

Series: Parables: Did You Hear That?
Message Title: ***The Parable About Scarlet Letters***
Date: Sunday, September 2, 2018
Scripture: Luke 7:36-50
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Location: Warren Baptist Church, Augusta, GA

Introduction

We are studying the greatest stories every told—the parables of Jesus. *Did you hear that?*

A parable is a simple word picture with a profound truth or message. Parables are side by side truths that help us to see contrasts, contradictions and consequences that affect us.

One of the most shocking and scandalous novels in modern literary history is the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne published in 1850, *The Scarlet Letter*. This book was written to show a path of redemption for a shameful woman and to expose the self-righteous pretense and practices of a community of puritans in early American history.

While we still have many scandalous novels and salacious literary works published

each year based on sensual and shameful practices, we more often direct our attention to tabloid journalism and sensational efforts to get the juicy details through “behind the scenes” expose’ in the lives of celebrities and stars. We have entire industries (paparazzi) who provide images and gossip for such purposes. In addition, social media generates and circulates the same kinds of stories and messages.

Today I want to take you behind the scenes of a shocking and scandalous event that happened at a dinner gathering in Israel many years ago in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. I already know you are going to be interested in the unfolding details of this event. But I pray you will be moved by something much greater than curiosity to a place of greater expression of your own commitment to Christ. I am praying for great heart response today.

“One of the Pharisees asked Him [Jesus] to eat with him, and He went into the Pharisee’s house and reclined at table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that He was reclining at table in

the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed His feet and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, 'If this Man were a prophet, He would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner'" (Luke 7:36-39 ESV).

This would have surely been one of the most circulated stories in the ancient world. Focus would have been on the Pharisee who had the self-proclaimed Savior, Jesus, and a "scarlet lady" in his home. Let's break it down—the drama unfolding in this place and passage.



Scene 1: The Dinner

Let's make sure we get the picture of what was happening and how this all unfolded. Most of us eat dinner on a daily basis, but there are those days, times and moments

when we have special dinners: first date, family gathering, special occasion.

Here a well-known and much respected man, a Pharisee, was part of a distinct order of the strictest adherents to Judaism. Josephus (historian) believed there to be some 6,000 of these Pharisees throughout Israel prior to the fall of the second temple. They were an uncommon class of religious zealots among the common people of Israel. They were educated, venerated, and often times promoted above the common Jewish people of their day.

This Pharisee invited Jesus to dinner—don't know why. Trap? No evidence. Maybe this was a way to show his ability to entertain a celebrity. He could have even wanted to hear and know more.

The setting of dinners would have likely been in the courtyard of the house. The posture of the guests would have been reclining—a full evening—and kept feet away from the table.

It was common (due to the interest of onlookers) to gather and even come in to

see and hear what was being discussed. But in the midst of all this, another guest—uninvited, unannounced, but unavoidable—came in and caused a scene.

Scene 2: The Distraction

Suddenly amid the intended plan and purpose of the dinner, there was this woman—a scarlet lady. You probably don't need much imagination to see and understand what a strange moment this was for all who were there.

"And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that He was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed His feet and anointed them with the ointment" (Luke 7:37-38 ESV).

Talk about a scandal! This was very uncomfortable. Most of the people knew her by appearance and reputation. She was regarded as loose, lewd and "lettered"

among the people of that community. She was at Jesus' feet and she was not sitting quietly. She was actively and openly showing a display of affection and gratitude for Jesus.

Think about the discomfort. Have you ever been somewhere and was suddenly caught off guard by something happening to you or around you that you couldn't get away from? Tears on an airplane? A fight with members of a family? A moment of celebration you can't overlook?

I want to be sure you are aware there was nothing sensual or impure happening here. She was revealing and reflecting tears of repentance. When people are truly broken over their sins and when people realize the immensity of God's forgiveness in their lives, it is not uncommon for there to be tears.

Oh no! She let down her hair! This was a really big deal. In this culture, it was customary for a woman to keep her hair up. Her display was now on the order of scandal in the home of this strict, law-keeping Pharisee. She wiped and kissed the feet of Jesus.

What happened next only intensified the moment. Rather than shaming, rebuking or sending this woman away and vindicating the host, Jesus called attention to her and honored her among all who were gathered there.

Notice that in Luke 7:39, Simon's thoughts betrayed him. In this case it wasn't what "Simon said," but what Simon thought! Augustine was the first to observe that "Jesus heard what Simon thought."

Scene 3: The Debtors

Jesus, the master storyteller, read Simon's mind and responded with a story that is both easy to understand, but pointed with application.

Who loves the most? The one whose greater debt was canceled!

Don't miss this; both needed forgiveness. The issue of forgiveness was evident to all. Why? Both had a debt, but the one whose debt was greater felt greater weight of offense and gratitude.

You get the picture, don't you? Both Simon and the sinful woman were sinners (debtors). There was just a difference in the perceived amount of their debt. In this story, one owed two months wages and the other two years of wages. Think about this.

