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*For She Loved Much*, painting by Jeff Hein

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# Simon and the Woman Who Anointed Jesus's Feet

*Gaye Strathearn*

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It was Alexander Pope who immortalized the words “To err, is human; to forgive, divine.”<sup>1</sup> One of the inherent facts of mortality is that we all commit sin. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans that “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), and John cautioned us that “if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves” (1 John 1:8). In this dispensation Elder Richard G. Scott said that “this subject [of repentance] is widely misunderstood and often feared. Some feel that it is to be employed only by those in serious transgression, while the Lord intended that it be consistently used by every one of His children.”<sup>2</sup> Likewise, Elder Henry B. Eyring teaches: “The truth is that we all need repentance. If we are capable of reason and past the age of eight, we all need the cleansing that comes through applying the full effects of the Atonement of Jesus Christ.”<sup>3</sup> So, while Alexander Pope penned his adage to encourage us to forgive one another, I would like to use it to reflect on the great desire of the divine Savior to forgive all who come unto Him.

Luke records an incident in Jesus's life that demonstrates His great desire to reach out to all people, regardless of their social status. To set the scene, Jesus appears to be in the town of Nain, where He raised the widow's son from the dead and where John the Baptist's disciples came to Him to inquire whether He is the expected Messiah. In addition, immediately prior to our story, Jesus responded to the Pharisees' and lawyers' criticism that He is “a friend of publicans and sinners” (Luke 7:34).<sup>4</sup> Then we read the following:

And one of the Pharisees desired him that he would eat with him. And he went into the Pharisee's house, and sat down [probably reclined<sup>5</sup> on a couch beside the dinner table] to meat.

And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster box of ointment,

And stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment.

Now when the Pharisee which had bidden him saw it, he spake within himself, saying, This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner.

And Jesus answering said unto him, Simon, I have somewhat to say unto thee. And he saith, Master, say on.

There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the one owed five hundred pence [about fifteen months' wages for a laborer], and the other fifty [about one and a half months' wages].

And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most?

Simon answered and said, I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most. And he said unto him, Thou hast rightly judged.

And he turned to the woman, and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head.

Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet.

My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment.

Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.

And he said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven.

And they that sat at meat with him began to say within themselves, Who is this that forgiveth sins also?

And he said to the woman, Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace. (Luke 7:36–50)

As I have contemplated this story, I have come to appreciate more deeply its message from two perspectives. The first is the more obvious of the two. It is clearly a powerful example of the forgiveness and peace that Christ offers to those who come unto Him. This story is just as much about Simon and the Savior's attempt to reach out to him as it is about the woman who washed the Savior's feet with her tears. There are wonderful lessons to be learned as readers contemplate the Savior's interactions with both of these individuals. The second perspective I have come to appreciate is how the author, Luke, pedagogically uses the story to draw his readers in and to encourage each of them to identify with and learn from the experiences of both Simon and the woman. There is real power in this story as readers alternately identify themselves with both of these individuals.

As the story opens, an unnamed Pharisee invites Jesus into his home for a formal banquet. Remember that immediately prior to this story, Jesus had just responded to Pharisees who criticized His ministry. Other events in the Gospels show that the Pharisees were famous for their legalistic interpretations of the scriptural commandments and the oral laws that they had developed around them. Many times Jesus and the Pharisees were at odds with each other over such things as what is permissible to do on the Sabbath (see, for example, Matthew 12:1–14; John 5:1–16) and their rules about cleanliness, especially as it pertained to eating (see Matthew 15:1–20). In fact, Matthew 23 records one of the harshest denunciations that Jesus ever made, and it was directed, in large part, against the Pharisees.

Yet, although Jesus's dinner host initially identified with the Pharisees, something unique happens in this story. Unlike all the other Pharisees mentioned in the four Gospels, this particular Pharisee's name is recorded. It is Simon. I believe this reminds the readers that Jesus knows each person as an individual and that He responds to each according to his or her individual needs. Further, the Savior sees beyond the labels that society places upon them. Simon is not just one of a group of Pharisees who have fought against the Savior at every turn; rather, the Savior responded to him as an individual who is in need of His help, even if he doesn't realize it! The irony, of course, is that Jesus treats Simon in such a way that he does not reciprocate to the woman who enters his house. Simon simply sees her as "a woman in the city, which is a sinner" (Luke 7:37; see also verse 39) and thus interprets her actions only within that framework.

