

The Freedom of Forgiveness

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Luke 7:36-50

I am a prison inmate serving my 29th year of incarceration. This is my story—a story of bondage and, finally, of freedom.

Ever since I was a small child, my life seemed to be filled with torment. I had seizures. Sometimes I started screaming for no reason at all. I was plagued by bouts of severe depression. My parents and teachers could neither reach me nor control me. I felt dark forces come over me in the middle of the night. I contemplated suicide.

After my mother's death, my father somehow pushed me through high school. Then, after three years in the Army I found myself alone in New York City. I made friends who were heavily involved in the occult, something that had always fascinated me. I began to read the Satanic Bible and engage in occult practices. Something evil entered my mind.

Eventually I crossed that invisible line of no return. After years of torment I became the criminal that, at the time, it seemed as if it was my destiny to become. Six people lost their lives. Many others suffered at my hand, and will continue to suffer for a lifetime.

In 1978 I was sentenced to about 365 consecutive years, virtually burying me alive behind prison walls.

When I first entered the prison system I was placed in isolation. I was then sent to a psychiatric hospital because I was declared temporarily insane. I almost lost my life when another inmate cut my throat.

Ten years into my prison sentence and feeling despondent and without hope, another inmate named Rick came up to me one day as I was walking the prison yard on a cold winter's night. He introduced himself and began to tell me that Jesus Christ loved me and wanted to forgive me. I mocked him because I did not think that God would ever forgive me or that He would want anything to do with me.

Still this man persisted and we became friends. He kept reminding me that no matter what a person did, Christ stood ready to forgive. He gave me a Gideon's Pocket

Testament and asked me to read the Psalms. I did. Every night. And the Lord began quietly melting my stone-cold heart.

One evening I was reading Psalm 34. I came upon the 6th verse, which says, "this poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him from all his troubles". It was at that moment, in 1987, that I began to pour out my heart to God. Everything seemed to hit me at once—the guilt for what I had done... the disgust at what I had become. Late that night in my cold cell, I got down on my knees and I began to cry out to Jesus Christ.

I told Him that I was sick and tired of doing evil. I asked Jesus to forgive me for all my sins. Some time later I got up, and it felt as if a very heavy but invisible chain that had bound me for so many years was broken. A peace flooded over me. I did not understand what was happening. But in my heart I just knew that my life, somehow, was going to be different.

Since that time I have worked in the Special Needs Unit of the prison, where men who have various emotional and coping problems are housed. I pray with them, read Scripture, and just show them brotherly love. I have also worked as the Chaplain's clerk, and I have a letter writing ministry. In addition, the Lord has opened ways for me to share God's love and forgiveness with millions via several nationally televised interviews.

My name is David Berkowitz. They call me Son of Sam, but I am now a Son of God. God's forgiveness broke the chains of mental anguish and sin that had me bound. Even in behind bars I enjoy the freedom of forgiveness.

David Berkowitz was one of America's most notorious mass murderers. And his testimony introduces our fourth installment in this series on transformation, as we see how Jesus brought this same freedom of forgiveness to a notorious sinner of his day.

Luke 7:36-50: When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. ³⁷ A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. ³⁸ As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

³⁹ When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner."

⁴⁰ Jesus answered him, “Simon, I have something to tell you.”

“Tell me, teacher,” he said.

⁴¹ “Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”

⁴³ Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.”

“You have judged correctly,” Jesus said.

⁴⁴ Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. ⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”

⁴⁸ Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”

⁴⁹ The other guests began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?”

⁵⁰ Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Our story opens in Luke 7:36: “When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table.” A Pharisee invites Jesus to his home for dinner. During that time there were two principle parties within the Jewish ruling council, or Sanhedrin. The Sadducees, who were mostly aristocrats, had bought into Greek culture. For them God was a deistic force who did not intervene in human affairs. They did not believe in the spirit world or the resurrection.

While the Sadducees were secularists, the Pharisees were the separatists of their day. They followed strict guidelines of right and wrong. They taught the Torah to the people and were much more popular than the Sadducees. Their view of Scripture and theology was much closer to that of Jesus.

