Luke 7:36-50  The Truth about Forgiveness

Luke is writing to help people be sure of the truth about Jesus’ life, death and resurrection

Context:
This falls into the section which runs from 4:14-9:50 and deals with Jesus’ Galilean ministry. The big issue that is dealt with is: **Who Jesus is.**

Alongside this we see Jesus calling disciples (showing what it takes to become a disciple). He has also started to explain what it looks like to follow Jesus.

In chapter 5 Jesus was challenged by the Pharisees as to why he associated with tax collectors and sinners. This accusation has been repeated in the section immediately previous (7:34).

Notes:

**Verse 36**
A new scene is introduced with Jesus being invited to have dinner with a Pharisee¹. Despite the disputes that Jesus has had with the Pharisee he still accepts the invitation. And he ‘reclined at the table’. This would have been the normal position for eating a special meal. Each person would lie on their side with their head towards the table and their feet sticking out, away from the table. It has also been suggested that such a meal would have been a public affair. These two facts explain how the woman gets to Jesus feet and also why her presence is not rebuked, but only her actions.

**Verse 37-38**
A woman arrives at the house. Many claim that she was a prostitute, however there is no evidence from the text that this was the case. The exact nature of her sin is not described. The point seems to be that she was excluded from polite society because of her sin².

Luke outlines her actions step by step, and points to everything she does: she was a notorious woman. She is described as ‘sinful’.

¹ Verse 40 indicates that his name was Simon.
² Bock notes that sinners feature prominently in Luke’s account. The reason has been explained by Jesus in 5:30-32. (Bock 1994, 695).
She learnt Jesus was at the meal and so came. She comes prepared as she brings a jar of perfume with her. This would have been a more expensive perfume than the normal olive oil used for anointing (compare v46 where olive is compared to what she used).

She stands behind Jesus
- As she stands she weeps wetting his feet
- She then wipes his feet with her hair. To have let her hair down may have caused further offence.
- She kisses his feet
- She anoints his feet with the perfume which she brought with her

This would have created an uncomfortable situation for all those present. The woman and her actions would have been obviously visible to all present at the meal.

Verse 39
While the action is taking place the camera shifts to what Simon is thinking as this happens. What he is thinking is quite revealing. His reaction is in terms of whether Jesus is a prophet. This suggests that in some way Simon has invited Jesus to assess whether he was a prophet. This incident informs his judgement of 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." (Luke 7:39 NIB)

His thinking runs thus:
1. If Jesus was a prophet he would obviously not let such a women touch him
2. Jesus is letting such a women touch him
3. Therefore Jesus cannot be a prophet

Jesus’ response will show that Simon’s reasoning is very wrong. He does know who she is and is willing to accept such devotion from her.

Verse 40-43
Jesus turns to the Pharisee and names him - which is unusual - and Simon calls Jesus teacher. As Tannehill says ‘it also helps the audience think of the man as an individual not just as another Pharisee’ (1996: 136). Jesus tells Simon a simple parable. This enables Jesus to challenge the thinking of Simon, that is, it will help Simon think about the situation in a new light.

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3 For this reason, and the polite interaction which takes place after, I think we should be cautious about implying that Simon was deliberately snubbing Jesus.
4 ‘It may be that the issue was with her being unclean as a sinner and thus defiling Jesus by her touch.’ (Bock 1994, 697). Simon, as a Pharisee, would have avoided contact with such a person thinking she may make him unclean. Although not the main point it shows that the Pharisees were not able to offer anything to sinners other than rejection. We will see that Jesus has offered something much greater.
5 In this also note that both are cordial.
In the parable there is a money lender with two debtors. One debtor has a large debt (500 denarii) the other a small debt (50 denarii). A denarius was a soldier’s or labourer’s daily wage (cf. Matthew 20:2). The striking thing in the parable is that the money lender forgives the debt of both. This is entirely out of character for a money lender. The word used for ‘forgive the debt’ can in other circumstance mean ‘to give freely as a favour’ (give graciously) or ‘to show oneself gracious by forgiving wrongdoing’ (forgive pardon). Rom. 8:32 is an example of the former:

> He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? (Romans 8:32 NIB)

While Col 2:13 is an example of the latter:

> When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, (Colossians 2:13 NIB)

The word has no sense of someone doing anything to deserve or merit the reception of the grace. It is given by the free will of the giver.

Jesus ends with a question about the response of the two debtors. He asks: “Which would love more? The answer which Simon gives in verse 43 is correct⁶. The man who is forgiven much will love much.

Verses 44-47

Jesus then turns to the women and asks Simon if he sees her: as if Simon might have missed her!

It is not until this point that we really start to see what Jesus’ reaction to the woman’s actions really is. Jesus proceeds to compare the woman’s actions with those of Simon’s in three areas:

1. Water for the feet:

   Simon did not give any, the woman provided it with her tears

2. A Kiss:

   Simon did not provide a kiss, the woman hadn’t stopped kissing his feet

3. Oil for anointing:

   Simon hadn’t given oil for his head, the woman had anointed his feet with perfume.

