

# Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Broadcast Date: 2 October 2016

No. T0957

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## Luke's Gospel: Jesus in Simon the Pharisee's house (Luke 7:36-50)

Today we are considering a story told to us in Luke 7:36-50. Only fifteen verses, and yet what a lot we can learn from them! If you have time, I suggest that you read this story in your Bible once this talk is over, or better still, read the whole of Luke 7 to get the context. You probably know the story well - how Jesus was invited to dinner by a Pharisee (Luke 7:36) and yet how the Pharisee was not very courteous to Him; how a sinful woman came in and showed her appreciation of Jesus (Luke 7:37-38), much to the Pharisee's distaste (Luke 7:39), and how Jesus spoke the parable of the two debtors (Luke 7:40-43) to show that those who don't think they need much forgiveness don't feel much gratitude towards God. There is a great deal we can learn from this account. I think this story is a great illustration of three important verses in the Bible. They are these:

- Luke 19:10, *"For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost";*
- 1 Corinthians 1:24 *"Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God; and*
- Hebrews 12:3 *"For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself."*

We will see how Jesus cares for those caught up in sin and how He can deliver them. We will also see how Jesus knows all about us and others, how He knows what we are thinking, and that He knows what to do to deliver us. Finally we get a snapshot of the kind of opposition that He had to contend with all through His life on earth.

Let's start with a brief overview of the surrounding chapters so we can place the story of Jesus in Simon the Pharisee's house in its proper context. Back in Luke 6:13, we read how Jesus had chosen His own twelve apostles, and then He had outlined the principles of His Kingdom (Luke 6:20-26). Then, in Luke 7:1, He came to Capernaum, where He responded to the faith of the Roman centurion by healing his servant (Luke 7:2-10). He acted in grace towards the widow of Nain, by bringing her son back to life (Luke 7:11-17). He encouraged John the Baptist (Luke 7:18-23), and showed God's wisdom, but deplored the fact that some had rejected God's will and God's wisdom (Luke 7:24-35). Then, in our story (Luke 7:36-50), we see how He showed grace to a repentant sinner. As we read on into the start of Luke 8, we see how Jesus preached the good news (Luke 8:1-3), and explained by the parable of the sower why this good news did not bear fruit in all who hear it (Luke 8:4-15).

How can we sum up this context? Perhaps like this: Jesus acts in grace and responds to faith, but His grace and His message can be refused. That is why I quoted the three verses earlier. Firstly, I quoted *"For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost"* (Luke 19:10). He came on an errand of mercy and grace. Then I quoted *"Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God"* (1 Corinthians 1:24). He is able to save all who put their trust in Him. Lastly I quoted, *"For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself"* (Hebrews 12:3). Sadly, there are those who refuse to accept Him and His message.

Now let's look at our story in more detail. One of the Pharisees, called Simon, invited Jesus for dinner (Luke 7:36). At face value this seems like a good thing that Simon did, but as we see later on, Simon did not seem to think very much of his guest, since he did not extend common courtesies to Him (Luke 7:44). We are then told that there was a woman in the city who was a sinner who came into the house when she knew that Jesus was there (Luke 7:37). We are not given any details as to who she was or in what way she was a sinner. Various conjectures have been formed, and some have identified her with Mary Magdalene in Luke 8:2 and assumed that she had been a prostitute, but the Bible does not give any details. Personally, I think it is very unlikely that this woman was Mary Magdalene. All we can say is that she must have been well known as a sinner since that is how she was described, and she was therefore someone of bad character or reputation, as we might say today. Evidently Simon the Pharisee thought that to associate with or touch such a person was defiling, as we can see in Luke 7:39: *"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."*

Why did this woman come into Simon's house? From the background reading I have done, I believe that in those days houses were somewhat more public than today, so that people might well drift in and out, and that hospitality was highly regarded. Thus it might not have been unusual for people to turn up to Simon's house, but what would have been unusual would be for this woman to come. Ordinarily, she would have felt the contempt and disapproval for her way of life. She must have been attracted by Jesus' grace. Indeed the passage says in Luke 7:37, *"when she knew that Jesus sat at the table in the Pharisee's house"*, so He was the reason that led her to come in.

