

STUDY ON THE TEACHING OF JESUS

A LOVE STORY

Read Luke 7:36-50

Introduction

The story of Jesus' feet anointed with tears and perfume by a sinful woman is a love story, pure and simple. A love much deeper and heart-felt than that, and one not infused with physical desire. But it is very much a love story.

The passage we are studying in Luke is similar to another story of Jesus being anointed by a woman and is often confused with it. So, if we are to understand the story of Jesus anointed by a sinful woman, we need to disentangle it from the story of Jesus' anointing at Bethany near the end of his ministry (Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:1-11; John 12:1-10).

The two events are confused easily enough because of several similarities:

1. Jesus is anointed with expensive perfume.
2. He is anointed by a woman.
3. The anointing takes place in the house of a man named Simon.

But the differences between the stories show that our passage in Luke 7:36-50 is really a different incident from that found in Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:1-11; John 12:1-10. *The anointing at Bethany* differs in that:

1. It takes place at the home of Simon the Leper, not Simon the Pharisee.
2. The woman doing the anointing at Bethany is not spoken of as sinful, but actually appears to be Mary, Lazarus' sister.
3. The meaning of the anointing at Bethany is to prefigure Jesus' burial.
4. The anointing is on the head (Matthew and Mark) and (perhaps) the feet (John).
5. The criticism is by disciples, especially Judas, over the *value* of the perfume that is "wasted," rather than as a criticism of the morals of the woman doing the anointing.

As a result of the confusion, Mary the sister of Lazarus is thought to be a sinful woman, but that is not at all how she is depicted in the Gospels. As we study Jesus' anointing by the sinful woman in Luke, don't presuppose. Let the elements of the narrative develop the story and its meaning for you. This is a story of contrasts – the self-righteous Pharisee vs. a sinful woman, formal hospitality vs. overflowing love, self-worth through righteous living vs. self-worth through forgiveness.

The Encounter (vv36-38)

Jesus is invited for dinner by one of the Pharisees. Invitation to dinner certainly implied respect for this new teacher and healer. Was He also a prophet? Simon wanted to learn more about Jesus or at least, he is open-minded about Jesus.

Verse 37 tells us several things about the woman. Surely, she has not been invited. While she is a resident of the town, she is looked down upon as a sinner (Greek *harmatolos*). We're not told what her sin is, but

she is probably a prostitute. More often, sinners were shunned by respectable society and prohibited from participation in the local synagogue.

There's something else we can deduce about this woman -- that she has been battered down. Her self-image is tattered and ragged. She is the continual object of cutting criticism in insults perhaps, by the wives of her customers. She is the example many mothers in town use to warn their daughters. She is shunned by the best people and used and abused by the worst. Inwardly, she is broken and bleeding. Her spirit is wounded.

But the sinful woman has heard of Jesus. She has probably heard his teaching. She has heard his gracious words of God's love and forgiveness and healing and restoration. She has heard him speak of his Father's Kingdom in words so plain and compelling that she can see herself as a child of God once more, a full citizen in this Kingdom of Love. Yes, she is still broken, but now she can see light and hope beyond.

How did she get in?

"... brought an alabaster flask of fragrant oil and 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." (vv37b-38)

The woman is standing behind Jesus, and early into the meal she begins to weep. We read that her tears fall upon Jesus' feet. How long this goes on we are not told. Each tear makes a brown wet mark in the dust of his feet, until his feet are wet with her tears.

Now she unfastens her hair, removing whatever kerchief she may have worn over it, and lets it fall free. She kneels down and begins to wipe his feet with her hair. To go about in public with her hair down was considered a shameful thing to do, yet she is not deterred. Her hair wipes his feet after her tears have washed them.

Next, she begins to kiss his feet. While we might look at this with sexual connotations, in her culture kissing the feet might be considered a common mark of deep reverence, especially to leading rabbis.

Finally, she pours scented oil onto his feet out of an alabastron, or perfume vial and this is not a one-time event. The imperfect tense of the Greek words translated "wiped," "kissed," and "poured" (NIV, or "anointed," KJV) indicate repeated action.

I am sure that once the flask of perfume is opened, almost immediately it is detected by everyone in the room. While Jesus has been the centre of focus up to now, all eyes turn to the woman now kneeling at Jesus' feet, weeping, wiping, caressing his feet with her long black hair, kissing his feet with her lips, and pouring perfume upon them. The very intimacy of her attentions appears to many of the guests as shocking. Add to that the woman's reputation in the community and this is downright scandalous, at least that is how Simon the Pharisee interprets it.

The Pharisees Judgment

"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."" (v39)

It doesn't take much of a mind reader to look at Simon's eyes and read his body language and the expression on his face. Simon acknowledges Jesus as a teacher (7:40b), but he doubts that Jesus is the prophet as some claim. He judges both the sinful woman and Jesus and is wrong in both his judgments. It is interesting that he doesn't condemn the action of touching, per se, but Jesus' lack of discernment

of who was touching him and her sinful history. He can't be much of a prophet and miss this! Simon must have said to himself.

The Parable of Two Cancelled Debts (Luke 7:40-43)

I am not quite sure if Jesus heard Simon speak out or this is Jesus' walking in word of knowledge, but Jesus doesn't let Simon's judgment go unchallenged. Jesus uses a simple and easily understood parable to illustrate the point: the more we are forgiven, the more we should love.

Therefore, Jesus explains the motive of the woman's deeply emotional devotion. She loved Jesus because in faith she anticipated His forgiveness. Simon the Pharisee did not see the woman as she was (a humble sinner seeking forgiveness, pouring out love for Jesus) for he was looking at her as she had been (a notorious sinner).

Love as Seen in Acts of Honour (Luke 7:44-47)

Instead of judging the woman, as Simon has, Jesus turns the judgment rather to Simon with a series of three comparisons. Jesus compares Simon's acts as a host to the sinful woman's acts of love.

1. No water to wash feet vs. washed feet with tears, wiped with hair
2. No kiss of welcome vs. kissed feet continually
3. No scented olive oil for his guest's hair vs. poured perfume on his feet

Jesus' point isn't hard to guess. Simon's actions have shown little love, while the sinful woman has lavished love upon Jesus. Now building upon his brief parable, Jesus turns the object from love to forgiveness.

"Therefore, I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little." (7:47)

To help Simon and the others understand her actions, Jesus first tells a story about forgiveness, and then uses the story to interpret the woman's devotion in terms of forgiveness of sin.

I can imagine Simon's reaction to this recital -- anger! It puts him in a bad light. It makes him look like the unenthusiastic host that he is. Why should he need forgiveness anyway? He wasn't a sinner!

Your Sins Are Forgiven (Luke 7:48-50)

But Jesus doesn't linger on Simon's shortcomings. Now he turns to speak directly to the sinful woman:

"Then He said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." And those who sat at the table with Him began to say to themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" Then He said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."'" (7:48-50)

Her sins are forgiven. Jesus continues, looking directly at the woman: "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." He acknowledges that her faith in his promise has brought her salvation. And he bids her the blessing that Jews offer one another in parting: "Shalom." It means not only peace -- and what wonderful peace and light had flooded this prostitute's soul! -- it also means prosperity and wholeness and goodness and blessing. From one believing Jew to another, Jesus has welcomed her back into the fellowship and salvation of God's people.

