

Parables of Jesus Week 7: Parable of Two Debtors
BG Bawks - Pathway Community Church (August 22, 2021)

Good morning Pathway. I hope you've all had a good week. Thank you again Savannah for leading us in worship today. The songs really capture the essence of our message for today.

We continue with our Parables series by looking at the Parable of The Two Debtors found in Luke 7:41-42.

⁴¹ “Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii,^[a] 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?”

This is a fairly short and seemingly straightforward parable. To fully appreciate its significance to its hearers,

You need to take into account the larger narrative within which it appears. The full story begins in vs. 36

and I'll read:

Jesus Anointed by a Sinful Woman – Luke 7:36-50

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. 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,^[a] 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.”

Jews of the day, and Pharisees in particular, were very concerned about purity and cleanness. In fact, one Rabbi says that for ancient Jews, uncleanness was worse than bloodshed. Pharisees went to great lengths to preserve and demonstrate outward cleanliness even at the expense of inner purity. It was one of the things that Jesus condemned them for, calling them whitewashed tombs that looked clean on the outside but were full of death and rot on the inside (Matt 23:27). So, to have this woman whose sin was a matter of public record not only come to the party uninvited, but touch one of the guests, was scandalous! It is not

specified what constituted her sinfulness but some have supposed that she was probably a prostitute. If that was the case, then the jar of perfume she brought to anoint Jesus with would have been something she used in her trade to make herself more attractive to her clients. Her coming to the party was one thing. But uncovering her hair and touching Jesus with it, and then anointing his feet with the perfume...well, that was just obscene! She was contravening every social convention of the day. It would kind of be like if a strip dancer showed up here at church with the tools of her trade and gave the pastor a lap dance! And because she was considered unclean, any person who came into contact with her would become unclean too. A Pharisee like Simon would never have let such a woman touch him, at least not in public. That could only mean that Jesus was not the holy prophet that everyone supposed him to be if he was willingly receiving this woman's attention.

But Jesus, really being a prophet, discerns the Pharisee's thoughts and responds to them with the parable: two men owed money to a moneylender. One owed a small amount, the other, a larger amount. Both could not pay so the moneylender freely forgave them. Simon would immediately have seen the meaning of the parable in light of the events unfolding before him: God is the moneylender; Simon and the sinful woman were the debtors. Through the parable, Jesus was implying that the sinful woman loved God more than Simon did. It would have been enough for Jesus to let the matter rest with the conclusion of the parable. But he went on to elaborate further on the difference between Simon and the woman's attitudes towards him. It was customary at the time to greet guests with a kiss and offer water to wash their feet. But even though Simon had invited Jesus to his house supposing him to be a prophet, and therefore an important person, he had somehow neglected these basic courtesies. Some have argued that he might have done this to shame Jesus since some Pharisees were always out to get Jesus. But it's more likely that it was an oversight not intended to insult. Whatever the case, Jesus was saying, "Since I've been here, you have not recognized my true identity and treated me as I deserve to be treated. You have not even accorded me the basic hospitality due to a regular guest. But this woman has not stopped showing love and honor since she walked in."

The parable that Jesus told is what is called a juridical parable, i.e., a parable intended to cause people to make a self-judgment. As with all his parables, Jesus intended that the people listening would identify with one of the parties in the story and would judge for themselves where they stood in the matter at hand. I find this a very loaded story because it unpacks several issues all at once. I'm going to look at a few of these issues and what they might mean for us today.

1. Jesus sees our true identity

At the heart of this narrative are questions about identity. First, there is the identity of Jesus himself. Was he really the prophet he was claimed to be? At the end of the narrative about the woman, Luke tells us that the other guests started asking among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" It wasn't the first time people had questioned Jesus' identity. To people like Simon, Jesus' actions and words went against what a true prophet was supposed to represent. He certainly wasn't behaving like the Messiah they were waiting for. But Jesus understood that his identity was not determined by external factors. He WAS the holy son of God and his contact with the woman did not automatically turn him into a sinner. Unfortunately, people like Simon who prided themselves on their understanding of Scripture often missed the mark when it came to recognizing Jesus' true identity. They were blinded to the truth that was revealed over and over through Jesus' message.

Simon's identity is also in question. Up until now, he has considered himself among the most devoted and righteous people. No matter what the standard, he was surely more devoted and righteous than the sinful woman. Like I said earlier, Pharisees were very concerned about outward piety and went to great lengths to show how holy they were. In Luke 18:9-14, Jesus told another parable to expose Pharisees' wrong assumptions about their own holiness. In this story, a Pharisee and a tax collector go to the temple to pray. The Pharisee, self-assured of his right standing with God, stands by himself and prays, "God, I thank you that I am not a sinner like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers- or even like this tax collector ." The tax collector on the other hand, fully aware of his true standing before God, beats his breast and prays, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Jesus concluded by saying that it was the tax collector and not the Pharisee who went home justified before God. Simon's identity would have been wrapped up in his knowledge and observance of the Law and now Jesus was casting doubt on this identity as a holy person.

