

Home at Last: The Invitation to Come Home

WITH MIKE TUCKER

Years ago, I worked as a Hospital Chaplain. One morning when I got to work I saw that, in addition to the regular room-to-room visitation I would do that day, I had two extra appointments. The first was a morning appointment with a young woman I did not know. She was 28 years old. The second appointment was set for the afternoon. It was with a 78-year-old woman who lived in a nursing home across the street from the hospital. I did not know her either.

That morning, the young woman came into my office. She was very pretty and quite nervous. We made small talk until she worked up the courage to say what she had come to say.

She said, "I'm 28 years old, and I've been married and divorced three times. Each divorce was my fault because I had extra-marital affairs. In fact, I've had more affairs than I can count and have broken up numerous homes. My children have been taken from me and live with their fathers. I rarely see them. My family has pretty much disowned me, and now I find myself all alone. So here's my question, chaplain: Is there any hope for someone like me?"

That afternoon, I walked across the street to the nursing home. The 78-year-old woman came right to the point. She said, "Chaplain, I'm 78 year old, and I'm dying of cancer. I've been married and divorced three times. Each divorce was my fault because I had extra-marital affairs. In fact, I've had more affairs than I can count and have broken up more homes than I can count. My children and grandchildren won't have anything to do with me. I have one niece who will visit from time to time. But now I find myself all alone. So tell me chaplain, is there any hope for someone like me?"

These women were separated in age by 50 years, but they had the same question for me on the same day. There really is nothing new under the sun, is there?

When Jesus was on this earth, the Pharisees, who were the Jewish religious leaders of the day, taught that God hated sinners, but He loved the righteous. They went on to describe sinners as those who did not keep the law of God. The "righteous" were those who kept the law, especially those who kept the law as the Pharisees thought it should be kept.

But Jesus had a very different teaching. Jesus taught that God loved sinners. And then He went on to state that there were two varieties of sinners: those who did not keep the law, and those who did.

While the Pharisees did not appreciate this teaching, many of the people did. And among those who received Jesus' teachings on the subject was a woman who the biblical writers euphemistically describe as a "sinner." This meant that she was a prostitute.

Prostitution was deemed by the Pharisees to be an unpardonable sin. They taught that in order for a sinner to be forgiven the sinner must confess the sin, turn from the sin, and then make restitution for the harm done by the sin. Only then could a sinner be forgiven. But how would a prostitute ever make restitution for her sins? In their estimation, she couldn't; therefore, this was an unpardonable sin.

But Jesus taught that God loved and forgave even prostitutes. It was a very radical teaching for the day.

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In Luke's Gospel, the seventh chapter, we find that a certain Pharisee had invited Jesus to dine with him. In another telling of this same story, the Pharisee is referred to as Simon the Leper. He was no longer referred to as a leper. That was because Jesus had healed him. So, his invitation for Jesus to dine with him was assumed to be an attempt to thank Jesus for having healed him. But this was not the case, as we shall see.

In the Jewish culture of that day, when you were invited to be a guest at someone's home, three things were absolutely expected. To fail to receive any one of these things was considered to be a grave insult. First, the host would greet you with a kiss, usually on the cheek. Then, water and a towel would be provided in order for you to wash your feet and your hands. Thirdly, the host would provide oil. Oil was used to anoint a person or to sooth the ravages of the desert sun. These three things were expected. It was unthinkable that a host would fail to provide them. A guest who did not receive any one of these three things would turn around and leave the house in anger and disgust over the shame that had been heaped upon them by their host.

With that as background, let's read the story:

Luke 7:36

Now one of the Pharisees was requesting Him to dine with him, and He entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table.

To Western eyes, this appears to be a fairly straightforward telling of the story. There's nothing out of the ordinary. But actually there is much more here than meets the eye.

Later in the passage we will find that Simon did not provide any of the three essentials for Jesus, his guest. Simon did not give Jesus a kiss, water and towel, or oil. There were other guests at the dinner who did not leave in anger or disgust; therefore, it is safe to assume that they had received these three expected items. Jesus had been singled out as the recipient of this insult. Simon had purposefully shamed Jesus in front of the other guests. This was a very big deal in that society.

