

Living by Grace By Dr. G. H. Visscher

READ: Luke 7: 36-50 (7:41-42)

It's one of the shortest parables of the NT: *"Two men 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 canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"* (Luke 7: 41-42)

It's also a parable that contains a great warning to those who are leaders in the church and those who want to be leaders.

What is the warning?

Craig Blomberg, in what I regard to be one of the best books on parables, regards this as a three-point parable, and suggests that the first point of the parable is this: *"Like the man owing fifty denarii, those who take their spiritual condition for granted and are not aware of having been forgiven of numerous gross wickednesses should not despise those who have been redeemed from a more pathetic state."*

In other words, the point is: those who are in leadership positions should never be surprised at the sins of others. Why not? Because they are acutely aware of their own sins.

The one person in the parable may very well have been the village prostitute. Verse 37 refers to her as *"a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town..."*. But notice verse 47 says *"her many sins have been forgiven."* Perfect tense.

And what happens on this occasion is this: this woman who has been forgiven, out of gratitude and thanksgiving to the Lord Jesus comes into this room, probably intends to pour the contents of the jar on the head of her master – but is so overcome by the stares and the comments of everyone in the room that she ends up pouring it all instead on his feet....

And meanwhile, there is Simon, and in verse 39, the narrator (who is omniscient) tells us what he thinks about this woman and about Jesus.... *"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."*

And thus we have a contrast, if ever we have one. A repentant sinner, vs a self-righteous Pharisee.

And so Jesus tells a parable.

There are two men with a debt problem. One man owes five hundred denarii. Five hundred day's wages -- well over a year. The other man fifty denarii. Fifty days – a month and a half. But unlike all other debt collectors, who would turn up the heat, this one does something else. He forgives the debt of **both** of them.

The question he leaves Simon with is: *"Now which of them will love him more?"*

The answer is obvious....and the conclusion is as well. So that Simon lamely says: *"I suppose the one who had the bigger debt cancelled."*

And this is the point here indeed.

The woman has a sense of her debt. The woman has a sense of her sin. And her shame.

In verse 47 you need to realize as well when the Lord Jesus speaks about her *"loving much..."* this is not a reference to her former way of life, to her life as a prostitute. Would the Lord, by the way, be calling those cheap acts done for money "love"? Rather, it is an expression that speaks **about her love for the Lord Jesus**. That was what was behind the tears, and the wiping of the hair, and the pouring out of the perfume. Love. Devotion. For the Lord Jesus.

The parable, you see, explains why the woman acted as she did. It began with an acute sense of debt; she received forgiveness. Inexplicable forgiveness. And that resulted in gratitude and love. These actions of love that she did there before all, testify to the presence of **forgiveness**. Forgiven much, she loves much. So you see this first. Why do some people embrace the Lord so warmly?

Our Lord Jesus is saying here: *our view of Him and our attitude towards Him depend upon our view of ourselves? And: our sin.*

If you have a light view of your *sin*, you'll have a light view of your *Saviour*.

If you have little sense of just what a *debt* of sin you have incurred, you will take lightly as well the *canceling* of that debt.

For isn't the opposite obvious with Simon? Simon really has no sense of debt, no sense of forgiveness, and as a result, also *no love for the Lord*.

Isn't that complaint of our Lord in verses 44- 47?

Simon, it was not her house that I came into, it was *yours*.

But what did you do? Did you give me *water* for my feet? Did you do what every other host would do, Simon: give me water for my feet? Or a servant to wash my feet? Did you do that, Simon?

Did you greet me with a *kiss*, Simon?

An embrace, a sign of affection, or just respect?

Oil on my head, Simon, that too is common in Israel. But not with you. Not in your house?

Don't you see it, Simon?

Why does she love so much?

Precisely because she has been forgiven so much!

And here, Simon, here is your problem and the problem of your fellow Pharisees: You have no sense of your own need of forgiveness.

She *loves much* because she has an acute awareness of having been *forgiven much*.

But you *love little* because you have *so little* sense of needing to be *forgiven*.

Here's where Blomberg puts it rightly again, when he says: "*Like the debtor owing five hundred denarii, those who recognize they have much for which to be thankful will naturally respond in generous expressions of love for Jesus.*"ⁱⁱ

As leaders and future leaders, we need to reflect on this. Think about it.

As we read the parable here, we are quick to conclude that the woman has the larger debt and Simon has the smaller debt. The woman the five hundred, and Simon the fifty.

But notice: the Lord never really says that. That's actually left somewhat open-ended.

The point is: Simon is quick to conclude that his is the smaller debt.

But tell me: how would you measure that? How exactly do you measure sin?

Think about it: which is greater: the debt of a woman who maybe out of need falls into a sinful lifestyle, **or**: the sin of a leader in Israel who has lost a true sense of what the Scriptures of Israel are all about?

How would you measure that?

When you read what the Lord Jesus says in the gospels, does He not so often, turn our sense of what is sin upside down? He says to the disciples and He says that there is something that is as bad as adultery; just looking at a woman lustfully is adultery. He tells them there is something as bad as murder; anger can be equivalent to murder. He re-evaluates so much.

Indeed, what is worse: to live the life of a prostitute with no spiritual appetite, **or** to live in the center of Israel with the Scriptures, the temple, the law, everything but with no spiritual appetite? Which is worse?

Isn't it a principle of Old and New Testament Scriptures: with more knowledge comes more responsibility? With more revelation comes greater need to respond to that revelation? More law....means: more knowledge of sin. More grace...more gratitude. Indeed, what is worse: to be outside of Israel and never have heard the gospel, or to be in Israel and never to have *really* heard the gospel either?

And that was precisely Simon's problem.

He who has been forgiven little, loves little.

Or better perhaps: he who thinks he has to be forgiven little, loves little.

And is that not **our** problem? Today? Here?

Aren't we also quick to conclude: that we are the ones who have the smaller debt – *fifty* denarii, or something like that? The five hundred...that's for those "sinners" who never go to church, who live on the streets in the downtown core, who have committed gross public

sin...and the like. We...we are just “little” sinners. They are the “big” ones.

Pharisaism is alive and well among us then, brothers.

But listen then to a converted Pharisee. He says: through the law comes knowledge of sin. And the law is given not to the man on the street, but to Israel. To me. And so he says: ***“I, Paul, I am the foremost of sinners..” I have this unbelievable debt...and the one and only way to get out of it is: through the grace of God.***

I have often said in preaching lately to the point of wearing it out: “if you are not the biggest sinner you know, you don’t know yourself very well.” Here we are channels of the grace of God, instruments of his peace, but we have all kinds of thoughts, wishes, dreams, too, don’t we? And they’re not so pure, are they?

Taking the Word, God’s presence, His promises, His grace, and all those wonderful gifts of God, for granted – don’t

ⁱ *The Parables of Jesus*, IVP, 1960, p. 185

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 186

we too often do that...? Presuming upon the grace of God for ourselves, and being skeptical about the degree to which others enjoy it...isn’t that a mistake we often make...? What indeed is worse: to never see it, or to see it – right there - but never *really* see it?

To be sure, if we would truly be instruments of God’s grace, we must be deeply convinced that we ourselves are one of the greatest recipients of that grace ourselves. We must eat it. Drink it. Know it. “I live by grace and by grace alone.”

To know the weight of **our** sin, the size of **our** debt...is to say: ***if God can save me, he can save anybody. If God’s grace can change my life, it can change anyone’s life. Then you will never be surprised by the sins of others that you will encounter throughout your years of ministry. And then you have a rich foundation for a lifetime of preaching.***



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