

ENGAGE

- This week we look at the inner thoughts of a Pharisee, the value of a life in the words of a disciple, a condemnation in the conversations of the crowd and the heartbeat of Jesus toward on needing love.
- Strive to have your group wrestle with their inner thoughts regarding those around them and to see that all of us are in need of a Savior and are made clean before the Lord when we come to him with a contrite spirit.

EXAMINE

In Luke's Gospel, it is precisely because Jesus was "suffering with" the outcasts -- showing them compassion -- that those in power challenged his authority. This is the case in today's passage, as well. Simon the Pharisee, a religious leader, has invited Jesus to dine in his home (only Luke has Jesus being invited specifically to the home of a Pharisee).

Jesus is invited for dinner by one of the Pharisees -- where we are not told, though presumably it is in Galilee where other events in this section took place. (Bethany, by contrast, is in Judea, just on the outskirts of Jerusalem.) Invitation to dinner certainly implied respect for this new teacher and healer. Was he also a prophet? Simon wanted to learn more about Jesus, but it soon becomes obvious that you can't count Simon as a believer -- rather as a skeptic trying to be open-minded.

It was an honor to host the visiting teacher and his party, and Simon wanted to the honor of hosting this famous rabbi. We can assume that Simon is well-to-do -- most of the Pharisees seemed to be, and this scale of dinner party required a larger home and money for food than the average person had at his disposal.

Hospitality is a very strong value in the Near East, with much fuss made over guests. For example, a basin would typically be provided so guests could wash the dust of the road from their feet. Scented olive oil was sometimes offered to anoint a guest's hair (Psalm 23:5b; 45:7; 92:10; Amos 6:6). And beloved guests would be kissed as they were greeted (2 Samuel 15:5; 19:39; Matthew 26:49). We see that Simon offered none of these marks of a gracious host. Such overflowing hospitality wasn't required; Simon wasn't being discourteous. The way he welcomed his guests this day seems pro forma, but not especially warm or cordial.

No matter the warmth, Jesus accepts the dinner invitation. In vs. 34 he is criticized for dining with sinners. But he is no respecter of persons. He is willing to associate with the religious elite, as well.

The text indicates that Jesus "reclined at the table" (Greek *kataklino*, "reclined"). This is a characteristically Eastern style of dining, with guests arranged around a very low table, reclining on their left arm and supported by divans or cushions, leaving their right hand free to feed themselves. Their feet, sandals removed, would be splayed out behind them, with some space between their feet and the walls so those who were serving the meal could bring the various dishes to the table. This is also the likely arrangement at the Lord's Supper when Jesus washed the feet of the disciples reclining around the table (John 13:5).

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Suddenly, an uninvited, unnamed woman appears who is described simply as a "sinner in the city." Without speaking, she weeps, wets Jesus' feet with her tears, wipes them with her hair, kisses them, and anoints them with perfumed oil (verse 38). Many commentaries point out that this anointing story could be read as preparation for Jesus' death and resurrection -- an ironic coronation for the rightful King of the Jews.

Vs. 37 tells us several things about the woman. Surely, she has not been invited. While she is a resident of the town, she is looked down upon as a sinner (Greek *harmatolos*). We're not told what her sin is, but she is probably a prostitute rather than an adulteress.[1] However, in Jesus' day it was very rare for adulterers to actually be stoned as the law directed (see Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22; and John 8:1-11). The Romans did not allow the Jews to inflict the death penalty; the most they could administer was forty lashes less one. More often, sinners were shunned by respectable society and prohibited from participation in the local synagogue.

We don't know how she came to be a prostitute. Perhaps she is filled with lust. But more likely she has been sexually abused as a child, or has grown up an illegitimate child with no prospects for marriage. Or perhaps she is a widow struggling to survive. We just can't say, and should know better than to judge her harshly.

There's something else we can deduce about this woman -- that she has been battered down. Her self-image is tattered and ragged. She is the continual object of cutting criticism in insults by the wives of her customers. She has been spat upon. She is the example many mothers in town use to warn their daughters. She is brunt of nasty jokes. She is shunned by the best people and used and abused by the worst.