That’s why the Pharisees are always popping up in the gospel narratives. Some of them even became followers of Jesus. Some were just curious. Others saw him as a threat, and we often find them setting theological traps, trying to discredit Christ.

It’s hard to say which group this Pharisee, named Simon, fell into. Earlier in this chapter Jesus was in Nain, where he raised the widow’s son from the dead. There is no indication

that he had moved on. So, perhaps the Pharisee was checking out this Jesus character in the aftermath of his spectacular miracle. It is quite clear that he was not a particular friend or follower of Christ.

Notice that they recline at the table, which was the typical posture for eating. Head toward the table and feet pointed away, the diners would lie on their sides, often on low couches or a mat.

They had been there only a short time, when in walks an uninvited guest, a woman. Verse 37 says, “A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, so she came there, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume.”

Now that might seem strange from our point of view, because here in the city we entertain our guests behind double-locked doors. But the houses in Israel were often largely open to the outdoors, due to the warm climate, and if a well-known person were invited to what would be a large meal, less fortunate folks from the community would sometimes gawk or hang around waiting for leftovers.

Still, it was a brazen move to come right in where they were eating. But it was not just the fact that she was an intruder that set the room abuzz. Perhaps by her appearance and probably by her reputation, she was well-known. Nain was a small town in a conservative Hebrew community, and this woman was a prostitute.

The text calls her, literally, “a sinner.” The NIV says that she “had lived a sinful life,” to make it clear that she was not just a sinner in the theological sense that everyone is a sinner. She was a notorious sinner, a woman of ill-repute.

There must have been a collective gasp as she walked into the room. Simon himself had to be on the verge of a holy convulsion. Here he is, a Pharisee, the guardian of family values, hosting an important itinerant preacher. And at the worst possible time, here comes Heidi Fleiss waltzing into his living room as if she belongs there. Who knows? Maybe this wasn’t her first visit.

Why is she here? Why now? And what is she up to? In his wildest imagination he could not have imagined the scene that was about to unfold before him.

Verse 38 describes what happened next: “As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.”

To approach someone’s feet at one of our dinner tables would require considerable agility, but having heard the explanation of how people reclined at the table, you can visualize her position. Evidently, she didn’t do anything at first but just stand there emotionally distraught. This scene must have lasted for some time, given the fact that her tears were dripping from her face to the extent that they began to wet Jesus feet. There’s no record that anyone said anything, and who would know what to say under such circumstances?

Even the woman herself is apparently silent. But, finally she does something. She begins to wipe her tears from Jesus’ feet with her hair, and so initiates a series of startling and scandalous actions. It was considered immoral for women to wear their hair down in public. Whether her hair was already loose or whether she loosened it for this purpose, her lack of modesty had the guests’ eyes popping. And that, even before she proceeded to use her provocative hair to make contact with Jesus in a rather intimate fashion. If her only goal had been to mop up her tears, she could have done so with the fold of her garment.

Notice that she has gone from standing to at least bending over to perhaps kneeling. She begins to kiss Jesus’ feet. There is some evidence in Jewish historic literature that people might kiss the feet of a very revered teacher, but it’s doubtful whether this custom was known in Jesus’ day, and even more doubtful that this woman was aware of it. It seems more likely that it this an authentic, impromptu expression of devotion.

Even accounting for cultural differences, this just isn’t normal behavior anywhere. The guests are both riveted and scandalized. Not the sort of scene that one would expect at a first century society dinner, especially in the home of a Pharisee. Would they have something to talk about at the well tomorrow!

The woman has brought with her an alabaster jar of perfume. These scented oils were the obsession of women in that day. They often wore flasks around their necks and had a special dispensation to do this even on the Sabbath. This woman, however, carried the flask, which would have had a bulb at the bottom and a long neck that had to be broken to dispense the contents. The fact that it came in an alabaster container indicates that it was quite expensive. Completely oblivious to the cost, she pours it on Jesus’ feet.

In verse 39 we see that the host's mind is going a mile a minute. "When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.'"

Not only would he know, but if this guy were really a prophet, then he'd put a stop to it to this unseemly behavior. You wouldn't even have to be a prophet to know that if this lady wasn't a prostitute, she had to be, at the very least, a desperate housewife.

