

Jesus, Friend of Sinners

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In Scripture, we see that Jesus is given a number of different titles. Some of these titles are very grand-sounding, like “Lion of the tribe of Judah” and “King of kings”. Others, at least for those who know little about Christianity, seem less glorious, like “Man of sorrows” or “Lamb of God”. However, one of the titles that is dearest to us is “Friend of sinners”. We know that everything that Jesus did, He did out of love for the lost, out of love for us.

However, this designation that has such meaning to us was not originally given in a complimentary way. We see the story recounted in Luke 7:31-34. Here, Jesus is criticizing the attitude of the Pharisees toward those whom God sent. God sent John the Baptist, who stayed in the wilderness and kept himself apart from people, and the Pharisees accused John of being possessed by a demon. Jesus, on the other hand, carried His ministry out among the common people, talking with them, eating with them, reaching out to them in love, and the Pharisees accused Jesus of being a drunkard and a glutton, a friend of sinners and tax collectors. To the Pharisees, the fact that Jesus was a friend of sinners wasn't a positive trait at all. Instead, it reflected badly on Him. They thought that because He was willing to associate with sinful people, that He wasn't more than a couple of steps from being a sinner Himself. Jesus, on the other hand, didn't look at the sinner and see a possible source of corruption. He saw a soul in need of the gospel that He could save.

This tension, between the Pharisees' view of the sinner and Jesus' view of the sinner, and indeed between the Pharisees' view of themselves and the way that Jesus viewed them, is played out clearly through the rest of Luke 7. The connection between this story and the Lord's Supper might not be immediately obvious at first, but I think that as we go through it, the meaning for us will become apparent. Let's look, then, at what it means that Jesus is the Friend of sinners.

The Situation

This context of Scripture begins with Luke's description of the situation. Let's read this description together in Luke 7:36-39. There are several things here that we need to note. First of all, even though Simon the Pharisee ends up being the villain of the piece, in some ways, he's actually not a bad guy. He invites Jesus to dine with him, which shows that he thinks Jesus is the prophet He claims to be. Simon is being hospitable, like all good Jews were supposed to be. Simon's problem is that he is trapped in the worldview of the Pharisees and doesn't realize that he is trapped.

In the next verse appears the irritant that will have such an effect on Simon—a woman who is a sinner. We don't know what kind of a sinner she was, but her sin was public enough that Simon knew about it and serious enough that Simon didn't want anything to do with her. Somehow, this socially unwelcome woman manages to make her way into Simon's house, stands by the feet of Jesus, and begins to make a scene. She begins to weep, sheds enough tears that Jesus' feet actually become wet, and then begins to wipe Jesus' feet off with her hair.

Remember, friends, this is not a tidy process. Jesus has been wearing sandals through streets covered with dust, mud, and various kinds of animal and human waste. If we saw the feet of Jesus at this point, we probably would not even want to touch them. And yet, here is this wicked woman, scraping the goop off of Jesus' feet with her hair. Once she's done, she produces a very expensive alabaster jar of ointment and uses that to anoint his feet. Jewish culture 2000 years ago was much more demonstrative than our culture is today, so this isn't quite as weird as it seems to us, but it was still pretty weird. Women didn't go around using their hair for foot towels. For this woman to embark on such an unusual display, she must have been brought to her knees by the recognition of how great her sin was.

Simon watches this whole demonstration with disgust. His problem with it, though, is not that this woman is now crouching there with street mire in her hair from using it to wipe down a man's feet. His problem is that Jesus allowed her to do this to His feet. To Simon's way of thinking, because she is a sinner, she isn't even good enough to serve as a human floor mat for Jesus, Simon, or any other righteous Jew. Any contact with her was enough in Simon's eyes to corrupt their purity. In fact, even though Simon has invited Jesus to his home, he's now questioning whether Jesus is a prophet at all, because a true prophet would have known who she was, and not allowed her to touch him.

Jesus' Teaching

In response to this disdainful attitude in the heart of Simon, Jesus relates **A PARABLE**. This portion of the story appears in Luke 7:40-43. As I was reading this passage, I was reminded of Peter and his habit of blurting things out to Jesus. We often criticize Peter for his impulsiveness, but as this story shows, even if you were only thinking something around Jesus that you shouldn't, He would call you on it. In that situation, you might as well blurt!

The parable that Simon has earned is one of the shorter and simpler that Jesus tells. It's pretty simple. A moneylender has two clients, one of whom owes a lot of money, the other of whom owes a little. The moneylender forgives them both. After relating this story, Jesus asks Simon who will love the moneylender more. To Simon, all of this is obviously coming out of left field. He has no idea what is going on. He may have the suspicion that he is being

railroaded, but he doesn't know where the railroad is headed. Probably with a confused look on his face, he gives Jesus the obvious answer. Clearly, the one who has been forgiven more is also the one who is going to love more.

