

Lesson 23 Luke 7:36-50
“A Tale of Two Sinners”

May 3, 2009

Introduction

Once upon a time there were 2 sinners. One of them, whom we will call ‘Big Sinner’, was much worse than the other, whom we’ll call ‘Little Sinner’. For the purposes of this fanciful reflection we’ll say that Big Sinner is a woman and Little Sinner is a man, though these roles could easily be reversed. These 2 sinners were acquaintances but neither new each other very well. Actually, Little Sinner knew more about Big Sinner than vice versa, but that wasn’t because he knew her better, it was rather because Little Sinner’s reputation was more well known. He knew, for instance that she was a hard partier. Her marriage had busted up years ago and she had not taken it well, turning to booze and other drugs to find solace and comfort. This had led to her losing her job which in turn led her to deep financial crisis and it seemed like the story of her life was a downward spiral of one bad choice after another. At least that was the reputation in town.

Little Sinner’s reputation, on the other hand was quite decent, if not so well known. He had a good paying job, a wife and 2 kids who lived a pleasant life in a house with a white picket fence on Pleasant Street. Big Sinner knew from a distance that this man was a leader in the local community church and that most people seemed to respect him. What she along with most people didn’t know was that Little Sinner really struggled with a poor self-image and that this had led him to some secret but very damaging behaviour. Sometimes the effort to maintain his polished reputation became too difficult and he would sneak away and find solace in a bottle of alcohol. This quickly became habitual and he found he was doing it more and more often. His relationship with his wife appeared to be decent but inside he was disappointed in himself and in his wife and this led him to sneak away again to private places where he quickly became addicted to pornography in an effort to dull his feelings. These behaviours however he was able to keep quiet so that his reputation remained unmarred in his family and in the community.

One day Jesus came to town. Little Sinner, being the upstanding church leader that he was, invited Jesus to dinner. This turned out to be the hardest but most influential day of his life. He learned something that day about Jesus that pierced him to his soul. Watching Big Sinner show up unexpectedly at his house and receive the healing touch of forgiveness and cleansing at the hands of Jesus was a shock and a wake-up call. He seemed to know everything about her without having been told. But then the bigger shock was that He seemed to know everything about him without being told as well! Today would be a day of decision... should he cover and run... or come clean and receive healing and wholeness??

In these words I have sought to bring the story recorded by Luke into our day in an effort to help us realize that the lesson of this story is very much a lesson for us today. In our journey through the Gospel of Luke we have come to a story with incredibly powerful ramifications for us in Victoria in 2009. The lesson we hear from this story is encouraging, inviting and uplifting while at the same time extremely challenging and one which requires deep soul-searching.

Main lesson: Jesus longs for sinners (of all kinds) to acknowledge their brokenness and respond with love to His forgiveness.

As we have been working through Luke it has been our desire to pay attention as we ‘walk beside Jesus for a while’. This is one of these days where we need to focus our thoughts carefully and see the wonderful kind of thing He is up to in this story! If we hear the message of this story I believe it has the potential to bring us to a place of freedom and peace in our lives where so often we are burdened down by the junk in our lives that we try to carry on our own. Jesus wants to send us on our way this morning with the same words he said to this woman: “your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

We will first of all make some observations about the story to make sure we hear it correctly and then I want to finish by suggesting that we find 3 principles that invite a response from us.

Observations

This is what is called by some scholars a ‘pronouncement story’. It is called this because of the pronouncement that Jesus makes to the woman, ‘your sins are forgiven’. We’ve seen one of these already in Luke – you may recall the story where the 4 men let down their paralyzed friend through the roof and Jesus makes exactly the same pronouncement over him.

This story has 3 **main characters** – **Jesus, Simon (the Pharisee) and anonymous woman**. It is worth noting right off the start that this story is unique to Luke. There are other stories in John and also in Matthew and Mark which have similar characteristics, but if you compare the stories there are enough differences to suggest that this is a separate incident.

Like the rest of Luke, this story is written with a great deal of skill. We find the heart of the story in the way in which these 3 characters interact with each other. So... let’s put each of the characters in the hot seat and observe how the other 2 characters respond to them.

Let’s begin with **Simon, the Pharisee**.

How does **Jesus** respond to and interact with Simon?

