

It's funny how your preconceived notions can affect how you look at an event. During his time in Israel, Jesus went to a number of dinners. And which ones caused a stir at the time? The ones where he ate with tax collectors and "sinners". You and I see that and think, "Well, yeah, that's why he was there!" And then we read an account like the one before us here and we are tempted to think, "Jesus, you went to have dinner with a Pharisee? You know what those guys are like! You really shouldn't be associating with people like that." Well, it's a good thing Jesus knows a lot better than us. At the home of Simon the Pharisee, Jesus manages to teach us an important lesson about love and forgiveness. <Read text: Luke 7:36-50>.

We do not know what prompted Simon the Pharisee to invite Jesus to dinner. Perhaps he was cautiously optimistic about what he had heard about Jesus. Perhaps he thought there might be something to this Messiah and he wanted to show some deference to him. Maybe he was trying to impress his other guests by having someone as "popular" as Jesus there. As events show though, the one thing we can say did not motivate him was a heart full of love for his savior.

What we do know is why the woman was there, Jesus makes that very plain at the end. Now, for us, someone strange wandering into our house at a dinner party might seem pretty out of place. And certainly, her presence there didn't go unnoticed, but without going into detail, we'll just say it wasn't difficult for her to find her way to Jesus and show the acts of love that she did. But again, it still caused a stir. Simon reveals his heart in what he thinks about this encounter. "If this man were really the prophet he claims to be, or that we think he might be, then he'd know what was going on here. He'd know exactly what kind of person he was letting do this to him. Clearly we are mistaken in thinking that he might be."

But Jesus answers Simon's unspoken argument, and by doing so, shows himself to be exactly who he claimed to be. Jesus tells a story of cancelled debts. One man owes five hundred denarii (each denarius was about a day's wages), the other only fifty. Neither had the money at the time to pay, and both debts were cancelled. Now the first man had a debt that was insurmountable. There was no way he was ever going to repay that and provide for himself at the same time. The second man, well... over time, with enough scrimping and saving and hard work, yeah he might be able to pay that back. And so the first was saved from an impossible situation, the second from... a lot of trouble, but nothing he couldn't get himself out of in the end. And now Jesus poses the question, which will love the lender more for cancelling the debt?

Simon, perhaps seeing where this is going suggests the obvious answer, the one with the impossible debt would love more. Jesus makes the analogy as clear as he can. Both Simon and the woman, through their actions, demonstrated how much love they had for Jesus in their heart. Jesus, as a guest in the house of Simon, should've been treated with a certain level of customary care. He should've been offered water to wash his feet from the dust of the road. He should've been greeted with a kiss of friendship. With his status he should've been offered oil on his head. But Simon gave him none of these things, showing the little care or love he had for this Jesus. But the woman showed all these measures of care, and what's more did not consider herself worthy to rise above addressing the lowest part of Jesus, his feet. One had loved much, one had loved little. Now through the parable, Jesus tells Simon why they were each they way they were.

Simon did not think he was forgiven by Jesus much, if at all. He, like many Jews, likely did not understand that this was the primary function of the Messiah. He also likely did not understand just how poorly he measured up to God's standards. As a law-abiding Pharisee, he felt it was within his grasp to work well enough to please God. He may have felt a small debt to his God, but nothing that could not be overcome with determination and hard work. Thus even if he was to learn of the forgiveness Jesus offered, he would've been grateful to a point, but not to an overwhelming degree.

The woman, on the other hand, knew exactly where she stood before God. She knew she could never possibly atone for her life, and she knew what it meant to have forgiveness given to her anyway. She knew her debt and she knew her savior and her love for that savior could not be contained, even if it meant crashing the party of a Pharisee. Jesus statement about her love at the end is a little misleading in the English here. Jesus' point in the parable is that love clearly comes after the cancelling of the debt, but the statement at the end in v47 almost makes it sound the other way around. A better way to render this might be something like "her great love shows that her many sins have been forgiven." This makes more sense when Jesus contrasts that with his next statement when he says, "But he who has been forgiven little loves little."

