

The parable of two debtors & the story of two sinners

This talk looks at the occasion when Jesus accepted an invite to dine at a Pharisee's house, where he spoke the short parable of the two debtors. The scene shows how the Pharisee was not aware of his own Sin, but in contrast there was real passion for Jesus from an ex-prostitute for her Lord. The talk draws parallels with David's passion for God, and how he responded by slaying Goliath.

[Luke 7v36-50](#) – Jesus dines with Simon the Pharisee & the parable of the two debtors

[1 Samuel 17v20-37](#) – David hears Goliath

Introduction:-

Whose got smelly feet, a fungal infection or athlete's foot? No matter how much you like that person, you would prefer to kiss him on the cheek, or hand, rather than kiss his feet. In Middle East culture the foot and the shoes are seen as degrading. The Jews would talk about making their enemies as a footstool, shaking your shoe or sandal at someone is an insult. The Psalmist said 'On Edom I cast my shoe'. The mighty John the Baptist said he was not even good enough to untie the sandals of Jesus, to express his total unworthiness in the presence of Jesus. After the Iraq war, when statues of Saddam were pulled down, his enemies were keen to place their foot on his head, or hit it with their sandals. This was much the culture in Jesus' day. You walked about a dusty climate in sandals and your feet would soon get dirty and smelly. It was normal to provide some water to your guests for feet washing, which you may do yourself, but might be done for you by someone of lower importance such as a servant. Foot washing as a courtesy to guests was carried out in the middle east right up to the nineteenth century.

Today's story has three key characters. Jesus, a Pharisee and a woman, most likely a beautiful ex-prostitute.

- At 30, Jesus was a young Rabbi. It is the age at which men could start priestly duties, and this is when he started his itinerant ministry. He had been getting a reputation, and some saw him as a mighty prophet following in the footsteps of Elijah. He has very recently performed a copycat miracle in raising from death a widow's only son in the small town of Nain. This has fuelled the Elijah rumours.
- Simon was a Pharisee, a religious group of men, who had hundreds of additional rules that were supposed to keep you pure and from sinning. The word Pharisee means "separated." They considered themselves more holy and righteous than ordinary men. Their cleanliness rules meant that there were certain things and certain people that they should not touch. Simon had either heard Jesus preach, or heard of the claims that he was a prophet.
- The lady in the story seems also to have had a previous encounter with Jesus, one which impacted her life so much that she gave up her sinful life-style, repented, and has felt the power of forgiveness on her life. She can no longer be labelled a sinner on the basis of her occupation.

We are going to look today at what happened when these three met in Simon's house, and understand the shocking relevance of the actions both took, as it would have been seen in their culture. We'll look at what Jesus' short parable of the two debtors meant and see how cleverly Jesus spoke it into the drama making it a story of two sinners, Simon & the woman. We'll see how acts of love flow out of our recognising God's forgiveness, and see how it encourages us to face our Giants, like David did with Goliath.

The invitation

Simon had a big house, and was putting on a banquet. In first century Palestine it was normal for religious groups to put on meetings with food, in which they would study and debate religious issues late into the night. They would sometimes invite a guest teacher. This was most likely a group of Pharisees and friends who met for their 'house group' at Simon's. On this day, Jesus, along with his closest disciples, had been invited to the debating banquet. There would be a long low table in the centre on which the food is. Low couches are angled such that the reclining guest has his left arm on the table and his feet away from the table. The doors to the courtyard would be left open, and locals were free to wander in and listen to their words or wisdom from the back, but they must be quiet and not participate. There would have been a big crowd of observers on this day, amongst them a lady who positioned herself directly behind where Jesus was reclining, behind his outstretched legs and feet. The Pharisees like Simon welcomed these debates and banquets on public show, but it offered a real challenge to Simon, as in order to keep his own rules of purity he had to be careful what and who he touched.

