

## A Friend of Sinners



David Wilkerson June 12, 2006

“The Son of man came... a friend of publicans and sinners” (Matthew 11:19). In Luke 7 we read the story of a Pharisee named Simon, who invited Jesus to his house to have a meal. This pious man also invited a select group of religious leaders like himself to join the supper table. Most likely, those guests were also Pharisees.

It was clearly a very religious gathering. Simon and his fellow Pharisees observantly kept the law, tithed meticulously and went to God’s house daily. They were scrupulously righteous in their own eyes, and they fancied themselves to be the holy men of their generation.

I’m not sure why any Pharisee would invite Jesus for dinner, let alone bring in other strict religious men to eat with him. A likely reason for the invitation was that Simon and his friends wanted to determine whether Jesus was a prophet or, really, to discount him as one. The passage makes clear that Simon knew of Jesus’ reputation as a prophet (see Luke 7:39).

In that culture, it was customary to greet each houseguest with a basin of water and a cloth, to wash dust from the visitor’s feet. (There were no paved roads then, so people’s feet were always dusty from their travels.) The guest was also greeted with a kiss on each cheek. Then he was given a small container of an oil-based ointment to rub through his hair, which was most likely in need of moisturizing.

As I read this passage, it seems that Simon had made arrangements to seat his other guests before Jesus arrived. And, almost certainly, those other guests were refreshed according to custom. After all, no Pharisee wanted a reputation among his peers for being inhospitable.

Yet the passage makes evident that Jesus received no such hospitality. All he got when he arrived was condescension. There was no water to wash the dust from his feet, no courtesy kiss on his cheek, no ointment for his head (see Luke 7:44–46). Instead, he was led to the reclining table as a lesser visitor, and he had to recline among the others with his feet still dusty.

Scripture doesn’t tell us what this group discussed around that supper table, but we can assume it had to do with theology. The Pharisees specialized in the subject, and they had tried to trick Jesus on other occasions with fanciful questions. But Christ knew what was in these men’s hearts, and it quickly became clear.

The next thing we read is that a woman of the streets “who was a sinner” crashed the scene. Somehow this notorious woman made her way past the servants of the house and walked up to the table where those religious men were dining. There she stood at Jesus’ feet, clutching an alabaster box of perfume and weeping.

Simon and his friends must have been too stunned to act. Indeed, they were probably paralyzed with shock. They recognized this woman as a great sinner in their city. (She may have been a prostitute.) I can imagine what those religious men were thinking: “How embarrassing, such a sinner breaking into this ‘Jesus meeting.’ We were talking theology here, and suddenly this streetwalker barged in.”

The sinful woman fell to her knees, cupped Jesus’ dusty feet in her hands, and began to bathe them with her

tears. At this, the Pharisees must have gasped, “Oh, no. How can Jesus allow this woman to touch him? It’s contrary to the law to have contact with anyone who’s unclean. He shouldn’t even let her touch his garments. Yet here he is allowing a prostitute to hold his feet.”

At that point, she did something unthinkable: she let down her hair. No decent Jewish woman would have performed such an act in public. Yet this disreputable woman used her hair to wipe Jesus’ feet clean. Finally, she opened the alabaster box and poured perfume on Christ’s feet.

The Pharisees were indignant now, thinking, “How shameful! This is eroticism. Jesus can’t possibly be a prophet. If he were truly sent from God, he would have known this woman is evil and stopped this display of flesh right away.” Indeed, Scripture says these were Simon’s exact thoughts (see Luke 7:39).

But Jesus read his host’s mind and announced, “Simon, I have somewhat to say unto thee” (7:40). I want to pause here to consider Jesus’ words to Simon. The fact is, after reading this story several times, I was stopped by the Holy Spirit and heard him whisper to me, “David, I have something to say to you in this story.” Indeed, I believe the Lord has something to say to all of us here.