- **He eats at his house!**

- This is surprising in the text to see this happening. We have already observed how the conflict is developing between Jesus and the Pharisees. Just last week we were observing Luke's commentary that these Pharisees had 'rejected God's purposes for them' by not being baptized by John and now most often when we see Jesus speaking hard words, they are directed to these 'guardians of the institution of faith'.
- We can learn something from Jesus here – even though he was often criticized by the Pharisees, we see Him responding to invitations to eat in their homes – not just here but other occasions as well.
- We may learn here the wisdom of pressing into the complicated relationships and seeking greater understanding. Food is often a great medium for such conversations. (I hope you'll all stay for lunch today, by the way).
- He **sees his heart; reads his thoughts; challenges his thinking**
 - This is one of the outstanding features of the story. Luke is presenting Jesus to us once again in a way that we cannot simply accept Him as a great teacher and caring person. He is the One who is able to read our thoughts – nothing is hidden from Jesus.
 - Just when Simon thinks he is safe with his quiet, judgmental thoughts in his head, Jesus exposes those thoughts for everyone to hear!
 - I wonder how comfortable I would have been in such an environment, knowing the Jesus could know exactly what I am thinking?? And yet, it is absolutely true right now that Jesus knows the thoughts and intents of our hearts! Do we think about this??
 - No wonder Paul urges, 'whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, pure, lovely, admirable... think about these things!' (Phil 4:8)

How does the **Woman** interact with Simon?

- She **enters his home**
 - This is probably not as strange as it may appear at first reading. First of all, the meal was most likely held outside in the courtyard of Simon's home. Typically there would be a ring of rooms around the courtyard with the primary meeting place being outside in the middle of the courtyard. The gates to the yard would be left open and in those particular occasions when a particular rabbi would be present at someone's house, other friends and neighbours would gather around to hear what this rabbi would have to say.
 - It would seem then, that the specific act of showing up at this meal would not in itself have been a problem, but as we shall see shortly, her reputation may have been a bit of a problem.

- She **pays him little, if any, attention**
 - This again is not highly unusual given the cultural practice – she was there to see the rabbi; not the host.

Now let's put the **Woman** on the hot seat!

How does **Simon** see the Woman?

- He **views the Woman as a sinner; an untouchable**
 - Being a local in the community, Simon knew the reputation of this woman.
 - In some of the parallel stories of woman anointing Jesus' feet, the women are specifically named as prostitutes. Luke does not use this word in this text and so we need to be careful not to read that into the story from the other incidents. All we know from Luke's careful account here is that she is known as a 'sinful woman'.
- She is a **woman with a reputation**
 - Her reputation in Simon's mind is sufficiently stained that any self-respecting prophet would not allow himself to come in contact with her as this would cause him to become ceremonially unclean.

How does **Jesus** view the Woman??

- He **sees through to her repentant heart.**
 - There is much discussion among the commentators regarding the actions of the woman in this story. Some suggest that her very presence at the meal was a brash violation of social conduct and that the act of letting down her hair was considered to be highly sexually suggestive and therefore her actions were totally inappropriate.
 - Others, however, I believe in a more balanced way, look carefully at Jesus' response to the woman's actions and see something different going on here.
 - We have already noted that more than likely she was not violating any social codes by simply being at the meal – she would be one among a crowd of onlookers who had heard about this rabbi and were coming close to hear His every word.
- Jesus receives the tears, the wiping with the hair, the kissing of the feet and the applying of the perfume, **as truly an act of brokenness, confession and an overwhelming outpouring of love**

- The story that Jesus tells Simon about the moneylender forgiving one person 500 denarii and another 50 drives home the difference between Simon's lack of love toward Jesus and this woman's deep and emotional expression of love
- Jesus **forgives her sins**
 - Once again as in the story of the paralytic man in chapter 5, you can almost hear the collective gasp in the crowd when He says this – “who is this who even forgives sins”
 - Once again Luke is not giving us the opportunity to receive Jesus as anything less than the Messiah of God
- Jesus **releases her to go in peace**
 - “your faith has saved you... go in peace”
 - We will come back to this remarkable statement but for now just let it sink in. Imagine you were this woman imprisoned up until now in a lifestyle of sin – Jesus has now forgiven you and set you free to live in peace – this is in fact what Jesus wants to do for all of us!

