

The Awkward Dinner Guest

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[0 : 00] So we are week three in a six-week series, and we're looking at the topic of hospitality. In the first week, we looked at the sort of inherent hospitality of the gospel. That was week one.

The gospel is a reaching out, inviting in thing, the gospel. Last week, we looked at a command in Hebrews 13 to be hospitable, and we sort of talked about what that meant for us.

This week, we have this fascinating story, a beautiful story in Luke 7. Jesus is at a table. He's having a meal where you would often find him in the gospels.

And at the heart of this story is a contrast. There is a huge contrast between how the main characters treat Jesus in terms of hospitality.

Now, what I just said then will make sense shortly. So we're just going to dive into this and see what the passage is going to teach us. Now, if you looked in your Bibles at the heading there, the story is called—this is not in the original Greek.

[1 : 05] The story is called A Sinful Woman is Forgiven. But the story is not just about her, is it?

There are three main characters. There's Simon, the Pharisee. There's this unnamed woman.

And there's Jesus. And I thought the best way to sort of unpack the story would be to look at each of these characters individually. So let's look at Simon first.

Now, Simon, he is a Pharisee, as I've said. And in fact, the passage makes a point of highlighting that fact. And in the first few verses there, it says Pharisee three times. Luke wants it to be known. This guy's a Pharisee. He's a member of the religious elite. He's at the top of his game. He's at the top of the social ladder. He's supposed to be one of the good guys. He's a respectable member of the community.

Obviously, sort of a curious sort of guy. I mean, he invites Jesus to his soiree, his dinner party. Jesus, this young prophet who's making a few waves in the neighborhood.

[2 : 11] Simon probably considers himself a fairly open-minded sort of chap. Maybe he reads, you know, like the religious column in the newspaper every day. But you should read the story, though.

You see that it would seem that his interest in Jesus is fairly intellectual. Maybe he was one of these guys that's like, I don't know if you've ever met people like this, but he's kind of like, maybe Simon, this Pharisee, was like a collector of interesting people.

You know, he was interested in new ideas. And he has Jesus over for dinner as a curiosity for his friends to sort of question this kind of, this young upstart rabbi.

Though I think Simon is ultimately a shallow man, it would seem that he does keep things at arm's length.

And he's a head sort of a guy. He's not a heart guy. It's a tempting spirituality to have, I think, to keep things up here. To have interesting thoughts.

[3 : 18] To engage widely in spiritual conversations. To have convictions that you blog about.

But not convictions that actually really cost you anything. Because they're just kind of like interesting thoughts that you might have. We actually find out later, there's a kind of like a shock in the story.

We find out later that Simon isn't that friendly to Jesus. He's been quite rude to him, actually. In verses 44 to 46, there is this undercurrent of disrespect towards Jesus.

Although he probably likes him as a curious sort of figure, there's this undercurrent of disrespect.

Simon doesn't follow the standard hospitality protocols with regards to having someone over at your house for dinner.

You know, when somebody came to your house in those days, you would give them water to sort of wash their feet. You'd greet them with a kiss. You'd give them maybe some oil to sort of put their hair down.

[4 : 20] None of those basic honors Jesus receives. It's this bit of a hospitality slight. And perhaps Simon thought he could forego all that.

Because perhaps he thought he was doing Jesus a favor. Perhaps he thought he was doing Jesus a favor. Giving this young man an airing with the spiritual heavyweights of the community.

Now, how does this turn out for Simon? It's very ironic how it turns out for Simon, actually, in the end of the story. Like I said, Simon likes to keep things at a head level. And Simon gets what he wants. What does he get from Jesus?

He gets a seminar. He gets a lesson. He gets an academic experience. Jesus says to him in verse 40, Simon, I have something to tell you.

Which you should watch out when Jesus ever says that to you. If you find yourself in this situation. But, you know, Simon says, yeah, tell me. What are you going to say? What does Jesus give him?

[5 : 26] A case study. A parable. A parable about two people in debt. And we'll come to that later. So Simon gets a lecture.

And he also gets Jesus back. Jesus turns away from him. And turns towards the woman. And he says, do you see this woman?

It's a wonderful question. Do you see this woman? Under that question, there is assumption that he doesn't see this woman. He doesn't really see her.

To Simon, this woman is a disease that's infected his wonderful gathering. He completely misses her. He completely misunderstands what she's about.

Completely misinterprets what she is doing for Jesus. And, of course, completely misunderstands who Jesus is and what Jesus is about. So that's Simon.

[6 : 27] We have a few more things to say about him at the end there. Let's have a look at this woman, though. Like I say, she doesn't get a name. That's not because God doesn't like women. It's because the passage here is trying, is adding to the contrast.

You have this powerful man. Simon, the Pharisee. And you have this sinful woman. It's trying to draw the contrast out about where they were, where their stations were in society at that time.

