

Love and Forgiveness

Luke 7:36-50

In Luke 7, the account tells of one Simon, a Pharisee, who invites Jesus to his home for dinner. A sinful city woman is also there, who kisses and washes Jesus' feet with her tears, anointing them with perfume from an alabaster flask which she had brought. Jesus then teaches a parable of a moneylender who forgives two debtors owing him 50 and 500 denarii respectively, though they are both unable to pay. When Jesus asks Simon which one would have loved the moneylender more, he answers it would be the one that was forgiven the more. Jesus then points out to Simon how much more than he the city woman is demonstrating her love for him and declares to the woman that her many sins are forgiven.

1. A casual explanation of the text

In a typical first glance of the text, we might interpret that, though this woman is living sinfully, she at least knows she needs to be forgiven by the Lord, so she comes and serves Him that she might gain His favor. Contrary to the principle of the parable, she loves more even *before* being forgiven. Consequently, with immeasurable pity, Jesus then forgives her in spite of her current worldly lifestyle when He sees her measure of faith.

However, this interpretation does not sit well with Jesus' parable. In the parable, the debtor loves more because he is forgiven more, but in our casual interpretation, it is reversed: the woman is forgiven more because she loves more. This begs several questions: is this understanding correct? Is this the message Jesus is trying to teach the Pharisee? Does Jesus really expect Simon to mentally manipulate the parable to make it fit His application of it? Let's look closer and see if this casual observation is missing anything.

2. She was a sinner

Let's first examine the state of this city woman. Verse 37 says she was a sinner. What does Luke mean? Is her current daily lifestyle still characterized by her past habitual ungodly behavior (1 John 1:5, 6), or was it only her former manner of life that was customarily sinful (1 Corinthians 6:11)? Otherwise, had she only fallen into sin on past occasions, just as all have done (Romans 3:23, 1 John 1:10)? The original Greek is in the imperfect tense, which allows for any of these conditions.

To explain, Dana and Mantey (DM) identify three regular uses of the imperfect. "The progressive imperfect... is used to denote action in progress in past time.... The customary imperfect... may be used to denote that which has regularly or ordinarily occurred in past time.... The iterative imperfect may be used to describe action as recurring in successive intervals in past time." Their explanation continues: "We have been unable to find in the New Testament any example of the imperfect we could adjudge as really corresponding to the present of existing state."

The word "was" in verse 37 is EN {ane}, the imperfect indicative of "to be:" EIMI {i-mee'}. This word in this very form is used to describe past action that happens *not* to presently continue (Luke 4:16; 8:2; John 9:18; Acts 4:13) and also past action that *does* happen to presently continue (Luke 1:21, 22; John 6:10; Acts 1:15). However, either case is a matter of coincidence, as it is not the imperfect tense itself that reveals this one way or the other. The imperfect concerns past action only with no indication of itself to the present. Conclusively, whether or not habitually sinful actions of the woman continue in the present situation cannot be detected by this tense at all, though it may be discernable from the greater context. It is therefore a reasonable possibility that her sinful lifestyle was in her past and that she is not currently practicing it. We will be able to make some conclusions about this after examining the context.

Notwithstanding, had Luke meant to make abundantly clear that her past condition continued into the existing situation, he could have used ESTI {es-tee'}, the present tense of EIMI, as he does in Acts 19:34 and 22:29. Present tense "is the idea of progress.... It signifies... state in persistence" (DM). Contrary to Luke's word choice, when Simon says, "She is a sinner" in verse 39, he uses the present tense, ESTI. This therefore might only be his prejudicial assessment based upon her past reputation. If so, Simon is proving himself to be the typical Pharisee, as described earlier in this chapter:

Luke 7:29-35 And when all the people heard Him, even the tax collectors justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John. ³⁰ But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the will of God

for themselves, not having been baptized by him.³¹ And the Lord said, "To what then shall I liken the men of this generation, and what are they like?"³² They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, saying: 'We played the flute for you, And you did not dance; We mourned to you, And you did not weep.'³³ For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.'³⁴ The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'³⁵ But wisdom is justified by all her children."

We know that many are believing in Christ among the drunkards, tax collectors, and harlots (Matthew 21:31, 32). Perhaps she is one of those whose life Christ changed with His words. We will make further observations on Simon's responses later in this study.

