

Faith of an Anointer

Devotional Reading: [Romans 8:1–16](#)

Background Scripture: [Luke 7:36–50](#)

[Luke 7:36–39, 44–50](#)

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."

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."

Key Text

Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."—[Luke 7:50](#)

Examining Our Faith

Unit II: The Measure of Faith

[Lessons 6–9](#)

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify what “saved” the woman.
2. Compare and contrast the mindsets of Jesus, the Pharisee, and the woman.
3. Evaluate his or her own mindset in light of those three.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. A Person’s Value
- B. Lesson Context

I. Three People (Luke 7:36–39)

- A. An Invited Guest (v. 36)
- B. An Uninvited Guest (vv. 37–38)
- C. An Ungracious Host (v. 39)

II. Different Actions (Luke 7:44–50)

- A. Criticism and Praise (vv. 44–46)
Feet Worth Kissing
- B. Little and Much (vv. 47–48)
- C. Forgiveness and Peace (vv. 49–50)
The Right Rock

Conclusion

- A. Who Needs Forgiveness?
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

alabaster	al-uh- <i>bas</i> -ter.
Capernaum	Kuh- <i>per</i> -nay-um.
Josephus	Jo- <i>see</i> -fus.
Magdalene	<i>Mag</i> -duh-leen or Mag-duh- <i>lee</i> -nee.
Nain	<i>Nay</i> -in.

Introduction

A. A Person’s Value

The “smiley face killer” (so-called because of notes he sent to the police) was a self-appointed vigilante. As depicted in the TV documentary series *Forensic Factor*, he seemed determined to put an end to prostitution in his town by murdering those who engaged in that immoral trade. By the time this

otherwise ordinary citizen was caught, he had murdered 13 women.

The investigation into the murders was initially hampered because there wasn't much concern from the general public over the fate of missing prostitutes. In the first place, few people noticed that the women were missing. Second, most people seemed to view prostitutes as the dregs of society.

Today's text features a law-abiding citizen and a sinful woman who both met the merciful Savior. Jesus' interaction with them reveals an important link between forgiveness and love.

B. Lesson Context

Just prior to the events of today's lesson, Luke summarized two viewpoints toward Jesus that had emerged. Those viewpoints are revealed by reactions to John the Baptist. On the one hand, "All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' words, acknowledged that God's way was right, because they had been baptized by John" ([Luke 7:29](#)). On the other hand, "the Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John" ([7:30](#)). Rejection of John the Baptist, the Christ's forerunner ([1:15–17](#); [3:1–20](#); [7:33–35](#)), meant rejecting the Christ as well ([Matthew 17:12](#)). This set the stage for a contrast between those who held these polar-opposite viewpoints.

As an oversimplification, we can see the tax collectors as a demographic that represented the first view above. These Jews had chosen to work with the Romans to extract taxes from their fellow Jews, thereby earning great scorn as collaborators. Tax collectors could become wealthy by overcharging taxes (see [Luke 19:2, 8](#)).

The Pharisees, by contrast, can be seen as primary representatives of the second viewpoint above. Pharisees advocated strict and scrupulous observance of the Law of Moses. Over time, this resulted in human traditions being added to that law. See Jesus' critique of this fact in [Matthew 23:1–36](#) and [Mark 7:1–23](#).

The first-century Jewish historian Josephus estimated that there were only about 6,000 Pharisees throughout the Roman empire. Perhaps no more than a few hundred lived in the villages of Galilee. Yet they exerted an influence out of proportion to their numbers, as witnessed by their being mentioned about 100 times in the New Testament. (By contrast, Sadducees are mentioned only 14 times.)

Today's lesson takes us to an early point in Jesus' ministry when things had gotten serious enough for Pharisees to come from "every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem" to investigate him ([Luke 5:17](#)). The nearest example up to the point of today's lesson is Jesus' having been in the village of Nain, about 25 miles southwest of Capernaum ([7:11](#)). Combining that fact with information in [Luke 8:1, 22](#), and [26](#), we conclude that a village in Galilee was the location of today's lesson.

I. Three People ([Luke 7:36–39](#))

A. An Invited Guest (v. [36](#))

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.

This is one of three times in Luke that *Jesus* was invited to a meal at the home of a Pharisee (see [Luke 11:37](#); [14:1](#)). On whether the Pharisee's invitation included other guests, see commentary on [Luke 7:49](#), below.

