

7/13/25

A Table of Contrasts

Luke 7:36-50

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— Today's Gospel passage from *Luke 7* begins, “One of **the Pharisees** asked Jesus to eat with him.” We can't appreciate everything that follows unless we have a good understanding of who the Pharisees were. Several of this summer's “Guess Who's Coming to Dinner” messages involve Pharisees, so we want to have a clear picture of what they were like. **Who were the Pharisees?**

The Pharisees were a Jewish religious movement known for strict devotion to the Law of Moses and oral tradition, belief in the resurrection and spiritual reality, and a desire to bring holiness into all areas of life. The Gospels often portray Pharisees as: **Hypocritical** (outwardly religious, but inwardly corrupt), **Legalistic** (overly focused on minor rules), and **Opposed** to Jesus' authority and teachings. The word “Pharisee(s)” appears at least **18 times** in the Gospel of Luke, mostly in confrontational or teaching contexts.

They first appear in *Luke 5*, when Jesus is teaching: “**Pharisees** and teachers of the law were sitting nearby.” Jesus says to a paralyzed man, who is brought by his friends (*Luke 5:20-21*), “*Friend, your sins are forgiven you.*” Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, “**Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?**”

Last week, Pastor David Pranga preached about the dinner at Matthew's house (*Luke 5:30 NRSV*), “The Pharisees were complaining to Jesus' disciples, saying, “**Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?**”

In *Luke 6:6-7 (NRSV)*, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. The scribes and **the Pharisees watched him** to see whether he would cure on the sabbath, **so that they might find an accusation against him. When Jesus heals the man (*Luke 6:11*)**, “**they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.**”

While talking about the baptism of repentance that John the Baptist offered, Luke says (*Luke 7:30*), “But by refusing to be baptized by him, **the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves.**” Jesus then says (*Luke 7:33-34*),

“John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon’; **the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’**”

So, up to this point in Luke’s Gospel, Pharisees have accused Jesus of blasphemy; been stunned that Jesus and his disciples have eaten with tax collectors and sinners; watched him with a “gotcha” mentality, so they could accuse him of violating the law of Moses; were filled with fury when he healed on the sabbath; have begun to conspire against Jesus and think what they might do to bring him down; and have accused him of being a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners! That gives you a sense of how the Pharisees, at least most of them in the Gospels, were feeling about Jesus.

Would you accept a dinner invitation from a person who was part of a group that acted and spoke the way the Pharisees did toward Jesus, someone from a group that was clearly hostile towards you and what you’re doing? Or would you think, “No way I’m going to his house for dinner. I’m getting indigestion just thinking about it”?

Jesus teaches us to be willing to risk being with people who are different in many ways than we are. Even with all he knew about the Pharisees, when Jesus is invited, **he immediately accepts. There’s no example in the Gospels of Jesus turning down an invitation to eat with someone.** In fact, **Jesus accepts meal invitations** from people who are suspicious of Him or actively oppose Him — like **Pharisees**. Jesus’ **openness to table fellowship** — even with **sinners, tax collectors, and Pharisees** — is a major part of His ministry. He **uses meals as moments of teaching, healing, and grace**. Jesus doesn’t avoid conflict or uncomfortable settings; He **goes where He’s invited**, not based on the host’s morality or support, but on the opportunity to share God’s love, grace, truth, and forgiveness. There’s **no recorded moment** when Jesus is invited and **says “no” or refuses to eat** with someone for any reason. He even eats with Judas at the Last Supper, knowing that Judas will betray him. If you’re willing to invite Jesus to dine with you, to spend time with you, to talk with you, he will!

Now, let’s listen to the story in **Luke 7:36-50**.

“One of **the Pharisees** asked **Jesus** to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house and took his place at the table. And **a woman** in the city, **who was a**

sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when **the Pharisee** who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, *'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.'* Jesus spoke up and said to him, *'Simon, I have something to say to you.'* *'Teacher,'* he replied, *'speak.'* *'A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?'* Simon answered, *'I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt.'* And Jesus said to him, *'You have judged rightly.'* Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, *'Do you see **this woman**? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.'* Then he said to her, *'Your sins are forgiven.'* But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, *'Who is this who even forgives sins?'* And he said to the woman, *'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'*

This story has three significant people in it: **Simon, the Pharisee; an unnamed woman; and Jesus**. We can learn from each of them how to be better people and better followers of Jesus. We can learn from every person in the Bible and every person we meet in life. Some people model how to live, and we want to emulate or imitate what we see them doing. Other people model what not to do and teach us how not to act or behave. Let's start with **Simon, the Pharisee**.