The insult directed at Jesus

All was not as it should have been at this meeting. Imagine I have invited you as a special guest to my house, for a meal and to meet friends that want to see you. Its raining, and you arrive with a wet brolly. You ring the bell, no-one answers. You push the door, its on the latch and you walk in. You can hear voices in the kitchen. One of my lads walks through, glances at you and says dump your stuff somewhere then walks off. You lay down your brolly, take off your coat and put it over other coats on the bannister. You come into the kitchen where I am talking with others, I give a slight nod of recognition, but then walk off into the lounge, without offering you a drink or introducing you to anyone. How are you feeling? I have broken all the social norms, I should have met you at the door, taken your brolly and wet coat for you. Greeted you with a hug and kiss to the cheek, showed you in, and got you a drink, then introduced you to my other friends.

Hospitality was legend in first century Palestine. There were rules that you observed or were shamed by your non-compliance. On the surface this looked like a genuine and generous invite from a senior well-respected Pharisee, a spiritual giant in his community, to a young rabbi. The normal convention would be to provide water for Jesus' feet, and ask a servant to wash them. He would be greeted with a kiss. Equals would kiss each other on the cheek, but you might be expected to pay deference to a teacher/Rabbi and kiss him on the hand. Certainly Jesus' disciples would have kissed his hand, as would Judas have done so on his betrayal, not on the cheek as often portrayed. For Jesus **not** to be kissed or have his feet washed, is a pre-meditated glaring omission from Simon. It was not an oversight, it was a deliberate insult. The reason for inviting Jesus is to expose him as a fraud. In Simon's eyes he is no teacher or prophet and it was his job to discredit him in front of others. He starts by trying to humiliate Jesus by denying him the courtesies he is due. The statement is that this man is far beneath me, and is not worthy of my kiss, or having his feet washed. It was also quite normal to anoint Rabbis on their head with Olive Oil as a sign of respect. None of this happened. They were callously omitted by a judgemental host. Those that noticed would no doubt be feeling some tension, but Jesus was calm and relaxed, looking forward to the food.

The passion directed at Jesus

The lady sees the insult from Simon, and looks down at her beloved Lord, and is overcome with emotion for him. Her gratitude to him, wells up inside her, and she starts to sob heavily, muffling her cries. She kneels down and her tears fall on Jesus' feet, tears and more tears. She dare not look into his face but weeps over him, looking down at his wet feet. Then in a moment of passion for him, she removes the wooden clip from her head, and her beautiful ringlet hair, cascades down over his feet, and she uses her tears and her hair to wipe off the grime from his feet and dry them, then showing her utter love for him, and deference to him, she kisses his feet, not his cheek, or his hand but his feet, then she does it again and again and again. Suddenly she remembers what she came to do and takes the small alabaster jar full of expensive perfume, perhaps the most expensive thing she owned, and tipped the whole lot over his feet. As a prostitute she may have work this around her neck to perfume her upper body and make her more alluring. If so, she had no longer need for it. This was a sign that she had already repented from her old ways.

The room was astonished at what she did. In the Talmud, the guide to Rabbinical laws and behaviour it gives instructions for what to do if you have to take by force a lady caught in adultery. If she is ugly you can treat her how you like, but if she is beautiful then the arresting priests are to take care not to rip her tunic and expose her breasts, and not to disturb her hair so that it is let down, as both could sexually arouse the priests causing them to sin. A man could even divorce his wife if she let her hair down in front of another man. So what this is saying is that even if she had got her boobs out it would not have been much more shocking to them than what she actually did. Her act would have electrified the room, and the strong smell of perfume would be hanging in the air. The act of anointing with perfume and not cheap olive oil, was reserved for the anointing of noblemen in the court of a king, placing high honour of the man. These were bold statement. Stunning and passionate acts in response to Simons insult of the Lord. Her acts were out of love for Jesus, but also in a bold response to this giant of their community who had insulted the Lord.

