

This is not the only account of a woman washing Jesus' feet. There are similar accounts in all the Gospels. They tell of a woman, that one gospel names Mary of Bethany, who anointed Jesus' feet with precious ointment (John 12:3<sup>i</sup>). In those accounts the major issues included the value of the ointment and Judas' accusation of waste. That event took place in the last week before the cross.

In this passage the woman is a noted sinner who washed Jesus' feet with tears and dries them with her hair and then puts ointment on His feet. It takes place in the middle of Jesus' ministry. Here, the main issue is the forgiveness of sins through a humble heart of repentance and faith (Psalm 32:5<sup>ii</sup>). For those reasons it appears to be a different event.

<sup>36</sup> *One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table.* Luke 7:36 Jesus dined with Pharisees on occasion. They seem to have invited Him so that they would have an opportunity to evaluate Him. Some passages even say they watched Him carefully to accuse Him as is done in this passage (See Luke 14:1<sup>iii</sup>). Jesus ate with tax collectors and with the ultra-orthodox Pharisees. He sees all of mankind with the same urgent need of grace and forgiveness.

<sup>37</sup> *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,* Luke 7:37 The woman who made her way into the house and to Jesus' feet was known in the town as a woman with a reputation. She came with an alabaster jar of ointment. There are several historical references to these jars. Women sometimes wore one of these small globular jars that had a narrow neck. The perfumed oil inside could be poured out when the neck was broken. It was so common that sages allowed Jewish women to wear such jars on the Sabbath (Shabbat 6:3<sup>iv</sup>). Alabaster flasks were not always made from alabaster but became known by that name as those were the best jars of that shape.

<sup>38</sup> *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.* Luke 7:38 Jews ate reclining on a low couch with their heads toward the table propped up with the left hand and eating with the right. Their feet were away from the table. The woman approached Jesus' feet and overcome with emotion began weeping. She used those tears to wash Jesus' feet. Then, in what was considered an undignified act, she let down her hair and used it to wipe Jesus' feet dry. She then kissed His feet. There are historical examples of kissing the feet of a highly honored rabbi (Sanhedrin 27b<sup>v</sup>), but it was not a common occurrence.

Her last act was to pour the perfumed oil on Jesus' feet. Normally such oil would be poured on the head, but apparently, she could not get to Jesus' head, perhaps because of the men on either side of Jesus. Or it may have been an act of humility implying that she was unworthy to anoint His head. In Israel, caring for a guest's feet was usually done by slaves.

We can only guess what caused this woman's act of contrition. She had possibly seen or heard of Jesus' miraculous acts of compassion. The Holy Spirit used whatever it was and convicted her of her sinful lifestyle. What happened to her has happened to many of us. We recognized our rebellion against God and knew we were in desperate need of

God's grace. She came seeking that grace with a humble and broken heart. It is a wonderful scene. She was about to realize the wonderful forgiveness that only Jesus can give. An unbearable burden was being lifted. The angels of heaven were breaking out in songs of praise to God (Luke 15:10<sup>vi</sup>).

<sup>39</sup> *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."* Luke 7:39 The next verse comes like screeching brakes on this beautiful scene. The host, Simon, (a common name in that age) is saying to himself that Jesus can't be a prophet because a prophet would never allow himself to be touched by a prostitute. The Pharisees wore special clothes so that everyone would know to keep a little distance so as not to defile them. They would be indignant if a stranger touched them, for they thought they could be defiled by contact with a sinner. Simon is wondering how a holy man did not discern that she was unclean and could allow her to touch Him.

What totally different perspectives! This is another example of the critical attitude of the self-righteous religious legalist. Instead of seeing from heaven's perspective and being overjoyed that the woman was repenting, Simon found fault with Jesus. Instead of wondering what Jesus had said or done that brought this woman to repentance or wondering why he never had that effect on sinners, he was convincing himself that Jesus couldn't be a prophet. Simon thought of himself as more discerning than Jesus.

