

1 John 4:18-21

18 There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

19 We love because he first loved us.

20 Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.

21 And he has given us this command: anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

Luke 7:36-50

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.'

40 Jesus answered him, 'Simon, I have something to tell you.' 'Tell me, teacher,' he said.

41 'Two people owed money to a certain money-lender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty.

42 Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?'

43 Simon replied, 'I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.' 'You have judged correctly,' Jesus said.

44 Then he turned towards 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.'

The Two Debtors 1 John 4:18-21; Luke 7:36-50

This is a slightly unusual and very significant parable because it's told in the middle of a dinner party which involves Jesus, a woman described as living a sinful life and a Pharisee, who represents the religious hierarchy.

It's a story which appears in all four gospels in slightly different forms, and the woman is probably Mary the sister of Martha, as the gospel of John (12:3) says. However Mark's version has the host as Simon the Leper, whereas Luke has Simon the Pharisee! These discrepancies do not disprove the authenticity of the texts, but just reinforce the fact that witnesses of an event like this have different recollections of things, as we all know. If there was any concern to make it watertight, you would think they would have agreed on whether Simon was a leper or a Pharisee! Parables like this prove that the truth of the message supercedes everything else. It's a pity these days we get so hung up on detail, even to the point of rejecting the bible, rather than taking the teaching seriously.

Anyway, you have to understand the context of this. The first thing you need to know about this sort of meal is that it would have been open to anyone to come in from the street. The invited guests would recline around a long low table. Their legs would be folded back at the knee with their feet behind them.

Any others would stand at the back around the walls. It's most likely Jesus has been invited, because Simon has heard him preaching. The *strict* convention in the Middle East at this time was for any guest, *particularly* if it was a rabbi, to be greeted with a kiss, and water to wash their feet. Also sometimes they would be anointed with oil. As we've read the whole passage to the end we can see from Jesus' remarks that *none* of this was offered.

So you can see that Simon's decided to confront Jesus from the word go, by insulting him as soon as he arrives. Before *anything* happens there's tension in the room. Everyone would have seen this snub take place, and be wondering how Jesus would react. But at first, he simply takes his place and doesn't comment. As I said the meal was open to passers by, and we're told that the woman also knew about Jesus being there and had got some expensive perfume, and was in the room from at least the same time that he arrived, standing behind him, by his feet. In v 45 he says

45 this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet.

So the woman was clearly some kind of disciple, but one *who lived a sinful life*, so clearly she was or had been a prostitute, so she added massively to the discomfort of everyone. She was a deeply embarrassing presence *before* she did anything.

But Simon's insult of Jesus triggers her emotions to such an extent that the first thing she does is fall at his feet in tears, dry them with her hair, and then drench them in perfume. For the dinner guests, letting down her hair in front of a stranger, which even for a *married* woman could result in divorce, would have been the last straw. *All* the rules had been broken, by the host and by the unwelcome sinner. We're told that Simon's thoughts at this point were that his scepticism about Jesus was confirmed, because any genuine prophet would know what she was and just throw her out. But the first to speak is Jesus and here is the parable which breaks into the stunned silence.

40 Jesus answered him, 'Simon, I have something to tell you.' 'Tell me, teacher,' he said.

41 'Two people owed money to a certain money-lender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty.

42 Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?'

Simon is forced to give the correct answer, it's the one who is forgiven more, of course. And so his plan to expose Jesus is scuppered.

And it seems quite obvious that the woman is not a random visitor but has already encountered Jesus somewhere else. Jesus turns to her but is addressing Simon, and he's the third one to break with all etiquette by insulting the host.

This was totally unacceptable even if the host was at fault.

44 You didn't give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.

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

46 You didn't put oil on my head, but she's poured perfume on my feet

47 Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – as her great love has shown.

Jesus speaks in the past tense, her sins *have been* forgiven

So the honoured guest here is the forgiven sinner, the repentant woman who is coming in loving response to the person who has transformed her life, to say thank you.

As in so many instances Jesus turns convention on its head by championing not the well respected host who is apparently upright, but the sinner who is an outcast from society. Who has a keener awareness of her sin. And ironically it's she and not Simon who offers Jesus hospitality! Referring to the parable, Jesus says *Whoever has been forgiven little, loves little* pointing this directly at Simon, because as the righteous man he is not in need of grace to the same extent as the sinner who has been condemned by the whole community. In fact he may think that, being righteous, he does not need any forgiveness! Here's the warning for all those of us who are tempted to judge others from a position of conviction that we're right.

Luke 5 says this: 29 Levi gave a great banquet for [Jesus]...; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them. 30 The Pharisees ...were complaining to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" 31 Jesus answered, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; 32 I've come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance."

The clear message of the parable is of the freely offered love of God, accepted as unearned, undeserved grace, to all people who turn to Him. Because we've all fallen short, we're all in different places, but we're all, still, unconditionally loved.

So the challenge to you and me is really: where is Jesus calling us to be? Is it to stay in our comfort zones, pleased that we at least are 'righteous', or should we be identifying with those who have no peace, no security, no hope, no love, no faith? Who are looking for something but don't even know what?

Do we *'eat and drink with sinners'*?

Do we sacrifice our own comfort to spend time loving those who are in need of God's grace? If not, why not?

Jesus is always present at the place of need, not only with those he calls disciples, but with every human being.

Those who already know his grace know they're loved, and know they're called to follow Him, not so as to impose a set of rules and rituals, but to freely give away the good news of the kingdom of God without prejudice to everyone they meet. Amen.