

Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity, Amen. The following sermon was written by Professor Paul Naumann, formerly Pastor of our sister congregation in Tacoma, WA. Today's text comes from Luke's Gospel, chapter seven, beginning with the 36th verse, as follows:

Then one of the Pharisees asked Him to eat with him. And He went to the Pharisee's house, and sat down to eat. 37 And behold, a woman in the city who was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at the table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of fragrant oil, 38 and stood at His feet behind Him weeping; and she began to wash His feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head; and she kissed His feet and anointed them with the fragrant oil. 39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he spoke to himself, saying, "This Man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner." 40 And Jesus answered and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." So he said, "Teacher, say it." 41 "There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon answered and said, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more." And He said to him, "You have rightly judged." 44 Then He turned to the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has washed My feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head. 45 You gave Me no kiss, but this woman has not ceased to kiss My feet since the time I came in. 46 You did not anoint My head with oil, but this woman has anointed My feet with fragrant oil. 47 Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little." 48 Then He said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." 49 And those who sat at the table with Him began to say to themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" 50 Then He said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace." So far the Holy Word.

In the Name of Jesus Christ, Who came to this world to "seek and save those who are lost," Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Did you like to do puzzles when you were little? Maybe you still do. When I was a kid I liked to do crosswords and word searches. I liked the ones where you had to find your way through a maze. But my favorite puzzles were the ones with hidden shapes in them. I remember they were in a magazine called 'Highlights' when we visited the dentist. They'd give you a complicated drawing to look at, and your task was to find, e.g., the fifteen flowers hidden somewhere in the picture. There were almost always one or two that I wouldn't be able to find. Then I'd look at the answer key and discover - of course - that the missing shapes had been staring me in the face the whole time. It seems so obvious when you know where to look!

Even grownups sometimes have trouble seeing something that's right in front of their face. In today's text, Jesus is trying to get a point across to a Pharisee named Simon. To do it, He gives Simon a picture to examine - a picture of two debtors suddenly released from their indebtedness. Then Jesus, in effect, asks Simon to find himself, hidden in that picture. Well, it's a puzzle that isn't too difficult to solve. And if you look closely enough, I think you may be able to find yourself hidden in that picture, as well! This morning's theme is a challenge:

FIND THE DEBTORS IN THIS PICTURE

I. Find Simon - a debtor who didn't realize how much he owed.

II. Find the woman - a debtor who realized her indebtedness and sought Christ's forgiveness.

III. Find yourself!

A man named Simon had invited Jesus to dinner. He was a Pharisee, one of the hypocritical Jewish leaders who were always looking for an opportunity to trap Jesus in His words and condemn Him. Jesus never turned anyone down - not even a Pharisee - so He entered Simon's house and took His place at the table. In those days people lay down to eat; they reclined on low couches with their heads toward the table and their feet away from it, leaning on their left elbow as they ate. That seems rather strange to us, but it was completely natural to them. Another custom that might seem strange - outside visitors frequently would stop by for a few minutes' conversation while the meal was going on. This was all very common. What happened in our text, though, was very uncommon -- and quite shocking to everyone present except Jesus.

A woman walked in and stood at Jesus' feet weeping. She was a woman everybody knew - a fallen woman, who had perhaps been guilty of adultery, or had had a child out of wedlock. The respectable people around the table were shocked, more so when they watched the woman washing Jesus' feet with her tears, and drying them with her hair. They couldn't believe it! Jesus never moved, while this person - who was so obviously a "sinner" - proceeded to kiss His feet, and anoint his feet with an expensive perfume.

Simon the Pharisee was outraged, but he didn't say so out loud. He thought to himself, "And this Jesus is supposed to be a prophet! If he really were a prophet, he'd know what kind of woman this was who is touching Him!" Jesus read his thoughts. He turned to him and said, "Simon, I have something to say to you." So he said, "Teacher, say it." So Jesus proceeded to tell him the Parable of the Two Debtors.

Two men owed money to the same moneylender; one man 50 denarii, the other 500. Now a denarius was a day's wages for a working man - say \$100 in today's money. That means one guy owed \$5000, the other \$50,000, which is quite a difference, if you think about it. Most of, I think, could come up with \$5000 in pretty short order if there was some sort of critical need. But I think most of us would have a lot of trouble getting \$50,000 together. That's a lot of money! So there was quite a difference in the size of the debts owed by these two men in the parable. However, they did have one thing in common: neither of them could pay.

If you've ever faced a financial deadline with no idea how you were going to pay the bill, maybe you can appreciate their misery - days of worry, nights of tossing and turning, dreading the coming day of reckoning. At last the day arrives, and both men go penniless to the moneylender to meet their doom. But something astonishing happens, something they never imagined -- out of the blue, the moneylender decides to cancel their debts completely, as if they had paid off the entire amount! Suddenly, both men found themselves free and clear, and all on account of the kindness and good will of their creditor. Now comes the point: Tell me therefore, Jesus asked the Pharisee, which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon answered and said, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more." And He said to him, "You have rightly judged."

"Well, that was a nice little story," Simon may have thought to himself, "but what's it got to do with this disreputable woman breaking in on my dinner party?" So Jesus explained it to him. He challenged him, in effect, to FIND THE DEBTORS IN THIS PICTURE. Simon himself was represented by a character in the parable, as was the woman. If we look close enough, I think we'll find that each of us is somewhere in that picture, too! FIND THE DEBTORS IN THIS PICTURE!

