

The Power of Forgiveness

By Steven Shepard

Authentic Christianity means loving God and others from the heart. This passage teaches us the reason why we love.

Luke 7:36-47 – Then one of the Pharisees asked Him to eat with him. And He went to the Pharisee's house, and sat down to eat.³⁷ And behold, a woman in the city who was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at the table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of fragrant oil,³⁸ and stood at His feet behind Him weeping; and she began to wash His feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head; and she kissed His feet and anointed them with the fragrant oil.³⁹ Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he spoke to himself, saying, "This Man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner."⁴⁰ And Jesus answered and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." So he said, "Teacher, say it."⁴¹ "There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty.⁴² And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more?"⁴³ **Simon answered and said, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more." And He said to him, "You have rightly judged."**⁴⁴ Then He turned to 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 has washed My feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head.⁴⁵ You gave Me no kiss, but this woman has not ceased to kiss My feet since the time I came in.⁴⁶ You did not anoint My head with oil, but this woman has anointed My feet with fragrant oil.⁴⁷ **Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little."**

I. The sinful woman

Simon the Pharisee invited Jesus to dinner at his home.

Why did Simon invite Jesus? Was he seeking a reason to accuse Jesus? Or maybe Simon was just curious or wanted to impress other people by having a celebrity in his home. Simon no doubt had often invited people to his home. But this time was unlike any other time. As they began to eat together, something extraordinary began to occur.

A woman suddenly enters Simon's home.

Bible commentator William Barclay provides us with a good explanation for why the woman came into Simon's home.

"The houses of well to do people were built round an open courtyard in the form of a hollow square. Often in the courtyard there would be a garden and a fountain; and there in the warm weather meals

were eaten. It was the custom that when a Rabbi was at a meal in such a house, all kinds of people came in – they were quite free to do so – to listen to the pearls of wisdom which fell from his lips. That explains the presence of the woman.”

We don't know who this woman was, but whoever she was she was not appreciated by Simon. The NIV describes her as a woman who lived a sinful life – no doubt a prostitute. The woman entered the home and brought “an alabaster flask of fragrant oil.” Jewish women often carried small phials around their necks containing very expensive concentrated perfume. Scripture says that she stood at Jesus' feet weeping. Jesus would have been reclining at the table on a low couch with His feet stretched out behind. The woman probably wanted to pour out the precious ointment on Jesus' feet. As she stood she was weeping profusely. Perhaps she was already weeping when she came in. Or perhaps it was the sight of Jesus that made her weep. No doubt this was not the first time she had seen Jesus. Perhaps she was one of the ones who had looked on when Jesus said, “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest (Matt 11:28).” Now she just stood at Jesus' feet crying. What caused her tears to come streaming down her face? Jesus later explains that she had been forgiven much. Were these tears of joy or tears sadness because of her sins? Or were they both – both tears of sadness **and** tears of joy at the same time. It is possible to be forgiven and yet under conviction at the same time. No doubt Jesus' forgiveness had set her free and made her whole and that caused her to have an even greater sadness and remorse for her sins. How many of us here today have grieved and travailed like that over our sins? As she wept tears fell in great abundance on Jesus' feet so much so that she began to wash Jesus' feet with her tears. What an outpouring of tears it must have been! Having no towel she begins to wipe His feet with her hair. For a woman to have her hair unbound in public was inappropriate. But at this point she did not care what the people thought. She could only think of one thing – and that was Jesus. She then began to kiss Jesus' feet. The Greek word means to kiss fondly or to kiss again and again. Then she anointed Jesus' feet with oil.

Simon meanwhile was watching intently.

Simon was a respectable man, esteemed in the community, and a religious leader. The text says that Simon spoke to himself. “This Man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner.” Simon begins to accuse Jesus in his mind of lacking discernment concerning the woman and therefore of not being a prophet of God. “Why does He allow this woman to touch Him? It should be obvious what sort of woman this is. Is Jesus that dense? Or does Jesus **know** about the woman but does not care?” Either way, for Simon, Jesus was demonstrating either a lack of discernment or a lack of virtue. How can this man be a prophet? But not only did Simon judge Jesus, he also judged the woman. He did not see her as a person but only as part of a certain class of people. He typecast her as the “sinner” and himself as “respectable” and “righteous”. Simon was convinced that he had better discernment than Jesus. But Simon was the one who lacked discernment. Though he was a Pharisee and a student of God's Word; yet he did not recognize the incarnate Word of God who was sitting at his table. He also had no understanding of the woman's behavior or how so great a sinner could be so transformed.

But Jesus knew exactly what Simon was thinking and speaks directly to the attitudes of Simon's heart.