The motive behind the invitations seemed to be that of scrutinizing Jesus more closely, noting any violations of the Law of Moses as interpreted by *the Pharisees*. In so doing, they were asking the wrong question of themselves. That question was: *Is Jesus on the side of truth as we know it?* But their question should have been: *Are we on the side of truth as Jesus is witnessing to it?*

B. An Uninvited Guest (vv. 37–38)

37a. A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house,

Some students have identified this *woman* as Mary Magdalene, who is introduced in the following chapter ([Luke 8:2](#)). But this identification is speculative. Unless the woman's arrival at *the Pharisee's house* was a “set up” to trap Jesus (compare [20:20–26](#)), it is safe to assume that she had not been invited. Therefore, the host did not welcome her presence at his dinner.

The scandal factor was multiplied by the fact that she *lived a sinful life*. Such a reputation probably suggests (but does not require) that the woman was a prostitute. Prostitution and prostitutes are mentioned about 100 times in the Old Testament and a dozen times in the New Testament. Sometimes this immorality is blended with the sin of adultery (example: [Hosea 3:1–3](#)). Prostitution is frequently used figuratively to refer to idol worship (example: [Ezekiel 16:15–34](#)). And although prostitution is sometimes presented in a matter-of-fact way (examples: [Genesis 38](#); [Joshua 2](#)), the activity as such is never commended ([Leviticus 19:29](#); [21:7](#), [9](#), [14](#); [1 Corinthians 6:15](#); etc.).

37b. so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume.

This action indicates preparation for the woman's encounter with Jesus. The woman who later anointed Jesus in Bethany also had *an alabaster jar* ([Matthew 26:7](#); [Mark 14:3](#); see also [John 12:1–3](#)). These were appropriate containers for various oils. The woman's vessel held *perfume*, which was an aromatic ointment that could be rubbed into the hair or onto the skin. On that other occasion, [Mark 14:3–5](#) establishes both the nature and value of the perfume. But no such specifics are noted in the scene before us. Even so, this may be at a great expense on her part.

38a. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears.

What happened must have surprised everyone. With no spoken word recorded, the woman went from a posture of standing to one of kneeling near Jesus—that's the only way for her to have been able to be in a position to wash *his feet*. It was customary to take off one's sandals during a meal, and people would sit around the low table on their knees with their feet behind them. The text says nothing about why she was *weeping*. We can only speculate that her tears come out of a repentant heart.

What Do You Think?

When have you been reduced to tears in Jesus' presence?

Digging Deeper

What blessing did you experience after being vulnerable at Jesus' feet?

38b. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

There's more than meets the eye here as the woman used *her hair* as a washcloth. Women's hair in this era was typically bound up. Therefore this woman's letting her hair down was a departure from propriety. This act further suggests that she was lost in the moment with Jesus. She did not consider what anyone else might see or think.

C. An Ungracious Host (v. 39)

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."

Identities of local prostitutes were likely well known since the activities of such persons could not be secret for long in small villages. If the woman was indeed a prostitute, it explains why *the Pharisee* was scandalized that Jesus would not recognize her as *a sinner*. The Pharisee himself recognized her immediately.

The Pharisee's unspoken thoughts condemned both the woman and Jesus (contrast [Luke 7:16](#)). The Pharisee reasoned from a certain presupposition that he wouldn't allow to be overturned: if Jesus doesn't fit the Pharisee's idea of how a prophet should conduct himself, then Jesus can't be one. Jesus was thought to have carelessly allowed the woman's touch. The Jews' understanding of what made them unclean was often tied to touching (example: [Numbers 9:6](#); [19:11](#)). In general, touching anything considered unclean made the toucher unclean as well (see [Isaiah 52:11](#); [Haggai 2:13](#)). Pharisees were obsessed with the avoidance of anything unclean or violations of the Law of Moses. This woman was the living embodiment of everything they warned against. The contrast between the woman, who expresses her love for Jesus, and the Pharisee, who views her with disdain, could hardly be sharper.

In the verses not included in today's lesson ([Luke 7:40–43](#)), Jesus told Simon a parable about a money lender pardoning debtors. While Jesus turns to the woman, he still speaks to Simon, but he is getting ready to make the parable a reality.