Can you imagine your banker calling you and saying, "We know you are struggling to meet your obligation. We are going to forgive the debt"?

Scene 4: The Dishonor

Jesus told a parable about two debtors. Each had been forgiven a debt, but clearly the one who experienced the greatest forgiveness expressed the greatest love. The bigger the debt, the greater the love.

Simon heard it forcefully, saw it clearly, and answered appropriately. But here is where the real scandal occurred.

"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 wet My feet with her tears

and wiped them with her hair. You gave Me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss My feet. You did not anoint My head with oil, but she has anointed My feet with ointment'" (Luke 7:44-46 ESV).

Hospitality was considered a virtue, yet Jesus said, "I came to you and you did not host me." Simon had ignored common, customary practices. He did not wash Jesus' feet. He did not kiss Him (kissing the cheek was a Middle Eastern greeting as a sign of peace). He did not refresh Jesus by anointing Him with oil.

Here the man who had a strong judgmental spirit—probably toward Jesus and certainly toward this woman—thought about the disgrace of what was happening at his table. And yet, he had completely ignored and dishonored Jesus, the guest he invited to come.

This man thought of God as being for him and against the woman, but the truth was that this woman understood the great reach of grace while the host was running from the very action of God he needed the most.

“One way to test our grasp of God’s grace is to see how we respond to the people we think of as sinners. What we say about them, how we treat them, what we do or fail to do to touch their lives with the love of Jesus. Christ indicates our true understanding of God and His grace. Sadly, there are many Christians who refuse to get involved in the lives of people who are in spiritual trouble—they do not touch sinners and they do not let sinners touch them.” —Philip Ryken

Scene 5: The Departure

Like all Pharisees, he believed Jesus liked nice people—not bad people. But this woman knew real sin, real debt, real shame and real forgiveness—a Savior. She went away forgiven. Free.

The scarlet letter was no more. For this reason, Jesus received her honor and worship, and Jesus declared her forgiven. What? Who can do this? Only God!

Nothing can compare with the impact and witness of a changed life. It’s not our arguments and defenses, but rather a

changed life. Jesus demonstrates this at the dinner.

Please be sure you understand it was NOT her act of brokenness or love that provided this forgiveness. Her love was not the cause of her salvation; it was the consequence of His forgiveness and grace already experienced in her life.

“Your sins are forgiven” is in the perfect tense (perfect indicative middle—ongoing results of a completed task). It communicated something that has happened on her behalf and is completed with continuing consequence and effect.

Forgiveness is a debt canceled. When this debt is canceled, there is a price, a cost, and a consequence. It does not go away, but it goes to the One who bears the debt. Someone else makes the payment for us.

We don’t know when this happened in her life, but it was already done. It was not the result of this moment. This moment was an expression of her love because she knew she was unworthy and Jesus was all together worthy!

Some of the biggest sinners in the history of the church have been the greatest saints (Paul; John Newton, "Amazing Grace").

"You don't have to be taken into the depths of depravity—the depths of sin—in order to love God deeply, but we must be brought to a consciousness of our sin." —Alistair Begg

She knew the debt of her sin toward God, and now she was experiencing the forgiveness of her sin in the presence of Christ. This was not guilt; it was gratitude being poured out on Christ.

We know what happened to her; what about you and what about me? Have you experienced God's forgiveness and do you have peace with God?

Notice this was a matter of faith, not works.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9 ESV).

She trusted God's grace and gift.

If this is true of you, true of me, then I must suggest these responses from our hearts today. We need to meet ourselves in this story. Let's consider how to trade our scarlet letters for characters of grace.

1. Jesus is Worthy of My Obedience

Jesus said, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments" (John 14:15 ESV).

First is baptism. Baptism symbolizes the exchange of your debt for Christ's forgiveness. Obedience begins with repentance that turns us from the old life, but turns us toward the evidences of grace.

See Matthew 28:18-20.

"And Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins...' So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:38a, 41 ESV).

Baptism is the first step of the Christian life. What about you? Have you been baptized?

2. Jesus is Worthy of My Sacrifice

The greater the love, the bigger the sacrifice. If you have known God's gracious love and forgiveness, then there is an eager desire and willingness to sacrifice for Christ. This woman showed extravagant love—the alabaster flask of ointment. This was something of great value that she, because of great love, poured on His feet.

Giving, serving, etc.

3. Jesus is Worthy of My Allegiance

This woman was shameless in her response to Jesus. She was bold, yet humble and courageous... and broken.

It can be easy for us to try and manage negative responses to our faith. I confess I want people to like me before I tell them about Jesus. We have to get over ourselves if we are going to share Christ and let others see and know the grace of God in us.

“For whoever is ashamed of Me and of My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38 ESV).

“But God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8 ESV).

Salvation is free, but it is not cheap!—the cross.