

# Grace for a Broken Woman



## Read Luke 7:36-50

<sup>36</sup> One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. <sup>37</sup> And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, <sup>38</sup> and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. <sup>39</sup> Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner."

<sup>40</sup> And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher." <sup>41</sup> "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. <sup>42</sup> When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" <sup>43</sup> Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly."

<sup>44</sup> Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. <sup>45</sup> You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. <sup>46</sup> You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. <sup>47</sup> Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." <sup>48</sup> And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." <sup>49</sup> Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" <sup>50</sup> And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

## 1. The Woman's Past

10 mins

We're going to focus on the opening scene when the sinful woman makes her entrance. *Read all three lessons before teaching this lesson so you have a feel for the whole scene.*



### Historical Background: "A Sinner"

The woman's description as "sinner" likely means she is a prostitute or she has committed adultery in the village.

## Q1. Jesus briefly describes her sin. Did any of you catch it?

Hint: it is in the last part of the story, v. 47. (Hold on Hints for about 30 seconds to give them time to ponder the answer. It is better if they can get the answer without the hint, but if you delay longer than 30 seconds it will slow the learning down too much.) “Her sins, which are many....”

Whatever she did, she did a lot of it.



## Q2. This woman has likely committed adultery multiple times. What is the effect of adultery or prostitution on marriages and families?

Various answers.

It is devastating. A marriage can recover but it is devastating. Most often it destroys the marriage and the kids. It is like a bomb going off in a home.

## Q. So what is Simon’s concern? Is Simon’s concern legitimate?

This woman has likely destroyed at least one family. She could destroy more. Yes, his concern is legitimate. The local marriage wrecker is in his house.

To further understand Simon’s reaction to this woman, we need to look closer at Simon’s world.



## Historical Background: Holiness

- **Passion for purity.** Simon’s primary concern is purity. This passion for purity goes back into the past. Impurity, a lack of holiness, led Israel into captivity. It is also a passion for the future. A saying in the Talmud said that the Messiah would return if all Israel went one day without a sin.
- **Impure by association.** You become impure by associating with impure people or things. Pharisees like Simon emphasized outer formal impurity and not, like the Hebrew prophets, purity of the heart.
- If you went into the Jewish bookstore<sup>1</sup> in Capernaum, one of the scrolls you would see was “Ben Sirach” written about 175 BC. It gives us a feel of Simon’s mindset:

“So no one pities a person who associates with a sinner and becomes involved in the other’s sins” (12:14).

“What does a wolf have in common with a lamb? No more has a sinner with the devout” (13:17).

“A prostitute is regarded as spittle....” (26:22).



Photo courtesy of Todd Bolen/BiblePlaces.com.

### Mikveh

Photo of a mikveh next to the temple in Jerusalem. Men would enter down the left side, immerse themselves, and come up the right side. The purpose was not physical cleansing, but spiritual. Notice the wear on the steps on each side. Archaeologists have discovered first century mikvehs are all over Israel.

<sup>1</sup> Of course, there were no bookstores in Capernaum because scrolls were so expensive.

## 2. The Woman's Present

15 mins

Now that we have a feel for Simon's mindset, let's look more closely at the scene.



### Historical Background: Simon's Feast

- **Sabbath feast.** It is likely that we are in the Galilee region and Jesus has preached at a local synagogue. It was common to invite a visiting rabbi to the Sabbath meal after he had spoken. A number of the dinners Jesus is invited to in Luke occur after a Sabbath synagogue service.
- **The Greek custom at a feast** was to lie down at a low three-side table (a Triclinium) on a cushion with your feet away from the table. This had become common in Jewish culture.
- **"The Men's Room"** was the actual name for the dining room. This was an all-male gathering.
- **Foot washing** was very important in those days, because the people wore open sandals and walked along very dusty or muddy roads.
- In this culture bathing was infrequent, and there was no deodorant. But women typically carried a **small alabaster jar of perfume** around their necks on a string, so that they could perfume themselves. If she is a prostitute, then she would have used this in "plying her trade."



### Ointment

Photo of alabaster jars found in Israel dated 600 BC. Notice the handles on the smaller jar for carrying it around the neck.

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### Q3. Let's look at all the things the woman is doing in order from the text.

First write down the numbers 1 through 5 so when people mention an item you can put it in its place. Then they can see what is missing.

1. Entering the room at the start of the feast carrying an alabaster flask.
2. Standing behind him weeping.
3. Weeping, begins to wet his feet.
4. Now seated, continuing to weep, wiping Jesus' feet with her hair.
5. Begins kissing his feet and anointing them with perfume.

