

HOW DO I LOVE THEE?

Luke 7:36–8:3

Dr. George O. Wood

The Gospel of Luke deals with the subject of Jesus and women. It's appropriate, therefore, on a Mother's Day, to have that kind of Scripture to share from.

“Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind Him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, ‘If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.’ Jesus answered him, ‘Simon, I have something to tell you.’ ‘Tell me, teacher,’ he said. ‘Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?’ Simon replied, ‘I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled.’ ‘You have judged correctly,’ Jesus said. Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.’ Then Jesus said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ The other guests began to say among themselves, ‘Who is this who even forgives

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sins?’ Jesus said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’ After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God.

The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod’s household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means” (Luke 7:36–8:3, NIV).

Let’s take a moment to look at the first three verses of chapter 8 and then deal more fundamentally with the woman who anoints Jesus with her tears and perfume. The first three verses of Luke 8 tell us that even the ministry of Jesus needed funding, and behind the scenes help. So the people who provided that funding and behind the scenes help were a company of women, three of whom are named, many of whom are not named.

Mary Magdalene, from a little village by the lake of Galilee out of whom He cast seven spirits. Never does the New Testament tell us she was a prostitute. Many have unfairly tagged her with that designation. She was a demon-possessed person whom the Lord healed.

Then there was Joanna, whose husband was a top financial administrator for Herod; a very responsible position, a professional man. It was probably a family with a great deal of funds. She broke out of the mold of the idea that a woman’s place is to simply be quiet and stay at home. Her husband gave her the freedom to fill a vital place of ministry and need in the company of Jesus. She broke the mold of Marabel Morgan’s *Total Woman*, and some others’ idea of the totaled woman, and was a woman who served God with the gifts and skills that God had given her.

Then there was Susanna, of whom we know nothing. There were many others unnamed. The active ministry of women is vital to the success of the Lord’s work, both then and now.

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When the history of this church is told in heaven, they will be talking about the people who served it who were women. Heaven will tell the story of a host of women, partners in ministry of Jesus and of the body.

But the major focus of my message today falls upon the story of Jesus being anointed by the person whom Simon calls a sinner. I want to explore three avenues of thought with you that show that the same things Jesus did for her, He does for us. The story doesn't have relevance if it's just a story. It only has relevance if there's an application to our life, if we find ourselves in the story and find the Lord speaking to us through the story.

I. The first thing the Lord does for this woman, which He does for each of us, is that He rejects the criticism and put-down tags that others place upon us.

This woman had some tags on her life. Verse 37 says, "She had lived a sinful life." The implication behind that was that she had lived an immoral life. In all likelihood, she had been a prostitute in that town. Simon, verse 39, calls her "a sinner." That is how he saw her. That was the cookie-cutter mold of her life. When the woman, however, stands behind Jesus—and we must remember that in Oriental custom, people who weren't invited could come and fill in the outer spaces of the room along the table, people reclining in oriental fashion, resting on their left hand and eating with their right hand with their feet out behind them as they out on low couches. She was one of the people who had gotten through and had found a place at Jesus' feet; her tears were spilling over on Jesus' feet. Then she took the alabaster jar, which had no stopper, you had to break the neck to release the contents and most every woman in Galilee had one. It was something precious. She dumped the perfume on Jesus' feet and then began drying them with her hair and kissing His feet in the process. Simon, who was the host of Jesus and a Pharisee

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observing all of this said, “How could He do this? She is a sinner.” Whereupon, Jesus said to Simon, “Do you see this woman?” (Luke 7:44).

That is the whole difference between Simon and Jesus. They see her in different lights. Simon’s problem was that he was so busy looking at what the woman had been, that he could not see what she could become. He had imprisoned her within his own label. Whenever we do that to a person, we do not give them the freedom to change, the freedom to become. For him, she would always be a prostitute. He could not see her as a penitent even though she had braved coming into his home and risking the displeasure of him and others by being there. He could only see her as she was: a sinner.

If you look down upon a person, you can never lift them up. If you freeze them in time and space and say, “I’ll write that person off,” then that is all they can ever be to you, and they must find—if they’re going to become different—someone who believes they can be something other than the tag that people have put upon them in life.