I felt prompted to put myself in this story and to examine myself in the light of its truth. Immediately, I saw there are two spirits at work in the passage: the spirit of Phariseeism, and Christ’s spirit of forgiveness and restoration. The Pharisees exuded a judgmental, holier-than-thou spirit, and they were judging both the notorious woman and Jesus. But Christ manifested the spirit of forgiveness and restoration as he told Simon he had something to say to him.

I confess that as I placed myself in this scene, my first thought was, “Of course, I have Jesus’ spirit. I’m a friend of sinners. I have spent years in ministry to addicts and alcoholics, to prostitutes, to the worst of sinners. I don’t have any Phariseeism in me.”

Or so I thought. Indeed, most of us think, “I’m not that kind of believer. I don’t judge others.” Yet it is the spirit of Phariseeism that reasons, “I’m not like others. I am more righteous, more holy.” At times most of us have allowed envy, jealousy or anger to color our opinions of others.

To me, the best definition of a Pharisee is “one who monitors the sins of others while justifying himself.” Jesus illustrates this by pointing to a Pharisee’s prayer in the Temple: “God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers...I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess” (Luke 18:11–12).

Simply put, the spirit of Phariseeism says, “Everyone else is in error. All around, I see nothing but sin and compromise. Yet I have it right. I’m a defender of the truth.”

What was it that Jesus had to say to Simon?

Christ told Simon a parable about two men who owed a creditor money: “The one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most?” (Luke 7:41–42).

Simon seemed to get the message. The next verse reads, “Simon answered and said, I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most” (7:43). What exactly was Christ’s message to this Pharisee? In short, he was telling Simon, “You’re the one who needs forgiveness.”

You see, when Jesus first told him, “I have something to say to you,” he meant, “I want to show you what’s in your heart. This moment around the table isn’t about this woman who has come in here. It’s about you, Simon. It’s about the spirit in you, your religious pride, your arrogance, your judgmental spirit, your lack of compassion.”

I believe Jesus was telling the proud Pharisee, in essence: “This so-called ‘wicked’ woman knows the depths of her depravity. She knows she deserves judgment. And she has admitted her hopelessness and sees herself as the worst of sinners. The very reason she came here and did this is because she’s so grateful for mercy and cleansing.

“This woman sees your disdain for her, Simon. She hears the whispers among all of you and feels your judgmental wrath. But she won’t judge you in return. No, she will love you in spite of it. That’s because she knows what she has been forgiven of. She is capable of loving everyone else, because she has been so loved in spite of her own

sins. Now she feels she has no right to judge others.

“But you, Simon, don’t see the depravity of your own heart. You sit in judgment of this broken woman, but you don’t see that you need as much, or even more, mercy. You think she needs much forgiveness and that you need little. But that isn’t so.”

Consider what Jesus had previously said to the Pharisees: “That which cometh out of the man, that defileth the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: all these evil things come from within, and defile the man” (Mark 7:20–23).

In my fifty years of ministry, I have seen so much foolishness, so much that’s false, so much merchandising of the gospel, so much extortion and false doctrine. And I know that all of it has grieved the Lord. Jesus drove out the moneychangers in his day and he exposed what was false. But he reserved his fiercest denunciations for Phariseeism. The gospel accounts convince me that there was nothing Christ hated more.

My prayer in recent weeks has been for the Lord to show me the Phariseeism in my own heart.

I have prayed, “Jesus, before I preach another sermon about the condition of your church — before I say another word about the shortcomings of another ministry — please, show me my own heart. Holy Spirit, mighty surgeon, cut deep down to my cancer and x-ray my heart. Show me the pride and hardness in my own heart.”

Recently I read that there are 3,700 Pentecostal denominations in America and some 27,000 worldwide. In addition to these, there are thousands of charismatic groups and small denominations. In Brazil and Argentina, Nigeria and other African countries, there are multiplied hundreds of these denominations. Baptists are not far behind in the number of various denominations.

