

Luke 7:36-50
More Forgiveness More Love

INTRODUCTION

On a hot, sunny day in May 2019 the graduating class of Morehouse College gathered in Atlanta for the commencement speech. But no one was prepared for what the speaker, Robert F. Smith, had planned. Near the end of his speech, Smith said, “This is my class 2019. And my family is making a grant to eliminate their student loans.” Jarvis Mays, one of the co-valedictorians, turned to one of the deans of the college and said, “Is he serious?” True to his word, Smith paid off about \$34 million in loans for the 400 graduates. On average, \$85,000 per student. Years later, one of the students says, “I’m literally still in awe of the love that was given to the class... I am beyond the word *grateful*, beyond the word *moved* by it...” Perhaps the word he’s reaching for to describe his response is *love*.

That’s the word Jesus uses in **Luke 7:36-50**. He says, “Whoever is forgiven much, loves much.” Of course, the debt Jesus refers to is not a financial but a moral debt. Yet the principle is the same, “The more forgiveness you receive the more love you offer.” We see this lived out in the characters Jesus encounters. One loves much the other loves very little. Which raises the question for each of us: *which one am I?*

Like the characters in the story our love – or lack of it – is related to the forgiveness we receive. Because this passage teaches: *the more forgiveness you receive from Jesus the more love you offer to Jesus.*

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A HOSTILE HOST

The story begins with an *invitation* in Luke 7:36.

One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. (7:36)

We learn the Pharisee's name is Simon. Not to be confused with Simon Peter. We don't know exactly why *this* Simon invited Jesus into his home for dinner.

Perhaps he simply likes the status of dining with a celebrity. Perhaps Simon wants to assess Jesus' claim to be a prophet. Perhaps he wants to correct Jesus' message. From "God loves sinners" to "God loves the righteous who keep the law."

Whatever the specific reasons it's clear by what *does not happen* that Simon is a *hostile host*. A guest would normally be honored with common courtesies. A hand placed on the guest's shoulder followed by a kiss of peace. Sandals removed and water to wash his feet. A little olive oil on the forehead. But Simon gave none of these. These were intentional omissions. Designed to *humiliate* Jesus. And everyone in the room would have picked up on it.

In that day, the houses of wealthy people were built around a common courtyard where formal dinner parties were held. The doors were kept open so people from the town could stop in and listen to the conversation. People would have gathered in anticipation. So, as Jesus enters, both guests and onlookers witness this *humiliation* (as indicated in verse 45).

It's an awkward and tense scene. Everyone wonders how Jesus will respond. Rather than leave or address Simon's contempt, Jesus decides to take his place at the table. More correctly, the text says, "he reclined at table."

The custom was to arrange low-lying couches in a "U" shape and then set food on a table in the middle. Each person lays on the couch with their left elbow, eating with the right hand. The feet of each person would extend away from the table. (See below.)

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As Jesus and the other guests recline at table, Simon's contempt for Jesus results in an awkward silence. Everyone wonders what will happen next.

AN OFFER OF LOVE

Whatever exchange they might have anticipated, no one expects what Luke describes.

Luke 7:37-38 (ESV) And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, 38 and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment.

The surprised shock is captured by "behold!" There's shock because of who this woman is: "a woman of the city, who is a sinner." Most likely this means she is a prostitute. As she bent over Jesus' feet the murmurs turn into embarrassed silence. For one thing, a prostitute is not welcome in a Pharisee's house. For another, this kind of public display of emotion and devotion is socially unacceptable.

It's important to understand that *this woman was there because of gratitude*. We're not sure where and when, but this woman had heard Jesus proclaiming his message of grace for sinners. Earlier, Jesus summarized it like this: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners (Mark 2:17)." This woman had heard Jesus' message and received forgiveness from Jesus. Learning that Jesus is in attendance she brings perfume to offer her love.

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But seeing Jesus humiliated, she decides to step in and offer the honor he deserves. Why? *Because the more forgiveness you receive the more love you offer. It's a costly offer of love.* It's socially costly. The others reject her. It's financially costly. She pours expensive perfume on his feet. Since she can't reach Jesus' head, she kneels over his feet. As she pours the perfume, she begins crying uncontrollably.

With nothing to dry his feet with, she does the unthinkable. She undoes her long hair and begins wiping his feet. This provokes gasps of horror. In this culture, a woman loosened her hair only in the presence of her husband. In fact, a woman could be divorced for letting her hair down in the presence of another man (*Talmud*). For those present, this act would have produced intense shock. But their rejection doesn't faze her. She loves Jesus. She's determined to defend his honor and *offer her love*.

After all, she had received so much forgiveness from Jesus. Her intense guilt and shame. Guilt and shame taken away by the good news of God's forgiveness. Her many sins rinsed clean. A life of rejection by so many was now a life of acceptance with God. Having received so much forgiveness from Jesus she doesn't care what others think. She's determined to *offer him her love*.

To call this scene uncomfortable is an understatement. More like embarrassing. Everyone expects Jesus to reject her.

A WRONG JUDGMENT

That's certainly what Simon expects. Look at verse 39.

