Forgiveness and Love (Luke 7:36-50)
Sunday school December 11, 2016

I want to call your attention to READ Luke 7:36-50 I just got through the introduction last week. The word “and” at the beginning of verse 36 ties this passage to what came before. The words Jesus said about John (and everything since verse 11) has taken place in the small town of Nain in Galilee, so that’s where this takes place as well. This passage starts with a Pharisee named Simon inviting Jesus to a formal banquet. It doesn’t tell us why Simon invited Him to this banquet. I think Simon was trying to entrap Jesus in His words to find an accusation against Him. From chapter 6 we know the Pharisees were out to pick a fight with Him, and in chapter 20 some Jewish leaders overtly try this tactic (unsuccesfully, of course) to try to find fault in Him. Alternatively, Simon may have been genuinely curious like Nicodemus in John chapter 3 and wanted to ask Him questions. I’ll show you why I think the way I do as we go through this passage, but there’s some evidence for the latter also in this passage that I’ll point out as well.

The key word in the discussion that transpires is the word “forgive.” The word forgive and its derivatives appears 6 times in the dialogue that is verses 40-50. So this is a discussion about forgiveness, but it’s also a discussion about love, in particular loving someone who has forgiven us the way we should love them. Back in chapter 6, Jesus told His disciples to “Love your enemies” (Luke 6:27). Elsewhere He tells us to love our neighbors, that is, everyone around us. So there is a single emphasis on loving people period, but this passage puts a double emphasis on loving those who have forgiven us. We are to love everybody around us, but we should REALLY love those who have done something to deserve it. That’s what we are going to study today: forgiveness and love.

Transition: HAND OUT OUTLINES So let’s get into the details of the text.

I. The Setting READ v. 36-38 To understand some of what goes on here, you need some cultural background on the situation Jesus is in. What Simon has invited Jesus to is a formal banquet with many guests. The other guests are not even mentioned until down in verse 49, but they are there all along. At such a banquet, the guests would have eaten and conversed while reclining on a sofa. They would have layed on their sides with their feet extended away from a U-shaped table. So if you were reclining on your left side, your feet would be propped up behind the person to your right. There are a few reasons that’s important. First, in verse 38 it says she “stood at his feet” as opposed to kneeled. That’s how she did that: His feet were propped up on a sofa behind the person beside Him. Second, she couldn’t get to His head and chest, which were at the table, but she could get to His feet. Third, if your feet were propped up behind another person, you couldn’t see somebody standing at your feet unless you got up and turned around. So using His human senses, He would have no way to know who was wiping His feet unless He turned around and looked, which it appears He does not until verse 44 where it says He turned to the woman.
In this formal banquet setting, this unnamed woman seems very out of place. Verse 37 calls her a sinner, which in this culture would mean she was a prostitute. Since Nain, the town this event takes place in, was a small town, she was probably well-known as a prostitute to Simon and everybody here except, you would think from a human standpoint, to Jesus. We don’t know how she got in Simon’s house. The Pharisees had no dealings with prostitutes, so she would not have been a guest at this banquet unless she was a ploy from Simon to entrap Jesus. That’s one reason I think this whole banquet was an attempt to trap Him: it’s hard to see how she would have gotten in otherwise. We don’t know where she got the ointment, but probably from her vocation. Given this woman’s vocation, in their culture what she does in verse 38, letting her hair down and fondling His feet, would generally be viewed as erotic, as the prelude to a sex act. That’s why what Simon starts thinking in verse 39 is the logical and natural thing to think in that culture.

Transition: That leads to...

II. The Conversation READ v. 39-40 The wording in these verses is interesting. Verse 39 says that Simon “spake within himself,” and then in verse 40 says “Jesus answered” as if Simon had spoken aloud. This is one of several places in this passage where Jesus shows He is God: only God knows people’s thoughts. That’s the main challenge in teaching. When you are trying to train people how to think, you first have to figure out what they are thinking. When I’m in front of a classroom, the best I can do is make an educated guess based on experience and observation. I ask questions and try to get the students to talk to me, figure out what they are thinking that way. I read their facial expressions, the nods, the huh’s? Sometimes I get a blank expression, and I wonder if they are thinking. But God doesn’t have to guess; He knows what everybody is thinking. Do you remember Hebrews 4:12? “For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” We can only look on the outward appearance, but God knows the thoughts and intents of the heart. That’s what Jesus demonstrates here: He is God, and therefore He knows the thoughts and intents of Simon’s heart.

What Simon was thinking was logical based on what he knew about the woman. He knew she was a prostitute, or at least he thought he knew that. But he doesn’t take into account that Jesus is God. Jesus knew the woman’s thoughts and intents a lot better than Simon did. Jesus knew she used to be a prostitute, but now as the rest of the dialogue indicates, she is a repenter. Going back to the two possible responses to Jesus and John in verses 29 and 30 that we studied last week, she was a verse 29 person who had repented and now justified God. So her acts toward Jesus were not erotic, like Simon thought. She did them because she loved Jesus, because she had been forgiven, because she had repented. Being God, Jesus knew exactly who she was and why she was doing what she was doing. When He explains it to Simon later in the passage, that’s another indication that He is God.
Jesus knew her thoughts and intents, and He knew Simon’s thoughts and intents. In verse 40, Simon addresses Jesus as master. Going back to the reason Simon invites Jesus to this banquet, people who think Simon was genuinely curious about Jesus rather than trying to entrap Him point to Simon’s address of Jesus as master to indicate that. That address of Jesus is used that way in Luke many times, but it’s also used deceitfully on at least one occasion. The reference I gave you is Luke 20:21, the chief priests and scribes at Jerusalem ask Jesus whether it is lawful to give tribute to Caesar, which is overtly an attempt to entrap Him, yet they address Him as master. So I don’t find that argument compelling. I think Simon was trying to entrap Him just like the chief priests and scribes are in chapter 20.