Luke does not indicate why Simon invited the Savior to eat with him. There is a feeling that he knew of Jesus's fame and maybe had

even listened to one of His sermons. In a sense, the details of what drew Simon to the Savior might have limited the reader from identifying with Simon. There are a multitude of reasons that lead individuals to invite the Savior into their homes, but the motivation is not nearly as important as the invitation, so Luke emphasizes that. Yet it is also obvious that even though Simon had extended the invitation, he did not have a clear understanding of who Jesus really was. Some previous encounter must have caused him to at least contemplate that Jesus was a prophet, but he dismisses this identification when he sees the way that Jesus allows the woman to treat Him (verse 39). The irony here is that Jesus chooses to show Simon that He is indeed a prophet, not by judging the woman's outward actions but by calling Simon to task for his own thoughts.

What I love about the exchange that follows is that while Jesus clearly chastises him for his thoughts, He uses the moment not so much to condemn Simon but to teach him. He hopes that Simon will better understand who Jesus is and what His mission is and also that he will move beyond the societal labels so that he can recognize the potential of this daughter of God. Societal labels are so often based on external criteria, and clearly Simon views the woman's actions through lenses of one of these labels. But the Lord has always used a different standard. He taught Samuel that He "looketh on the heart" of an individual (1 Samuel 16:7).

Jesus's question, "Seest thou this woman?" in verse 44, is an invitation for Simon to lift his sights and see the woman as the Savior saw her. To help him make that transition, Jesus offers him the parable of the two debtors and then, with probing questions, guides Simon to the mirror of self-awareness.<sup>6</sup> Although Simon probably considered himself to be a righteous man, at least by Pharisaic standards, he had failed to recognize what it meant to invite the Son of God to dwell with him, even if it was only for a single meal. He had invited the Savior as a guest into his home but then had neglected to treat him with the respect He deserved. The Pharisees were correct when they charged that Jesus ate with sinners, but in this case, regardless of how Simon might have judged his personal worthiness, the sinner was not the woman.

Are there lessons that we can learn from Simon? Are there ways that we sometimes can relate to him? Are we at times guilty of inviting the Savior into our homes but then failing to treat Him with the respect He deserves? Are there times when we mechanically attend church without actively participating in the gospel? We extended the invitation to Christ on the day we were baptized, and we reissue it to

Him every time we partake of the sacrament or go to the temple. But are there times when we, like Simon, fail to provide water for Him to wash His feet by failing to magnify our home-teaching or visiting-teaching assignments? Do we sometimes neglect to greet Him with a kiss by neglecting to reach out to those in need within our sphere of influence? Do we sometimes forget to provide oil to anoint His head by filling our minds with good intentions but then either procrastinating or just failing to follow through? Luke doesn't record how Simon responds to the Savior's teachings. He leaves it open perhaps so that his readers can write their own conclusions from the annals of their own lives.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike Simon, the woman in this story is not named. In fact, there is much that we do not know about her. She was a real person, but by and large she remains anonymous. The one detail that Luke provides about her past is that people considered her to be "a woman in the city, which was a sinner," and Jesus acknowledges in verse 47 that her sins "are many." This has led many, including Simon (see verse 39), to view her as a prostitute,<sup>8</sup> but it is important to note that Luke never makes that label explicit in his recounting of the story.<sup>9</sup> Two important reasons may explain Luke's ambiguity here. On the one hand, it is a reminder, as Elder Scott taught, that everyone has "many sins" that need the healing power of the Atonement.<sup>10</sup> Since this woman is anonymous, she represents everyone who reads the story. But the suggestion of her past life also serves as a powerful sense of hope that Christ's Atonement can and will heal even one of the most serious of sins (see Alma 39:3-6). President Boyd K. Packer reiterates that same sense of hope when he says, "There are times you cannot mend that which you have broken. Perhaps the offense was long ago, or the injured refused your penance. Perhaps the damage was so severe that you cannot fix it no matter how desperately you want to." I can imagine that this was once how the woman in our story felt. But then President Packer continues: "When your desire is firm and you are willing to pay the 'uttermost farthing,' the law of restitution is suspended. Your obligation is transferred to the Lord. He will settle your accounts. I repeat, save for the exception of the very few who defect to perdition, there is no habit, no addiction, no rebellion, no transgression, no apostasy, no crime exempted from the promise of complete forgiveness. That is the promise of the atonement of Christ."<sup>11</sup>