II. Different Actions

([Luke 7:44–50](#))

A. Criticism and Praise (vv. 44–46)

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."

An awkward situation ensued: Jesus *turned toward the woman*, but his words were for the Pharisee.

We also learn that the Pharisee's name was *Simon*, a common Jewish name. Simon (or "Simeon") was the second-born son of Jacob ([Genesis 29:33](#)), a patriarch of the tribes of Israel. Jesus had two disciples named Simon ([Matthew 10:2, 4](#)) as well as a brother ([Mark 6:3](#)), but this Pharisee was none of these.

Foot-washing was a centuries-old cultural practice ([Genesis 18:4; 19:2; 43:24](#); etc.). It was an act of hospitality for guests in one's house. Footwear of the era did not keep dust and dirt out. Walking on unpaved roads resulted in feet getting filthy quickly, thus the expedience of the foot-washing courtesy—or at least providing water and a towel for the guest to do the foot-washing himself. Yet Simon had not even provided those to Jesus! Simon's actions were cold and calculated; both he and Jesus knew it. What a contrast to the woman, whose actions were those of spontaneous gratitude.

45. "You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet."

As difficult as it may be for us to understand the ancient cultural practice of foot-washing, understanding the significance of a *kiss* is scarcely any easier! The missing *kiss* at issue here would have been an expression of greeting and welcome, customarily offered by a host to his guest (see [Luke 15:20](#); compare [Romans 16:16](#); contrast [Luke 22:47–48](#)). As with the absence of foot-washing water, the lack of a kiss indicates something less than full acceptance by the host.

The kissing of *feet* rather than the cheeks was not a part of hospitality expectations. But its presence here shows the woman's humility and her desire to serve Jesus.

Feet Worth Kissing

You will be hard-pressed to find a culture where kissing someone's feet in public is a normal, everyday expectation! It's a universal truth that feet stink, especially when people wear open sandals and walk on streets also used by animals. Most kissing aims for the face, cheek, or hand for a variety of reasons. And surely one of those reasons is that if we want to put our lips on something, clean is better.

To kiss feet eagerly indicates total devotion. The one whose feet are worthy of being kissed is special. It's uncomfortable to display affection in a way that breaks cultural norms unless the esteem of the object of one's love requires it. When was the last time your level of devotion to Jesus caused you to exceed your "embarrassment threshold" in an act of loving service to him?

—D. D.

46. "You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet."

To offer one's *head* to be anointed *with oil* also seems strange to us, something we would never expect when visiting a friend's home. But this, too, was a gesture of hospitality in first-century Palestine. The practice communicated favor (see [Psalm 23:5; Ecclesiastes 9:8](#)). Simon had withheld this level of courtesy as well.

The oil to which Jesus referred was olive oil, the multipurpose liquid used for cooking, fueling lamps, and medicinal purposes. By contrast, the woman anointed the *feet* of Jesus with *perfume* from her alabaster container. This might have been nard oil, which was highly prized and expensive in Palestine—much more so than household olive oil (compare [Mark 14:3; John 12:3](#)). The contrast of

anointing the feet rather than the head demonstrated the great humility of the woman. Her actions were unsolicited.

What Do You Think?

When do you practice hospitality? Keep in mind that this is not limited to hosting dinners.

Digging Deeper

How does your hospitality honor Jesus?

B. Little and Much (vv. 47–48)

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.”

The Pharisee Simon had doubted Jesus’ credentials as a prophet. But at this point, Jesus spoke with prophetic insight. The moral status of the woman as “a sinner” is uncontested—it is a given. But the scene depicted here illustrates the astonishing power and magnitude of God’s forgiveness and its realization by the recipient. The woman’s great love demonstrated that she knew she had much for which to be forgiven (see [Luke 7:42–43](#), not in our printed text).

By contrast, Simon loved *little* because his scrupulous attention to the Law of Moses had resulted in few sins to be forgiven of. Simon was proud of his tidy lifestyle as a Pharisee. He believed that he was vindicated by his success in keeping the Law of Moses strictly and by his descent from Abraham ([John 8:39](#)). The Pharisee understood neither why he needed to love (and be loved by) Jesus nor how the woman’s *many sins* could be *forgiven*, especially by Jesus (see [Mark 2:7](#)). In his encounters with sinners, Jesus walked the fine line between affirming the person while not condoning the sin (examples: [John 4:17–18](#); [5:14](#); [8:10–11](#)), and that’s what we see him do here.

