

A Tale of Two Sinners

Luke 7:36-50

How do you respond when you meet someone like Simon? He's certainly not the most attractive character in the Bible, is he? His problem, like that of all the Pharisees, is not that he is zealous for holiness. He's right to pursue holiness. Becoming more holy should be one of the main concerns of every Christian's life.

No, Simon's problem is that he defines holiness by the distance a person keeps, not from sin, but from sinners. He's the sort that looks down his nose at people because he knows they commit certain socially unacceptable sins. He's the spiritually suspicious type. To put a label on him, he is a spiritual separatist.

We all know people like this, don't we? In fact, many of the people who are the most interested in personal holiness fall into this category. And that's precisely what makes separatists so dangerous. Because they combine the pursuit of personal holiness with a callous disregard for the feelings of others, because they identify themselves as people of God at the same time that they push other people away from themselves, they end up pushing people away from Christ: and that's the ultimate expression of lack of love for others. Thus, in their efforts to purify themselves by staying away from impure people, they end up just as impure as those they are trying to avoid.

But because this is a tale of two sinners, we need to give Simon a little credit. For if he considers this unnamed woman to be a sinner, he judges rightly: after all, Luke acknowledges that fact in verse 37.

Ok, but what is the nature of this woman's sin? Most commentators agree that some sort of sexual sin is in view: she might be a prostitute, or perhaps simply an adulteress. But either way, Simon doesn't seem so off-base, does he? I mean, how would you react if you saw the preacher standing on a street corner talking to a prostitute – even if it was just to share the gospel? Or, ladies, would you let your husband visit her at her house – even if he was only trying to be neighborly? Or would you be suspicious, too?

Or let's bring this a bit closer to home. Over the last 50 years or so, we've seen the tremendous damage that unbridled sexuality has done to our society. More and more people have kids outside of marriage, and the marriages that do exist seem to be more and more fragile. A staggering number of today's youth will grow up in homes without one of their parents, and as a result they will be at greater risk of too many psychological and social problems to mention: in fact, an increasing number can't even identify what gender they belong to.

In other words, Simon's view of this woman is spot-on. He looks at her as a morally irresponsible libertine, and he's right. At the same time, she looks at him as a stuck-up, self-righteous, holier-than-thou prig, and she's right too.

So what are we to make of this tale of two sinners? Well, as long as we focus our attention on them, we will learn nothing at all. For in that case, we will inevitably choose up sides, some defending Simon's separatism as a necessary tactic in an increasingly godless culture, and others defending the woman's licentiousness in the name of political liberty. In fact, this debate is currently raging across the United States as we disagree about abortion, the definition of marriage and even the question of what it means to be male or female. And no one is being persuaded, no one is learning, and nothing is being decided.

But the opposition between holiness and liberty is not the main point of this story. For as Jesus clearly points out in his parable of the two debtors, both of them are, in fact, sinners. And that means that the particular nature of their sin is immaterial: for all sinners, and that means all men and women, deserve the death penalty from God, the divine judge. No, what is important is not our view of these two sinners, but their view of Jesus. For Simon and this unnamed woman look at Jesus in radically different ways.

Now, Simon certainly respects Jesus as a teacher, to some extent. Simon did, after all, invite Jesus home to dinner, probably after a Synagogue service. Simon did not, however, go out of his way to show any special regard or affection for Jesus. His behavior was polite and correct, but nothing more.

But more troubling is Simon's personal opinion of Jesus. For verse 39 makes clear that because Jesus allowed such a sinful woman to touch Him, Simon doubts that Jesus could possibly be a prophet at all: Simon thus

displays his own separatist tendencies and calls Jesus' own holiness into question. Finally, Simon, along with the rest of those privileged people gathered around the table, gasps in astonishment at the very notion that Jesus could presume the authority to forgive sins.

Yes, Simon's view of Jesus is perfectly clear. Simon's merely perfunctory duties as host, and his skepticism both of Jesus' goodness and of His power and authority all add up to one simple fact: Simon doesn't love Jesus very much, if at all.

And Jesus points out that the reason Simon's love is so slight is that Simon's gratitude is so small. Jesus compares him to a man who has been forgiven a debt of 50 denarii. Now, each denarius was equal to a day's wage for a laborer. So if that laborer was working for minimum wage today, that debt would come to about \$3200, the amount that many people carry on a credit card.

In other words, Simon looks at his sin as a manageable problem. So why should he be overjoyed when a wandering rabbi preaches the good news of God's grace and then pronounces absolution for those who trust Him? Since Simon believes he is basically a good person, why should he think forgiveness is such a big deal?

It's bad enough to look at other people in the holier-than-thou way that separatist Simon does. But looking at Jesus with such cool or skeptical eyes is deadly, for we sign our spiritual death warrant if we imagine that we don't need Jesus to save us. And if we go on believing in our heart of hearts that we aren't so bad, that we don't really need salvation, we will be disabused of that notion in no uncertain terms on the day when Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead.