### Q. When did she start weeping at Jesus' feet? Jesus gives us a hint after the parable.

v. 45 "From the time I came in."

### Q. How much weeping do you need to be doing to soak someone's feet while you are standing above them?

A lot.

**Q. So how loud is this opening scene? How strong must be her crying to create this many tears?**

It is very loud. She is likely drowning out conversation.



### Literary Insight: Weeping and Kissing

- The word for *weeping* [brecho] is a particularly strong word that is used to describe rain showers in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:45) and in the book of James (5:17). Jesus' feet were actually being cleaned, she was weeping so much.
- The word for *kissing* is also a particularly strong form of the verb meaning "to kiss eagerly, affectionately or repeatedly."<sup>2</sup>
- Even in ancient culture, it was rare to kiss someone else's feet. There is one reference in the Talmud (the Jewish writings in 3rd-5th century AD) to a freed murderer kissing the feet of his lawyer when he was overcome with gratefulness to the lawyer for getting him off.<sup>3</sup>

**Q. So what has this woman done to Simon's feast?**

Crashed it.

Next she lets down her hair.



### Historical Background: A Woman's Hair

In the Ancient Near East and most traditional cultures even today, a woman only lets down her hair in private with her husband. Here are some sayings from this era collected by the scholar Kenneth Bailey, from the Mishna and the Talmud<sup>4</sup>:

A man may divorce his wife and leave her no financial settlement "if she goes out with her hair unbound, or spins in the street, or speaks with any man."<sup>5</sup>

Rabbi Meir talks about a "bad man who sees his wife go out with her hair unfastened and spins cloth in the street with her armpits uncovered and bathe [*sic*] with the men.... Such a one it is a religious duty to divorce."

**Q. So how might Simon interpret her letting her hair down?**

As a lewd act.



### Teach: Letting Down Her Hair

Later we will see that Jesus sees this as an innocent gesture. One scholar said, "How completely the woman was overcome by . . . gratitude towards her Savior is shown by the fact that self-consciously she took off her head-covering and unbound her hair in order to wipe Jesus' feet.... Evidently she was so shocked at having bedewed Jesus with her tears, that she entirely forgot her surroundings."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1993), 847.

<sup>3</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus, Second Revised Edition* (London: SCM Press, LTD, 1972), 126.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 248.

<sup>5</sup> The mishna was the oral law written in 220 AD from the teachings of the Pharisees during the Second Temple period (570 BC - 70 AD). Jesus reacts strongly against this, which he calls the "teachings of the elders." The mishna was written down after Jesus' time but generally reflects his era.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 126.



#### Q4. Quick recap: What disgusts Simon about this woman?

- She's an adulterer. She has wrecked families.
- She's crashed his party.
- She's making a scene with her weeping, touching Jesus, and undoing her hair.

### 3. Simon's Reaction to Jesus

10 mins

#### Q5. How does Simon relate to Jesus during this opening scene? What has he discerned about Jesus?

*Hint: What does Simon think to himself about Jesus in v. 39?*  
He judged Jesus for not judging the woman.

#### Q. What does Simon mean when he says, "If this man were a prophet..."?

Jesus doesn't realize that the woman at his feet is a mess.

Simon has likely heard the report that Jesus has just raised a widow's son to life in the village of Nain.

#### Q. Listen to the crowd's reaction in Luke 7:16-17 to the raising of the widow's son.

"They were all filled with awe and praised God. 'A great prophet has appeared among us,' they said. 'God has come to help his people.' This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country."

#### Q. What title do they give Jesus?

Jesus is a prophet.



### Historical Background: Prophets Raising Dead Sons

Here's why the crowd said, "A great prophet has risen among us!"

- **Elijah.** The prophet Elijah had raised a widow's son at Zarephath. Just like Elijah, Jesus met the woman at the gate and gave the son back to his mother.
- **Elisha.** Elijah's disciple, the prophet Elisha, also raised a dead son at Shunem, only a mile from Nain.
- **Jesus.** When Jesus raised the widow of Nain's son, he was deliberately reenacting what these two prophets had done. A prophet was someone who saw people from God's viewpoint and spoke to them the words of God and acted with the power of God.

#### Q. So why does Simon think that Jesus isn't a prophet?

*Read the answer after their answers.*

Simon discerns (like a prophet!) that Jesus is not a prophet because Jesus does not *see* this woman clearly. If he really *saw*, he would recoil from this disgusting house-wrecker.



#### Q6. Let's drill down. What is Jesus doing that so bothers Simon?

- Jesus is not doing anything. That bothers Simon.
- He's just silently receiving her.
- He's not telling her to get lost.

