let down her hair... an unthinkable lude act in public, especially around any man that was not her husband.

This was a provocative scene; easily judged **indecent**, on the surface, by anyone watching... so indecent that one should look away.

³⁹ When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, 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." ⁶

The Pharisee had sized things up; he had passed judgement on the scene, and on the woman, and on Jesus. This scene was unacceptable. This woman was a sinner. And Jesus must not be a Prophet after all.

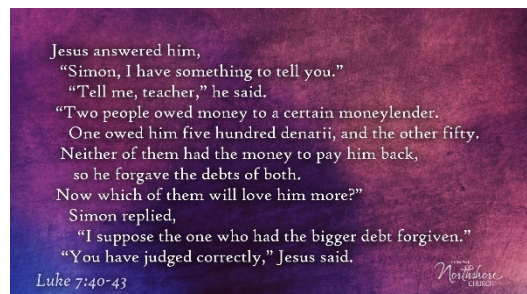
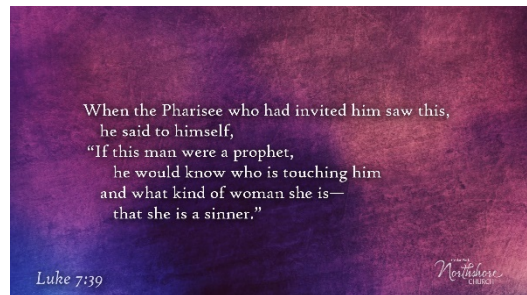
⁴⁰ Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." ⁷

That is an interesting turn of a phrase: Jesus *answered* him. The text specifically said that the Pharisee had only said these things to himself. And Jesus answered him by name: Simon. No longer a title (like Pharisee) or position (like host)... but a person, Simon.

Perhaps Jesus was a prophet after all; He at least had Simon's attention, who still respected Jesus enough to address Him as rabbi (teacher).

⁴¹ "Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii [around \$2,000 to us], and the other fifty [couple of hundred bucks]. ⁴² Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

⁴³ Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven."
"You have judged correctly," Jesus said. ⁸



⁶ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 7:39). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁷ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 7:40). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁸ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 7:41–43). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Does this seem *messed up* to anyone else?

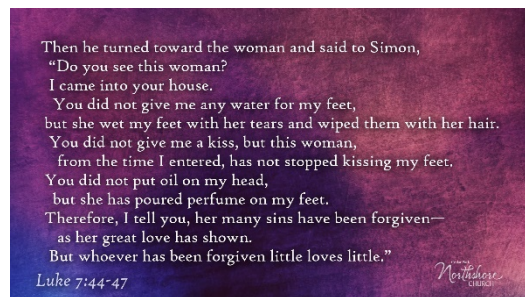
It appears to be a perfectly fine scenario for Simon the Pharisee... who likely made a life out of heaping debt onto the shoulders of people (both literal debt and more *figurative debt* like the weight of guilt and shame).

It seems just fine to Simon that, in this story, love is for sale. The more money, the more love. Sound familiar. Wasn't Simon against "love for sale?"

And what is with Jesus? Did Simon really judge correctly? I suppose we better read on.

⁴⁴ Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman?"⁹

I suspect that Simon the Pharisee had never really seen this woman... or any woman like her. All Simon saw was her sin. Simon saw her only as a category. An outcast. A sinner.



I'm certain that Jesus knew her name, just as He knew Simon's name. I wish Jesus would have called her by name... but this moment was more about Simon, and to Simon she was just "this woman... this sinner."

Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet."¹⁰

Jesus asked Simon, "Do you see this woman." And then Jesus held her up as a mirror so Simon would be revealed to himself.

Jesus accepted Simon's invitation, but Simon failed to fulfill his most basic obligations as a host.

Upon entering, there should have been an opportunity to clean up. Simon didn't have to wash Jesus' feet, or even provide a servant for such a task... but there should have at least been water and supplies.

⁹ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 7:44). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁰ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 7:44–46). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

A host should greet a guest with a kiss... at least in that time and culture. Most in our culture don't do such things... and, of course, if you tried that today you should be fined and quarantined. That is NOT social distancing.

It would not be uncommon to offer a guest a bit of oil... an essential oil as a welcome (sort of like Evangelical woman might do today). Simon offered no such accommodation.

He was not prepared to honor a guest like Jesus... but this woman was prepared to honor Jesus far beyond the expectations of basic hospitality.

The contrast was stark and startling. The tables had been turned.

Before that moment, I'm confident that Simon the Pharisee would think nothing of humiliating that woman and any like her. Now Simon was humiliated... not that the woman intended to humiliate him, but the contrast drawn by Jesus should have left Simon humiliated.

Jesus then said:

⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.” ¹¹

Let's be sure to not misunderstand. This was not a transaction. Jesus did not forgive her sins *because* of this act of devotion. The text leads us to understand that her sins were forgiven some time before. We don't know the details of that encounter. Was it that day? In that town? One-on-one or in a group? We do not know. But Jesus knew. And she knew... showing it with her preparation, her sacrifice, and her love.