David v Goliath

The enemy was in Judah. Dividing lines were drawn. On a mountain one side of the valley were the people of God, and on the mountain the other side of the valley were the enemy, those that would oppose God, the Phillistines. Their 9 foot giant, Goliath taunted the Israelites. He wanted to embarrass them and destroy them. 1 Samuel 17v23. Goliath made the challenge again and David heard him. He was coming against the Lord of Israel and David heard him. David decided to do something about it. He

declares to his King 'No-one should be afraid of this Phillistine, I shall go and fight him' (v34). 'I have killed lions and bears, and I will do the same to this heathen Phillistine who has defied the army of the living God' (v36). The others hid behind stones, David picked one up and threw it. He defeated Goliath. A thousand years later, the battle lines of history were drawn once again. The giant of his community, Simon the Pharisee had decided to insult the Lord, and the woman, perhaps viewed as the least significant in her community, had seen this and did something about it. It would have been much easier for her to have hid, but she acted, perhaps even putting her life risk, as David did. Risking all to protect the honour of God.

Our own Giants

We come up against our own Giants don't we? One's that defy God and his purposes. That come against the best that God has for us as individuals, as a church, as a country. What Giant's make you angry. Is it a big illness like a cancer? A depression or anxiety?? Is it a world-wide sin that angers you such as child-trafficking? Is it the politics of the day driving society away from Christian values? Is it the politically correct culture which dictates you should not send a Christmas card, or wear a cross, in case you upset some-one of another faith? What do we do with our giants? Do we hide behind a stone, or pick up a stone and throw it? The stones could be relentless prayer, a well-timed protest voice, a petition, a financial gift, words of support.

Simon speaks

Into this electric atmosphere of both insult and passion directed against Jesus, who is calmly helping himself to food, Simon speaks. He speaks out his thoughts which reveals something of his reasoning for inviting Jesus in the first place. The language is offensive - 'If **this** was a prophet..' This thing here, this so-called rabbi that the people are heralding prophet, he can't even discern the unclean nature of the woman touching him. He puts a sensual connotation on the word 'touch'. It is clear that the issue of whether or not Jesus is a prophet, is a big reason for the invite, to probe him and discredit the notion of him being a great prophet like Elijah. He may have just healed a Centurions servant from a distance, and brought to life the son of a widow, but that is nothing to Simon. 'He doesn't know this woman, and thus know she is a sinner'. His worry about his own purity law, and the state of his heart is clouding his judgement. But he was wrong, Jesus **did** know this woman, and he knew that not only had she been a prostitute, but she had given up her sinful ways, had repented and was wanting acceptance by the community for what she had done. We can see from the encounter that the immoral woman has turned from her ways and is completely redirecting her life. This is authentic repentance. But one to which Simon shows complete indifference, as he is happy to still declare her a 'sinner'. Grim faces around the room looking at her, affirm to her that she is still rejected. His plan to discredit Jesus is working quicker than he expected. Then Jesus spoke.

Jesus speaks (parable of the two debtors)

What a difference it makes when Jesus speaks. We can be completely lost in our lives, and then Jesus speaks into it. Simon had insulted Jesus and poured scorn on a repentant sinner, then Jesus spoke..

"Simon – I have something to say to you" – The Aramaic phrase Jesus used, was one that was used for introducing a blunt statement that you may not wish to hear, perhaps you've said to your child – Come hear **now** – I want a **word** with you "If you are the child you know you are not about to receive high praise.

"Teacher – speak up" – perhaps in his mind he is thinking – let the sport begin.

Simon in his response recognises Jesus as Teacher/Rabbi. But if he is worthy of this title, which he was, then he was also worthy of the honour, and hospitality, due to the title. In using the word 'teacher' he has started to condemn himself.

Jesus tells the parable of the two debtors – two men owe money to a lender, one about a years wage (500 silver coins) and another about a months wage (50 silver coins). Neither are able to pay him back. Instead of having them thrown in prison (which is where you went if you could not repay a debt regardless of the size), he freely offers grace to them both, and their debt is wiped out. There starts with a difference between the two debtors, but they are levelled in their need as neither can pay and are facing prison, The same grace is extended to each.

But it is also a clever word play from Jesus because Simon has accused the woman of being a sinner, and the Aramaic word for sin and for debt is the same word (hobha). So it moves from being a parable about forgiven debt, to instruction on forgiven sin.