There's more...

**Q7. Simon's disdain of Jesus began even before the woman came into the room. How do we know that?**

*Hint: What does Jesus tell Simon about how Simon greeted him?*

Jesus tells Simon that Simon treated him rudely by not washing his feet, anointing him with oil, or kissing him.

 **Historical Background: Greeting a Rabbi**

A well-known rabbi such as Jesus was to be greeted with a kiss, oil on the head, and foot washing. The neglect of these was the equivalent of a public put-down or slap in the face. It is like inviting someone over for dinner and ignoring them or not greeting them. Simon's greeting of Jesus is rude.

 **Historical Background: Biblical View of the Person as "A Center of Surprise"**

- Simon has put both Jesus and the woman in a box. Simon has inhaled the spirit of paganism that puts everyone in boxes. In paganism you are defined by your past or your family. So if you've committed adultery, then that defines you. For instance, in paganism, the Old Testament Jacob, who is very crafty and deceitful, would be "crafty-Jacob."
- The Bible never traps people in their sin. Jacob, to use the words of the Hebrew scholar Robert Alter, is a "center of surprise."<sup>7</sup> That is, God doesn't view people as "categories," such as "mentally ill" or "bi-polar" but as persons who can change. So the biblical view of the person makes grace possible. We are not fixed in stone. We are not frozen by our birth, status, or past. Repentance can happen.

 **Modern Culture: The Return of Paganism**

Our world is returning to the world of paganism by giving people fixed descriptions. In particular, psychology gives people fixed descriptions that trap people in behavior. Here are some examples: terrible-twos, bi-polar, etc. Scholar David Powlison puts it this way (a summary), "The label seduces us, initially providing identity and understanding, but as soon as you take it on you are trapped, narrowly defined by that label."<sup>8</sup>

## 4. Jesus' Reaction to the Woman 10 mins

Let's see how Jesus reacts to the woman.

**Q8. How does Jesus relate to the woman in the opening scene? Focus on Jesus' response to her, not on what she is doing.**

*This is subtle because Jesus doesn't say anything.*

- He lets her love him.
- He lets her touch him and move close to him.

**Q. How do you think most men would feel at this luncheon if this woman came in and started crying over them and wiping their feet with her tears?**

Really awkward.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, NY: Basic Books, A Member of the Perseus Books Group, 1981), 126.

<sup>8</sup> Personal conversation with David Powlison.



**Q. Have you ever noticed that it is hard to receive love? Why do you think that is?**

To receive love requires openness, vulnerability, a complete absence of self-protection.



**Q12. What is the difference between Jesus' view of purity or holiness, and Simon's view?**

Use the questions below to draw out some of the answers in the chart.

They are radically different.

**Q. What are their different views of how to relate to bad or impure people?**

**Q. How does a holy person act around unholy people?**

**Q. Are people capable of change?**

SIMON	JESUS
Outward Purity	Inward purity
Keeping away from bad people	Moving towards needy people
Legalism, law-only centered	Beautiful blend of grace and law
Put people in a box	People are capable of change
Trapped by your former sin	Freed by God's grace
Focus on past failure	Focus on present change



### Teach: Jesus' View of the Person

Simon's view of the person was frozen. The sinful woman was defined by her sinfulness. In contrast, Jesus treats her (and us) with dignity by leaving space for us to emerge. He doesn't overwhelm our personhood. He respects our dignity.

## 5. Jesus' Silence

15 mins

**Q. In this first scene, before Jesus tells the parable, do we know for sure what Jesus' attitude is towards the woman?**

No, we don't.

**Q. Why don't we know?**

Because Jesus is silent. He doesn't say anything. He just silently receives her. Luke doesn't say anything about Jesus responding to her verbally.

**Q13. What is the effect of Jesus' silence? That is, if you were one of the disciples with Jesus, how are you feeling? What questions are on your mind as the woman washes Jesus' feet?**

- Bottom line, it is very awkward.

- It opens the door to you judging Jesus like Simon!
- It puts you in an *ambiguous, uncertain* place. You aren't sure what Jesus is going to do. *This is the most important point.*

## **Teach: Jesus Creates Ambiguity**

What Jesus is doing is not clear. Jesus is present, but seemingly disengaged. Jesus often deliberately creates situations where he is present but seemingly not in control.

Here are a few examples of other stories from Jesus' life where he does that:

- After the disciples have been rowing all night on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus walks on the water past them in the boat, deliberately not going to them. The disciples are afraid until Peter calls out to Jesus.
- After his resurrection, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene but doesn't tell her who he is.
- When Lazarus is sick, Jesus deliberately delays until Lazarus dies, creating anguish for his two sisters, Mary and Martha.

