

## “Dinner with a Sinner”

Luke 7: 36-39

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**Text: (NIV) <sup>36</sup> Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. <sup>37</sup> When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, <sup>38</sup> and 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. <sup>39</sup> 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."**

Quite amazing if we think about it. This Pharisee is a religious leader and a man of high standing. So, one would think that he had great skills in the matter of discernment. One would think that he was a man who could sort of “tell” about other people. Someone you could count on to guide you. The kind of man that you could quietly ask “Hey...what do you think of this fellow Jesus?” In fact, maybe....perhaps... when Jesus arrived for the dinner that night...maybe one of the other guests went over by him and whispered "What's the deal on this guy...Jesus? Is he *someone* or not? Some people think he is a Prophet. Do *you* think that?" And maybe the Pharisee responded “Well...we'll see won't we?” Then, after the woman came in and Jesus did not turn her away, the Pharisee 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."** Translation: “I don't know *who* this Jesus is...but he is definitely *NOT* a prophet!”

Why would he conclude that? Because everyone knew how Prophets behaved and Jesus was not behaving properly. How about us? Are we so sure about how God behaves that we would condemn others when God would not? Condemn even Jesus himself? Are we so sure about who would be welcome to have dinner with Jesus that we would predict the guest list? Back to the Pharisee... is this yet another religious leader who has absolutely no idea what is going on in the Kingdom of God? Interesting set of elements in this passage. Before proceeding, let us pray.

A few years ago, friends from Cornerstone invited us to join them in Washington, D.C. to attend the President's Annual Prayer Breakfast. President Bush was in office at the time and it was a real blessing. To join with four thousand other friends in an intimate sit down with the President and several of his cabinet members at the Hilton Hotel in a dining room the size of the U.P! The breakfast was interesting but getting in to the breakfast was even more interesting. Really!

Because of security concerns, we were screened a month or two before. They required social security numbers. They did background checks. I learned that many people would not be welcome. Anyone with a felony on their record or an arrest record or any kind of criminal activities would not get into that dinner. Of course, you could take nothing in with you and once you got inside, there were secret servicemen standing near each table watching you politely but with rather intense faces. And if you looked closely you might see a small bulge in their jacket pockets. You clearly had the idea that you if did the wrong thing, you'd be ushered out of the dining room at rocket speed! I recall thinking "My goodness. It would be easier to have get into a dinner with God Himself and sit and dine comfortably than with the President!" And this woman? I don't think she'd have gotten admitted! Her background check would probably have disqualified her immediately. And with no one to vouch for her character, she would be wasting her time at the door. But... she did get admitted to a dinner...with Jesus. A dinner where the other guests did not know that Jesus actually specializes in "Dinners with Sinners!"

Consider the host of the dinner. He was a Pharisee. That means he was a leader among the very religious Jews. It may have been a small group with just the Pharisee himself and Jesus but probably not. More likely other leaders are there reclining at the table and the Pharisee has other Pharisees there all of them looking to find fault with Jesus. In any case, the irony here is that the host, the Pharisee host, does not know who Jesus is but the sinful woman does. He is typical of those who are terribly religious but do not think that they themselves are true sinners. They think that their religious activities have placed them in good standing with God and they proudly despise those who are not like they are. They do "works" of religion but their hearts are unchanged. They are not humble but proud.

Jesus spoke of such a man in the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee. He said:

**Luke 18:10-12 (NIV) <sup>10</sup> "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'"**

The key here is what the Pharisee said about himself: "I am not like other men!" He thinks because he is not a robber or an evildoer that he is far more welcome in the presence of God than most people. In fact, he even boasts to God about what he does in the way of fasting and giving. This man, and the one hosting the dinner we are studying are the worst kind of confused and unredeemed people. They are all about themselves. They have never come face to face with their own sin and with their own need for redemption. Their daily lives revolve around getting to do what they want to do and being made happy. They think too highly of themselves. They are still caught up in their pride and they are so self-absorbed that they actually think they would be valued guests at a dinner with God!

The lack of humility that is found in all of us is overwhelming! And we need to hear this unhappy truth: even if we are saved we still struggle with the idea that we are really quite honorable and virtuous ...and God ought to be happy to have us at his dinner. But before we are welcomed into his presence we must be humbled. We are born into sin and self and every single action we take is rooted in pride of self and selfishness.

In our natural state, we actually think that we could stand face to face with God and look him in the eye and say "Hey God. It's me!" The key to genuine Christian faith is dying to self! Taking on the humility of Christ and forgetting about ourselves. There used to be a praise song that said "Let's forget about ourselves, and concentrate on him and worship him!" No one truly dines with God without first being humbled by an awareness of their own sin and their own personal need for salvation...for the blood of Christ. The great forgotten and overlooked trait of the true Christian...required by the Word of God is humility before God and others. And we only get there by being broken by sin and put back together...by Jesus.