Back in Luke 5:17-26, we read about when Jesus had healed the paralysed man whom his friends had let down through the roof. Jesus had told that man, "*Man, your sins are forgiven you*" (Luke 5:20). This had shocked the scribes and the Pharisees, but Jesus had proved His power by healing the paralysed man. Then, in Luke 5:27-32, we see how Jesus chose Levi the tax collector, otherwise known as Matthew. The Pharisees were not pleased that Jesus and His disciples associated with tax collectors and sinners, but Jesus had said, "*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance*" (Luke 5:31). Perhaps it was these words and these incidents that had given the sinful woman hope. Here was a Man who did not despise or condemn the outcasts. He did not approve of their sin - He said that "*He had come to call them to repentance*" - but He was offering grace and the means to start again. She must have had faith that Jesus would not reject her in order for her to brave the disapproving looks and comments as she dared to go into Simon's house!

Once in the house and near to Jesus, she seems to have been overcome with emotion. Luke 7:38 tells us that she "*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.*" Evidently, she was sorry for her sin, whatever that sin was, and she seemed to understand instinctively that this holy Man would bring her out of her captivity.

Simon was not impressed. In Luke 7:16, when Jesus had brought back to life the widow of Nain's son, the people had said, "*A great prophet has risen up among us.*" But here, in his house, Simon does not think that Jesus is even a prophet, because he cannot understand why Jesus would want to associate with this woman, let alone have her touch His feet. He didn't say anything out loud, but Luke 7:39 tells us what he thought: "*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.'*" He did not know that Jesus would know what he was thinking! I dare say that Simon's face and body language pretty much betrayed the tenor of his thoughts, but the Bible records his exact thought. As you read this story, note the fascinating use of language in Luke 7:39-40: "*He spoke to himself*" and "*Jesus answered and said to him...*"! Jesus knows our thoughts, and He can respond to them. This is both encouraging but solemn.

Jesus then spoke a very simple parable to Simon (Luke 7:40-43). How good it is when we can give a simple illustration or a story to make a point! We tend to relate to and remember stories much better than we do abstract arguments. Stories stay with us and make the message real to us. Two debtors owed money, with one debtor owing more than the other, but neither was able to afford his debt (Luke 7:41-42). The creditor wrote off both debts. Both debtors would have been delighted, but the one who owed more would have been the more grateful.

Jesus then used the parable to prick Simon's conscience. Simon had not given Jesus water for His feet, nor greeted Him with a kiss, nor anointed Him with oil, but the woman had (Luke 7:44-47). From what I understand, these would have been expected courtesies of the day. I don't know what the equivalent today would be, but perhaps it would be something like inviting someone for dinner but not greeting and welcoming them when they came in, not taking their coat to hang up, and not offering them a drink. It would indicate that Simon did not think that much of Jesus. What is interesting is that Jesus noticed these lack of courtesies. He was hurt by them. He does feel it when we do not care for Him, are not grateful for all His mercies, and when we do not wish to spend time with Him. He was, and is, a real Man, as well as always being the Son of God.

Yet Jesus is full of grace, and His comments to Simon were not because He was upset for Himself that Simon had been discourteous. Jesus, who always thinks of others, was trying to reach Simon's conscience so that He could save him. Jesus had said that He had come "*to seek and to save that which was lost*" (Luke 19:10). That meant the sinful woman, but it meant Simon too! Jesus wanted to save both of them.

Simon, I suppose, would have admitted that he was not perfect and that he had committed one or two sins in his life, but he would have felt that he was like the debtor who owed fifty denarii as opposed to the debtor who owed five hundred. Consequently, he would not have felt that much gratitude. Certainly he did not seem to think he owed Jesus anything! The woman, on the other hand, knew that she was a sinner. She also knew Jesus could help her. I read a lovely comment about this passage the other day, and it went like this: the author said, "Simon thought that Jesus was not even a prophet and that He did not know that she was a sinner. But He knew her well; if she was a sinner He was a Saviour!"

Jesus then assured the woman that her sins were forgiven (Luke 7:47-50). He does this in a wonderful way. He says it publicly, so to speak, when He speaks to Simon in Luke 7:47: "*Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven.*" He then says it to her personally in Luke 7:48: "*Then He said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.'*" She could therefore be fully assured. He had told her personally, and He had made it a matter of public record. Her faith had saved her, as we see in Luke 7:50. She had come to the right person, and she had not been disappointed.