<sup>40</sup> *And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher."* <sup>41</sup> *"A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty."* <sup>42</sup> *When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?"* <sup>43</sup> *Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt."* *And he said to him, "You have judged rightly."* Luke 7:40-42 Jesus not only knew what sort of woman she was but what sort of man Simon was. Jesus told Simon that He had something to say to him. Simon can hardly say no because he has invited Jesus as a guest. Jesus proceeds to tell a parable of two men who owed a money lender an amount they could not repay. They could be thrown in debtors' prison or forced to give up something dear to them to repay the debt (2 Kings 4:1<sup>vii</sup>), but they were both forgiven. Forgiving the debt would be a very gracious act, for a denarius is equivalent of a day's wage. One owed over month's wages, the other over a year's wages.

Jesus asked Simon which debtor would love the moneylender more. Simon answered the obvious truth that the one who was forgiven the most would. The parable showed that **the response to great grace is great love**. The more grace one receives, the more they should love the one who gave it.

Every born-again believer should want to love God more. Jesus revealed how that is possible. Be willing to see how much forgiveness you have received. Be willing to see your pride, selfishness, and disobedience and how Jesus loved you enough to endure the cross that you might be forgiven of those sins, and you are sure to love Him more.

<sup>44</sup> *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."* <sup>45</sup> *You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in*

*she has not ceased to kiss my feet.* <sup>46</sup> *You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.* Luke 7:44-46 Jesus moved from illustration to application. The first question was key. Simon, do you see this woman? Obviously, he hadn't really seen her. He knew of who she was. He did not see her brokenness, humility, and repentance. He couldn't see that a wonderful thing had taken place in her heart. Perhaps he could not relate because it had never happened in him. And maybe that is why Jesus proceeded to tell Simon of his lack of love contrasted by the woman's acts of love.

An honored guest would have his feet washed by a servant, but it was never offered to Jesus. The woman considered it an honor just to wash Jesus' feet with her tears. An honored guest would receive a kiss from the host as a greeting. Jesus received none from Simon, but His feet were covered in kisses from this broken-hearted woman. If Simon truly honored Jesus, he would have poured a little inexpensive olive oil upon his head. By contrast this woman anointed Jesus' feet with expensive perfume. Which one obeyed the law of loving your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18<sup>viii</sup>)? The Pharisee prided himself in keeping the law, but he had been outdone and exposed as a hypocrite by a repentant prostitute. Conviction should have brought him to his knees.

<sup>47</sup> *Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.*” Luke 7:47 Because of these heart-felt acts of contrition prompted by love, her many sins were forgiven. Jesus let Simon know He knew exactly who she was. Simon's discernment was completely off base.

I have observed people who are judgmental like Simon come up with accusations of various kinds toward godly people. When they are proven wrong as Simon was, they rarely show any remorse. They just move on to make another accusation. It can happen over and over and they never seem to ask themselves, "What am I missing? I should go back and apologize. This person's actions and life have proven me wrong. Where is my heart out of line with God's heart?" **Pride keeps us from seeing the ugliness within.**

Simon was obviously the one who loved little for he had been forgiven little. That does not mean that he had little to be forgiven. We see in this account he was seeking to find fault and his heart was so hard he could not rejoice when a person repented of their sin. It means he could not see how dark his own heart was. He had probably asked for forgiveness for failing in minor religious routines, but at the same time never seen his merciless, critical, and unloving soul.

<sup>48</sup> *And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."* Luke 7:48 Perhaps she was already forgiven for Jesus had just said her act of love was gratitude for forgiveness. Jesus' declaration may have been to assure her of that forgiveness. It also may have been to open the eyes of any at the table who were convicted by Jesus' teaching that He must be the object of faith to find forgiveness.