Positively, there are several things we see in Simon. First, **he has the courage** to invite Jesus into his home, even though that might cause some of his family or friends to be angry with him or to shun him. There could be familial, religious, or financial consequences for Simon because he invited Jesus to his home for dinner. It's important, in Bible stories, not to caricature any person. It's not that Simon is all bad and everything about the unnamed woman is good. While nuance, subtlety, and complexity

are embraced by fewer people — and media outlets — in our country, they’re a real part of life, relationships, communication, and decision making. Simon is courageous in issuing the invitation. There are genuine risks he faced, and he’s willing to do so to have the chance to have Jesus in his home. All of us can benefit from having the courage to invite Jesus to be a bigger part of our life and not to be ashamed or embarrassed for people to know.

A second positive characteristic of Simon is **his curiosity**. He wouldn’t have invited Jesus to eat with him if he didn’t want to know more about Jesus, what he was teaching, and the way of life he was modeling and advocating for people to follow. Simon wants to know more about Jesus, and that’s always a good thing for any of us, because the more curious we are, the more questions we ask, the more we learn, the more we open ourselves to Jesus, the greater the growth and change we’ll experience.

A third positive quality we see in Simon is that **he’s teachable**. Jesus said to him (*Luke 7:40*), “*Simon, I have something to say to you.*” “*Teacher,*” he replied, “*Speak.*” Simon calls Jesus, “Teacher,” and invites him to speak into his life. Jesus asks him a question, and Simon responds, and he listens to Jesus’ explanation. All of us can benefit from practicing courage, curiosity, and being teachable, like Simon.

However, there are also things we learn from Simon, negatively, that we don’t want to do in our lives. **He doesn’t practice generous hospitality**. He fails to show Jesus the most basic forms of Middle Eastern hospitality. He didn’t provide water for Jesus to wash his dusty, sweaty feet, as any household would have done. He didn’t give Jesus a kiss of welcome. He didn’t provide oil for Jesus’ head, after being out in the heat of the day. Why didn’t he do those things that were expected of a host? Perhaps because of the second thing we learn from him, negatively.

Simon lacked humility and looked down on other people. While he showed some courage, curiosity, and teachability, he didn’t respect Jesus enough to treat him with the honor and dignity that any guest expected in that culture, much less what Jesus deserved. He also questioned Jesus’ spiritual knowledge and insight — “He said to himself, *‘If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him — that she is a sinner’*” (*Luke 7:39*). He also looked at the woman and made judgments and assumptions that he was superior to her, better than her, more righteous and worthy in the eyes of God than she was. He

regarded the woman as a sinner, but not himself. He's self-righteous, arrogant, and judgmental, which are deadly qualities, spiritually speaking — yet, ones that the Pharisees repeatedly demonstrate, and sadly, so do many self-identified Christians today. Those attitudes are a huge turn-off to people who are not followers of Christ, and we hurt the cause of Christ when we reveal these attitudes are within us.

Let's turn our attention to **the woman**. Luke is clear that the woman is a sinner. Luke identifies her that way in verse 37, Simon describes her that way in verse 39, and Jesus says plainly, in verse 47, "*her sins, which were many.*" It's not a question of if the woman was a sinner; she was. The difference is **she knows** she is a sinner, and Simon doesn't know he's a sinner, who also needs forgiveness. They're both sinners — it's just that their sins are different. What do we learn positively from the woman?

First, **be honest with yourself**. She's a sinner, and she knows it. Many people struggle to be honest with themselves. Some folks like to think they're better than they are. Other people struggle with the opposite — they wrestle with feeling that they have any worth or value at all. Simon was the former; the woman was the latter. She must have heard that Jesus could forgive sins, and she knew she's a sinner. She learned that he's at Simon's house, and, like Simon, **she shows courage**. Can you imagine the nerve it took to show up, uninvited, at the home of a Pharisee — to barge in and interrupt a dinner with an important guest, knowing how you'd likely be treated? It wouldn't have been a surprise if she'd been thrown out. But her desire for forgiveness was greater than her fear of how she might be perceived.