And we do know a few things about this. It says that she's a woman of the city and a sinner.

Tradition holds that she was a prostitute. And I think that probably makes sense of the passage. We also know that she came to the party, that when she came to the party, she was already a Christian. I say that because in verse 48, when it says, your sins are forgiven, the grammar in the Greek says that she had already been forgiven. So this suggests that this woman had had some previous interaction with Jesus, had come to faith.

She was already a member of God's family, had heard about that Jesus was going to be at this thing and went in here and did her thing, which we'll get to in a moment. So she comes to this soiree, this dinner party, this upmarket function, and she enacts some radical hospitality.

[7 : 53] Now, before we explain that, it's probably good to have a little bit of background here.

These dinner parties were held. Wealthy folks had houses which had these big sort of open courts.

And the dinner would have been held sort of in that court at like a U-shaped table. And they would sort of essentially kind of lie down, resting on a left elbow, feet behind them, eating off a kind of a low table.

It sounds very uncomfortable to me, but it's kind of like what it did, like sardines or something, kind of lined up around this U-shaped table. And locals could actually come in. What would happen is locals could come in, and they couldn't sort of interact, but they could sort of stand by the wall and, you know, listen in to the important people having these wonderful conversations.

So this woman comes in, but she doesn't stand by the wall. Let's read what happens. It's beautiful.

Verse 37. And behold, a woman of the city who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at the table of the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment and standing behind at his feet weeping.

She began to wet his feet with her tears and wipe them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. So in contrast to Simon, this woman offers Jesus the hospitality that's extravagant, that is all about honoring Jesus.

[9 : 28] There's no theological talk here from her. It's just this unyielding devotion to Christ. And the rest of the guests would have been fairly outraged.

I mean, it all looked a bit sketchy. It would have looked pretty dodgy. I mean, we have this known prostitute coming in, playing with Jesus' feet, kissing his feet.

She lets down her hair, which back in the days is you just didn't do. Like it was... Like even today, like in the movies, you know the slow motion when a woman lets down her hair?

Like she said, I can't do it very well, but do you kind of... It doesn't have the same effect. I appreciate that, but you know. And the hair's like that.

It kind of looks a bit sort of, you know, like it looks a bit saucy. Like it looks a bit sort of like, ooh, this is a bit something's going on here, right? So we still have that now, that kind of sense.

[10:31] And so back in the days, it was like public nudity, a woman letting down her hair. It was completely inappropriate culturally back then. But the guests just misinterpreted.

They just thought, prostitute, fiddling with Jesus' feet, this is just awful. Ooh, ooh. At our nice dinner. Hence the question from Jesus.

Do you see this woman? Verse 44. Isn't that a... I love that question. Do you see this woman? I want you to see her. She is a forgiven woman.

That's why she's doing this, Jesus is trying to tell her. For years, she has carried an enormous burden of guilt. And she's free.

And she's whole. And she's incredibly thankful. And that's why she's doing that. Do you see this woman? You don't. You don't see her.

[11:34] Simon's completely unaware. He doesn't see her new status. That she's a member of God's community. Completely free. Free to love.

Free to love in such a way where she doesn't care what other people think. So to help Simon understand this, as I said, we come back to him. Jesus tells this parable.

Gives him the academic experience that he wanted. And it's not really what he wanted, as it turns out, I don't think. Because it's very cutting. Verse 41 to 43.

A certain money lender who had two debtors, one owed 500 denarii. Let's say it's about a year's wage, say. The other 50. When they could not pay, he canceled the debt of both.

Now, which of them would love him more? Simon answered, the one, I suppose. Even in his answer, he's not kind, I don't think. The one, I suppose, whom he canceled the larger debt.

[12:30] Jesus is trying to explain this woman's response by explaining the gospel to him. And there's three things I want to say about this. There's three major points to this parable, I think. I think the major, major, major point is that she's forgiven.

She's whole. She comes to Jesus with incredible vulnerability and thankfulness from this very deep place. That's why she does it. That's sort of the main thing.

So, of course, of course she loves Jesus extravagantly because she's been forgiven much. I think that's the major point. But there's a couple of other points that come out in this very, very short parable which are really important to us.

Let me just bring those to you. In the story, there are two people. They owe money, a large sum, smaller sum. It's pretty clear that it's meant to be read like this.

Simon owes 50. The woman owes 500. But the minor point here, they're both in debt. And that's what Simon doesn't understand. They are both in debt.

[13:30] Now, in those days, if you couldn't pay, you couldn't pay, you went to prison. It didn't matter how big the debt was. You're going to lose it all. Either way, both people are going down unless something happens.

It didn't matter. \$100, \$1 million, you're going down for it. If you couldn't pay, they're going to come and get you. Both people are in debt.