But Jesus chose not to leave in anger. Instead, He reclined at table. But we lose something in the translation of this story.

At a dinner party, the host would always seat the guests and would always begin with the eldest. He would work his way down to the youngest guest. Jesus was in his early 30's, so he was certainly not the eldest guest. So, since Jesus saw the shameful insult his host had paid Him, He decided not to wait for the host to seat Him. Social graces were being thrown aside, so He chose his own place at the table and seated himself. Essentially, Jesus sent a message back to Simon. The message was, "OK. I get it. I'm not here to be honored, but to be tested. Game on!"

Luke 7:37-38

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And there was a woman in the city who was a sinner; and when she learned that He was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster vial of perfume, and standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet and anointing them with the perfume.

She is referred to as “a sinner.” Again, this was a euphemism. Somehow, this woman had gained access to Simon’s home and had witnessed the shame heaped on Jesus. Her heart was broken. She could not stand to see the man who meant so much to her – the only man who had treated her with respect – treated in such a shameful manner. So she attempted, at every point, to reverse the insults paid to Jesus. She entered into His shame with him in an effort to reverse it.

In essence she said, “You have given Jesus no water or towel, and you would not provide these things for me if I asked. So I will use my tears as water to wash His feet, and I will use my hair as a towel.”

It was deemed to be shameful for a woman to let her hair down in public. The first time a man would see his wife’s hair was on their wedding night. It was taught that a woman’s hair was so sultry and seductive that it should never be seen in public. In fact, it was taught that if a man’s wife ever let her hair down in public, it was his duty to divorce her immediately and refuse to give her a financial settlement. Yet this woman willingly shamed herself in an attempt to reverse the shame heaped out upon Jesus.

Next, she kissed Jesus’ feet. In essence she said, “You will give Him no kiss of greeting? I will kiss his feet.”

This was extremely awkward. Women were never to touch a man, especially not a man to whom they were not married. It was thought to be too seductive, too shameful a thing to do. And yet, this woman willingly endured the shame in an attempt to reverse the shame heaped upon Jesus.

And third, she had brought an alabaster box filled with costly perfume. In another telling of this story Judas declared that the box and perfume were worth 300 denarii. That was equivalent to 300 days wages for a laborer. Where did this woman get that sort of money? She had only one source of income. She used the money from prostitution to purchase a thank-you gift for Jesus. Interestingly, Jesus received the gift.

It seemed as though she was saying, “You refuse to give Jesus oil? I will anoint Him with costly perfume.”

Simon had shamed Jesus in three specific ways. This woman attempted to reverse the insult in all three ways. She willingly chose to enter into Jesus’ shame with Him in an attempt to help Him bear it. It was the most costly gift she could give Him.

Luke 7:39

Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner.”

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Simon's thoughts tell us that instead of bringing Jesus into his home to honor Him, he had actually brought Him there to test him. Jesus had declared that He was a prophet and even more. Simon wanted to test that declaration and perhaps to set Jesus' theology straight. How foolish of Jesus to teach that God could possibly love sinners! How insulting to think that those who kept the law were sinners!

Luke 7:40

And Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he replied, "Say it, Teacher."

Again, we miss the force of this statement because of the translation from one language to another. Jesus used a Jewish idiom. What Jesus was essentially saying was something to the effect of: "Simon, you don't want to hear what I'm about to say, but I'm going to say it anyway!" And Simon's reply was essentially, "Bring it on!"

Can you feel the tension of this moment? The other guests were silent, scarcely breathing. No one was comfortable.

Now, what Jesus did next seems strange to Westerners. He told a story. But Jesus was a Jewish theologian. When Jewish theologians taught their theology, their beliefs about God, they did it by telling stories. The theology was in the story.