Now that we have thought about this story, let's see what practical lessons we can gain from it. What are we going to take away with us from this account? What effect will it have on our Christian lives? I have four points that I would like to consider briefly, and they are these:

1. Do we take the Lord Jesus for granted?
2. Have we forgotten the purging of our former sins?
3. Are we self-righteous?
4. Do we go in peace, having exercised faith in Jesus?

### 1. Do we take the Lord Jesus for granted?

As I said earlier, He did feel the lack of courtesy in the way in which Simon received Him. I came across an interesting cross reference for this story. In the Old Testament, in Genesis 18, we read how the Lord appeared to Abraham. Three men came to Abraham while he was sitting in the door of his tent. If you read on in that chapter, you will see that the three men were in fact the Lord and two angels appearing to Abraham as men. Abraham realised what was happening, and in Genesis 18:3-5 he says, *"My Lord, if I have now found favour in Your sight, do not pass on by Your servant. Please let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. And I will bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh your hearts. After that you may pass by, inasmuch as you have come to your servant."* Contrast this with Simon who did **not** bring any water for Jesus to wash His feet!

I need to be careful that I do not slight the Lord with lack of interest in His affairs, and lack of desire to spend time with Him and with His word. I can learn from this story in Luke 7!

### 2. Have we forgotten the purging of our former sins?

We can consider Peter's words in 2 Peter 1:9: *"For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins."* Simon did not really think he was that much of a sinner. He was like the fifty pence debtor who was not as grateful as the five hundred pence debtor. If we have understood and accepted the message of God's gospel of grace, and if we know that Jesus died for our sins and rose again for our justification, then we should remember how much God has done for us! Of course we don't want to be constantly thinking about our former sins. God forgives and has promised to remember them no more, and we should move on. But, we must not forget that we were cleansed from our old sins. We were forgiven, saved and justified, not because we were good and nice people, but because God is loving and gracious and we needed to be saved. This will help us not to despise other people and not to think too highly of ourselves!

### 3. Are we self-righteous?

Jesus had said in Luke 5:32, *"I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."* Simon was self-righteous. Remember how in Luke 7:39, *"[Simon] 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.'"* He did not consider the possibility that *he* might be a sinner too! When we compare ourselves to other people, we can always find someone whom we think is worse than ourselves. But we need to consider the grace, the holiness and the others-centredness of the Lord Jesus. When we see His perfection, then we begin to see that we are not as perfect as we thought we were.

### 4. Do we go in peace, having exercised faith in Jesus?

We saw how the Lord assured the woman that her sins were forgiven, by a public declaration and by a personal message. He told her that her faith had saved her, and He bid her, *"Go in peace."* How might she have felt? We don't know, because we haven't been told. But we can imagine that she felt a tremendous sense of peace, happiness and relief. Perhaps later on other people might have tried to destabilise her, by reminding her of her past, and casting doubt on the forgiveness of her sins. But Jesus had spoken clearly and definitely. We can sometimes be tempted to worry whether God really has forgiven us, whether the promises of the Bible apply to us in our circumstances, and whether He loves us personally. But we must put our faith in His character and His word and His promises, because we know that He never lets anyone down. Then we can *"go in peace"* also!

### Conclusion

And now, let's finish off with a thought for Simon the Pharisee. I don't know, but I like to think that he was saved eventually too. The reason I say this is that his name, Simon, is given. Of course the names of wicked persons like Herod and others are given to us, for obvious reasons, but it seems to me that in general where people are specifically named in the Bible, where they did not have to be named for the sake of the story, it may well be because they were or they became the Lord's own. He said in John 10, *"he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out"* (John 10:3)

and, "*I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep*" (John 10:14). I may not be right here, it is only a suggestion, but we do know of Pharisees who were saved, such as Nicodemus and of course the Apostle Paul. Let's hope that Simon profited from the parable that Jesus told him, and that he became one of the Lord Jesus' sheep.

How patient the Lord was, and is, towards all kinds of people! How good it is that we have a God who cares for us individually, and who knows the right way of reaching our hearts and our consciences! Let us remember the cleansing of our sins, let us not take Him for granted, and let us "*go in peace*"! (see Luke 7:50).

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