Then there is the woman's identity. She is not even named in the story but simply identified by a label: a sinful woman. In the eyes of Simon and his guests, her label was her identity. They could not see beyond her reputation as a sinner. Imagine if people only knew you by your worst quality; if introductions went something like, "This is Liar. And next to her is Thief who is married to Arrogant over there." The good news for this woman and for us is that Jesus sees beyond our labels. Even though her reputation preceded her wherever she went, Jesus saw and affirmed her humanity. His question to Simon, "Do you see this woman?" was crucial in this regard. Jesus was saying, do you see this person? Not what she does, not what people say about her...do you see HER? Simon's unrighteousness was revealed in his attitude towards the woman. If he truly loved God like he supposed his love would have resulted in compassion for the woman.

Simon was forced to confront what he thought he knew about identity: Jesus's, his own, and the woman's. And just like him, we too need to develop the ability to truly see ourselves and others beyond reputation, needs or any other things we use to define ourselves. We cannot truly love others when we are blinded by their outward labels. Labels distract us and force us to respond to things rather than responding to people. Likewise, we cannot truly receive and appreciate God's love without casting aside our own labels and false identities. This woman could have let her reputation keep her away from Jesus. She could have allowed the people's opinions to define her and make her doubt God's love for her. She could have heard the message of forgiveness and thought to herself, "I'm sure he doesn't mean people like me." But she did not. She chose to believe fully in the message of love that Jesus was preaching and she chose to accept fully the forgiveness he was offering. She decided to see herself the way Jesus saw her and so should we.

2. We all owe a debt

The second question I see in this narrative is the relationship between forgiveness and love. Forgiveness is a theme that cuts across many of the parables that Jesus told. More specifically, Jesus was concerned with people's response to being forgiven. The issue of forgiveness and love in this story comes directly from the parable itself and Jesus' assertion that those who have been forgiven much will love much. I have to say that I have really struggled with this parable, maybe revealing my own self-righteousness. Quite frankly, Jesus' little parable offends me, as it no doubt did for Simon. See, by my own standards, I would fall in the category of those forgiven little. I don't have a dramatic conversion story; I wasn't redeemed from a life of debauchery or any of the things that we typically consider big sins or struggles – I wasn't the town drunk, wasn't saved from a gang or a life of partying and sleeping around. I was your average sinner. So is Jesus saying that I don't love him as much as I would have if I had been forgiven bigger or more sins? Who is he to judge my love for him? Oh wait, He is God! Never mind.

As I wrestled with this I have come away with two things. The first is that I've had to admit that Jesus was right. It really makes sense that someone who's been forgiven of a great debt would love the forgiver more. And I see it in the difference in "devotion" and passion I have for those who don't know Jesus yet than someone who grew up with no access to the gospel or someone who became a Christian in prison. There is a sense in which they are more aware of what is at stake for people who don't know God's love that I tend to take for granted. So yes, there are different levels of sinfulness and debt and different levels of gratitude.

The second thing I see is that even though the "size" of our debts might be different, we are all equally indebted to God. The Bible is clear in Romans 3:23: all of us have sinned and fallen short of God's standard for righteousness. Some of us might have been fallen further than others, but we're all on the ground! And when called to account, none of us could pay off our debt. It is helpful to look at the debts from the debtor's perspective: both had an equal responsibility to pay back what they owed. Debts by nature demand payment. The one who owed 50 denarii could not have gone to the moneylender and said, oh come on. You don't really expect me to pay this back, do you? It's so little! Surely you have people who owe you more. I have actually had an experience where someone who owed me money got offended when I asked them to pay it back. They considered it beneath me to ask for the money back because it was supposedly a small amount. And I remember thinking, "it wasn't so small to you when you needed it! But here's the point I'm trying to make: Both the 50 and 500 demanded payment. And both amounts were big enough to each debtor that Jesus tells us that neither man could pay. It might have been easy for the one who owed less to look at his debt from the moneylender's perspective and think, canceling this debt doesn't really hurt him that much. But if he looked at his from the point of view of what the debt had meant for him, then it's possible that he would have developed a greater sense of gratitude.