Inwardly, she is broken and bleeding. Her spirit is wounded. Perhaps you've felt like that; perhaps you feel like that right now. You've failed miserably, and though time has passed, you still are humiliated and unsure, and feel too weak and fragile to pick yourself up and move on.

For her to come to the banquet at Simon the Pharisee's house is hard, too. She is viewed as a sinner, one who conveys uncleanness by her very touch, almost as if she has a communicable disease. She knows that Simon will not be happy to see her in his house.

But the sinful woman has heard of Jesus. She has probably heard his teaching. She has heard his gracious words of God's love and forgiveness and healing and restoration. She has heard him speak of his Father's Kingdom in words so plain and compelling that she can see herself as a child of God once more, a full citizen in this Kingdom of Love. Yes, she is still broken, but now she can see light and hope beyond.

In researching this I didn't find much to explain her presence. William Barclay says, "It was the custom that when a Rabbi was at a meal in such a house, all kinds of people came in -- they were quite free to do so -- to listen to the pearls of wisdom which fell from his lips." [2] Even though I can't find much to substantiate this practice, I think it must be the case. Simon doesn't seem so alarmed that such a woman is in his house, than that Jesus doesn't perceive what kind of woman she is. On another occasion, Jesus is invited to eat at a prominent Pharisee's home and finds a man "in front of him" suffering from dropsy (14:1-2). In American society this would

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be considered "crashing the party," but in their culture, apparently anyone was free to attend and listen to the dinner conversation.

This sinful woman doesn't slip in late, either. She has heard that Jesus will be there, and gets to the house even before he does (7:45). She must see Jesus again. She must. And so she is waiting with the others when he comes.

"... She brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and 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." (7:37-38)

Early in the meal there is no focus on the woman. Simon may feel uncomfortable about her being here, but he does not exclude her from his home. That would have caused an ugly scene. So he allows her to remain. But the focus is clearly on Jesus and his words as he partakes of the meal.

The woman is standing behind Jesus, and early into the meal she begins to weep. We don't read that she is racked with sobs, but we read that her tears fall upon Jesus' feet. How long this goes on we are not told. Each tear makes a brown wet mark in the dust of his feet, until his feet are wet with her tears.

Now she unfastens her hair, removing whatever kerchief she may have worn over it, and lets it fall free. She kneels down and begins to wipe his feet with her hair. To go about in public with her hair down was considered a shameful thing to do, yet she is not deterred.[3] Her hair wipes his feet after her tears have washed them.

Next, she begins to kiss his feet. While we might look at this with sexual connotations, in her culture kissing the feet might be considered a common mark of deep reverence, especially to leading rabbis.[4]

Finally, she pours scented oil onto his feet out of an *alabastron*, or perfume vial, such as Jewish women commonly wore around their neck.[5] Nor is this a one-time event. The imperfect tense of the Greek words translated "wiped," "kissed," and "poured" (NIV, or "anointed," KJV) indicate repeated action.

I am sure that once the flask of perfume is opened, almost immediately it is detected by everyone in the room. While Jesus has been the center of focus up to now, all eyes turn to the woman now kneeling at Jesus' feet, weeping, wiping, caressing his feet with her long black hair, kissing his feet with her lips, and pouring perfume upon them. The very intimacy of her attentions appears to many of the guests as shocking. Add to that the woman's reputation in the community and this is downright scandalous; at least that is how Simon the Pharisee interprets it.

It doesn't take much of a mind reader to look at Simon's eyes and read his body language and the expression on his face. Simon acknowledges Jesus as a teacher (7:40b), but he doubts that Jesus is the prophet as some claim. He judges both the sinful woman and Jesus, and is wrong in both his judgments. It is interesting that he doesn't condemn the action of touching, per se, but

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Jesus' lack of discernment of WHO was touching him and her sinful history. He can't be much of a prophet and miss this! Simon huffs to himself.