This unnamed woman had experienced the power of that complete forgiveness before she ever entered Simon's house. Again, Luke does not record the details of her journey to repentance. Such things do not

occur in an instant.<sup>12</sup> Note what Elder McConkie has to say: “Here is a woman who once was a sinner but now is clean. Jesus is not going to forgive her sins—he has already done so; it happened when she believed and was baptized in his name; it happened when she repented with full purpose of heart and pledged her life and every breath she thereafter drew to the Cause of Righteousness.”<sup>13</sup> Luke’s silence on the specific details gives his readers another opportunity to insert the details from their own life pages. Jesus’s declaration to the woman in verse 48, “Thy sins are forgiven thee,” is a reiteration of what the woman already knew, but it is also a public declaration for Simon and his other guests at the banquet. As one New Testament scholar has noted, “She does not need forgiveness from God, but she does need recognition of her new life and forgiveness among God’s people.”<sup>14</sup>

So why does this woman seek out the Savior if it is not to obtain His forgiveness? It is precisely because she has tasted the sweetness and healing power of Christ in her life that she seeks Him out to thank Him. Words apparently could not adequately convey the feelings of her soul at that time, so instead she expressed her gratitude and love in abject humility by washing His feet with her tears, wiping them with the hair of her head, kissing them, and anointing them with ointment. This is a very tender, intimate moment. Perhaps she felt as the Apostle John did when he wrote, “We love him, because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). Luke has drawn his readers into this story. He wants each of them to identify with this woman, but how can modern readers show their love for the Savior? The Savior taught some very concrete ways His followers can show that love. He taught His disciples, “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). Later in the same discourse He focused even more specifically. “This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you” (John 15:12). In effect, He was encouraging them to live the second great commandment (see Matthew 22:39). Jesus’s brother James later taught that “pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world” (James 1:27).<sup>15</sup>

And so the Savior reminds the woman that “thy faith hath saved thee” (Luke 7:50). Her faith had given her hope that forgiveness was possible. Her faith had led her to overcome her fears and seek out the Savior. Her faith had led her to pay the “utmost farthing” to receive her forgiveness. Her experience with the Savior shows Luke’s readers what is possible for all people who allow Christ to encircle them in the arms of His love. Note the pleading of President Gordon B. Hinckley:



Don't ever feel that you can't be forgiven. Our Father in Heaven loves you. He is your Father. He is your Heavenly Parent. He has great concern for you. He reaches out to you in love and forgiveness. . . . Our Father in Heaven will take care of the forgiveness. You put it behind you. You talk with your bishop. You live in righteousness. You do what is right and things will work out for you. I don't want to see you going around brooding forever about something, some little thing, perhaps, that may have happened, or some serious thing that may have happened. There is hope. There is forgiveness. There is peace for those who follow the right path.<sup>16</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that the last direction the Savior has for this woman is to “go in peace” (Luke 7:50). Having received the power of the Atonement, she can finally find peace with herself, with her God, and, hopefully, with Simon and his other guests. As the Savior taught, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (John 14:27). But notice that having received this peace, the woman is told to take it with her as she leaves Simon's house and returns to the world. Peace in the world can only be achieved only as individuals come unto Christ, receive of His love and forgiveness, and then return to the world to, in turn, help others do as this unnamed woman did.