I had the tremendous joy this week of preaching at a Southern California Teen Challenge retreat in Riverside on Monday and Tuesday. There were about 250 young people from Teen Challenge centers from all over Southern California, including 50 staff members. Our audience was filled with former drug addicts and PCP users and prostitutes and pimps, all set free by the liberating power of Jesus Christ. Someone went into Teen Challenge with a vision of what people could be. Not what they were, but what Christ could make them. I was seated on the platform in a couple of services and two young people sang. One, a girl named Erin. A beautiful girl who sang the most beautiful music to the soul, about the changes Jesus makes in our life. The director of Teen Challenge said to me, “Two years ago, Erin was working the streets of Hollywood. She’d never sung a note in her life, never written a song in her life. Two years ago the Lord saved her,

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marvelously freed her. Now, she's writing music and the song she's singing is her own song. The background you hear on the tape is the background she has made." It was gorgeous.

A young black man stood up to sing. Handsome, well-dressed. When he opened his mouth and the first note rolled out, it was the most beautiful bass voice. It was the kind of register that shakes windows in a building—it's so deep and resonates. I said, "Where did he come from?"

The director said, "You'll never believe where we found him. He was sleeping under bridges in San Diego and was a wino. He came to Teen Challenge and met the Lord and got delivered and this is what he is today."

They said they were going to cut a record with those soloists and the Teen Challenge choir. I stood up and volunteered this church for a live recording. The entire Teen Challenge is going to come. They're going to gather here for a live recording, a tribute to what the Lord can do. The Holy Spirit breathes into us a new feeling, "Once I was clothed in the rags of my sin, naked and poor, lost and lonely within. But the king of all kings in love took me in. And now, praise God, I'm a child of the king."

Paul said he was the chiefest of sinners, the worst one of the lot. That's why he was able to help people, because he didn't put himself on a stand above people and look down on them. I went through the Gospels and tried to find any place where Jesus ever looked at a person and said to him, "You're a sinner." While Jesus deals very seriously with the matter of sin, He never sticks a person with that tag. He never says to a person, "You're a sinner." He calls people, "daughter" and "son" and "child" and "son of Abraham." But He doesn't say, "You're a sinner." Because He doesn't want to stick anybody with that tag. He wants them to be different and to change into His own likeness.

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Simon is saying, “Write her off. She’ll never change. She’ll always be that way.” Maybe you’ve had someone in your background and in your life. We’ve all had someone in our background that has said that. “I don’t see how you will ever make anything out of your life. You’ll never amount to anything.” If we’re going to see changes in our life, we have to ignore the Simons and get to Jesus, and the people who have been touched by Him. We have to see life the way He sees it and believe in what He can do.

Jesus does not put the tags on us that other people put on us.

II. The second great thing about this story is that He understands our heart. He not only keeps us from hurtful tags but He understands our heart.

What’s striking about this story in the Gospel of Luke, chapter seven, is that this woman never says a single word to Jesus. Her action and her tears say it all. Martin Luther has said that tears are the water of the heart. It’s good to get that sorrow of the heart to empty out. She does that and He understands.

Now I must confess that when I used to read these stories when I was younger, I got really uncomfortable. I got uncomfortable with Jesus for allowing Himself to be treated this way. He risked being misunderstood.

What would you think if at a dinner at your house I, as pastor, were invited and somebody came in off the street and started crying at my feet; and then poured perfume on them and then took her hair down and started wiping my feet dry and started kissing my feet? I don’t know what your attitude would be, but if it were happening to me, I’d be uncomfortable with that. Why isn’t Jesus uncomfortable with that?

One of the great things about Jesus is that He lets people do things they need to do because He can graciously receive a gift and realize that it’s important for that woman to get the tears out of

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her heart and to not interrupt her moment of penitence and coming clean. So He lets her do it, even though it may be personally uncomfortable and even embarrassing for Him. The hardest thing some of us have to do is to learn to receive gifts that other people are trying to give us out of love.

I'm a lousy gift-receiver. If somebody wants to do something, I say don't do it. When I was a kid, I said, "When I grow up, I'm never going to let anybody pick up the check or give me a discount," because that's what preachers are notorious for. Mooching off people. Letting people pick up the check and getting the discount. I said, "I'm going to pay my own way. If I can't pay my own way, I don't want to go into the ministry." So in the early years of ministry, I'd literally fight people to pick up the check to prove that I, too, was a man who could pick up a bill.