Jesus makes Messianic overtones explicit in the gospel parallels to this story (Matthew 26:12; Mark 14:8; John 12:7). Others (taking their cue from Jesus' indictment of Simon in 7.44-47) contrast the woman's lavish act of hospitality and faithfulness with Simon's failure to demonstrate the ancient virtue of hospitality, bringing shame upon his entire household. Still others point out that the setting in Luke 7:36-50 is similar to a Hellenistic symposium, an ancient genre in which a host invites guests to his home to dialogue about weighty abstract matters like love, friendship, or wisdom. I wish to focus instead on a small detail of the story that often goes unnoticed: the fact that Simon objects "to himself." Simon thinks, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him, that she is a sinner" (Luke 7:39). Let's explore this a little more closely: the story of the woman anointing Jesus' feet occurs in each of the other canonical Gospels, but in comparison with the other versions, only Luke makes it clear that Simon objects silently, "to himself."

In Mark's version, the onlookers object to the woman's actions "among themselves" (Mark 14:4), which implies that they spoke aloud, (though perhaps only amongst themselves), rather than directly to Jesus.

In Matthew, the disciples object openly (Matthew 26:28), and similarly, in John, Judas voices his concerns out loud (John 12:4-5). Only Luke highlights Simon's unspoken thoughts, and Jesus' ability to perceive them. We find in the Lukan version of this scene a fulfillment of the prophecy pronounced over the infant Jesus by Simeon that because of him, "the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed" (Luke 2:35).

Internal monologue is so common in today's literature that we hardly even notice it, but ancient authors rarely used this device in telling their stories. When they did, it was typically at a moment of crisis in the story, when the hero is undergoing some intense internal conflict. In fact, authors like Homer, Ovid, and Virgil often followed a 3-part formula: (1) The introduction to the inner speech (2) Taking stock of the problem (3) The hero's chosen solution.

Luke also tends to incorporate interior monologue into crisis situations, when the thinker wrestles with a difficult decision, but unlike these other ancient authors, Luke's thinkers are not heroes. We never see Jesus "thinking to himself." Instead, Luke tends to use internal monologue for characters who are not noble or heroic -- in fact, they embody self-centeredness. This is a prominent theme in ancient Jewish literature: what one says to oneself indicates wisdom or foolishness.

Most commonly in the Hebrew Bible, inner speech depicts the thoughts of the wicked. The fool says "in his heart" that there is no God (Psalm. 14:1), for instance, while the one who turns away from God blesses himself "in his heart" (Deuteronomy. 29.19). These and other passages in Wisdom literature emphasize the folly of ungodly self-address (Ecclesiastes 1:16; 2:1, 3, 15; 3:17, 18; Zephaniah 2:15; 1 Samuel 18:17, 21; 27:1; 1 Kings 12:26).

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Luke 7:36-50 is the first story in the Third Gospel where a character thinks to himself (the others are in Luke 12:17, 45; 15:17-19; 16:4-7; 18:18.4-5; 20:13). Like other ancient thinking characters, Simon faces a choice; he is deciding between two opposing views of Jesus' identity - either Jesus is a prophet or he isn't. The question itself demonstrates that Simon lacks love, hospitality, and true discernment. Furthermore, he clearly does not want to dialogue with Jesus; he simply "thinks to himself."

But Jesus doesn't let Simon's judgment go unchallenged -- even his silent judgment. Jesus is probably seated at the place of honor to the right of the host, so Jesus turns to Simon at his left and says to him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." It is almost a question, asking permission to speak freely.

"Tell me, teacher," responds his host.

So Jesus begins to tell a story, a parable, to make a point. In this case he recalls the appreciation one would feel to be absolved of the crushing and fearful load of debt to a moneylender, who has the power to throw non-payers into debtor's prison:

"Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled."

"You have judged correctly," Jesus said. (7:41-43)

Simon has stepped into the trap.

Simon's Acts

The Sinful Woman's Acts

No water to wash feet

Washed feet with tears, wiped with hair

No kiss of welcome

Kissed feet continually

No scented olive oil for his guest's hair

Poured perfume on his feet

Jesus' point isn't hard to guess. Simon's actions have shown little love, while the sinful woman has lavished love upon Jesus. Now building upon his brief parable, Jesus turns the object from love to forgiveness.

"Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven -- for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little." (7:47)

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To help Simon and the others understand her actions, Jesus first tells a story about forgiveness, and then uses the story to interpret the woman's devotion in terms of forgiveness of sin.

I can imagine Simon's reaction to this recital -- anger! It puts him in a bad light. It makes him look like the unenthusiastic host that he is. Why should he need forgiveness anyway? He wasn't a sinner!

But Jesus doesn't linger on Simon's shortcomings. Now he is turns to speak directly to the sinful woman:

"Then Jesus said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.'

"The other guests began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?'

"Jesus said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.' " (7:48-50)

Now for a question: Were the woman's sins actually forgiven before she came to Simon's house, or at this point where Jesus pronounces them forgiven? I would argue for the former. I think she came with perfume, and wept, and kissed Jesus' feet BECAUSE she had already reached out in faith and accepted the forgiveness of God that he offered in his teaching. She came because she KNEW she was forgiven; she came out of gratitude; she came out of love. That conforms well to Jesus' explanation of her actions.

The guests, however, don't understand. They think that he is he was absolving her sins then and there -- and that troubles them because only God could forgive sins (Luke 5:21ff).

But Jesus continues, looking directly at the woman: "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." He acknowledges that her faith in his promise has brought her salvation. And he bids her the blessing that Jews offer one another in parting: "Shalom." It means not only peace -- and what wonderful peace and light had flooded this now prostitute's soul! -- it also means prosperity and wholeness and goodness and blessing. From one believing Jew to another, Jesus has welcomed her back into the fellowship and salvation of God's people.

Instead of judging the woman, as Simon has, Jesus turns the judgment rather to Simon with a series of three comparisons.

"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. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered,

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has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet." (7:44-46)

Jesus compares Simon's acts as a host to the sinful woman's acts of love.

When Jesus says, "Simon, I have something to say to you" (Luke 7:40), he may be implicitly contrasting his own willingness to dialogue with Simon's failure to do so. Jesus then goes on to address Simon's unspoken objection directly. Ironically, Jesus' response proves exactly what Simon is questioning: he does, in fact, know the character not only of the one who is touching him (the woman), but also of the one who is judging him suspiciously (Simon).

Internal monologue has a significant function for an audience, as well. Giving voice to a character's thoughts can uniquely engage readers' or hearers' emotions by inviting them to imagine their own personal reactions to similar situations. Luke invites us to ask, "What would I do in this situation?" "What would I say in my own heart?" In addition, Jesus' response to Simon might serve as a useful prompt for us to think carefully about how we can transform our internal monologues (what psychologists today refer to as "self-talk") into dialogues with God -- into that "prayer without ceasing" to which 1 Thessalonians 5:17 refers.

Questions

1. Who invited Jesus to dinner? (36) Why might he have done so? (36) What does Jesus' response show about him? How is the woman who burst on this scene described? (37a)
2. What can we assume about her past and present? (37a) What does her bold entrance into a Pharisee's house tell us about her character? What compelled her to come to Jesus?
3. What did the woman bring with her? (37b) What did she do? (38a) Why did she do this? (38a) How might her actions have embarrassed Jesus? (38b)
4. What did the Pharisee think about Jesus' attitude toward this woman? (39) How did he misunderstand Jesus? (39) What story did Jesus tell Simon the Pharisee? (40-41)
5. How were the two men in the story different? (42a) How were they alike? (42a) What did Jesus ask Simon and what is the obvious answer? (42b) What was Simon's answer? (43)

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6. What does this tell about the woman's motive? (43) How did Jesus compare and contrast the woman and Simon? (44-47) Why did Jesus rebuke Simon? (44-47)

7. How did Jesus conclude about the relationship between forgiveness and love? (47) What did Jesus say to the woman? (48-49) How can we receive the grace of forgiveness? (50)

8. Do you identify more with Simon the Pharisee or the sinful woman?

9. What should our response be to Christ's forgiveness? Where do we hold back?

10. How can we change our inner thoughts about people and their spiritual states?

11. How do you think the Lord views "spiritual comparisons?"

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