So far, straight-forward, but then Jesus launches the question that traps Simon. “Which one then, will love the moneylender more”

Simon can see where Jesus is leading, and all he can manage is a lame, I suppose. I suppose the one who was forgiven more. Simon misinterpreted the scene in front of him, but he does not miss the point of the parable. Love is the response to grace, love is the response to forgiveness. Acts of love. For those who have a strong realisation of their forgiveness, those who have been forgiven much they will be free with their love to the one who showed them grace. For those who feel they do not need forgiveness, or feel they have been forgiven a little, they will be less generous with their love. Jesus lays down this principle with the parable – love flows out of accepted forgiveness and grace. Then Jesus with shocking clarity, applies it to the current scene.

We have said hospitality is legend in Jesus’ culture, and a never broken rule was that you never criticise your hospitality. You supposed to say ‘Oh what trouble my host has been to and all for my sake’, but Jesus breaks right through the tradition and exposes Simon to all.

Importantly, whilst the speech is addressed to Simon, he turns to the woman to speak, it is delivered to her as a speech in praise of her kindness and worth. It does not have the harshness it might if speaking directly to Simon, but it takes on a tone of gratefulness and gentleness expressed to a daring woman in desperate need of a kind word.

It starts with a question – Do you see this woman? Simon was so intent on gathering evidence against Jesus, had he really seen or understood this woman and her actions. I came in under your roof, as your guest, and you were responsible to extend to me the traditional forms of hospitality but you refused. This woman who you despise has magnificently compensated for your failure. You gave me no water for my feet (not even to wash my own), but she has washed my feet with her tears and wiped them with her crowning glory, her hair. You did not greet me with a kiss as you should have, but she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint me, a teacher, with a courtesy drop of olive oil, but she has anointed my feet with the most expensive perfume, fit for a nobleman. In three clear actions the woman has demonstrated her superiority over Simon the Pharisee, and this had been put across to all assembled in a poetic form that no-one there will forget. Simon tumbles into a pit of shame.

Two sinners

Jesus declares that “ the great love that she has shown proves that her many sins have been forgiven. But whoever has been forgiven little shows only a little love”

Jesus does not then forgive her sins, as some in the room seem to think. She has already repented and been forgiven. She has accepted this forgiveness, and it is from the assurance and realisation of this forgiveness has poured out her expression of love. It is the parable in action. That’s the whole purpose of the parable. She has been forgiven much, realises it , and loves Jesus much for it. But Jesus goes further than the title of prophet that Simon was testing, because he emerges as the very agent of God who can recognise and announce the forgiveness of sins, and accept on Gods behalf the love response to this forgiveness.

Simon had many sins, with little awareness of them.

It is not just the glaring shortfalls in hospitality that he has been guilty of towards Jesus, but he has shown deep levels of pride, arrogance, a hard heart, insensitivity, a judgemental spirit, sexism, a rejection of sinners, and misunderstanding the nature of God’s forgiveness.

This is a parable of two debtors, but a story of two great sinners. One first sins outside the law, and the second sins from within the law. The first has accepted her many sins and responds with much love. The second has no real awareness of his sin and pride, feels that he has few spiritual debts, and thus does not see his need for Grace and forgiveness, and so does not show the love.

The judge (Simon) becomes the accused. He is shamed, but is brought to the point where he himself has had his shortfalls are exposed and now with this realisation he could himself repent and be forgiven.

Like so many parables and stories of Jesus, the final scene is missing. We do not know how Simon responded to this crisis in his life, we may assume he stayed hard-hearted but we don't know. There is a choice for Simon, just as there is a choice for us. It's good that the last scene is missing, because in some way we find ourselves in that last scene, making the same choices.