The problem with measuring our sins against other people's is that it can actually leave those with "smaller" debts in a worse spiritual position than those who owe more because they are more likely to take God's grace and forgiveness for granted. It is important to remember that no sin is so small that it could be paid for by the sinner. Against God's standard, we all owe a debt that none of us could pay. And God knew this, so he sent Jesus to die for all of us equally, and give us an equal measure of freedom. God freely and equally dispensed His grace on all our lives and we all have an equal obligation to respond to this grace. This brings me to my final point:

3. God's grace requires a response

My final issue coming out of this narrative is the question of how we are to respond to God's grace. The woman in the story demonstrates a beautiful response to her awareness of how much she had been forgiven. We don't know exactly when she first encountered Jesus and his message but it is clear that something she heard or saw from him changed her life. She had probably been living under a heavy burden of shame and guilt over her lifestyle and the gospel of Jesus had taken that away. She must have heard Jesus say to someone else that their faith had made them whole, or that their sins were forgiven (something he constantly got into trouble with the Pharisees for). And she had come to believe that that message of love and forgiveness was for her too. She had come to accept that forgiveness and experienced a newness of life. She must have felt reborn. And having experienced a dramatic transformation, she couldn't hide it! She had to let Jesus know how thankful she was for that free gift. So she brought what was of most value to her and in a sense, surrendered it to Jesus's feet. She risked ridicule, perhaps even the possibility of being cast out of Simon's house, to show her gratitude.

Once we become aware of just how valuable God's grace is to us, we will develop gratitude that responds to God's love and acts to express our love back. God's grace transforms us; it creates new love in us that we did not know before. His grace calls us into a new relationship with God, with ourselves and our fellow man. It puts us in a place of responsibility. As one author puts it, "Forgiveness is without limits, but not without responsibility, confession, truth, and even restitution." God's forgiveness makes us right with him, but it also makes us right with our fellow man as we seek to be carriers and conduits of the same grace we have received. It calls us to make amends not just to God but to ourselves and those around us. We see this in the story of Zacchaeus who was a tax collector. Men like Jesus did not typically associate with men like him so when Jesus called him down from the tree and then invited himself to Zacchaeus' house, Zacchaeus recognized it as an act of great love and grace. And he allowed that love and grace to change him, responding in Luke 19:8, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." He was saying, Lord, you have changed my life today and I want to change someone else's life as a result. He understood that God's grace calls us to "go and sin no more," and also to, "go and do likewise." In other words, let this forgiveness you have received change who you are on the inside and how you act on the outside.

If you're Baptist, all the woman's drama with the weeping and wiping feet with hair might make you a little uncomfortable. Sometimes our labels and false identities can hold us back from fully experiencing and fully expressing God's love. One of the books I was reading on the subject suggested evaluating our cultures and how they shape our awareness of our need for God's grace and intervention.

During our vacation, we got to spend time with some dear friends who also happen to be a Kenyan married to an American. They had just bought a house when we saw them and we have been looking to buy a second car and hopefully a house at some point in the future so we got to talking about how different our approaches were to the issue of finances. From a general standpoint, hard work and self-reliance are core values for Western cultures. People take a lot of pride in being able to handle their business and not look for handouts, even from God. When it came to financial needs, the default is to look to yourself first and what you can accomplish with planning and good stewardship. Africans on the other hand generally tend to have a big awareness of the spiritual world and its impact on their lives. You just need to watch a Nigerian movie to understand what I mean. A good harvest is not merely the result of good farming techniques but a sign that God is pleased with you or the community. A bad one definitely means punishment for some communal infraction that must be atoned. So, here's how our car buying conversations were going:

David: I think we need to revise our budget and expand our options to see what we can afford to buy.

Me: Ooor, we could just ask God to give us a car.

David: God is not just going to give us a car we haven't paid for?

Me: Why not?

David: because we don't need handouts! We just need to find the right car that's within our budget and pay for it.

Me: It's not a handout when God gives you something you didn't buy. It's called a miracle!

David: but we don't need a miracle to pay for something we can afford!

Me: what are you talking about? We need a miracle for everything!!

Of course, I see the danger of my perspective and its tendency towards fatalism. I am aware that God's work in our lives needs both His initiative and our response. And if I remove my personal responsibility from the equation and wait only for God to act, then I am not being a good steward of the grace and the provision that God has already made. The danger of David's perspective on the other hand is the tendency to remove God from the equation of everyday experiences and needs and only involve Him in things that seem out of our control. We need a balanced view of God's activity in our lives and our response to what He is doing. So yes, I know that God's grace has made it possible for us to buy a car when we find the right one. And David also needs to acknowledge that God can take care of our everyday needs without our help: both are manifestations of His grace. And it's not just finances where we need this view; it is in every single area of our lives. The Bible says that in Christ, we live and move and have our being. There are no compartments in our lives that belong just to us and others that belong just to God. ALL of our lives come down to God's grace. And having a constant awareness of this can really change how we go about our business, how we relate with others, how we pray and worship. One of the questions I've been struggling with this week is, "do my daily routines really reflect the love I claim to have for Jesus?"

I'll conclude with two reflection questions:

1. Are there labels or false identities you wear that might be keeping you from fully enjoying God's grace in your life?
2. What is one thing you can intentionally do this week to demonstrate gratitude for God's forgiveness and grace? How can you testify to what God has done for you this week?