What Do You Think?

What danger is there in not acknowledging one’s own sins as serious or many?

Digging Deeper

How do you guard against both excessive pride in your own efforts and debilitating awareness of your sin?

48. Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”

Jesus then spoke directly to the woman, but his words were for everyone in the room to hear. No such declaration of *your sins are forgiven* is recorded for Simon the Pharisee.

C. Forgiveness and Peace (vv. 49–50)

49a. The other guests began to say among themselves,

The Pharisee’s invitation in [Luke 7:36](#) above does not mention the presence of friends or colleagues of the host or whether any of Jesus’ disciples were invited. But *other guests* were indeed present

at the dinner.

49b. “Who is this who even forgives sins?”

This is not the first time that Luke records controversy resulting from Jesus’ forgiving *sins*. In the story of a paralyzed man of [lesson 6](#), Jesus both healed the man and pronounced his sins to be forgiven ([Luke 5:20](#); compare [Matthew 9:2](#)). The audience of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were outraged. But they spoke better than they knew with their rhetorical question, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” ([Luke 5:21](#)).

Similarly, Simon and his other guests in today’s lesson are startled by Jesus’ declaration. The pronouncement of forgiveness of sins in both texts forces a choice on the religious leaders: if Jesus indeed had the power to forgive sins, then he is God-in-the-flesh. But if Jesus did not have such power, then he was guilty of blasphemy.

50. Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

The episode is closed with a final two-part word from Jesus to the woman. First, he clarifies the underlying reason for her forgiveness: her *faith*, which is the source of her love. By devoting herself to Jesus, she has yielded her heart to him in repentance.

Second, Jesus’ telling her to *go in peace* reminds us of his words to a sinful woman caught in adultery. After that woman’s accusers left the scene, Jesus said to her, “Go now and leave your life of sin” ([John 8:11](#)). Neither woman would have found peace if they had departed only to resume lives of sin.

What Do You Think?

What circumstances make it difficult to experience peace in your salvation?

Digging Deeper

If Jesus told you to “go in peace,” how would that impact your daily activities?

The Right Rock

The most important test of Carl’s life neared, but he wasn’t nervous. He had no reason to be as long as he still had his lucky rock. Once upon a time, the smoothest oval-shaped stone he had ever laid his eyes on sat under a tree in his yard. Ever since then, from first grade to college, he never took a test without the lucky rock in his pocket. He earned straight A’s.

So when Carl flunked his first test in over a decade, he was shocked. The rock had been in his pocket the whole exam! The failure shook his faith.

Faith has no power in itself. It’s only as powerful as the object of one’s faith. Faith in a rock to help you ace a test is silly and impotent. Rocks don’t do that. Our faith in something does not magically activate what we believe it can do.

Faith in Christ Jesus is what matters. He is the ultimate Rock ([Psalms 18:31, 46; 19:14; 28:1; 95:1](#); etc.). He will never fail us. The faith of the sinful woman was not faith in her ability to convince Jesus to do something by means of her power of persuasion. Rather, her faith was focused on her Savior. Where is your faith focused? On your horoscope? On your retirement nest egg? On the government?

Conclusion

A. Who Needs Forgiveness?

Many unbelievers today are involved in unholy, unbiblical activities. Some even make their living doing things that Christians know are immoral. It is easy for those within the church to take a dim view of these people, judging them to be incorrigible sinners. To be sure, a judging function does (or should) exist legitimately within the church ([Matthew 7:16](#); [1 Corinthians 5:1–6:5](#); [Titus 1:10–16](#); [3:10](#); etc.). But this judging function bears little, if any, resemblance to the one used by Simon the Pharisee. His viewpoint was that of complete rejection, thinking of himself more highly and being confident of his own righteousness (compare [Luke 18:9–14](#)).