But perhaps someone here is not clear about what humility actually is. Fine. The Scriptures show us. In Luke Chapter Five we read:

**Luke 5:12-13 (NIV) <sup>12</sup> While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." <sup>13</sup> Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" And immediately the leprosy left him.**

His face to the ground! Not even looking Jesus in the eye. Face in the dirt and begging Jesus! Making no claim upon him and offering no argument about how much he deserved to be healed. He had leprosy and it was visible and he knew he was disgusting! It showed. A Christian woman we knew years ago was a hunchback. She worked under my leadership. One day I was embarrassed to ask if she was technically "handicapped?" She said she was and I should just describe her that way without concern for her feelings. Then she said something amazing and deep. She said: "Richard everyone is handicapped. It's just that my handicap shows!"

The leper's sickness showed. The Pharisee host in our text today had leprosy of the soul but it did not show...except to Jesus! The man totally lacked the humility to begin to grasp that Jesus came to save sinners and he was one of them! He reminds me of a man for whom I did a wedding years ago who stunned me at the rehearsal. When I showed the couple the point at which they were to kneel before the Lord, she knelt down but he did not. I looked at him and he said in a rather annoyed manner "I'm not *kneeling*!" I really wanted to walk away and just tell them to get someone else to marry them. A man so arrogant that he cannot and will not kneel before God? For her sake I proceeded but I paused and said to him "Well...you will."

Pride. One day Jesus was asked a curious question by some who thought they were without sin. They asked why he ate with tax collectors and other sinners. Don't be confused by his answer.

**Matthew 9:12-13 (NIV) <sup>12</sup> On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. <sup>13</sup> But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."**

He was not saying they were righteous and that they did not need his salvation. He was saying that he had not come to call those who thought they were righteous. Like our Pharisee host who did not grasp that Jesus came to have dinner with sinners...including himself. He would be the man at the wedding who would say *"I'm not kneeling!"*

Now consider the woman. Why was she admitted? Would she ordinarily have been allowed to enter in? It's obvious they don't care about her. But they let her in to use her to see how Jesus would react to her. Yes, she was a prostitute. She was the girl in high school that all the guys knew about but who would ignore her in polite company. Act like they did not know her. Perhaps she had even been with one of them. Maybe not. But she had been promiscuous and promiscuity, especially prostitution, always takes its toll on a woman's self-esteem. No culture admires the loose woman. If a man is promiscuous most cultures still say "Boys will be boys!" But women? They are to be chaste and pure. But she knows that she is not. Over the years, she had probably sold herself to a hundred dirty soldiers who tossed coins at her...one at a time...each time feeling more and more cheap and defiled. Until her heart was blackened and perhaps her body was diseased. And she was not able to get rid of the soil on her soul! She was like Lady Macbeth who was guilty of a murder plot. Looking at her hands that are clean and perfumed but all she can see is blood! And she wrings them together saying "Out damned spot! Out!" But the guilt will not go away. Few people are more trapped in guilt than the man or woman who has been impure.

But this woman apparently has been set free. There is much speculation about who she was and what had occurred. I am impressed with only this: she had met Jesus and he had set her free. Somehow and somewhere he had confronted her and spoke the truth to her...perhaps he had told her to "Go and sin no more" or "Go and get your lovers and bring them back here so I can speak to them also" ... but he was the life changing Jesus who had made her clean! She was the embodiment of the words of our Lord when he said:

**John 8:32 (NIV) <sup>32</sup> Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."**

What was that truth? That Jesus came to save sinners! That Jesus came not to condemn but to save! That Jesus came to call the proud to humility and confront those who thought they were righteous in and of themselves...righteous enough to have dinner with God! Jesus came to totally and completely prove wrong the words of the Pharisee/host when he said:

**"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."**

Yes wrong! Jesus knew exactly who was touching him and he did not stop her! I suspect that he considered the woman washing his feet with her tears to be the most wonderful thing that happened in his life that day! Could there be a greater act of humility from one person to another than that? And Jesus was fully a human person as well as fully God...and so the Son of Man ...the perfect Adam of the new humanity received into his flock a woman no one else wanted and he rejoiced. And the host needed to know that yes! In fact, yes! Sinners can touch God if they come in humility!

But Jesus even cared about the Pharisee. So, he explained to him about how a person who had many sins and knows it...celebrates salvation with such passion as to wash his feet. The Pharisee, Simon by name didn't worship Jesus that way because Simon thought he was not a sinner. Simon thought that Jesus was excited about coming to his house because...it was his house and a dinner invitation was quite an honor. But Simon did not know that Jesus is pleased to be invited to dinners with sinners.

I think that Simon probably would have gained admittance to that prayer breakfast with the President. But...I'm not sure Jesus would have when they checked his background and saw the list of conflicts on his resume. And the woman? She would not have gotten into the hotel much less the dinner. But she and Jesus would have gone elsewhere to be with others who worshipped him and not themselves.

At the Passover Feast before his Crucifixion, we read:

**Luke 22:19 (NIV) <sup>19</sup> And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."**

This is why we celebrate the Lord's Supper...the Communion with him among us. Because Jesus delights in dinners with sinners. But do you come to this table as the Pharisee not in touch with your own sins? Or do you come as the woman having given her sins over to Christ and been set free? Let us pray.