At this point, Jesus reveals what **THE APPLICATION** of the parable is. We find His discussion in Luke 7:44-47. The great irony of Jesus' words here is that He is doing the same thing that Simon is doing. He is comparing the smug Pharisee to the woman at His feet. The difference is that Jesus is using a different standard than Simon used.

In Simon's eyes, the woman and he existed on entirely different levels. He was a man; she was a woman—strike one against her. He was righteous; she was a sinner—strike two. He graciously invited the prophet to supper, she made a scene—strike three, Simon wins. Jesus agreed that Simon and the woman existed on two different levels. However, His words make clear where each of them belongs. Simon didn't give any water to Jesus for Him to wash the yuck off His feet. The woman wet Jesus' feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. That's strike one on Simon. Simon didn't greet Jesus with a kiss, but the woman has been kissing His yucky feet. Strike two on Simon. Finally, Simon didn't give Jesus any oil to put in His hair, but the woman has anointed His feet. Strike three on Simon. This Pharisee, so confident of His own righteousness, so contemptuous toward this sinful woman, is confronted with the truth that in terms of the way they have each treated Jesus, she has been more righteous than he has, and he is looking up at her. He's the one who has had his home defiled by a wretched sinner, and yet the prophet who is his guest has defended her and not him.

That's bad enough, but it gets even worse for poor proud Simon. Jesus doesn't merely compare actions. He compares motivation too. The woman didn't pour out this lavish display of affection for Jesus because she thought she was righteous. Indeed, it was precisely the opposite. She treated Him so well because she knew she was a sinner, and she looked to Jesus for forgiveness of her many sins. Simon, on the other hand, didn't have that goal in mind. Simon thought he was righteous. Simon thought that he didn't need help from Jesus, and so he treated the Messiah, a man nominally his guest, with a show of casual unconcern. Simon would have known, as any Pharisee would have known, that the two great commandments of the Law were to love God and to love your neighbor. In the end, though, it was the sinful woman, who probably did not even know that those were the two greatest commandments, who showed great love for Jesus, and it was the Pharisee, who probably had them written on his doorposts, who showed little love. The difference wasn't that she needed forgiveness and he didn't. In reality, Simon was just as much a sinner as she was. The difference was that she acknowledged her sin and approached Jesus accordingly, and he never thought to do so.

Finally, we come to **THE RESULTS** of this dialogue. They appear in Luke 7:48-50. In this last portion of the story, Jesus does one more astounding thing. He tells the woman that her sins have been forgiven. Even today, that would be an astounding statement. Imagine, if you will, that some preacher visited our congregation, and after services, he went around telling visitors that their sins were forgiven. We would yank that preacher into a private discussion so quickly his head would spin. For the Jews who have witnessed this scene, Jesus' statement is even more shocking. They know that under the Law of Moses, a man must offer a sacrifice for his sins to be forgiven. Here, no sacrifice has occurred, but Jesus tells this woman that her sins have been forgiven anyway. They ask, "Who is this that forgives sins?"

That is an excellent question, and the answer gets us to the heart of why Jesus is the Friend of sinners. Jesus knew better than any of them that forgiveness required a sacrifice. I am certain that even as Jesus spoke the words of forgiveness to the woman crouched at His feet, even as He saw the look of astonishment and joy on her face, part of His mind was looking forward to the cross, to the price that He would have to pay in His flesh so that she could be forgiven. What made Him her Friend, and indeed the Friend of every sinner, was His willingness to pay that price, to offer Himself in the name of kindness and mercy and love, to die for the godless and the hopeless, because they needed a Friend. Simon thought the sinful woman was dirt. Jesus thought she was worth dying for.

Conclusion

That's why we're here this morning, why we are gathered in remembrance of our Savior's sacrifice, because He thought we were worth dying for too. Of course, remembering Jesus is only half of our solemn observance. Just as the Scripture calls us to remember Him, it also calls us to examine ourselves, and we must do so in the light of His word.

We must be honest, friends, about where in this story we find ourselves. Do we find ourselves in the person of this woman, this social outcast, weeping at the feet of Jesus because of the greatness of her sins? Or do we find ourselves in the person of Simon the Pharisee, outwardly hospitable to Jesus but inwardly proud and self-righteous?

The only way that we can tell which one we are is to look at what we do. Jesus Himself provides the test. The one who thinks he is forgiven little, loves little. The one who knows he is forgiven much, loves much. If we love much, we will show it in the same way the sinful woman did. We will be willing even to humiliate ourselves to serve Him. On the other hand, if we love little, that too will reveal itself in the grudging, halfhearted way we serve our Lord. If we struggle with apathy, with lack of devotion to Jesus, perhaps our problem is the same as Simon's. Perhaps we don't want to admit how badly we need forgiveness either, and our self-righteousness is keeping us from Him. Jesus is the Friend of sinners, not of Pharisees. If we want to have Him for our Friend, we have to acknowledge ourselves as sinners first. Let's think about these things this morning as we partake of the Lord's Supper.