But Simon was not completely sinless. As a student of the Law of Moses, he should have realized, as the Pharisee Paul did, that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” ([Romans 3:23](#); compare [Acts 23:6](#)). Another way to look at it is to imagine a survey being taken in Pharisee Simon’s village. The survey question is, “Who needs to be forgiven, Simon or the immoral woman?” The villagers would predictably respond overwhelmingly to “the immoral woman.” But this is really a trick question since it presents a false choice. It is not a matter of “either/or,” but one of “both/and.” They both needed to be forgiven of sin. They both needed a humble faith that would bring them to God with hearts full of love. They both needed to follow Jesus, love God, and serve others. The tragedy of this story is that only one of these people left the banquet forgiven. Simon’s apparent pride in seeing himself superior to the woman blocked any realization of needing forgiveness.

Christians are to flee from sin and obey God. We show our love for God when we keep his commandments ([1 John 5:2–3](#)). But does this justify us when we reject and condemn those who struggle with sin? Are sinners welcome in our fellowship if they are seeking to love Jesus? Or must they clean up their sinful lives before they enter the doors of our church? Jesus taught that even the vilest of sinners can be forgiven if they turn to him in faith and love. Are we willing to follow him in his love for sinners and help them as they strive to follow Jesus, however imperfectly?



Visual for [Lesson 8](#). Allow learners to ponder this question and what their love for Christ suggests about the answer before praying to end class.

What Do You Think?

What makes a good dinner guest?

Digging Deeper

Do Jesus' words and actions at this dinner change your answer? How, or why not?

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, you have shown us your willingness to forgive sinners. May we not keep that message to ourselves! And let us not be selective in pretending to know who will accept and who won't. Help us to love our neighbors as you love us by taking the good news of your Son to them. In his name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

To have forgiveness, we must first realize that we need it.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible Student](#) (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the [NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition](#)).

Into the Lesson

Write on the board *Rejection / Acceptance* as the headers of two columns. Divide learners into pairs or triads and ask them to brainstorm books, songs, TV shows/episodes, and/or movies that have themes fitting under one or both columns. Invite them to use smartphones to help them if needed. After five minutes, let groups share their conclusions while you write them on the board. Discuss with the whole class: 1—How common is rejection in our culture? 2—What have you learned by being accepted just as you are by someone in your life?

Lead to Bible study by saying, “Today’s lesson will show us someone who was known for her sinfulness. Yet she risked further rejection to honor Jesus. As we look at the story, try to imagine what she, and those around her, were thinking as the incident unfolded.”

Into the Word

Distribute a handout (you create) with the title “What Were They Thinking?” The chart should have four columns with the headers *Scripture / Pharisee / Woman / Jesus*. In the *Scripture* column, list four references from today’s text: [Luke 7:36–38](#); [7:39](#); [7:44–47](#); [7:48–50](#). Using the same groups as earlier in the lesson, ask learners to complete the chart together. Ask them to use their “sanctified imaginations” to consider what each person might have been thinking and feeling.

After six to eight minutes, ask learners to share their answers, jotting down any they hear from another group that are particularly compelling. Then have them circle the reactions on their charts that they find most surprising and put an exclamation point beside the sections they find most troubling. Then call the groups together once again to discuss as a whole class.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “An Encounter with Jesus” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have groups work together to complete as indicated.

Into Life

Have learners refer back to the Bible-study chart they completed above. Ask them individually to put a star beside any emotions or thoughts recorded on their charts that they have ever had themselves. After a minute, ask volunteers to share.

Divide the learners into two groups. Assign a different discussion question to each group: 1—What

leads Christians today to sometimes think like the Pharisee in this story? How can Christians react more like Jesus and less like the Pharisee? 2—What leads Christians today to react to Jesus with the passionate conviction this sinful woman displayed? What would prompt us to relate to him more as she did? Give groups several minutes for this discussion.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Scripture Story, Contemporary Attitudes” exercise from the activity page. Have learners complete it individually in a minute or less before discussing conclusions with a partner.

After either activity, call the class together and urge as many as possible to share their reactions and conclusions after comparing the characters in today’s story with their own life experiences.

Distribute slips of paper to each learner to write down one or more of the following prompts:

1. Lord, help us to have the compassion of Jesus for those who may not feel worthy to seek him.
2. Lord, help us to overcome our preoccupation with ourselves that keeps us from boldly expressing our love for Jesus.
3. Lord, forgive us when we’ve looked down on others who need Jesus as much as we do.

Invite participants to use the prayer slips as part of their prayer time this week.