Simon is easy to find in the parable. He's the debtor who had less to forgive. Jesus cast him in that role because that's how Simon saw himself as compared with the woman. After all, he was an upstanding member of the community, very religious, in the synagogue every Sabbath, paid his taxes. Certainly, he was far above that wicked woman in terms of righteousness -- or so he thought! But notice the parable - in the parable, both debtors were bankrupt! Neither of them had the means with which to pay their debt. By the way, in those days they threw you in prison when you couldn't pay your debts; and it didn't matter how much you owed - one dollar or a million dollars, the punishment was the same. Likewise, the punishment for sin is the same for every sinner - eternal death. Simon's problem was that he didn't realize how much he owed. The Bible says "The soul that sins, it shall die." "And he who shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in ONE POINT, he is guilty of ALL!" -- Js 2:10.

Simon the Pharisee was ignoring his own sinfulness and his own need for a Savior. And the evidence for this was clear, said Jesus. Like the man in the parable, "he loved little." When the Lord Jesus came to his house, Simon didn't show love for him -- actually, he wasn't even very polite! For instance, it was common courtesy in those days for a host to greet his guests with a kiss on the cheek as they arrived; but, Jesus said, You gave me no kiss. Normally a servant would appear to wash the feet of the guests before dinner; But Simon, You gave me no water for my feet. For special guests, a few drops of scented oil would be placed on the forehead as a gesture of welcome; You did not anoint my head with oil. If Simon the Pharisee had known how much sin he actually had to forgive, he certainly wouldn't have omitted these polite customs. But he didn't know. His self-righteous nose was so high in the air that he couldn't see his own sin. His lack of love for Jesus proved that he was the worst kind of sinner: an unrepentant one, one who was teetering on the brink of hell!

Can you find yourself in this picture? All too often, I'm afraid, we too are like the debtor who loved little. So often we underestimate how far in debt to sin we've become. We explain, and rationalize, and minimize our responsibility for sin. Does it ever happen in our life that, instead of kissing Jesus' feet in repentant acknowledgement of our sin, we spit in His face by nonchalantly continuing to do what we know is wrong? Do we, like Simon, despise the Lord Jesus? Have we ignored the preaching of His Word, scorned His gift of forgiveness by missing the Lord's supper? Have we been guilty, like Simon, of looking down self-righteous noses at those of our neighbors who are "less holy" than we are?

-- You begin to feel it, don't you? The conviction that your sins are great, and that the punishment for sin is dreadful. Fear not. For there is good news in our text today as well.

FIND THE DEBTORS IN THIS PICTURE. What about the other one? The one who was forgiven a debt not of five thousand, but FIFTY thousand dollars? -Of course, Jesus was referring to the sinful woman at His feet.

The woman had no illusions about her own sinfulness - she knew how low she had fallen, and the danger that that sin posed to her eternal soul. Yes, she knew all about her sin -- but she also knew about HER SAVIOR. Maybe she had heard Jesus speak somewhere, or perhaps she had only heard a rumor about Him: "The Messiah has arrived!" someone may have whispered. "His name is Jesus of Nazareth, and He'll forgive the sins of anyone who comes to Him!" However it happened, the Holy Spirit had worked faith in this woman's heart. She knew that Jesus was the One who could lift the heavy burden of guilt off her sinful shoulders, and there wasn't anything that could keep her away from Him. She knew very well that Jesus was the creditor who could and would cancel her huge debt of sin.

She wasn't wrong about that, either. Jesus once said, "He who comes to Me I will by NO MEANS cast out!" While Simon and his other guests looked down their noses at her in disgust, Jesus looked upon her with loving compassion. And He granted her fondest wish. He said unto her, Your sins are forgiven... go in peace.

What a wonderful blessing Jesus gives - to suddenly be completely released from the bondage of sin! The woman must have felt the same way that that man did in the parable - the one who was most deeply in debt. Sudden release! Sudden freedom! Sudden salvation from certain ruin! Her gratitude for Jesus' forgiveness was plain for all to see. There was no pride to be seen as she knelt at Jesus' feet and washed them with her tears. There was no self-righteousness in the way she kissed His feet and anointed them with oil. There was only one thing - LOVE FOR HER LORD JESUS. This love was the evidence of her faith. Of the two characters in the parable, she was the one who was forgiven much, and therefore loved much.

Did I say, "two characters"? Actually, there are three. Because you are in there, too! " You've felt the same conviction of sin that that woman felt. You, in your life, have felt the same desperate longing for forgiveness. Don't be afraid - it's not too late! Come to Jesus today and lay all your sins at the foot of his cross. He is waiting for you with full forgiveness for each of your transgressions! When you're driven to cry out with Paul, "O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from this body of death?" - that's when the sweet words of Jesus are the most comforting thing on earth: "Come unto Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am meek and lowly of heart, and you shall find rest unto your soul. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.

If we find ourselves in this parable, let it be as the ones who were forgiven much, and loved much. Let us come to our Savior's feet, humbly confessing our sin; not boasting of our own accomplishments, but seeking the forgiveness only His grace can provide. We won't come away empty-handed. Are your sins many? So were that woman's, and she wasn't turned away! "Where sin did abound," our Lord says, "there grace did much more abound." It was for that sinful woman that Jesus walked the way of the cross. It was for you that He bore the Roman whip and crown of thorns. It was for me that He suffered the wounds of nail and spear. Our sins have been atoned for by Jesus; and our debt is cancelled. We have been forgiven much. My fellow Christians, let us with our lives show the world that we can love much, as well!

It is Jesus' final words that make this passage an especially comforting one. A famous Lutheran Theologian was once asked what he most wanted in life. He replied, "For myself, I want no more than what Christ gave to that sinful woman - the words, 'Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.'" My friends, if that sounds as good to you as it does to me, then the puzzle is solved. By the grace of God, we've found our place in the picture, and our eternal future is secure in Christ! AMEN.