I heard the illustration the other day that talks about this. Because they're both, the debt here is spiritual death. They're both in a state of spiritual death. One looks not so bad.

One looks terrible. This is before the woman was a Christian, obviously. Here's an illustration I

heard the other day I thought was great. If a spider, a very poisonous spider, comes into your room at night and bites you on the neck and you never wake up.

You die in the midst of a beautiful dream. You're dead, right? Right. Person one. Person two.

Middle of the night, in the middle of a beautiful dream, lion jumps through your window, bites off your head, eats your leg, dismembers you.

[14:40] Which of them? It's not true. It's not a true story, crying child. So it completely rips you apart, right?

Rips you apart. They're gone now. That's good. Right. Which of these two people is more dead? One is pretty dead.

One is messy dead. But they're both dead. Simon lived a nice life. Respected. She led a very broken life.

They were both spiritually dead. He was nice dead. She was ugly dead. But they were both dead. Simon's faith, Simon's religion, his beliefs is, I don't need a savior. I just need a path.

I need some structures. I need some rules. I need some boundaries. I want some interesting teaching. I can save myself. And the parable says, no, Simon, you're lost. You're lost.

[15:45] Even though it looks nice, you're lost and you need a savior. Simon's religion said, I can be my own God because I'm good enough. Now the woman, or just to talk more broadly, the irreligious person basically does the same thing, actually.

And they'll say, I can be my own God, aka I can do whatever I want. I can live the most, the craziest, most immoral, most ridiculous life.

Flout all the rules and the life can become this complete mess. It's an ugly death. It's no more dead than the religious person's death, though. And that's the thing, he just couldn't see it.

He can't see. He just thinks he is just and she is lost. And it was the opposite. The truth was it was the opposite.

So the first point, the first minor point of the parable, they're both in debt. He couldn't see it. The second thing the parable makes clear is this. Forgiveness means somebody pays.

[16:51] Somebody always pays. Here's what I mean. This is the thing that she understands, but he didn't, I think, as well. In the parable, somebody pays. It's just not the debtor.

It's the moneylender. They both owe money to the moneylender. The moneylender forgives the debt. But it doesn't mean that all of a sudden, you know, like, denarii just starts falling from the sky for the moneylender.

And he magically, the moneylender doesn't magically recoup any of this money he's owed. The moneylender takes the hit. When he forgives, he absorbs it.

Forgiveness costs the forgiver. This is a great picture of the cross. God just can't forgive and pretend no evil ever occurred in the world.

He doesn't just sort of sweep sin under the carpet. Nothing to see here. Everything's okay. Sweep it under the carpet. No, there is a cost to God's forgiveness. And the cost is the cross.

[17:52] We pay for the evil in the world, for the sin of the world? Well, God pays. And the cross says God pays. The cross is God taking the hit for us.

Let me finish up here with a couple of short comments. This is a story of contrast. This is a bit of a summary here, this verse. It's a story of contrast. She knew she'd been forgiven.

And as a result, she lovingly and passionately loved Jesus. And it's wonderful. Psalm, on the other hand, had a religion with no tears, with no vulnerability, with no touching.

It crept him out that she touched him. He wanted an elevated discussion, not a personal faith in a person. He wanted a remote religion, one that he was in control of.

And we must be on guard for that in our own spiritual walk. That is death to our walk with Christ. The second thing, to finish up here.

[18:53] The story ends with a benediction. It's a benediction for this woman. He says, go in peace. Your sins have been given. Go in peace. Now, we don't know what happened to this woman. Simon, being this former notorious sinner, was she embraced by the community of God?

We don't know. Could they get past her messy background? We don't know what happens to her. But I come back to it again. I've been so struck by this very poignant question of Jesus in the last verse.

Simon, do you see this woman? I have to admit, many of us, I think, probably wouldn't see her. I don't know if I would.

I don't know if I would see her like Jesus saw her. One of the reasons we wanted to do a series on hospitality is because sometimes, I know for me, my idea of welcome, there's murkiness in there.

And my welcoming, my hospitality can be spoilt by hidden motives or sort of hidden agendas. You know, like, I want to impress, I like to be entertained by educated people and have lovely conversations.

[20:08] I like to be around people who are more successful than me. You know, you sort of feel like you're kind of moving up a social ladder or something. I want others to think, well, me, I mean, you know this. We want to gain something out of our hospitality.

This is not biblical hospitality. The Bible here is reminding us to see people through God's eyes. And it reminds us that we are here because God has called us. God, in an act of radical hospitality, has invited us into his family. And none of us earns it. And God only invites people who can never pay him back. None of us could pay God back, no matter how good we are. Folks, we are all in the same boat here. Let's love each other on that ground. That we are all sinners, saved by grace. Amen.