### **Q Have you ever seen Jesus do that in your life, give you a tough situation where he is seemingly silent?**

*Rhetorical question. Various answers.*



### **Q14. Why do you think Jesus does this? Why does he remain hidden?**

*Various answers. Teach what they don't say. There are three principal dynamics:*

1. We emerge because Jesus is quieter. That means that because Jesus is silent, we can react, start talking, or come alive in some way. He doesn't overwhelm the conversation. Ambiguity means that we are left in limbo so we have to reach out to him. We grow because he is hidden.
2. We see him better.
3. We end up closer to Jesus. We have a real relationship. God's silence grows our faith.

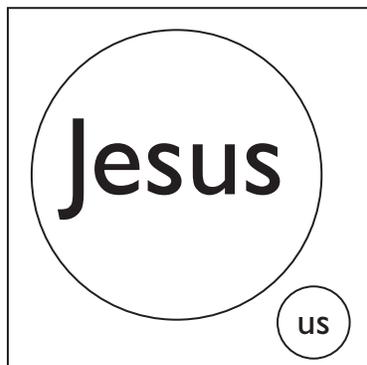


## **Read John 11:14-15**

Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

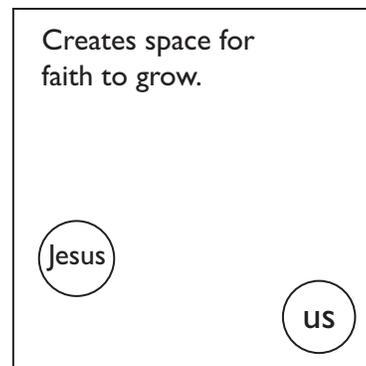
Because Jesus "was not there" he created a situation where they "may believe."

### **We want to see...**



We want a big Jesus, constantly, visibly present so we never have to worry.

### **What God shows us...**



Jesus in the corner—his presence is subtle, at the edge. He doesn't overwhelm our space. That creates space for a real relationship.



## Teach: Space Creates Room for Us to Grow

Instinctively we want Jesus to completely fill the space. But if that happened there'd be no room for relationship. We'd never grow. For example, if you are with a narcissist, the narcissist fills all the space by talking about himself. You can't really have a relationship with a narcissist because you, the friend, can never emerge. It's not complicated, if someone is always dominating the conversation, they suck the air out of the room.

*Depending on whether you are using the Participant's Manual or not, you can ask generic questions such as **"What struck you about this lesson?"** or **"What did you learn from this study?"** Or you can just go directly to the Lesson Application questions on the next page to end the lesson.*

# Lesson 1 Application

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*Reflecting on categorizing or stereotyping people.*

- Q. Can you recall a time when someone judged you or put you in a box? What was it like? Give a specific example.**
  
- Q. Are there ways that you categorize or freeze yourself?**
  
- Q. Do you have a sin in the past that freezes you, that you just can't get over?**  
*Be sensitive to people's responses, but help them to see that confession and repentance is freeing.*
  
- Q. How does Jesus' command, "Your sins are forgiven," liberate you to be like this woman?**

## **Person of Jesus Insight: Let Jesus Love You**

Picture yourself, with your sin now, at Jesus' feet weeping, receiving his forgiveness, his blood washing over your past, and healing you.

- Q. Are you more like Simon or Jesus as you relate to people around you? Do you freeze people in their sin or do you see people as a "center of surprise," capable of repentance and change?**
  
- Q. Why do you think we are so quick to freeze people, including ourselves?**
  
- Q. How do you both be discerning of people and yet not put them in a box?**  
*You absolutely need the Holy Spirit, the very presence of Jesus in you.*



## **Modern Culture: Secular-Liberalism**

Secular liberalism tries to be the person of Jesus without 1) Jesus' atonement (the cross), 2) Jesus' presence (the Holy Spirit), and 3) Jesus' body (the church). It always fails. It ends up creating a law out of compassion that is used to marginalize people. That's what political correctness is. You can't do Jesus without Jesus.

### ***Reflecting on the silence of God.***

**Q. Has God ever been distant or hidden in your life?**

**Q. What does it feel like when God is hidden or silent?**

**Q. What kinds of things is God doing during that silence?**

**Q. Can you recall a time (or relationship) where you tend to be quieter? What is the value of that?**

The value of our quiet is that it makes room for God.

**Q. What do you do with your spirit that wants to talk or "fill the space"?**

The only way to endure during those times when you know you have to be quiet is to pray.