Luke 7:39 (ESV) Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner."

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You've heard the phrase "often wrong but never in doubt." That's Simon. He judges Jesus wrongly. His expectations of what a prophet is and does lead him to conclude that Jesus is not a prophet.

He judges the woman wrongly. Rather than rejoice that this woman turned from her sinful lifestyle and received forgiveness, he condemns her as an unredeemable sinner.

He judges himself wrongly. He sees himself as righteous and she a sinner.

A CANDID CONFRONTATION

Simon was wrong about several things. The truth is, Jesus knew what was going on in the woman's heart – and Simon's too. Jesus decides it's time for a candid confrontation. So, in verse 40 we read,

Luke 7:40 (ESV) 40 And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he [Simon] answered, "Say it, Teacher."

The phrase "I have something to say" meant, "Gird up your loins pal, I'm gonna speak bluntly!"

a. Confronting Their Common Debt.

Jesus confronts Simon with the little parable found in verses 41 and 42.

Luke 7:41-42 (ESV) 41 "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

Jesus confronts their common debt. The moneylender is metaphorical for God and debtors for sinners. Both debts were significant. In that culture a denarius was equivalent to a day's wage for a common worker. That means that it would take 50 days to pay off one debt and 500 for the other! These were big-time debts in that cultural context.

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Jesus basically says, “Congratulations Simon, she’s a ‘500 sinner’ you’re a ‘50 sinner.’ You should be very proud! Jesus agrees that the woman had more outward sin, but his point is that both Simon and the woman are guilty on the inside. They are both debtors.

b. Confronting Their Common Inability to Pay.

And their common debt means neither can pay. *Whether you owe ‘500’ or ‘50’ if you cannot pay, you’re in trouble.* The point is, before God neither the ‘500’ or the ‘50’ sinner can pay.

Yet graciously God cancels the debts of each. Having confronted Simon with his common debt and inability to pay, he now confronts each debtor’s response.

c. Confronting Their Responses.

Jesus asks, “Now which of them will love him more?” There’s only one response. Simon can’t escape the logic of Jesus’ little parable. He reluctantly responds in verse 43.

Luke 7:43 (ESV) 43 Simon answered, “The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.” And he said to him, “You have judged rightly.”

Where Simon wants to focus on the sins of the woman. Jesus shifts the focus to her response to forgiveness. *The more forgiveness you receive the more love you offer.* Even Simon gets it! At least in theory.

Jesus is amazing! He experiences a hostile host, is offered costly love, and candidly, graciously, and brilliantly confronts his self-righteous host. But what happens next is even more amazing.

A COSTLY DEFENSE

Everyone expects Jesus to reject the woman. Or he could try to soften it by apologizing for her. Something like: “I’m so sorry. How embarrassing. Yes, I do sometimes eat with sinners...but this display is not something I’m comfortable with. I’ll have a word with her...” But Jesus doesn’t reject her. He doesn’t apologize for her. Instead, Jesus defends her.

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Jesus defends the woman based on her response to forgiveness. It's an unexpected, loving, and costly defense.

Luke 7:44-46 (ESV) Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. 46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47 Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." 48 And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

Recall the shock at the woman's offer of love. This defense is costly is because Jesus shifts the rejection from the woman to himself. He does this by comparing the woman's behavior with Simon's. He elevates the woman and humbles the host. In that culture, to confront a host like this was incredibly bold – and offensive. In doing so, Jesus shifts the anger and rejection back to himself. He is willing to hurt in her place. Socially speaking, it's a costly defense.

Just to make sure everyone gets the message; Jesus delivers the knockout punch in verse 47. The HCSB rightly renders verse 47,

Luke 7:47 (HCSB) Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; that's why she loved much. But the one who is forgiven little, loves little."

The woman does not offer her love hoping to receive forgiveness. Rather she first received much forgiveness and now has much love to offer. In other words:

The more forgiveness we receive from Jesus the more love we offer to Jesus.

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A FINAL WORD

As Jesus pronounces forgiveness over this dear woman, the guests bristle.

Luke 7:49-50 (ESV) 9 Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this, who even forgives sins?” 50 And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

The woman has not said a word but her love for Jesus speaks volumes. And so, Jesus speaks this wonderful blessing over her: “Go in peace.”

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APPLICATION

We've seen two responses to Jesus. Which raises the question for each of us: which one am I? Which one are you? What do we do if we have little love? Jesus says, "the more forgiveness we receive the more love we offer." So, we must grow in receiving.

But here's the problem – we're not very good at receiving.

So, here are several themes to help us receive.

1. See Your Need to Receive.

Jesus teaches that both law-keepers and law breakers need forgiveness. Both are sinners. But that's exactly what Simon didn't see. If you don't see your need you won't receive.

Simon saw sin as outward action, so he was blind to his inward sin of dependence on self. A dependence on self that was deeply offensive to God. A dependence on self that turned him away from dependence on God, love for God, and love for others. Like Simon, your dependence on self is so deep-seated that you don't even realize it. Like an operating system on a computer, your dependence on self constantly runs in the background. Spinning out strategies designed to minimize your need.