How beautiful of Jesus to just nonverbally accept this lady, because He knew her heart. Simon, the Pharisee, is sitting there saying, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him." But it was Simon that didn't know. Simon didn't really know the woman. He thought he did but he didn't. The reason why he didn't know the woman was because he didn't know Jesus. And if you don't know Jesus, you're not going to know other people, let alone know yourself. Simon had invited Jesus to his house and then treated Him discourteously.

It is a Near Eastern custom that, when a guest comes, his sandals be removed, that the servants wash his feet, that he be greeted with a kiss of greeting and that his head be anointed with olive oil. Simon didn't do this. He had invited Jesus, but maybe it was just out of curiosity or maybe he meant to entrap Him in his conversation. Simon's problem is very interesting. It doesn't appear to be theology, because in many respects, Simon believed the same things Jesus taught—the resurrection of the dead, the belief in one God, the belief in angels, the belief in the Spirit—Simon believed all of that. And Simon's problem didn't appear to be moral. He appeared to be a

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moral man. His problem was that he was rude and discourteous. There are people, I'm ashamed to say, even in the body of Christ, whose theology is all correct—they can check every point of the doctrinal creed that they believe—but who become rude in their relationship with people.

They're discourteous. Why has that happened? Because discourtesy rises out of unforgiveness in our life and unforgiveness rises out of lack of love. When we're discourteous with one another, either in the family setting or in the body of Christ or the world at large, we reflect some of this absence of forgiveness and love that the Lord teaches us about.

Teenagers, take a look at discourtesy in your life. This is a good day—Mother's Day. There needs to be much love in order for there to be much forgiveness. Because parents don't always do things right; sometimes they do things right and we're in the wrong. But where there is much love, there is much forgiveness. And where there is much forgiveness, there is much love. We as parents need to take a look at discourtesy toward one another in our home.

Jesus illustrates this with the story of two debtors. One who owed five hundred days' wages and another who owed fifty days' wages. He says the person who has the greater sense of being forgiven is the one who has the greater sense of love. Jesus understands our heart. That's why we can be safe in His presence, because He knows us as we really are and understands us.

The third great thing about the Lord is: He not only rejects the tags others place on us, and that He understands our hearts but...

III. He refreshes us with His unconditional love, acceptance, and forgiveness.

What was it that brought this woman to Jesus? It was a deep desire, I believe, to change. A deep confidence that He was the one who could give her a new life; she would never think of coming to Simon's house without Jesus being present. If you went to Simon the Pharisee's house without

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Jesus being present, all you could be would be in a room where the demands of religion were being made without the healing power of the love of God.

Simon's house is a parable of a house or a church where great demands are made to people and the law is laid down, but there is no healing in a legalistic house. For there could be no love. But if love is present in the home, the woman can get through and find the healing of Jesus. And if love is present in the church, people who are hurting can come and get the healing that He gives.

Some recent psychological studies have shown that a vital ingredient of effective therapy between a client and a counselor is that the counselor love the person he or she is counseling.

Psychologists are reluctant in the counseling process to use that term "love" applied to the love of the counselor toward the client, so a term has been coined that sounds less emotional and less spiritual. The quality that is being sought between the counselor and the client is "non-possessive warmth." That's kind of nice, a clinically accurate term. Non-possessive warmth. And we're the therapists. He does not try to manipulate the person into being good or being responsible, but relates in non-possessive warmth. There's a far greater chance for healing to happen.

Jesus knows that. That's why He's relating here in non-possessive warmth or love to this woman. Love makes the difference.

The story is told of a tyrannical husband who demanded that his wife conform to standards of his own choosing. She was to do certain things for him as a wife, a mother, and a homemaker. She came to hate her husband as much as she hated his rules and regulations. Then one day, mercifully, as far as she was concerned, he died. Sometime later, she fell in love with another man whom she married. She and her husband seemed to live in a perpetual honeymoon. She devoted herself to her second husband's welfare and happiness, and they were living week after week, month after month, year after year in great delight in one another's presence. One day, she

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was going through a box of things and she discovered in that old box the list of the “do’s and don’ts” from her first husband. To her amazement, she discovered that she was doing all the things that her first husband had demanded of her. Except her new husband never once demanded or even suggested she do those things. But she did them as an expression of her love. Love drew out the qualities that the legalist was seeking.