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⁶ ‘There is no need at all to read supercilious indifference into Simon’s reply (v43), and it in unnecessary to suppose that his treatment of Jesus had been discourteous; he had performed the duties of hospitality, but had not gone out of his way to give Jesus as special welcome’ (Marshall 1970, 900)
There seems to be no consensus on whether these three things were part of normal hospitality. If they were, then Simon has been clearly discourteous. ‘Nevertheless, in comparison with the woman’s actions, Simon’s welcome of Jesus looks decidedly cool’ (Tannehill 1994, 136).

Verse 47 provides the lesson that Jesus wants Simon to learn. It consists of two parts:

Firstly he proclaims that the reason that the woman has acted in this way is because her many sins have been forgiven. There is a little ambiguity in the verse - it seems as if it could be saying that ‘her many sins have been forgiven because she has shown great love’. That would make her actions the basis of forgiveness she has received, but that would contradict the parable which Jesus tells. In the parable the love comes in response to the forgiveness of sins. It would also contradict the last phrase of verse 47 which says that he who has been forgiven little loves little (where the order is first forgiveness, then love). It also contradicts the wider testimony of Scripture. It is necessary to understand her actions as a response to forgiveness. As the 2011 version of the NIV translates it:

Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – as her great love has shown.

This leads us to conclude that this woman must have had a previous encounter with Jesus where he had proclaimed her sins were forgiven (as he did to the paralysed man in 5:20). This must be the reason why she came to the house with her jar of perfume in order to undertake this task. The fact that Jesus points to her ‘many sins’ shows that he knows who this woman is. Simon had thought that Jesus could not be a prophet because he didn’t seem to know who the woman was. That is shown to be false by Jesus’ knowledge here. It also challenges the premise on which Simon was basing his reasoning.

The second thing Simon is to learn is that the one who is forgiven little loves little. This is obviously directed at Simon. Simon is characterised as one who has little sin, yet whether he has been forgiven or not isn’t clear. While Simon may not have been rude, he certainly hasn’t shown love. As Bock states ‘the remark is rhetorical: Simon thinks he needs little help and has little need for forgiveness. Jesus’ point is that the women is much closer to God’s grace than Simon is’ (1994: 703).

This is the last we hear of Simon. It leaves us as readers wondering what his response to all of this was. Did he see that Jesus was a prophet from God who could forgive sins and to whom Simon should offer devotion? Or did he continue as he was, thinking he was OK? The question is, was he willing to humble himself before God to receive the forgiveness on offer? We are left with no answer and it should cause us to question in our own hearts what is our own response.

**Verse 48**

Jesus now addresses the woman for the first time in the incident. At first glance it seems as if Jesus may be pronouncing forgiveness for the first time. However that is not the case. Jesus is merely reassuring her that her sins have been forgiven. Just as we often need to be reminded of the reality

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7 It is ironic that the sinful woman has become Simon’s teacher!
of God’s grace so did this woman. She did not come with the intention of receiving such an assurance, but as she responded with gratitude, wonderfully that is what she received.

**Verse 49**
All of this prompts the other guests to question who Jesus is. The reason for asking the question is that he has forgiven the sins of the woman. This highlights another theme in the section, which is the identity of Jesus. We have seen that Simon thinks Jesus cannot be a prophet and Jesus demonstrates that at the very least he is that. However the question points further than that. It raises in our minds the last time in Luke we have heard that question:

> Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Luke 5:21 NIB)

Jesus is no ordinary prophet. Prophets would always speak indirectly of God’s words ‘the Lord says’, however here Jesus speaks directly ‘your sins are forgiven’ (Bock 1994: 706).

**Verse 50**
In a final word to the woman Jesus says to her:

> "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." (Luke 7:50 NIB)

Note that this again points to the fact that her actions are not the cause of her forgiveness of sins. Rather it is her faith, that is, her trust in Jesus.

The woman is then told to go in peace. This reminds the reader of the angels’ message to the shepherds:

> "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests." (Luke 2:14 NIB)

Here is someone who is to go in peace. This suggests that she is also one on whom God’s favour rests. This helps us understand that peace comes through the forgiveness of sins. And God’s favour is on those who, in faith trust in the forgiveness of God.

**Structure:**

7:36-38 Setting the scene: A Pharisee’s meal and a sinful woman’s anointing
7:39 Reaction of the Pharisee: doubt about Jesus
7:40-47 Jesus’ reply
i. A parable about being forgiven and loving (7:40-43)
ii. Parable applied to Simon and the Woman (7:44-47)

7:48-50 Final remarks and a question about Jesus

Themes:

Forgiveness of Sin:
We see clearly in this section that Jesus is able to forgive sins. We saw this in Luke 5 also. Again Jesus is proclaimed as the one who forgives sins. That forgiveness of sins is what the Christian gospel continues to proclaim. Any preaching of the gospel which does not contain that is not preaching the gospel.

The response to forgiveness:
The woman demonstrates that those who are forgiven much love much. Her devotion to Jesus is quite staggering. This should be the love and devotion which we demonstrate to Jesus as those who are forgiven. We see that the motivation for devotion to Jesus does not come from wanting our sins to be forgiven, rather it comes from the experience of having our sins forgiven.

Who is Jesus?:
See comments above in verse 49.

Purpose Statement:

Respond to the forgiveness of sins with gratitude to the one who is able to forgive sins.