May Jesus' words also speak to us today! If they do they will give us understanding about what it means to love God and to serve Him with all our hearts.

II. Jesus explains the woman's conduct

Jesus begins to speak to Simon and explain why the woman was behaving as she was. Jesus tells a parable about a man who was owed money by two people. One owed him ten times more than the other. Since neither one could pay he forgave both debts. So Jesus asked Simon, "which of them will love him more?" Simon stated the obvious, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more."

Jesus said to Simon, "You have rightly judged." Then Jesus contrasted Simon's behavior with the woman's. Simon gave no kiss, brought no water, and did not anoint with perfume. Again William Barclay sets the stage,

"When a guest entered such a house three things were always done. The host placed his hand on the guest's shoulder and gave him the kiss of peace. That was a mark of respect which was never omitted in the case a distinguished Rabbi. The roads were only dust tracts, and shoes were merely soles held in place by straps across the foot. So always cool water was poured over the guest's feet to cleanse and comfort them. Either a pinch of sweet smelling incense was burned or a drop of attar of roses was placed on the guest's head. These things good manners demanded, and in this case not one of them was done."

The bottom line is that Simon did not even show politeness to Jesus. What about the woman? All the things that Simon was supposed to do but did not - she did. Yet her actions went way beyond mere courtesy or formality. Her actions expressed an extravagant love. She did not just provide water for Jesus' feet; she used her own tears. She did not give a quick kiss of greeting at the door, but repeatedly kissed Jesus' feet. She did not just place a drop of oil on His head - but she poured out all a whole vial of expensive perfume. Were these actions inappropriate like Simon thought; or was there something else that motivated the woman that Simon could not see? Jesus gives the reason for her love in verse 47, "Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little."

We must not confuse the meaning of Jesus' statement. Jesus did not mean not mean that the woman was forgiven because she loved. Her love was not the cause of her forgiveness, but rather her love was the result of her forgiveness. Her love was the proof of her forgiveness. The story does not teach why the woman was forgiven, but why did the woman love? The answer that Jesus gave not only explains why she loved, but explains why anyone truly loves. The one who is forgiven much loves much. It was not that the woman was a much greater sinner than Simon and therefore was forgiven more which caused her to love more. Simon was also a great sinner. Simon's need for forgiveness was just as great as the woman's need, maybe even greater! But Simon did not see his need for forgiveness and the woman did. The woman saw her condition.

Do you see your condition today? Do you see your need for God's forgiveness? Have you been forgiven by God? And if you have been forgiven, have you been forgiven much or only a little? If you are a believer there should be no doubt in your mind about the answer. And while there may be degrees of sinfulness and therefore degrees of forgiveness required for each person, yet everyone who has been forgiven at all has been forgiven much. We need to understand the reality of how much we have been forgiven. The following eight points I hope will help us to understand what it means to be forgiven much.

III. Understanding God's Forgiveness

1. God's forgiveness is the greatest need of all human beings who have ever lived.

Romans 3:23 says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Ezekiel 18:20 says, "The soul that sins shall die." Sin makes every person guilty and under the judgment of an infinitely holy God. Every time we sin we commit an infinitely evil act because we sin against an infinitely perfect righteousness. We therefore deserve an infinite punishment. 2 Thess 1:6 – 9 describes what will be the final state of all who are not forgiven by God. We are referred to a time "...when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, ⁸in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power."

Sin is infinitely evil and we underestimate the seriousness of our sin. We underestimate sin's destructive nature. We think it is not so bad. But by our sins we actually bring destruction to our own lives and we bring destruction to the lives of others. We don't even realize the harm and ruin that we cause by our sins. The things we do and the things that we fail to do have the power to bring either life and blessing, or death and destruction.

But, ultimately it is against God that all sins are committed. **Ps 51:4** says, "Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight-- that You may be found just when You speak, and blameless when You judge." We have all experienced what is like to offend another human being and then not be forgiven. There is a barrier that cuts off the relationship. We feel rejected by that person. What if that person is God? How horrible is it to not be forgiven the one who created us, sustains us, and has the power to save or to destroy soul and body in hell? All of us have a great debt that we cannot pay. God rightly requires payment and justice to be done for each transgression against His perfect righteousness. So forgiveness from God is everyone's greatest need.

2. Forgiveness means the canceling of penalty.

Greek: To send away, lay aside, remit, cancel all penalty, remove the cause of offense (as if it was never done). In forgiveness God removes His penalty for all the times we have offended Him and broken His law.

3. God's forgiveness is completely based upon the finished work of Christ.

It is at the cross that Jesus forgave our sins. The act of Jesus dying in our place completely secured forgiveness once and for all for all who believe. At the cross Jesus became a propitiation, or a price paid, or a satisfaction of the justice of God by receiving our punishment. Forgiveness is not to be found in any other place. God's forgiveness is not received through our own works of contrition, confession, penance, the sacraments, or any other outward human responses.