Before he could even verbalize his thoughts, Jesus spoke up in verse 40: "Jesus answered him, 'Simon, I have something to tell you.'"

Apparently, the woman was still anointing Jesus' feet as he addressed Simon. What Simon says is, "Tell me, teacher." What he's thinking is, "Boy, this has gotta be good." But as is so often the case, Jesus addresses the situation indirectly rather than directly. Instead of offering an explanation, he tells a story, and that catches the Pharisee off balance.

As verse 41 informs us, the story has to do with a man who had two debtors. "Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty." So, there's a considerable difference between these two debts. 500 denarii was maybe \$40,000 or more. The second man owed only one tenth that much. But what the two debtors had in common was that neither had the funds to repay the moneylender.

So, dis small-time guy, he could en' up wid like a pinky broke, you know? Bud dis udder guy, well, now, dat's a lotta money. A fella could lose a coupla kneecaps in a deal like dat, if you know what I mean.

Fortunately, the moneylender in this case is anything but a Mafioso with a cheesy Rocky Balboa accent. He forgives both debts, the big one and the small one, according to verse 42: "Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both." So, the question Jesus poses to Simon is this, "Which one is going to be more grateful? Which one is going to be more devoted to his forgiver?"

Verse 43: "Simon replied, 'I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.'" Notice that he begins his response with "I suppose." I don't know of any place else in Scripture where the speaker qualifies their response in such a manner. Not that he doesn't know the

obvious answer. But he's hedging, or perhaps he senses that he's stepping into a trap.

Jesus confirms Simon's answer and then proceeds to spring the trap. "Now," says Jesus in verse 44, "let's do a little comparison between my hypothetical situation and what we're experiencing here. You see how this woman is treating me—with lavish affection—wetting my feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair, of all things! But you, when I came in you didn't even offer me water for me to wash me feet myself, which is considered a common courtesy. And a kiss would have been a friendly greeting, but you were, at best, standoffish.

Compare that with this woman who is kissing my feet, an outlandish display of affection which has undoubtedly made you squeamish. And not just once; she's been at this ever since I came in. You didn't even offer me cheap olive oil for my head, as hosts often do, but she has given me something far more valuable and applied it to my feet from a position of humility.

By answering in this way, Jesus explodes two of Simon's unspoken accusation. First, Simon had concluded that if Jesus were a prophet he would know what kind of woman he was dealing with. But, of course, Jesus did know. If he could read Simon's mind, then certainly he could see the plain truth of this woman's situation.

Simon also assumed that if Jesus did know who she was, he wouldn't let her carry on like that. But Jesus has nevertheless accepted her affection as appropriate, and, furthermore, he's used it as a foil to show the contrast between the response of the self-righteous and that of someone who is humbled by grace.

We might, however, wonder if Simon didn't have a point when it comes to the appropriateness of the woman's actions. It's a pretty plain breach of decorum, and perhaps we share some of the Pharisee's unease. But decorum was not #1 on Jesus' list of priorities.

According to Jesus' example of the two debtors, her actions might have been inappropriate had she been forgiven little. But her sin debt was monumental. From an objective standpoint, she had engaged in shameless immorality in a way that dragged others into her sinfulness and undermined societal standards. But, perhaps even more importantly, her debt of sin was monumental from a subjective point of view. Because she recognized the extent of her unworthiness, she also marveled at God's forgiveness.

And if her sin was indeed great, then, Jesus maintained, her forgiveness *required* a lavish display of love.

I have read this passage many times, and it's not one of those stories that requires much imagination to understand it. Jesus explains it quite well. And, yet, I must confess that until I studied it this week I never really got the point. My impression had always been that she comes crying under the burden of conviction. That she is a penitent weeping at Jesus feet and seeking salvation.

But that's not the conclusion Jesus draws. We don't know how she had met Jesus. Maybe she had seen him raise the widow's son. Maybe she had listened to him teach. And she might still be emotionally overwhelmed by the conviction of her sin. But that's not the main reason she was there.