But there is another way to look at Jesus. For standing in stark contrast to Simon's polite but skeptical point of view is that of the woman Luke calls a sinner. For while Simon's attentions to Jesus have been merely perfunctory, hers betray self-abandoned adoration.

Imagine the scene. This woman has been greatly moved by something Jesus has said or done. It doesn't really matter what: she and Simon lived in the same town, so it is likely that they had had similar experiences with Jesus. Perhaps she had just attended the same synagogue service.

But in any event, she follows Simon and his guests into the house. Now, at a formal dinner party in those days, the guests would not sit in chairs, but recline on cushions, resting one elbow on the low table and stretching their feet out behind them. And so, she stands behind Jesus, perhaps waiting for him to rise in order to speak, or maybe she just wants to be near Him. And she has a vial of perfume with her: one similar to those carried by many ladies in those days.

But as she stands next to Jesus, she begins weeping uncontrollably. Perhaps she has remembered something that Jesus said in his sermon, something that pierced her heart, something that is being discussed in colder, more distant tones around the table. And perhaps she notices that some of her tears have fallen on Jesus' feet.

What happens next is frankly confusing. In her haste and anxiety to avoid giving Him offense, it makes sense that she would try to dry His feet. But why did she use her hair? We can't understand the actions of one overcome by emotion, not reason, and perhaps we shouldn't try. But it is obvious that as she touches Jesus, she loses all sense of propriety or self-control, kissing His feet, and anointing them with her perfume.

No, there is really only one thing that is clear about this woman's actions: whatever else may have been going through her mind, she did what she did because she loved Jesus, because she loved Him with all her heart. She loved Him to the point that she didn't care what anyone else thought about her. There can be no doubt of that.

And why did she love Him so much? Jesus explains that with his parable of the two debtors. For in contrast to Simon, she didn't perceive her sin as a manageable problem. She knew she was a sinner. She knew she had made a terrible mess of her life in one way or another. Something that Jesus had said or done had genuinely convicted her of her sin.

And so she didn't see her sin as a 50 denarius problem, a problem that could be paid for with 2 month's wages. Hers was a 500 denarius problem, a debt that would take a laborer 500 days to pay off. That's two years of work if you don't work on weekends. That's not a credit card payment: that's a home loan. She knew she couldn't pay such a staggering debt.

So, why did this woman love Jesus so much more than Simon did? Because she had no illusions about the extent of her debt, she was much more grateful for how much she had been forgiven. And it is still the case that the most spectacular of sinners often end up becoming the most convincing witnesses for Christ.

But mere conviction of sin doesn't necessarily lead a sinner to love God: after all, Adam and Eve knew they had sinned and yet they ran from God and hid in the garden. No, this woman didn't just love Jesus because she knew she was a sinner.

No, she loved Jesus because of the gospel. Now, we don't know the particular words Jesus had said that caused her to trust in Him. Instead, we see Jesus preaching the gospel, not in words but in actions in this very story, don't we? For remember, this is a tale of two sinners. We have seen that Simon and the woman have very different reactions to Jesus. But what about Jesus' reactions to these two sinners?

How did Jesus respond when Simon invited Him home to dinner? Jesus knew Simon's cold, skeptical heart. Jesus knew Simon's self-righteousness and his unwillingness to see the depth of his own sin. Jesus knew Simon's sin, but Jesus came into his house anyway.

And how does Jesus respond when this sinful woman touches Him? He knows how many men she has touched in infidelity. He even knows if she might have done terrible things to earn the money to buy that vial of perfume from which she anoints His feet. Jesus knows her sin, but Jesus allows her to draw near to Him anyway.

And isn't this the heart of the gospel? For the good news is that Jesus is not a separatist. Jesus did not recoil in horror from all our sin and rebellion. He did not remain in Heaven, aloof and distant from our misery, from the messes that we have made of our lives.

No, the good news is that Christ came to be with us, to be one of us, and to take all our sins upon Himself at the cross. The good news is that Jesus holds out His nail-pierced hands to embrace us, no matter what we have done, no matter how selfish or wicked we may have been.

This is why such a sinful woman loved Jesus so much. She loved Him because He did not turn her away in spite of her sins, because He did not shrink from her touch. She loved Him because although she knew the magnitude of her sins, she also trusted that He would forgive her and accept her. And her trust and her gratitude and her love for Him swelled up until they overflowed in tears and in worship, however awkward or confusing or downright clumsy her actions might appear to us.

So yes, we can go on pointing fingers at people who have different sin problems from ours. Yes, we can go on imagining that our own sin problems aren't that serious. We can go on kidding ourselves, pretending that we are basically good people. But if we do, we will miss the blessing of our Lord.

Or, we can be honest about who we are. We can trust Jesus for Who He is and for what He has done for us. If we do, then we can be sure that Jesus' beautiful words have been spoken directly to us: "Your sins have been forgiven." And then we can fall down at His feet in worship, responding to His grace in love and praise.