Now, let's take a few minutes to consider what Jesus is trying to say here between these two. Is Jesus trying to say that only the worst of sinners who come to him for forgiveness will be able to have the full love for the Lord in their

hearts? That those of us who've never really let ourselves go will only ever have a lukewarm care for God because we've never done anything really all that evil? And if so, should we maybe indulge in a few of those really evil acts? Give over to the worst of sin for a while so that we can really appreciate our forgiveness? You can see the absurd ends that kind of logic leads to. Obviously not! So that cannot be the case. There's a critical bit of information missing that leads a person down that path. To get at the truth that Jesus is trying to teach, we have to ask one question:

Was Simon less sinful than the woman who interrupted his dinner?

No, he was not. His very apathy toward his guest demonstrated that a love for his creator was not in his heart. He was arrogant enough to think that he did not need God or God's help to be righteous before God. He felt he was his own savior. All cardinal crimes against the first commandment. His lack of love toward God because he did not think he needed God's help convicted him, and demonstrated just how much he *did* need God's help. His debt was not larger or smaller than the woman's. It was no less impossible for him to pay for himself. The only difference was the woman understood her situation, Simon did not.

And so you see, the real issue is not whether your debt to the Lord is large or small, the issue is whether you understand just how large your debt really is. Do you understand just how much you owe God? Or have you given in to the lies of our culture that most of what you do really isn't that bad? Sure you may have broken some of *God's* commands, but you've never really gotten in *trouble*. Do you know just how deep your debt to God is, or do you still labor under the false notion somewhere in the back of your head that without Jesus you'd still be okay?

Well, by Jesus' own words, the best place to check that understanding is to look at your love for the Lord.

So how is your devotion to the Lord? If your first answer to that question is "Not as good as it could be," then you're at least on the right track. But don't let yourself off the hook with that easy answer that doesn't leave you accountable to change anything. Dig in to your life with the tough questions. When it comes to planning your time, what comes first, you or your Lord? Do you freely choose to spend time with God in regular worship and to hear his voice speak to you daily in his Word rather than let the world crowd him out of your life? If you even do that, is it a joy...or a chore you carry out because you feel you ought to? When it comes to dividing up your income, does his portion come first? Is what you give freely given because you want to show gratitude for what he's given you? Is the amount consistent with the thanksgiving you owe him, or is it just enough to satisfy your conscience so you don't feel guilty about it and can still afford all the toys you want? How well to you represent him before others. Do you have the boldness of the woman to show your love without shame in a hostile environment, or do you more often keep quiet, because it's easier?

I haven't even gotten past the first commandment yet. We could go down the whole line. The whole mirror of the law that is given to us as a standard to measure our love of our God against. But let that be enough for now. So, have you invited God to the dinner party of your life out of some sense of obligation and that's all you're going to do for him...or have you come up to him in tears of thanksgiving for his forgiveness, offering up the very best you have to him? Your debt to God is no smaller than anyone else's. Don't give in to the devil's whispers that try to convince you you're a pretty nice person and God kinda likes you for who you are. God does love you. But not because you are loveable.

Our failure to demonstrate love to our God in our lives is the noose we are hung with. Like Simon, it shows us that we are not as good as we might like to think. And if we find our love for the Lord lacking, then we need to increase our own understanding of just how badly we have failed to live up to God's standards. We don't do that to wallow in bad feelings or the guilt of it, but to appreciate all the better what it means when Jesus says to us, **"Your faith has saved you; go in peace."**

The depth of our love for God hinges on this understanding: without God, you would have nothing. You would be trapped in a death of your own making, ticking away pointless hours until you were left to torment that would not end. With Jesus, you are saved from this outcome and given a new life that promises his care from now until the day you join him forever in heaven. You have never given God a reason to do this for you. In fact, your life has been one long challenge to God, daring him *not* to do a thing for you. And yet he did anyway. God has never owed you a thing and your debt to him is tremendous. But in grace and mercy he has cancelled your debt and he asks for nothing in return.

Yet in return we cannot help but love him. Not because he demands it, not because we will be condemned without it. It would not be forgiveness if those conditions still existed. No, we love because there can be no other reaction to hearing and understanding this message. The greater our understanding of our sin, the greater our love will pour out over our forgiveness as we realize just how undeserved it is. If you feel your love for God inadequate, then take some time to stare into the dark of yourself and realize just what you would be without him. And then look back and realize just what you are and what you have with him. You have been forgiven much, understand that, and let it pour out in your life with much love for God. Amen.