3. Already forgiven

When Jesus says to the woman in verse 48, "Your sins are forgiven," we do not need to assume that the instant before He spoke these words she was not yet forgiven. The original Greek is in the indicative mood and perfect tense (which is likewise reflected in our English translation). Dana and Mantey explain: "The perfect tense is the tense of complete action. Its basal significance is the progress of an act or state to a point of culmination and the existence of its finished results." Of the intensive perfect, the explanation continues: "This is the emphatic method in Greek of presenting [an existing] fact or condition... more forcibly than either the Greek or English present could possibly do." An example is presented:

Romans 14:23 But he who doubts is condemned [perfect tense] if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.

"When fully rendered into English the meaning is, 'But he who doubts has already been condemned...'" (DM).

Furthermore, the word "forgiven" also appears in the passive voice. If Jesus were to say that He was forgiving her sins at that very moment, He would have used the aorist tense (action at a point in time) and active voice, as in Matthew 6:12-15.

Incidentally, the phrase, "Your sins are forgiven you" in verse 48 is identical in Greek to that in 1 John 2:12, as he writes unto the brethren. We would not think that those brethren were not yet forgiven until John wrote those words.

Now if the woman had already been forgiven, when did it occur? Forgiveness occurs at the same time for everyone: when we submit in faith to God's terms, empowered by the blood of Christ alone, regardless what dispensation we are under. Under the Patriarchal Dispensation, it was the law of conscience (Romans 2:12-16). Under the Mosaical Dispensation, it was the law of Moses (Hebrews 9:13-15). Under the Dispensation of Christ, it is the law of faith and liberty (Romans 3:27; James 1:25). Jesus is never seen in scripture to arbitrarily forgive the sin of anyone in open rebellion to Him but only to those exhibiting faith. Otherwise, God would be showing favoritism.

Romans 2:11 For there is no partiality with God.

Jesus is God, omniscient, and already knows her heart before He ever meets her at Simon's house (Luke 16:15; John 1:47-49; Romans 8:27). She had obviously made preparations for this visit, and Jesus knows her tears are not contrived and her penitence is sincere.

4. Forgiveness and love, cause and effect

Does the woman love because she is forgiven, or is she forgiven because of the love she shows the Lord?

Luke 7:47 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.

In this verse, "for" is from HOTI {hot'-ee}, which Thayer defines: "as conjunction; [demonstrative] that (sometimes redundant)... that, because, since." It is sometimes used to indicate a cause for an effect:

Matthew 2:18 A voice was heard in Ramah, Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, Refusing to be comforted, Because [HOTI] they are no more."

The reason Rachel refuses comfort is because her children are lost. However, HOTI does not always indicate the cause for an effect but sometimes is used as a conjunction to simply connect two associated statements together. An example of this usage is found in verse 39:

Luke 7:39 (NAB) Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that [HOTI] she is a sinner.

Therefore, as sound hermeneutic always seeks to harmonize scripture, the explanation that complements the parable would be that she did not love so much that she was forgiven; she was forgiven so much that she loved. In other words, she didn't serve Jesus in order that he might forgive her; she served Him because she knew how much He forgave her. Accordingly, other reliable translations render this as, "...hence, she has shown great love," (NAB) and "...thus she loved much" (NET).

We ought to never serve Jesus out of a desire to be forgiven by him, as if thinking that by doing so much service he would consider us worthy. We ought to serve Jesus from knowing how much he is willing to forgive us in spite of our utter unworthiness. We understand that we must meet the requirements of faith by submitting to Him in obedience through baptism in order to be forgiven (1 Peter 3:21), but we better not ever think it is our obedience that takes away our sin. Only the blood of Christ by the mercy and grace of God has the power to forgive, and forgiveness is a gift (Romans 5:15-18, Ephesians 2:4-10). We are powerless of ourselves, which is well presented in the parable of the moneylender. However, the Pharisees, for the most part, considered themselves worthy and looked at others with contempt.