This act of devotion, this expression of love, was her response to forgiveness. Jesus saw her. And regardless of all that He saw, Jesus forgave her of her sin. Her response was to worship, to pour out her love in this way.

Jesus exposed this contrast between the woman and the Pharisee. But were they in significantly different places, at least in regard to the degree of their sin? I'm sure the Pharisee thought so, and Jesus seemed to commend the Pharisee for his judgement on such things.

But that does not necessarily line up with my understanding of the Gospel.

¹¹ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 7:47). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God¹²

That's what I read in Romans 3:23... ALL have sinned. And all sin cuts us off from God. Was either the woman or the Pharisee any farther away from God than the other. I'm sure the Pharisee thought he was much closer to God (at least up until that moment with Jesus).

It seems to me that such comparisons and considerations about who is closer are a waste of time and thought. It is as if I said let's take a walk... to Disneyland (Google Maps says it should take us around 393 hours of walking... a couple of months). Would it matter if I started in Kenmore and gave you a lead by letting you start in Bellevue (390 hours away)? When walking to Disneyland, there really isn't a difference between Kenmore and Bellevue. It is sort of like debating who is farther away from the moon.

It is that sort of thing with our distance from God. No matter where we start, the Way is the same. And the Way is Jesus.

We don't weep or wash our way in. We don't get in by religious stuff. The Way is forgiveness from God... not our steps toward Him, but His steps toward us. The Way is to believe in Jesus.

The only thing we can bring is our confession of sins.

⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.¹³

That is 1 John 1:9.

The woman knew who she was, what had been done to her, what had become of her; she didn't need the Pharisee to condemn her.

But she had been purified. She had been forgiven. And all she could do was pour out her love on her Savior... no matter the cost... no matter the risk.

When Jesus said that Simon had judged right when it came to these matters of who was more grateful, who loved more, he was right from the perspective of the one who owed the debt. It was a commentary of the love and gratitude and worship of the one who realized the magnitude of the debt that was forgiven.

¹² [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Ro 3:23). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹³ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (1 Jn 1:9). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

This isn't about what the lender felt he was owed; it was about the gratitude felt by the one who could not pay.

⁴⁸ Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." ¹⁴

Like I said, I'm sure this was not the first time she heard this, not the first time she knew it. But, can we ever hear this too often? Don't we need to be reminded over-and-over again that sins are forgiven.

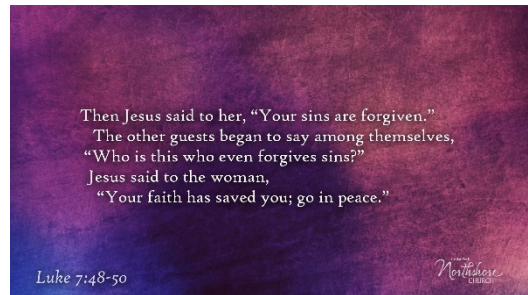
Don't we need a Savior who receives our confession of sins, and forgives us, purifying us, every day?

With that said, I suspect that Jesus said it out loud not only for the woman, but perhaps more importantly for all those listening. Jesus was teaching the Gospel, and this made it clear to them all.

"Your sins are forgiven."

⁴⁹ The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"

⁵⁰ Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." ¹⁵



It wasn't a religious observance. Not a penance paid. Not even this beautiful moment of worship that saved her; it was her faith. She believed Jesus and was saved. Her faith in Jesus was met with forgiveness and a new life.

And so it is with us. So it is with everyone.

I wish we knew what happened next. We don't know. We know that the people in attendance were grappling with this idea that Jesus had authority to forgive sins. We don't know how Simon the Pharisee responded.

Did he flip over the tables, rip his clothes, scream and throw everyone out?

Did he get it? It sure seems like Jesus was trying to get through to Simon. Did it work? Did Simon understand? Did Simon confess his sins? Did Simon believe?

We don't know how the Pharisee responded... but, more importantly, we can determine how we will respond.

¹⁴ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 7:48). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁵ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 7:48–50). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Are we grateful today?

Where is our focus? It is easy to be distracted by the sin of others. Isn't it? But it is a waste of time and energy to condemn.

These days it is really easy to focus on suffering. Our suffering. Our physical suffering. The danger we are in with this pandemic raging. The suffering of others. The fear of economies collapsing. Is this the sort of thing that consumes our focus?

Today, God's Word calls us to focus, again, on Jesus... and the great debt that He paid so we can be forgiven and saved. Today is a day to believe, and be thankful. Today is a day to hear the Savior say, again, "Your sins are forgiven."

Hear it today. Maybe for the first time in a deep significant way. Maybe for the first time in a long time. Your sins are forgiven; only believe. If you knew it yesterday, and every day for a long time before yesterday, know it again today. Your sins are forgiven.

And if you don't know it... believe with me today. Know that your sins can be forgiven. Today can be your day.

Pray with me.

Father, thank You for the forgiveness of sins. Thank you for the great debt that we could not pay that you paid. We are forgiven because of Jesus. We believe today. We confess our sin, and receive your forgiveness. Thank You for this remarkable way that You welcome us into the Kingdom of Our Savior, Jesus; we pray in that Great Name of Jesus. Amen.