Col 1:14 in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.

Rev 1:5 and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth. To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood,

4. God's forgiveness is total.

God's forgiveness does not just cover some of our sins. It covers every sin, past, present, and future, no matter how terrible. Christ bore all of our sins at the cross.

Col 2:13 And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, ¹⁴having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

God's forgiveness includes everything that proceeds from our sin natures.

Heb 9:26b but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.

Romans 6:6 For we know that our old self was crucified with Him so that the body of sin might be done away with...

If you were raised in the church you may not feel that you were a very bad sinner or that you needed to be forgiven much. But you still had the same sinful nature. Human beings are described in Scripture as: deceitful, desperately wicked, corrupt, proud, unthankful, lovers of self, living in lust, unloving, slanderous, despisers of good, ignorant, blind, poor, naked, miserable, living in vanity, unclean, under the power of Satan, dead in trespasses and sins, and enemies of God. If you are convinced of the depravity of your sinful nature you will understand "that you have been forgiven much". Though raised in the Church, you still have to be born again, regenerated, and your conversion is just as dramatic to God, even if it is not in your own experience. **It is only the realization of our own situation apart from Christ that makes it possible to have an intimate relationship with Christ.**

Is 64:6 But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousness are like filthy rags; we all fade as a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.

Rom 7:18 a For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells;

Col 1:21 And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled ²²in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight—

5. God's forgiveness is unchangeable.

Because forgiveness was already accomplished in history at the cross, it will **never be reversed**. Another human being may say to us, "I forgive you" and then that person closes their heart to us. We may say back, "I thought I was forgiven. I guess I am not." But God is not like that. Once God forgives He never changes or takes it back. When God initiates a saving relationship with His people He never breaks it off. Whoever God chooses to call to Himself, whoever He justifies, whoever He forgives, and whoever He adopts as His child He preserves in the faith. When we sin we break our fellowship with God, but our position or relationship with God is not changed. When we confess our sins we simply appropriate the forgiveness that is already ours because of the cross and we are cleansed from all our unrighteousness.

Rom 8:30 Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

6. God's forgiveness is personal.

Forgiveness is more than a doctrine. It is a personal experience. It is not enough to know the doctrine that God forgives sins. What is important and what will change your life is that God has forgiven your sins in particular when Jesus died on the cross.

7. God's forgiveness is received through faith alone.

Acts 10:43. ⁴³To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins."

8. God's forgiveness is completely undeserved.

Rom 5:8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ¹⁰For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.

We did nothing and can do nothing to merit God's forgiveness. By nature we are children of wrath and enemies of God. We are dead in our sins and unable in our own natures to come to Jesus in repentance and faith. God must enable us to come to Him. He does this by changing our hearts so that we will respond to Him. God's forgiveness is an act of sovereign grace from beginning to end. Even our repentance and faith is a gift from God.

IV. Conclusion

If we know God's forgiveness we will naturally love God. Knowing that we are forgiven much by God sets our hearts free and makes us whole so that we can love God not out of duty, but from the heart.

But knowing God's forgiveness is also the key to loving others. It is hard to criticize another or be resentful when we know that we have been forgiven much. This is the key to all of our relationships.

Take for example marriage. We can go to marriage seminars and learn about romance, sensitivity, and relational techniques. But it is all in vain if the heart is not changed. When we understand our own depravity and how much we have been forgiven, it humbles us. It causes us to be more understanding and less demanding toward the other person. Because we ourselves have been forgiven much we are not so quick to become offended or to criticize. We are able to treat the other person with humility, forgiveness, and compassion.

Again I repeat the question I asked before, have you been forgiven little or much?

Like the woman who came to Simon's house, have you travailed over your sins? Have you been made aware of your condition before God? Has God revealed His forgiveness in your life? If so, do you love Jesus? Are you like the woman? Are you welling up with gratitude, consumed by love?

Or are you like Simon, interested in religion but complacent about your relationship with Jesus? If so, then repent and believe the Gospel. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall receive the forgiveness of sins.

Everyone in the world desperately needs the forgiveness that God freely offers to all mankind. As the church it is our calling to proclaim it. This is the Great Commission.

After Jesus was raised, and just before He was taken up to heaven Jesus said, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things." Let us all go forth in obedience to our Lord! (Luke 24:46b-48)

Related verses

John 1:29 The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

1 Tim 1:15 This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.

Is 53:6 All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

Acts 13:38 Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins;

Matt 6:14 For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.¹⁵But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.,

Rom 8: 7 Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. ⁸So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.