<sup>49</sup> *Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?"* Luke 7:49 Sin is an offense to God and only the one offended can forgive. The Pharisees knew this. Jesus' words were another way of declaring Himself one with the Father (John 10:30<sup>ix</sup>). People still claim Jesus never said He was God, but that's because they don't read or understand the numerous declarations in the Gospels.

<sup>50</sup> *And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."* Luke 7:50  
If Jesus did not conclude with this declaration He may have been stoned for blasphemy long before it was His time to die (Luke 5:23,24<sup>x</sup>). Jesus is declaring that faith is the means of obtaining salvation, just as it was for Abraham (Romans 4:3-5<sup>xi</sup>). The woman believed by faith that Jesus had mercy on her and could and would forgive her if she repented. She took hold of salvation by faith (Ephesians 2:8,9<sup>xii</sup>). She believed Jesus is the God of steadfast love and mercy as declared in the Psalms (Psalm 51:1<sup>xiii</sup>).

We would like to think that we are nothing like that scoundrel Simon. We believe in Jesus. We know we are sinners saved by grace through faith. But let us consider the ways Simon neglected to honor Jesus and see if some of his nature is in us.

The most egregious thing about Simon was his attitude of judging Jesus. He saw the woman, knew her past, and believed no holy man should let her touch him. He then concluded Jesus couldn't be a prophet. Is it possible that we look at situations in our lives and conclude that God has made a mistake? Do we ever judge God negligent because He doesn't answer our prayers the way we think He should? Is that not like Simon's attitude of "I know better than Jesus"? Or do we see the compassion and grace of Jesus and conclude as the woman did that Jesus is trustworthy and faithful?

Simon did not have Jesus' feet washed by the household servant. You can bet Simon's feet were washed. Wearing sandals on the roads that animals traveled caked your feet with dirt, and it didn't smell so nice. I would bet the rest of the guests had their feet washed.

What is the equivalent in our day? Jesus is not physically present, so we can't meet a physical need. But I ask you, do you give to Jesus the courtesy you give to others? When He speaks, do you listen and pay attention as you would a guest at your table? Most of us have claimed Revelation 3:20<sup>xiv</sup> which tells us if we open the door to Him that He will dine with us. He is present at our table. But are we giving Him the courtesy of listening carefully as He speaks? Is our mealtime prayer just a routine or from the heart?

The typical greeting when one met an acquaintance was a kiss on the cheek. But Simon didn't offer this to Jesus. It was a sign of friendship. We are always in the presence of Jesus. We say we love Him. Do we greet Him? When we wake do we say, "Good Lord it's morning!" or "Good morning Lord"? During our daily routine He often reminds us of His presence. Sometimes it is a check in our spirit that something is wrong. It comes to turn us in the right direction. Do we thank Him? Blessings come throughout the day as well as trials to grow us. Do we recognize they are from Him and express our gratitude? The woman did not cease kissing Jesus' feet. Do we give Jesus expressions of our love throughout the day? Or do we find ourselves so abundantly blessed that we forget to appreciate the Giver as we should?

Simon did not anoint Jesus with oil. That was something a little above the ordinary to show honor. But the woman gave something precious to her to show her gratitude. Do we go above the ordinary to show Jesus our gratitude? This might be done by spending your best hours of the day in His Word and prayer. Or it may be a special gift prompted by His Spirit to a needy person. It might be to take your time with someone to help them through a difficulty, being Jesus' comfort and encouragement to them. Whatever it is you are giving something of value to you because you realize how much you have been

forgiven, and therefore you want to serve Jesus as an expression of your love. Are we forgiven little or much? Do we love little or much? Great love expresses itself.

Luke recorded this account that we might consider whom it is that we are most like, Simon, who has a lack of love and grace, or the repentant woman and her generous display of gratitude for the heart of Jesus.