But now let's put **Jesus** on the hot seat...

What is **Simon's** view of Jesus?

- Simon is **testing Jesus; curious**
 - We don't really know why Simon invites Jesus to his home for a meal, but at best it would seem that he was curious and wanted to find out more for himself. Not all Pharisees were equally opposed to His teaching – we think of Nicodemus who comes by night with seemingly some sincere questions for Jesus.
- He **considers Him to be a prophet**
 - At first he considers Him to be not a very good prophet given his seeming lack of awareness of who this woman is who is touching His feet!
- He is **forced to make a decision about Jesus' identity**
 - We don't know the end of the story – but we do know that Jesus confronts him strongly and leaves him with 2 options – to confess, repent and express love to Jesus; or to reject and turn away from Him

How does the **Woman** view Jesus?

- She is **desperate for cleansing**
- She **responds with deep emotion**

- The picture is very emotional and traumatic – one gets the feeling from the way Luke tells the story that her intent was simply to come and anoint Jesus feet with oil, but in the emotion of the moment as she realized the depth of her need and the reality of Jesus’ loving presence, her emotions poured out in a flood of tears.
 - Not knowing quite what to do about this, she, without thinking, lets down her hair and wipes her tears away
- She responds with love and faith
 - These are the 2 qualities that Jesus points out in response to her emotional display
 - Her love is contrasted with the lack of love shown by Simon
 - Jesus says clearly that her faith has saved her...

But how do we respond to this story? I want to close by highlighting 3 principles that I believe call us to respond:

1. You can hide from me; I can hide from you; neither of us can hide from God – let’s work on being transparent
 - a. Brothers and sisters, I am increasingly burdened with the reality that church really only happens when you and I learn to walk in each others’ lives in a deeper and more radical way.
 - b. You cannot be transparent or know everything about 200 people, but this only serves to heighten my conviction that every one of us needs to belong to some kind of small group where we can walk close enough to each other that we know that junk in our lives; we know the struggles and the temptations of life that would seek to trip us up and take us away from our walk with God.
 - c. It is far too easy for us to live anonymous lives if all we do is attend church on Sunday! If you are not inviting other believers to walk close enough to you to hold you accountable in your struggle against sin, then it doesn’t really matter what kind of things we do together on Sunday mornings – we are not functioning as the Body of Christ!
2. We love God through acts of repentance and worship – let us offer our worship to Him
 - a. How did the woman show her love for Jesus? With overwhelming emotion.
 - b. I will be the first to admit that our worship style is not often conducive to emotional response. However, I believe we need to be challenged by this story to allow the reality of the story of Jesus to touch us at the deepest place of our lives.

- c. It is far too easy for us to simply be here every Sunday by force of habit; to mumble through the songs without really paying attention to the reality of the Glory of God; it is so easy for us to forget the reality of His unfailing love that is most vividly expressed in the act of Communion!
 - d. How can we re-gain the sense of awe and wonder as we ponder together this wonderful Person of Jesus and what He has done to give us life??
3. Sin enslaves us; forgiveness frees us – let us learn to walk in freedom
- a. I am deeply moved by the final instruction by Jesus to the woman: “*Your faith has saved you; go in peace.*”
 - b. This is God’s desire for you & me as well. That we would walk in peace and in the knowledge of His forgiveness.

Conclusion

This leads us to return to the main lesson for this story:

Main lesson: Jesus longs for sinners (of all kinds) to acknowledge their brokenness and respond with love to His forgiveness

As we close our time I want to open a short time of personal reflection:

- If you have never become a follower of Jesus by simply coming by faith to receive His forgiveness for your sins, I would urge you to take a 2nd look at this wonderful Person of Jesus today – He longs to bring you wholeness, forgiveness and new and eternal life. Along with the woman in our story, all we have to do is to repent, confess and respond by faith, putting our trust in His unfailing love.
- Maybe you are a follower of Jesus but you’ve seen something of yourself in Simon the Pharisee. Perhaps you have been trusting in your own external show of doing church but on the inside you are judgmental, or maybe enslaved to some secret sin which is dragging you down deeper and deeper each day. Jesus longs to release you from that burden of sin, wash you whiter than snow and to say to you, ‘your faith has saved you; go in peace’.