Luke 18:9-14 Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: ¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men – extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' ¹³ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

5. God knows the heart

Perhaps one reason for the casual misinterpretation that the woman is not yet forgiven until Jesus declares it in verse 48 is because of the reaction of the attendees, "Who is this that even forgives sin?" (verse 49), which they express in the present tense and active voice. This seems to suggest that they also take this as the action of Jesus in the present moment. Nevertheless, their response is reasonable when we consider the role of the heart in forgiveness. The Hebrew mindset would have readily accepted that forgiveness is only for the sincere of heart, not the pretender (Psalm 7:10; 24:3-5). However, no man on his own can know with certainty the heart of another man (1 Corinthians 2:11), but God alone indeed knows and judges the heart of every man (Psalm 17:3; Isaiah 29:13-15). Therefore, they can only conclude that Jesus is making a claim no man has the right to make. By His astonishing words, Jesus indirectly declares Himself to have divine knowledge. John can likewise make such a statement of divine knowledge in his epistle by the Holy Spirit's gift of discernment (1 Corinthians 12:10; 1 John 2:12).

Jesus also uses the exact same phrase when speaking to the paralytic He heals in Matthew 9 (Mark 2, Luke 5). In this case also, Jesus knows his faith – the forgiveness is not arbitrary. When the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees take issue in their hearts, Jesus provides even further demonstration of His divine knowledge when He rebukes them for their unspoken thoughts. They would acknowledge that God forgives the faithful (John 9:31), but they have trouble seeing the faithfulness of the sick, poor, disreputable, or anyone other than themselves (Luke 18:11). It would have been typical for them, like Job's friends, to assume the paralytic was in that condition due to his ungodliness (Job 4:7-9; John 9:1, 2, 34). Because of this prejudice, they are unable to recognize the divinity of Jesus and are offended by His bold affirmation that such obviously unworthy souls have forgiveness. Since forgiveness is ultimately of God alone, whether past, present, or future, they are prepared to charge Him with blasphemy, even after Jesus further proves His divine power by healing the man.

6. The hearts revealed

Returning to Luke 7, compare the spirit of Simon with that of the city woman. Simon cloaks his true feelings in pretense. With his spoken words, he addresses Jesus as "Teacher," (verse 40) which translates

DIDASKALOS {did-as'-kal-os}. Thayer defines this as "one who teaches concerning the things of God, and the duties of man." Both Friberg and Gingrich indicate its common use as a title of respect. However, in his heart, he is denying that Jesus is the Messiah, saying to himself that if He were a prophet, He would know better about the woman (verse 39).

In those days, a kiss was the customary greeting for both genders (Romans 16:16). Since sandals were the typical footwear and roadways dirt paths, so foot washing for guests was also common courtesy in homes. The well-to-do would have servants for this task (John 13:3-16). An anointing on the head with a little soothing aromatic oil was also a familiar practice for guests (Matthew 6:17). In our North American culture today, this is comparable to not offering a visitor in our home at least a handshake, a place to hang his coat, a comfortable chair, and something to drink. Jesus knows the hearts of men, and since He unhesitatingly delivers an implied rebuke (verses 44-46), we are inclined to think that He knows this is a deliberate slighting and not an unintentional social blunder, which He would otherwise teach us to overlook (Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:12, 13).

In contrast, this woman of the city exhibits the attitudes of a godly spirit:

Matthew 5:3-5 Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, For they shall be comforted. ⁵ Blessed are the meek, For they shall inherit the earth.

When Jesus says to Simon, "Do you see this woman?" in verse 44, He is apparently expecting him to see her godly character in the moment and not pre-judge her on the basis of her past (1 Samuel 16:7; John 7:24). Moreover, while others in attendance are wondering, "Who is this that even forgives sin?" she is far ahead of them and already recognizes and openly acknowledges the divine power of Jesus to forgive the most unforgivable.

Some material in this study is derived or directly quoted from the following texts, which are suggested for further study and additional information:

- (JHT) "A Greek-English Lexicon Of The New Testament," Joseph Henry Thayer, 1979, Zondervan Publishing House.
- "Greek-English Lexicon Of The New Testament: Based On Semantic Domains," Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, 1989, New York: United Bible Societies.
- "Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament," Timothy and Barbara Friberg, 1994.
- "Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament," 2nd Edition, edited by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick William Danker. Copyright 1965 by The University of Chicago Press.
- (DM) "A Manual Grammar Of The Greek New Testament," 1927, 1955, Dana and Mantey, Macmillan Co.

Bible translations referenced in this work include:

NKJ: New King James Version (1982)

NAB: New American Bible, 2011

NET: New English Translation

Bible quotations in this work are from the NKJ unless otherwise indicated. Anglicized equivalents of Greek and Hebrew words appear in all upper case characters with the approximate pronunciation following in braces.