

MEN AND WOMEN OF THE BIBLE

NCTM. Thursday a.m. Class. 26th August, 1993. G.C. Bingham

Third Term Course: Men and Women of the Bible

Study Six: The Woman Who Loved Much & The Man Who Didn't

Introduction. The passage of Luke 7:36-50.

The story is simple. A woman known as 'a sinner' arrives at the house of a Pharisee named Simon, who has invited Jesus to a meal. The woman comes into the dining area and begins to weep. Her tears help her to wash his feet, which she dries with her hair, then anointing his feet from a flask of precious ointment. Simon disparages Jesus in his mind, seeing the kind of woman Jesus allows to minister to him. Jesus is aware of all details and tells Simon the story of two debtors, one owing a little the other lot. Jesus asks which one would love him most, the one forgiven the little or the one forgiven a large debt. Simon gives the obvious reply and Jesus points to the woman and explains her love by the fact of the forgiveness of her sins. Implied is Simon's lack of love, seeing he sees little that needs to be forgiven, on his part. Jesus tells the woman to go in peace for her faith has saved her.

The Man Simon, the Pharisee

When we read the story through and get the mind of the Simon we are led to believe he invited Jesus with some view to catching him out for his spirit seems dry and critical. He certainly does not welcome Jesus with any ceremony, and is entirely without affection. He accords the title 'Teacher' to Jesus but does not really respect him for he is critical of Jesus' seeming failure to know the woman is a notorious sinner. Commentators argue that there was no need for any welcoming ceremony, but such do not know the customs of the East. Most hosts would certainly welcome a Teacher as famous as Jesus with some ceremony. We are simply told that Jesus 'went into the Pharisee's, and took his place at table'. The host misinterprets the acts of the woman, he is critical of Jesus for failing to be a prophet, he hears a story about a creditor forgiving debtors and still the message does not reach him. He is a long way from grace and love. A glorious event of love is taking place before his eyes and he cannot recognise it. In the end you wonder at his inability to recognise the transformation of a hopeless sinner into a person of faith and peace.

The Event Which Shows us the Woman of Love

It is sometimes argued that a woman such as she was would have no right to enter a house, particularly that of a Pharisee. If we take it that the meal was a special happening, that there were other guests and that the Teacher who taught publicly would be seated out in a courtyard and that even spectators would be allowed to view the event, then there is no difficulty presented by the story. If custom were against her entering, then she would have been **prevented, but that was not the case**. Often when a special person is invited the place is thrown open to spectators. Perhaps, even, the Pharisee wished to catch Jesus publicly. We do not know. We know the woman was already deeply affected. Jesus would be seated on a couch, facing the low food table, with his legs tucked behind him. She stood behind him and began her ministrations. Her love was so full that she wept. Perhaps she came with that kind of face and attitude which told all she was a humbled and penitent person. Her tears flowed and so much so that she could wash the feet that had scuffed their way through the Palestinian dust. In letting down her hair she was doing a shameful thing, yet her passion led her to do it.

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Having wiped his feet with her tresses she broke open an alabaster container of ointment and anointed his feet. The Pharisee was critical of Christ for not being a prophet, not knowing the woman to be a sinner. In fact Jesus not only knew she was—he later said, ‘Her sins which are many’—but he also knew the mind of Simon, a double proof that he was a prophet. It was Simon who was the ignorant one.

Jesus told the story of the two debtors, one owing a little to his creditor and the other quite a lot. Of course if one were forgiven a large debt one would have great affection for the creditor. Doubtless Simon did not get the point because he would have thought of himself as owing little to God: he was not a ‘great’ sinner, if a sinner⁵ at all! Of course the woman was a ‘sinner’! A Jewess, she would be outside the pale. Jesus showed the difference between her love for him and the non-love of Simon. By contrast with her warm love, Simon was cold and dry’.

Jesus’ Exoneration of the Woman.

It is clear that the woman knew her sins were forgiven before she came to the house. That was what impelled her to come. It might be shown that she heard his words of Matthew 11:25-30 and so had laid her burden at Christ’s feet. A chronology of events in the Gospels is difficult to ascertain. In any case her love flowed from forgiveness whilst Simon was as one who seemed—in his own mind—to need no such forgiveness. The story of two debtors clears her. Jesus then pronounces the fact publicly that she is forgiven, thus publicly exonerating her from her past. Elsewhere we read that the Son of Man has authority (from God) on earth to forgive sinners Matt. 9:6; Luke 5:24). The theologians were stunned, debating the incredible fact, ‘Who is this who even forgives sins?’ Perhaps few of us really understand this great matter. Jews could have forgiveness only through the blood of the sacrifices.

The Glorious Outcome

The woman went away, justified. Her past was purified. Life was given back to her. She was no longer a notorious sinner. She was as pure as the snow (Isa. 1: 18). Grace had come into her life and given her release. She had no need to hark back to the past. Life **now opened up with** a wonderful vista before her. She was now a ‘true woman’.

We ask, ‘Did her faith really save her?’ The answer is, ‘No: it was Jesus who saved her, but then, yes, her faith in him saved her. Had she not believed her sins were forgiven she would not be saved, nor could she go in peace.’

What we need to keep in mind is that it cost Christ the Cross to forgive and transform this woman. He took every one of her sins and bore the guilt and shame of them all, as well as their judgement. His authority to forgive sins was proleptic of the Cross where he would destroy them. Thus her agony was to become his, that her liberation and purification might be complete. No wonder she loved him deeply!

⁵ In the Temple there was a court for ‘sinners of the Gentiles’ (Gal. 2:15) and excommunicated Jews, and these were not allowed into the court of sacrifice. The term ‘sinner’ was reserved for such people.