However and wherever and whenever she had had an encounter with Jesus, she had placed her faith in him and had been forgiven. That's why she came with her outlandish, lavish display of affection. Otherwise, we must conclude that Jesus entirely misunderstands and misapplies the point. His explanation for her behavior is not that whoever needs forgiveness most must humiliate themselves most thoroughly. His explanation is that she can't control her love, because she is so cognizant of the magnitude of the forgiveness she has already experienced!

In verse 48 he pronounces her sins forgiven. Given the context, however, we understand that he was announcing that her sins had already been forgiven. And, yet, there must have been something special about hearing that absolution from the lips of Jesus.

This confirmation on the part of Jesus was made based on the evidence of her response. But it was not just for the sake of the woman. This was not the only time in his ministry that he made a public point of announcing someone's forgiveness for the benefit of his listeners and to demonstrate his own divine prerogative to forgive sins.

It was, as verse 50 makes clear, her faith that had saved her. And, now, Jesus can tell her to go in peace. Peace was precisely what she had not known. Her sinful ways had destroyed her peace with God and with her own self and even with society. But when God removes the guilt, he removes the barrier that stands between you and him, and he removes your own tendency to see yourself as something less than he created you to be. Only when you have the assurance of forgiveness can you go in peace.

This passage brings several important applications to mind. It reminds me of the universal need for forgiveness and why so many do not find it. Some, like Simon, think themselves too good to need forgiveness. And, others, like this woman throughout most of her life, felt herself too bad to even hope for it. Today, as back then, there are many people today living without God's forgiveness, not because he doesn't want to forgive them but because they are not prepared to accept it.

But a different transformational lesson has been pursuing my heart this week. I just can't escape this correlation between my appreciation of what God has done for me and the way I display my love for him. Like many of you, I have known the Lord since childhood. I've never lived a debauched life. My conversion experience is not the stuff that novels or tabloid stories are made of. And yet, reading this passage, I can't avoid the conclusion that God enjoys it when we love him lavishly, and that often I do not. I just love him routinely.

Loving lavishly does not come naturally for me. I'm not the most emotionally expressive person in the world. This is me when I'm feeling normal. This is me when I'm really excited [same expression, thumbs up]. In addition to being naturally even-tempered, I'm from the Midwest, where personal dramas and emotional histrionics can be capital offenses.

And, yet, the example of this woman pierces me. Jesus is not saying that some of us are just naturally like the woman and some are just naturally like Simon, and that either way is cool or that there's nothing you can do about it. The clear implication is that he's really pleased by those who love him lavishly, because they "get" grace. They get it. They appreciate God. They revel in his presence. It's not the same old, same old. His mercies are new every morning.

The fact is that in order to love much and to love lavishly, you do not have to be a converted mass murderer or a sleazy character. Both objectively and subjectively those of us who cannot easily step into this woman's shoes have every reason to do so.

Regardless of our starting place relative to one another, God's forgiveness does not just give us a boost to a more acceptable level of morality, it carries us across an infinitely wide chasm that separates us from the holiness of God. So, some of us may be Simon in our own minds, but, in reality, all of us are this woman before God.

If you have truly known Christ for most of your life, then you should have also developed a certain theological depth that drives home the wonder of God's forgiveness. You should be capable of evaluating your own goodness based on a comparison with God's holiness, not with those around you. You should know the depth of depravity in your own heart. And you should be able to imagine what your life could have been, had God not intervened early on.

If you are capable of such reflection, then you can love much and love lavishly. For it is not so much the objective sinfulness from which you have been redeemed that makes you a great lover of God, it is your subjective sense that you have truly been saved from something awful that sets you free to love like the woman of Luke 7.

It's not just the fact of forgiveness but our appreciation of it that sets us free. Free to revel in God's goodness, more concerned with abandon than restraint, driven by desire rather than decorum. That's the freedom of forgiveness. Not just freedom from the consequences of sin, but freedom to love the Lord your God lavishly.

Sometimes people ask me, "Who is your favorite Bible character?" It's kind of a hard question to answer, but if you asked me this week, I'd have to say that I can't tell you her name, because it isn't even mentioned. But this unnamed woman pursues Jesus even at the most seemingly inopportune times, because her love is overflowing. She has been transformed by the freedom of forgiveness. And I desperately want what she had. I hope you do too.