Mothers, this is not a little story to encourage you to pray for the death of your first husband! But it is a story that says to us, if we want change to take place, love is the way to draw it out. An unconditional acceptance.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning said it so eloquently, “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. I love thee to the depth and breath and height my soul can reach, when feeling out of sight. For the ends of being and ideal grace.” Love.

No gospel story is complete unless we find ourselves in the story. With whom in this story do you identify?

Is it possible that we may identify with Simon? Our treatment of Jesus is cool. It’s at arm’s length. We’ve invited Him to live in our house or we’ve invited Him to visit with us. But our treatment of Him is just to let Him be there, without responding from the depths of our heart to His presence. Is it possible that Jesus could be in your house but not in your heart?

Or do you identify with the woman? So many people feel that they don’t have a real need for God. Everything’s ok and we can somehow make it on our own without Him. One of the great things that this woman models for us is the fact that, if we take a moment to let our heart really talk to us, we can all think of moments in our life where we have not been what we could have been. That’s a fundamental definition of sin: to miss the mark, to fail to be what we could have been. Or to transgress, to do wrong. This woman had a profound sense that she needed Jesus.

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She senses that Jesus is indeed one who loves her as He loves us. To identify with this woman in responding to the love of Jesus is to end the cool correct relationship, a casual relationship, a relationship that periodically finds me in church, finds me respectful toward Him, but has somehow not yet brought about a real response from my heart of, “Look at what He’s done for me! He died for my sins. He cares so immensely about me.” We often talk about responding to the truth of God. How about responding to the love of God? How do we handle the love that is so great that the one who loves us will lay His life down for us? What can we say in response to that? Except, “I don’t understand it, but if love is what You’re looking for, then let me give it to You.”

We’re often so afraid of disclosure when we say, “If you only knew me the way I am you’d never accept me.” Have you ever felt that way? We’re afraid. “If you really knew me as I am you wouldn’t accept me.” Many times we transfer that to God. God could never accept me because He really knows what’s in me. This story so powerfully shows us that here is a woman who braved all that and was willing to stand and let her hair down, physically and spiritually, I think there’s a lot in that little phrase—letting her hair down in the presence of Jesus. Did Jesus say, “Don’t do that?” No. “Your sins are forgiven you. Go in peace.” Unconditional love and acceptance we find in Him, because He really knows us as we are. And really loves us as we are. And really seeks to bring His wholeness and peace and love and forgiveness into our life.

Closing Prayer

What great, refreshing, good news it is to know that, even though You really know us, You accept us and love us. We take this moment in prayer to ask, in Your presence, where we are in the story and what our response is to You. I pray, Lord, for those whose relationship with You may be cool and at arm’s length, that this message will be a seed of love to say that that day, You

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not only loved the woman who came to You, but You deeply loved Simon and were seeking to bring him into Your home and heart as well. I pray, Lord, for those who feel so cast down in their spirit because they are not what others want them to be, nor what they want to be, let alone what You want them to be. Your love for us is so great that, while we were yet sinners, You died for us. So, Lord, You really do love us. We pray to respond to Your love, to not be passive about it, to not just let it go by as some other kind of idea. For, Lord, Your love invites us to respond, not just with thinking, but with our heart and with the giving of our life to You. For those here in this service who do not personally know You in their life or who have never taken the occasion to give You an official invitation from their life to Yours saying, “Jesus, come into my heart and live in me,” I pray that this morning that will happen. That every person here who has not had that conscious moment when they invited You into their heart would find themselves now in Your presence saying, “Jesus, come into my life.”

While your heads are bowed, I'm going to ask you this: I feel that so many are so close to the kingdom of God. Perhaps the thing that keeps you back is your fear of what other people would think and that may, even at this moment, keep you from responding by coming forward to the front. You'll get the courage in time to come to the front. What the Lord wants to see is your response to Him right where you are, and He accepts you right where you are. I'd like to ask that if you're here today and you'd say, "I've not invited Jesus into my life but I want to"—you may be old, you may be young, but you want to—would you, where you are, agree with me in prayer and say, "Yes, pastor, today I want to invite Jesus into my life." Those of you who have raised your hands, if you would just take a moment now and say to the Lord, right where you are, "Lord Jesus, come into my life. I give You an invitation. Come into my life. Forgive me for

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my sins. Come in, Lord Jesus.” The Lord will do that as you pray. Thank You for that, Lord.

Amen.