- Deny sin. You tell yourself "I only feel guilty because I was brought up in a Christian home." Once I move out, I can live by my own standards. Then, no more guilty feelings. This approach denies sin by denying the existence of God and the certainty that you will give an account to him.
- Try to be a better person. You tell yourself, "I'll never do it again." Or "I'll do better." Or "I'll try harder." This approach minimizes sin by self-improvement.
- Compare yourself to others. You tell yourself, "I may get angry with my wife and kids but at least I don't beat them." This approach minimizes sin by comparison.

Your greatest sin is your dependence on self. Your deepest lie is that you can depend on yourself. It's why you don't see your need to receive. And it has devastating consequences.

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In the words of one author,

The lie that I can depend on myself is the only thing that has truly ruined me, the only thing that has turned me into something else... We are not most changed by what we think or feel or by what happened. We are most changed by what we depend on. And nothing has disfigured me more cruelly than my dependence on myself.

Here's the thing. Dependence on self is not unique to law-keepers. Law breakers are just as dependent on self. It is the fundamental sin of the human heart. Once your eyes are open to see, you'll see dependence on self everywhere. You'll see your need to receive.

A second theme.

2. Trust That Jesus Defends Those Who Receive.

Simon condemns the woman because of her sin. Jesus defends the woman because she receives forgiveness. Once we see our need, we still need to receive forgiveness. Receiving is hard. It takes humility. That's why Jesus defends those who receive forgiveness.

Jesus says to the woman, "Your faith has saved you." As the story makes obvious, the woman's faith is in Jesus. He is the object of her faith. Something significant happened. Previously, as a lawbreaker her life was marked by dependence on self. Now, she transfers her dependence onto Jesus. She depends on, or receives, Jesus and his message of forgiveness.

Jesus defends others who receive. Paul was a law-keeper fiercely dependent on self. He persecuted and murdered followers of Jesus. But when Paul met the resurrected Jesus, he receives forgiveness. Understandably, other followers are suspicious of Paul. Jesus defends Paul by telling them: "He is a chosen instrument of mine..."

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The woman had significant sins. Paul had significant sins. Jesus doesn't reject them. He defends them because they receive. *Are there significant sins in your past or present?* Receive forgiveness. Trust that Jesus will defend you too.

This isn't a one-time deal. Whenever you confess your sin and receive forgiveness, Jesus keeps on defending you. 1 John, 2:1, "But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." An advocate is a defender. Trust that Jesus will defend you.

Receiving more forgiveness leads to offering more love. So far, we've looked at two themes that help us receive. First, see your need to receive. Second, know that Jesus defends those who receive.

A third theme.

3. Know What It Cost for You to Receive.

Jesus offers an unexpected and costly demonstration of love to the woman. He defends her at great social cost. He's willing to be hurt in her place. This willingness is the hallmark of his ministry, which climaxes in the cross!

The cross is an unexpected and costly demonstration of love. Unexpected because when God comes in the flesh you expect that he would come to be served. But Jesus came not to be served but to serve. Costly because he came to give his life for you and for me. He came to die in our place. On a Roman cross.

In the song, "I'm Gonna Be (500 Miles)" a man proclaims his costly love for a woman. He sings,

But I would walk five hundred miles
And I would walk five hundred more
Just to be the man who walked a thousand
Miles to fall down at your door

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I mean, if someone were willing to walk a thousand miles to get to you would you doubt their love? That's a demonstration of costly love. But Jesus was willing to do more than walk a thousand miles. Your forgiveness cost Jesus his life. On the cross, he paid your debt in full.

This means he wants you. He wants you that much. Knowing what it cost helps you receive.

So, learn to receive by seeing your need to receive, trusting that Jesus defends those who receive, and knowing what it cost to receive. A final theme that helps us receive.

4. Recognize the Results When You Receive.

Forgiveness is for people who are bound. Simon. The woman. You and me. This means that forgiveness is not only a debt paid but a release from bondage. Forgiveness releases you from the bondage of sin, death, the devil, and hell and releases you to all the things that belong to Jesus. In a word, forgiveness means freedom! Freedom in God. Peace with God. That's what Jesus accomplished for you on the cross!

The result? You have nothing to prove. You probably won't be the best anything. You aren't the best dad, wife, son, daughter, student, athlete, business owner, musician, whatever. You aren't the best. You won't be the best. But if you've received forgiveness from Jesus, you don't have to be! You're free! Free to be you – messy, finite, limited, small. You have freedom in God and peace with God. No matter what happens you are okay.

The results of forgiveness are astonishing. Freedom in God. Peace with God. Recognizing the results of forgiveness helps us receive forgiveness.

Jesus says you can offer more love. You don't need to do more or try harder. You don't need to pretend or minimize your sin. You need to receive more forgiveness.

Because the more forgiveness you receive from Jesus the more love you offer to Jesus.

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As we close, practice receiving. Receive this pronouncement from Jesus:

“Your sins are forgiven.”

Now receive the results of this pronouncement: “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”