The woman also shows **great love, contrition, and humility** — all qualities we're called to practice. She's weeping, which is a sign of remorse and regret, and perhaps, also relief, because Jesus allowed her to do what she did and he didn't withdraw from her, reject her, or tell her to leave. She performs some of the obligations of hospitality that Simon had failed to provide. She washes Jesus' feet, an act of humble service that Jesus would do for his disciples shortly before his death. There's a lot to commend in the woman's actions, but **negatively**, we learn from her that it's better to avoid living a life of sin that's dishonoring to God and not healthy or helpful for ourselves. We don't know the exact nature of her situation, or what she had done, or why — none of that is given in the text. But she was a sinner, who had made choices and

done things that were better left undone. To sin means to miss the mark, and she missed it.

What about Jesus? Jesus shows love and compassion in being willing to eat with anyone. Jesus shows grace and patience to both Simon and to the woman. He doesn't express anger or irritation when he doesn't receive the hospitality that was anyone's right to expect. He doesn't tell the woman to stop touching him, or to leave. He doesn't show any awkwardness with what is taking place. He doesn't tell Simon off for questioning his spiritual insight, but instead, tells him a story about a creditor with two debtors, so that Simon can provide the answer, himself, about which of the two will love him more when he cancels the debts of both. Verse 44 says, "Then turning toward the woman, Jesus said to Simon, '*Do you see **this woman?***'"

This is at the heart of this story, and at the heart of the approach to life that Jesus wants you and me to have. Simon did not see **this woman**. In his own words, Simon describes her as "*what kind of woman this is.*" He sees a kind of person, a representative of a stereotype; he doesn't see **this woman**. Jesus wants us to see each person as an individual, who is made in the image of God, and not to see people as members of a group, a stereotype, or a generalization. We learn from Jesus how to see each person as an individual, and to freely extend forgiveness.

Finally, the story has three major people in it, but in verse 49, we hear that there were other people present, in addition to Simon, the woman, and Jesus. "But **those who were at the table** with him began to say among themselves, '*Who is **this who even forgives sins?***'" This is the question that Luke wants you to answer. Who has the power, the desire, the ability, and the grace to forgive sins? The answer is Jesus, who wants to be our Savior, our friend, and the leader of our life. As we will see, throughout this series, Jesus consistently **accepts meal invitations**, even from hostile or controversial hosts. His **radical openness** at the table is a central image of the Kingdom of God — one of **hospitality, grace, and challenge**.

Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners, and that raises two questions for us: **do we recognize that, like the woman, we're sinners in need of God's grace and forgiveness? And are we doing the same thing Jesus did?** Are we having meals with sinners, with lost, hurting people who are far from God and need grace, forgiveness, mercy, spiritual meaning, encouraging supportive relationships, and a

moral framework on which to build a joyful and content life? If not, what are we waiting for?

Jesus said to the woman, *“Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”* How will hearing this story change your life? Can you imagine the change in Simon from witnessing this scene in his home? Is it possible that, years later, Simon told this story to Luke as he was learning all he could about Jesus to create his “orderly account” of Jesus’ life and work? I like to think that Simon was changed by this dinner experience and became a more loving, humble, and gracious man.

Can you imagine the change in the woman from when she approached the door of Simon’s home with fear and trembling, with no idea how she might be treated, to leaving feeling light as feather, free and unburdened, like she’d never felt before in her life? I’d bet she became an incredible disciple and witness. I can see her living a totally changed life, and people asking her, “What happened to you?” And her replying with breathless joy and gratitude, “Let me tell you ‘bout my Jesus.”

Let’s pray.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What do you notice about the contrast between the Pharisee (Simon) and the woman in how they approach Jesus? What might this say about their understanding of their own need for grace?
2. Why do you think the woman was so emotional in Jesus’ presence? Have you ever experienced an overwhelming sense of gratitude or humility before God?
3. In verse 47, Jesus says, “The one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” What does this mean? How does it apply to us today?
4. How does Jesus’ response to the woman challenge or confirm your view of God’s character?

5. Simon questioned whether Jesus was truly a prophet, based on who he allowed to touch him. What does this reveal about Simon's heart? What assumptions might we make about others today, in a similar way?
6. What role does faith play in this story (see verse 50)? How is faith connected to forgiveness and peace?
7. How can we, like the woman, express deep love for Jesus in our daily lives — not just with words, but with actions?