Our Response

For those of you who have come from a very dark place, from a near hopeless situation, drugs & thoughts of suicide etc It may not be surprising if you are overwhelmed by what Jesus has done in your life. Others of us will have done pretty good at keeping the law, and have a less colourful background than others. We can fall into the trap of believing that we have not been forgiven much. But what if everything you said and did last week was listed down and given to God. Think of that list. Then Jesus takes a yellow marker pen and highlights all of those words and actions that fell short of what God requires. Would the highlighter pen run out before he'd finished. We all fall woefully short of what God requires, and we are the benefactors of amazing grace. We need to realise in our own life, the huge debt we have to God. We have a huge debt that we can-not pay, but the Grace of God freely forgives us. This is not just true for the woman in our story, its true for me too, its true for you too.

Simon the Pharisee disrespected Jesus and provoked daring acts of love from the woman. and the things and people that disrespect Jesus and his Way. The Giants that loom large in our life and the life of our world, corrupting and spoiling, preventing the best. Are we hungry for God, a passionate desire to honour his name and serve him? Hunger and desperation will change your desire. Normally I would not eat small fish whole including the heads and tail, or eat the sour pickly pear to keep me going, but that's what I did when in Algeria. I had run out of money and food and would have taken on pretty much anything such was my hunger and desire to eat. You should be asking Jesus for a hunger and desire for him and his purposes that come out of a realisation of how much he has done for you personally. It is a time to stand up and be passionate to defend the Name of the Lord and his people as David did, against the Goliaths that would seek to take down the Christian principles in our country, and to seek to bring down the purposes of God in the lives of ourselves, our church and our nation. There are giants that should bother us. It is a battle for the reputation for God (or Jesus) that we are fighting. Same for David and the Prostitute. When attacked do we hide behind a stone, or pick it up and throw it like David (literally), and the ex-prostitutue (metaphorically). Do we hide our feelings for Jesus or do we demonstrate our love for him visibly, by all we do and say. Embrace Righteous Indignation. Stand up for Jesus, and have a passion for his name. [Don't have an indignation deficiency – see something and not be bothered].

Faith has saved you

He stays looking at the woman, but now speaks directly to her not to Simon. "Your faith has saved you, go in peace". She is blessed by Jesus. There is a blessing on those that bless others (Proverbs 11v25). I wonder if the words from the Wisdom literature were ringing in her ears that night as she left; "He brought me into his banqueting house and his banner over me is love." (Song of Solomon 2v4).

It was her faith in God, not her acts of love that has saved her. We are not saved by what we do, instead we place our faith in God, and we are saved by Grace, undeserved Grace, a gift from God. As you look down all the highlighted items on where you fell short, and realise the extent of Gods Grace, then you should feel the love for God that builds up a desperate hunger to be with him, be in his presence and to align your life to his, to be his hands and feet. When you see and hear people dishonouring God, the Giants in your life, your love him for him should get you out there to confront them. It may take much prayer, much love, your money, your time, your commitment; you might fall or fail. But our love for God, for his people, for his kingdom, should in itself empower us to have a go with the help of his Spirit for He that is in us, is greater than he that is in the world. Amen.

Notes:-

1. The Talmud

The Talmud was a written record from the oral teachings of thousands of Rabbis on a wide range of subjects linked to Jewish law (plus ethics, philosophy, customs, history, theology, lore and many other topics). In importance to Jewish law, it was second only to the Torah (First five books of the bible).

2. Old Testament bit

1 Samuel 17. The Philistine army was on Judean land. They were encamped on one mountain with the army of Israel on the facing mountain. They were either side of the Valley of Elay. It was a stalemate. Neither wanted to give up the high ground and advance their main army through the valley where King Saul and his advance party had moved to. The Philistines had an answer to the stalemate, a 1 on 1 battle in which the winner takes all. The 9 foot giant in an incredible suit of new armour. Who will be your man. As darkness fell on the Israelite camp the Philistines taunted the Israelites with the chant 'Choose your man?' coming through the night air.

The Giants taunt the people of God. I am bigger than you, I am mightier than you, come and fight me for you will surely loose. You already defeated before you even try.

The Giants still taunt the people of God. The anti-Christian politics of the day. The giant illnesses. The giant temptations. When young David appeared, he was enraged by the insult towards God and Gods people. The insults enraged his own passion for God, and full of love for God he took on the challenge.