Simon had brought Jesus into his home in order to set his theology straight. Jesus was now about to share His theology with Simon in an attempt to share sacred truth with him. He used a story form that was common among the teachers of that day. He told a story of a moneylender. In the typical moneylender stories, God was deemed to be the moneylender, and sinners were the debtors. The Pharisees would never refer to themselves as debtors, since they believed themselves to be the "righteous." But Jesus makes it clear with His use of this story that Simon is indeed a debtor.

Luke 7:41-43

"A moneylender had two debtors: one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they were unable to repay, he graciously forgave them both. So which of them will love him more?" Simon answered and said, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more." And He said to him, "You have judged correctly."

Now, Jesus speaks of the insults that Simon had subjected him to:

Luke 7:44-47

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 she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet. You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume. For this

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reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little."

This woman had attempted to enter into Jesus' suffering and shame with Him in order to reverse the insults. She attempted to do it with all three insults. It was obvious that this woman loved Jesus greatly. She was willing to endure any shame for His sake. Why did she love so greatly? She loved greatly because she had been forgiven much. She had been forgiven of things she believed to be unpardonable!

Luke 7:48-50

Then He said to her, "Your sins have been forgiven." Those who were reclining at the table with Him began to say to themselves, "Who is this man who even forgives sins?" And He said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Do you see what has happened here? Jesus has subtly declared Himself to be God. Remember? God is the moneylender – the one who forgives the debts. Jesus just forgave the woman's sins. The emphasis in the original language is, "I forgive your sins." The people at the table didn't miss this nuance. They said, "Who is this man who even forgives sins?" The answer? This man is God!

Jesus, who was God in the flesh, had healed Simon. Simon owed his life to Jesus, but Simon had not been forgiven. Why not? He wasn't forgiven simply because he didn't ask for forgiveness. And Simon didn't ask for forgiveness because he didn't think he needed it. If he owed anything to God, he reasoned it to be a trifling amount, perhaps as little as 50 denarii.

The woman, by contrast, knew her sin was great, so she loved Him greatly.

Here is the important thing. What Simon didn't realize is that there *are* no 50 denarii debtors. We *all* owe 500. We all owe a debt that is too great for us to repay. My sins may be different than your sins, but they are no less odious before God. Our debt is huge! It is impossible for us to pay it.

But here is the good news: God's grace is greater than our sin! You and I can be forgiven if we only ask.

So, I visited two women that day as a chaplain. One was 28, the other was 78. Their stories were identical. Both asked the same question. "So, tell me chaplain, is there any hope for someone like me?"

What was the answer? God's grace is greater than your sin! One prayer and your sin is gone! Jesus loves you like crazy, and you can be forgiven.

It's true for the two women. It was true for the prostitute. It's true for me. And it's true for you. God's grace is greater than your sin – and you, too, can be forgiven.

Why am I sharing this with you? During this series of meetings we are talking about going home. We are talking about the Second Coming of Jesus, the time when Jesus will come and take His children home. We are learning how to chart our course for eternity.

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Sometimes we know where we want to go, but we don't know how to chart the course that will take us there.

The journey to Heaven begins right here. It begins with acknowledging that you, too, owe a debt you cannot repay. Your sin has separated you from God and removed you from the opportunity to go to Heaven.

1John 1:8

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

You and I are sinners in need of grace. And without grace – without the forgiving grace of God – we will never see Heaven. But Jesus doesn't want it to be this way. That's why Jesus came to earth as a man.

John 3:16

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Jesus' life and sacrificial death has paid your debt. If you will accept His death as payment for your sins, you can spend eternity with Jesus.

Ephesians 2:8-9

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.

You cannot earn or deserve the grace of God. It is given to you as a free gift – a gift for the asking. Jesus has paid your debt.

So how is it that we can be in that group that goes to Heaven when Jesus returns?

Romans 10:9-11

If you declare that Jesus is Lord, and believe that God brought him back to life, you will be saved. By believing you receive God's approval, and by declaring your faith you are saved. Scripture says, "Whoever believes in him will not be ashamed."

Consider this your invitation to go to Heaven. If you want this – if you want the unspeakable gift of forgiveness for your sins, no matter how many or how bad they may be – then pray with me just now.