Many of these denominations are doctrinally sound, do a great work, and are raising up spiritual churches. They’re preaching the gospel powerfully and winning great numbers of souls. But there is also much that is blasphemous, many false prophets, and much begging for money from the poor.

So it was in the days of Christ. There were so many types of Pharisees, so many splinter groups of Saducees, so many opposing priests. False doctrines abounded, widows were robbed and the elderly had their houses stolen, all for “religious” reasons.

Jesus made it clear that one day the perpetrators of such sinful acts will all be judged. They will each stand before him on that day and account for what they did. Yet while Jesus ministered on earth, he refused to spend time monitoring these people’s affairs. He was not yet sitting on his judgment seat; instead, he placed his focus squarely on the work of his kingdom.

In the coming days, we’re going to see a rise in foolishness and falsity in the church such as never before. Angels of light will emerge, demon-possessed preachers and evangelists whose speech is glib, articulate and enticing. These men will be mighty in their presence and smooth in preaching a word that is wholly devil-inspired.

Not long ago I saw one such evangelist on television holding a fund-raising drive. He told a wild story about a woman who gave \$100 to his ministry and within weeks she received an inheritance of more than \$800,000.

I was glued to my chair in shock as I watched this horrible enticement go on. Soon I was burning in anger, and I shouted to the heavens, “I’m going to expose that man!” Yet, the next thing I knew the Lord was whispering to my heart: “No, you’re not. You’re going to leave him alone. The blind lead the blind, and they all end up in the ditch.”

I truly believe my desire was to defend the gospel, but I was reacting in my flesh. The fact is, Jesus has already made a statement on this very subject. His disciples came to him one day saying, “Master, you’re offending the Pharisees by what you teach.” Jesus answered them, “Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch” (Matthew 15:14).

I have been compelled to deliver many a strong word during my years of ministry, words that came against the false and the foolish. I’m not backing away from that, though I know at times I’ve been misguided in my zeal. Yet things are going to become so bad, with so much that grieves the Lord, we could easily spend all our time trying to put out those fires. Christ tells us that is not to be our primary focus. Instead, he gives us a clear word about what

our purpose is to be in these last days.  
We are called to restore the fallen.

Consider the other spirit that was manifested in Simon the Pharisee's house that night: *the spirit of forgiveness and restoration*. Scripture tells us, "And he turned to the woman" (Luke 7:44). Here I see Jesus showing us where our focus must be: not on false religion, not on false teachers, but on sinners.

Looking away from Simon and his guests, Jesus turned to the woman and said, "Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much.... Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace" (7:47, 50). Jesus was revealing here why he came: to befriend and restore the fallen, the friendless, those overtaken by sin. And he is saying to us today, "This is what my ministry is all about."

Likewise, says the apostle Paul, this is what our focus must be. We are not to judge a fallen person, but to seek to restore them and remove their reproach. In fact, he made this the test of true spirituality: *a readiness to restore a fallen person*. "If a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted" (Galatians 6:1).

When Paul uses the phrase "considering thyself," he's asking the Galatians to recall their own past needs for mercy. In other words: "What has Christ forgiven in you? What reproach in your past did mercy remove? Did the Lord cover those sins? Now consider all the unkind deeds and thoughts in your daily life, and your own need for Christ's ever-flowing grace and forgiveness."

The theologian John Calvin said, in essence: the Christian who judges the sins of others, while guilty himself, is like a convicted criminal who ascends the judge's seat to convict another. Hence Paul's warning: "Considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted."

Paul then quickly adds this instruction of Christ's way: "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (6:2). What is the law of Christ? It is love: "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another" (John 13:34).

The truth is that sin is man's heaviest burden. We simply cannot overlook or condone sin in others. But there is a way to help bear up others in their burden, and that is gentle, loving kindness and correction. We are to restore repentant brothers in gentleness and love.

