Sunday School Commentary Lesson

By

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A Reversal of Shame, Luke 7:36-50

Unless we see something of ourselves in the character of Simon the Pharisee, we are so blind to our own need that we have failed to hear the story. The soft underbelly of pride is always vulnerable to the truth, and we are most vulnerable when we are blind to our own shortcomings. Simon thought he was blameless. He knew the woman was a sinner, and he assumed she had defiled Jesus. Jesus then exposed the contrast between Simon's failure to show hospitality and the woman's sincere affection. The contrast was clear, and it left Simon doubly exposed and humiliated. First a shameful display of affection from a sinful woman occurred in his house. Second, a guest had called attention to his lack of hospitality. In the Middle East the importance of honor and shame were essential factors about which everyone was greatly concerned.

Commentary Lesson

The scene in our passage occurs at Simon's home. It was common during this time for homes of wealthy people to be built around an open court yard. The custom in those days was when a rabbi was at a house all kinds of people came into the courtyard to listen to the pearls of wisdom.

When a guest entered a house there were three things that were always done. The host would give his guest a kiss of peace. That was a show of respect, especially for a distinguished a Rabbi. To not give that kind of attention and recognition would have been a disgrace. The roads were merely dust tracks, and shoes were merely soles held in place by straps across the foot. So always cool water was poured on the guest's feet to cleanse and comfort them. Either a pinch of sweet-smelling incense was burned or a drop of attar of roses was placed on the guest's head. These things were customary ways to show good manners, signs of welcome and respect. However, in this case not one of them was done.

In the east the guests did not sit, but reclined, at table. They lay on low couches, resting on the left elbow, leaving the right arm free, with the feet stretched out behind; and during the meal the sandals were taken off. That explains how the woman was standing beside Jesus' feet. Simon was a Pharisee, one of the powerful religious elite. Why would such a man invite Jesus to his house at all? William Barclay states that there are three possible reasons. "It is just possible that he was an admirer and a sympathizer, for not all the Pharisees were Jesus’ enemies (Luke 13:31). But the whole atmosphere of discourtesy makes that unlikely. It could be that Simon had invited Jesus with the deliberate intention of enticing him into some word or action which might have been made the basis of a charge against him. Again it is not
likely, because in verse 40 Simon gives Jesus the title, Rabbi. Most likely, Simon was a collector of celebrities, and, with a half-patronizing contempt, he had invited this startling young Galilaean to have a meal with him. Simon was a man who tried to patronize Jesus."

The woman was a well known sinner, a prostitute. No doubt she had listened to Jesus speak from the edge of the crowd and wondered if he could lift her from her hopeless situation. Round her neck she wore, like all Jewish women, a little phial of concentrated perfume; they were called alabasters; and they were very costly. She wished to pour it on Jesus' feet, for it was all she had to offer. But as she saw him the tears came and fell upon his feet. For a Jewish woman to appear with hair unbound was an act of the gravest immodesty. This kind of intimacy was reserved for a bride's wedding day. The fact that this woman loosened her long hair in public showed how she had forgotten everyone except Jesus.

Does love lead to forgiveness, or is the ability to love the result of being forgiven? The question is not easily answered because the issue can be seen from both perspectives. Jesus accepted the woman's expression of love as a sign that she had been forgiven much. Love is the natural response of the forgiven, but the capacity to love is directly related to the ability to receive grace, forgiveness and love. Simon's problem was not his conduct but his attitude and self-understanding. Jesus cut through the lack of showing him proper respect to Simon's regard for himself. Simon had no idea what it meant to be forgiven and no awareness of his own need for forgiveness. He loved little because he had experienced so little of God's love. Simon, therefore, represents the position furthest from God. On the other hand, because the woman knew she was a sinner, she could receive God's forgiveness. Knowing she was a sinner, she could also know what it meant to be forgiven.

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