Transition: At Simon’s urging to “say on,” Jesus then launches into...

III. The Parable (of the Creditors) READ v. 41-43 The word “pence” is plural for penny, or in the coins of Jesus’ day a dinarius. One dinarius was approximately equal to one day’s wages for a laborer, so someone who owed 500 pence in modern terms would owe about 1.5 years worth of salary. Imagine if you owed 1.5 times however much you make in a year in credit card debt. That’s a lot of money to owe. These days no reasonable credit card issuer would extend that much credit to you.

What Jesus is really doing here is explaining forgiveness of sins and the effect it should have on us in terms that Simon and indirectly we would understand. Simon must have had a decent amount of money or else he could not afford to host this formal banquet. Since he had some money, he would be familiar with business transactions, so he would know what it is like to owe money and what it is like to have money owed to you. In my line of work, it would not be money but textbooks. When I was a student, professors lent textbooks to me for me to read, learn, and extend my knowledge. These days I lend textbooks to students all the time. I write my name in ink in the inside front cover of the book so that I can identify it as mine, but I still lose more textbooks that way. I had a student a few years ago who emailed me several months after he graduated wanting to mail me a book he had borrowed from me but never returned. I appreciated the gesture, but honestly I had already counted that book lost, so I told him to keep it.

Jesus is explaining to him the woman’s actions in a way he’ll understand. That’s a large part of what I try to do as a teacher, explain biblical or mathematical ideas in a way my audience (hopefully) will understand. That’s what Jesus is doing here. As a Pharisee, a student of the Old Testament, you would think that Simon would understand forgiveness of sins. You would think that he would read verses like Genesis 15:6, where it says that Abraham “believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness,” and understand that forgiveness and righteousness come by faith. But his thoughts concerning the woman and his continued reaction indicate that he didn’t.

Transition: After the parable comes...
IV. The Application READ v. 44-47 When Simon saw what the woman was doing to Jesus, he saw an erotic act, as probably did most of the guests at this banquet. Jesus, however, sees it for what it really is: love for Him because she had repented and been forgiven. In the parable, she was the one who owed much, the 500 pence. So she loved Him a lot. Jesus never directly says this, but by implication Simon was the one who owed little, the 50 pence. So Simon loved Him very little, and in my opinion was probably actually trying to entrap Him. That’s the point Jesus is making when He refers to the actions in these verses. Just like the woman’s love is demonstrated through her actions, Simon’s lack of love for Him is demonstrated in his actions. Being the host of such a banquet, Simon would have been expected to show some hospitality to the guests, including Jesus. In their culture, that hospitality would have included water to wash His feet (verse 44), a kiss on the cheek to show fellowship (verse 45), and some oil (olive oil) for His hair (verse 46—it’s an ancient hair conditioner and dandruff remover). Jesus tells us he neglected this hospitality because he loved Him little.

There are a couple of applications for us on this text. First, often times when we read this text we focus solely on the relative amounts (500 pence versus 50 pence) because that’s the main point Jesus was making and we miss the fact that both of them owed a debt they could not pay. That reminds us that we all owed a sin debt that we could not pay. Romans 6:23 says, “The wages of sin is death.” I can’t pay a death payment and live to tell about it. Whether the prostitute or Simon, a large sin debt or a small one, He paid our sin debt that we couldn’t pay for us. We should love Him, if for no other reason, because He paid our sin debt for us. Second, when I was young, in my teens and twenties, I thought I was the one who owed 50 pence, who was forgiven a little. Back then I thought, “I haven’t killed anyone. I haven’t stolen. I haven’t committed adultery. My sin is not really that great.” Now that I’ve gotten older, and (I think) closer to God, who is righteous and completely sinless, I realize: my sin is great. I’ve been forgiven a lot. I hope I love Him more as I more accurately realize how much He has forgiven me.

**Transition:** That leads to the last point...
V. The Pronouncement READ v. 48-50 The double pronouncement Jesus makes in verses 48 and 50 are spoken to the woman, but they are not primarily for the woman’s benefit. She already knew she was forgiven because she had repented, as demonstrated by her actions. Her actions were not an attempt to buy forgiveness; God’s forgiveness can’t be bought. Jesus just told us that they show her love for Him because she was forgiven. He makes that doubly clear in verse 50: “Thy faith hath saved thee.” It wasn’t her love for Him that saved her; it was her faith that saved her. Forgiveness of sins is always by faith, always has been, always will be. So the pronouncements in verses 48 and 50 are not primarily for the woman’s benefit but primarily for the guests’ benefit. Three times in this dialogue Jesus has shown them He is God: when He reads Simon’s thoughts, when He tells them who this woman is although He has probably never met her before, and when He pronounces forgiveness of sins. Back in Luke chapter 5 when He healed the man with the palsy He had shown the Pharisees that He does indeed have power to forgive sins. Unfortunately, their reaction in verse 49 indicates they don’t believe Him. He tries over and over to show them who He is, but they are verse 30 people: they reject the counsel of God.

Conclusion

As a final thought on this passage, we are not forgiven because we love Him. Forgiveness of sins is always by faith. However, we should love Him if for no other reason (and there are plenty of other reasons) because we are forgiven. We should show that love by spending time with Him in prayer and meditation, Bible reading, worship with His people, and by keeping His commandments. Those are two good ways to show we love Him. The closer we get to Him, the more we realize how sinful we are and therefore how much He has forgiven us, the more we should love Him. That’s been the experience in my life. I love Him more now than I did 20 years ago, at least partly because I realize more now how sinful I am. Based on what I have seen from you, I think it is your experience too.