Paul wrote to Timothy about how to deal with those who are in "the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will" (2 Timothy 2:26). He instructs, "The servant of the Lord must not strive [with them]; but be gentle... apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; and that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil" (2:24-26).

It is important that we fully understand what Paul is saying in this one verse.

As we read Paul's instruction to "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ," we have to ask ourselves: "Do I truly want to live pleasing to the Lord, fulfilling his Word?"

Oh, the many, many ways I have tried to please God. I've prayed, "Oh, Lord, prostrate me before your presence. Let me weep with brokenness. Make me contrite, stir my spirit, let no lukewarmness infect me. Give me a greater passion for your Word."

All of these things are good, they're scriptural, and doing them makes us feel good, because we know we're doing things that please God. Yet Paul says, "Here is what the Lord wants most from us. Here is his word on how to fulfill the law of Christ: *Bear the burdens of others. Restore the fallen.*"

I can't shake off these words from Paul. They leave me asking, "Lord, how exactly do I bear someone else's burden? I can't bear another's sin; that is Christ's work alone. Yet, Lord, I hear you saying that this is what you desire. Therefore it ought to be the one thing I know how to do, but I don't. Where are the directions?"

This is what I hear from the Holy Spirit: I'm to ask him to dig out all my pride, all my envy and jealousy, all my judgmentalism and misguided zeal. And I'm to ask him to give me his spirit of forgiveness and forbearance. In short, I am to seek the spirit that Jesus had in Simon's house.

When we have such a spirit in us, it works like a mighty magnetic force to draw those who need God's mercy. It's what drew the notorious woman to the spirit of compassion in Jesus. We know it is the Holy Spirit's work to woo and draw sinners to Christ. But why would the Holy Ghost send a person needing forgiveness to us if we don't have the spirit of forgiveness?

The great evangelist George Whitefield and John Wesley were two of the greatest evangelists in history. These men preached to thousands in open meetings, on the streets, in parks and prisons, and through their ministries many were brought to Christ. But a doctrinal dispute arose between the two men over how a person is sanctified. Both doctrinal camps defended their positions strongly, and some vicious words were exchanged, with followers of both men arguing in unseemly fashion.

A follower of Whitefield came to him one day and asked, "Will we see John Wesley in heaven?" He was asking, in effect, "How can Wesley be saved if he's preaching such error?"

Whitefield answered, "No, we will not see John Wesley in heaven. He will be so high up near Christ's throne, so close to the Lord, that we won't be *able* to see him."

Paul called this kind of spirit "enlargement of heart." And he had it in himself as he wrote to the Corinthians, a church in which some had accused him of hardness and who had sneered at his preaching. Paul assured them, "O ye Corinthians, our mouth is open unto you, our heart is enlarged" (2 Corinthians 6:11).

When God enlarges your heart, suddenly so many limits and barriers are removed. You don't see through a narrow lens anymore. Instead, you find yourself being directed by the Holy Spirit to those who are hurting. And the hurting are drawn to your compassionate spirit by the Holy Ghost's magnetic pull.

So, do you have gentleness of heart when you see hurting people? When you see a brother or sister who has stumbled into sin...who is having problems...who may be headed toward divorce...are you tempted to tell them what's wrong in their lives? They don't need to be told that, because most likely they already know. What Paul says such hurting ones need is to be restored in a spirit of meekness and gentleness. They need to encounter the spirit that Jesus demonstrated at Simon's house.

Here is the cry of my heart for my remaining days: "God, take away all narrowness from my heart. I want your spirit of compassion for those who are hurting...your spirit of forgiveness when I see someone who's fallen...your spirit of restoration, to take away their reproach.

"Take away all exclusiveness from my heart, and enlarge my capacity to love my enemies. When I approach someone who's in sin, let me not go in judgment. Instead, let the well of water springing up in me be a river of divine love for them. And let the love that's shown to them kindle in them a love for others." ?

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