Yes, “to err is human,” but forgiveness, ultimate forgiveness, is a divine blessing bestowed upon us through the Atonement. The Savior is waiting with open arms to bestow it upon all those who would come unto Him. The more I have read and pondered the experiences of Simon and the unnamed woman recorded in this short passage, the more I have come to appreciate how much the Savior loves me and reaches out for me. Sometimes I am like Simon. Sometimes I invite the Savior into my home but fail to treat Him as an honored guest. Sometimes my devotion is mechanical. But although He chastises me, I have felt a warming glow in my soul as He helps me raise my spiritual sights and strive for more than spiritual mediocrity. At other times the power of His love is so overwhelming that all I can do is to fall at His feet in humble gratitude and love for all that He does for me. I bear testimony that in either situation I find myself, I know “his hand is stretched out still” (Isaiah 9:17), beckoning me to come unto Him. **RE**

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## Notes

1. Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism*, 2:525, in *The Select Poetical Works of Alexander Pope* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1848), 67.

2. Richard G. Scott, "The Path to Peace and Joy," *Ensign*, November 2000, 25.

3. Henry B. Eyring, "Do Not Delay," *Ensign*, November 1999, 34.

4. Later in Luke the accusation of the Pharisees and scribes is not only that Jesus is the friend of publicans and sinners but also that He eats with them (see Luke 15:1–2). See also the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1–10.

5. Recognizing that Jesus was reclining on a couch helps us make better sense of the detail that the woman stood behind His feet when she began to wash them with her tears (see Luke 7:38). This point (along with the fact that there are others also at the meal) suggests that this was a formal banquet. In Roman times, formal banquets consisted of two parts: the *deipnon* (the meal proper) and the *symposion* (the period of conversation and debate after the meal). The incident described in Luke 7:36–50 takes place during the *symposion* (see François Bovon, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, trans. Christine M. Thomas, ed. Helmut Koester [Hermeneia Series; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002], 290; Dennis E. Smith, "Table Fellowship as a Literary Motif in the Gospel of Luke," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 [December 1987]: 614).

6. We must be careful here that we do not fall into the same trap that some of the Saints in Rome did about Paul's teachings. Some there misunderstood his teachings to be that we should "continue in sin, [so] that grace may abound" (see Romans 6:1; see also Romans 6:15; see also Romans 3:8). Jesus is not encouraging Simon to go out and sin so that he will love the Savior more!

7. See Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 308.

8. See Kathleen E. Corley, *Private Women, Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 92, 124. Elder McConkie says that "her past life could not have been other than one of gross immorality" (*The Mortal Messiah: Volume 2: From Bethlehem to Calvary* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980], 200).

9. See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (I–IX): Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 689.

10. See Scott, "Path to Peace and Joy," 25–26.

11. Boyd K. Packer, "The Brilliant Morning of Forgiveness," *Ensign*, November 1995, 19.

12. The reading of verse 47 in the King James Version seems to indicate that Jesus forgives her because of her outpourings of love. There are two reasons that suggest otherwise. The perfect tense of the Greek word *afeōntai* can be translated as "have been forgiven" (John J. Kilgallen, "John the Baptist, the Sinful Woman, and the Pharisee," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 [1985]: 675–79). In addition, Jesus's use of the parable of the two debtors strongly indicates that the outpouring of love is the result of forgiveness rather than the catalyst for it. The important Greek word is the conjunction *hoti* that is here translated in a causal sense, "because." However, it can also be translated in a logical or resultant sense (see John 9:19; 1 John 3:14; Matthew 8:27; Hebrews 2:6). For a discussion of this second point, see Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 692.

13. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah*, 2:200–1.

14. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 314.

15. King Benjamin taught that while it is important to *receive* a remission of our sins, it is equally important that we *retain* that remission "from day to day." Note what he identifies as the best way to retain it: "I would that ye should impart

of your substance to the poor, every man according to that which he hath, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally, according to their wants” (Mosiah 4:26). In the scriptures, one of the greatest examples of someone who did this is the Apostle Paul. Not only did he spend the rest of his life after his conversion administering spiritually to those in need, he was also heavily involved in collecting money to aid the poor in Jerusalem (see Galatians 2:7–10; Romans 15:25–27). Likewise, in the cases of Alma the Younger and the Sons of Mosiah, we know that after they had felt the power of Christ’s Atonement in their lives, they were also keen to administer spiritual relief to those in need (see Alma 36:23–26; Mosiah 28:3–5).

16. Gordon B. Hinckley, *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 231.