I'd like to close by returning to the repentant woman going away with the peace she found in repentance. Only those who know they are right with God can have genuine peace in their souls. We can tell ourselves that we will never face a God who holds us to account for the way we lived, but in the recesses of our minds we know we will have to answer. Later in Luke's gospel he will tell us that Jesus said we should fear the One who has authority to cast into hell (Luke 12:5<sup>xv</sup>). Most people realize this life is not all there is and know deep down that how we live now affects our eternal condition. Salvation in Jesus is the answer to that unrest within. He is the only solution for our guilt (John 8:36<sup>xvi</sup>). We can unload our burden of guilt when we realize Jesus' forgiveness.

About one hundred years ago there was a man of God who quit a successful career and went to Japan by faith to lead Japanese to Jesus. He met up with a bilingual pastor. They rented a small hall to hold meetings and went through the streets of Tokyo with a megaphone proclaiming, "If you want to know peace, come to the so-and-so hall at six p.m." One elderly couple were sitting on their balcony and heard them. The husband said, "All my life I've wanted peace in my heart. Let's go hear what they have to say." After listening to how Jesus died for our sins so that we could have peace with God, this couple received Jesus and became Charles Cowman's first converts. He would go on to lead tens of thousands to Christ and saw a gospel tract go to every home in Japan before he died.

Is there peace in your heart? Can you be honest about your heart's condition? Are you willing to ask God how He sees you? If you are willing to see just a portion of the grace and forgiveness you have received, you *will* love Him more! There is only one way to know peace, and that is to know the Prince of Peace. Receive the forgiveness that Jesus offers because He took our punishment on the cross, and then you too can go in peace, transformed, to walk in newness of life (2 Corinthians 5:17<sup>xvii</sup>).

## Questions

- 1 How was this story of the woman different from the other woman washing Jesus' feet?
- 2 What did the woman's actions show?
- 3 Contrast what Simon was seeing with what Jesus was seeing?
- 4 How can we love God more than we do?
- 5 What shocking words did Jesus say to her?
- 6 Why was the woman forgiven?
- 7 How did her actions rebuke Simon?
- 8 Why didn't Simon repent?
- 9 How can we be free of guilt?
- 10 How did Jesus treat women?
- 11 Does Biblical truth supersede cultural tradition? Why?

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<sup>i</sup> **John 12:3 (ESV)**

<sup>3</sup> Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

<sup>ii</sup> **Psalm 32:5 (ESV)**

<sup>5</sup> I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah

<sup>iii</sup> **Luke 14:1 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully.

<sup>iv</sup> "The sages exempt her with a koveleth and with a phial of myrrh, [holding them to be adornments."

<sup>v</sup> "Bar Ḥama then arose and kissed Rabbi Pappi on his feet and accepted upon himself to pay his tax [*karga*] for all of his years."

<sup>vi</sup> **Luke 15:10 (ESV)**

<sup>10</sup> Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

<sup>vii</sup> **2 Kings 4:1 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> Now the wife of one of the sons of the prophets cried to Elisha, "Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that your servant feared the LORD, but the creditor has come to take my two children to be his slaves."

<sup>viii</sup> **Leviticus 19:18 (ESV)**

<sup>18</sup> You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

<sup>ix</sup> **John 10:30 (ESV)**

<sup>30</sup> I and the Father are one."

<sup>x</sup> **Luke 5:23-24 (ESV)**

<sup>23</sup> Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? <sup>24</sup> But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the man who was paralyzed—"I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home."

<sup>xi</sup> **Romans 4:3-5 (ESV)**

<sup>3</sup> For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."

<sup>4</sup> Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. <sup>5</sup> And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,

<sup>xii</sup> **Ephesians 2:8-9 (ESV)**

<sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

<sup>xiii</sup> **Psalms 51:1 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

<sup>xiv</sup> **Revelation 3:20 (ESV)**

<sup>20</sup> Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

<sup>xv</sup> **Psalms 51:1 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

<sup>xvi</sup> **John 8:36 (ESV)**

<sup>36</sup> So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

<sup>xvii</sup> **2 Corinthians 5:17 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.