

When Jesus Came To Dinner

by Steve Zeisler

Many of us are familiar with C. S. Lewis' series of stories for children, 'The Chronicles of Narnia.' In these stories, Lewis, who was perhaps the most effective Christian apologist of this century, recounted biblical truth in a land of talking animals. In Narnia, Christ is represented as Aslan is a powerful, unpredictable, remarkable lion. The last book in the series deals with the end of time in the land of Narnia, and readers are reminded that, 'Asian is not a tame lion.' The anti-- Christ produces a fake lion-- a donkey clothed in a lionskin-- which fools many people, but the remnant will not be taken in because they refuse to believe that the real Aslan would ever appear as the docile, inadequate figure presented before them. Their Lord is no tame lion.

As in Narnia, the last thing in the world Christians should be deceived about is the notion that our Lord is predictable, routine, or limited. Following him is always an adventure. We can never know ahead of time what encounters he has in store for us. The book of Galatians (which we have been studying throughout the summer), is vivid testimony to the greatness of this far from tame, far from predictable Lord who calls us to freedom, to a faith that comes from the heart rather than the flesh, a faith that is made manifest in love, not pride.

Today we will look at a passage in chapter 7 of the book of Luke which illustrates in some measure the theme of the book of Galatians, the theme of the difference between worldly religion and the gospel, the difference between external performance and a truly changed heart. We should feel right at home as we look at this passage, as this incident occurred when a group of people gathered together to eat. If there's one thing we're good at as a congregation, I feel, it's getting together to eat! Luke 7:36:

Now one of the Pharisees was requesting Jesus to dine with him. And he entered the Pharisees's house, and reclined at table. And behold, there was a woman in the city who was a sinner; and when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster vial of perfume, and standing behind Jesus 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.

We should not confuse this incident with a similar occurrence which took place later in Jesus' life-- at the beginning of the last week of his life, in fact- as the other three gospels, most notably John 12, record. To set the scene, it will be helpful to us to know something of the customs of the day when a guest entered a home. In New Testament times it was customary for a host to have one of his slaves wash the feet of his guest. The host greeted his guest with a kiss of greeting, and in another gesture of cleansing, applied olive oil to the guest's head. As we will see, however, Simon neglected to do carry out these common practices.

What happened, actually, was that a woman (a 'sinner,' a prostitute, she is called in verse 37), performed this ritual cleansing of Jesus' feet. In that day, people ate as they reclined full-- length on couches, thus this woman had ready access to the feet of Jesus. But she carried out an extravagant form of the courtesies to which Jesus was entitled as a guest in this Pharisee's house. In New Testament times, the Pharisees were a consecrated laity, a proud, separated people who set an extremely strict standard of behavior for themselves which kept them apart from everybody else. It was to this haughty, self-- righteous group that Jesus later addressed these words, 'Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the front seats in the synagogues, and the respectful greetings in the market places. Woe to you! For you are like concealed tombs, and the people who walk over them are unaware of it.' (Luke 11) Simon, one of those Pharisees (William Barclay labeled him, 'a collector of celebrities'), was the one who invited Jesus to dine with him.

But Simon did not even extend to his guest the rudimentary courtesies which we have described, although he did invite Jesus to his home. Jesus was a man of action who stirred the interest of many people. As such, he was one whom this 'collector of celebrities' sought to have in his home so as to boost his own sense of

importance and notoriety. This incident brings to my mind what it must have been like 30 years ago when the color barrier was broken in major league baseball. Then, white owners of baseball teams began to hire notable black players to play on their teams, but they made them travel in the back of the bus, they made them stay in seedy hotels, eat their meals separate from the white players, etc. While the owners and the fans loved the skills and the entertainment which the black players brought to the game, they paid little respect to them as men. That is somewhat of the attitude which Simon had for Jesus when our Lord dined at his home on this occasion. While Jesus was a very interesting celebrity, he was not worthy of Simon's respect.

Then, right in the middle of the dinner, a woman of the streets entered the house of this Pharisee and extravagantly poured out upon Jesus the respect denied him by his host. Simon had erred in his assumption that he was in control of events at his house and that he could use Jesus to boost his own self-- image. No, Aslan is not a tame lion.

Jesus did not allow himself to be used in that way, but rather turned the tables on the whole intent behind the invitation to dinner and instead ministered to those present in a powerful way. That is what Christians always ought to expect from our Lord: that when he is present he is in charge, no matter what plans we have in mind to use him to our own ends. Simon was a smug hypocrite who made the big mistake of inviting a lion to dinner. Let's see what happened. Verse 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." And Jesus answered and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he replied, 'Say it, Teacher.'" "A certain moneylender had two debtors: one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they were unable to repay, he graciously forgave them both. Which of them therefore 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." And 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 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." And He said to her, "Your sins have been forgiven." And those who were reclining at 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. "

Having arranged the entire occasion to benefit himself, Simon reasoned, on observing this remarkable action by the woman, 'If this man were truly a prophet he'd know that this woman is a sinner.' Then a very disconcerting thing happened: Jesus began to answer Simon's thoughts! How Simon must have been taken off guard by this development! He was thinking something to himself, and Jesus, reading his thoughts, began to react to what he was thinking. Our Lord's answer to Simon's objection, which has two parts to it, is striking. First, he clearly declare!) that Simon's analysis is wrong: the woman is not a sinner; and secondly, he announces, somewhat more subtly, that there remains at least one sinner at the table, and that is Simon himself. So while this pompous Pharisee is thinking that Jesus has certain inadequacies as a prophet, he doesn't really know what's going on. Jesus begins the process of enlightening him and answering his objection.

This woman had a reputation as a woman 'of the city,' a sinner. But that reputation was not up to date; it stopped short of certain knowledge and information that Jesus had. Jesus declared, 'I'm going to interpret for all present what you have just seen in this house, what is actually happening as this woman wets my feet with her tears and dries them with her hair, and as she extravagantly pour, expensive perfume on my feet.'

The woman utterly disregarded the expense of her action; she had no sense of propriety in sniffing and crying during this dinner party; she gave up all thought of modesty as she lowered her hair (an act no Jewish woman would do except in private), to wipe the feet of Jesus. She betrayed by her actions, by her gratitude for Jesus, that she did not even consider the fact that there were others present in the room. On seeing this, Jesus

declared, 'This woman has experienced a forgiveness for sin so remarkable that it has moved her to perform these incredible acts of love.' She had somehow learned, perhaps through listening as Jesus taught the crowds that followed him, perhaps by reading the Scripture, or by the inner witness of the Holy Spirit -- she may even have had a personal conversation with Jesus sometime in the past -- by some means she knew that God had entered His creation to save sinners and that she was forgiven. On realizing that truth she had felt exalted, she had been utterly changed, she had experienced freedom, wholeness, a sense of purpose. Most of all, that realization had awakened in her a boundless love for the One who had saved her. Thus, as he observed her actions, Jesus could see that she was no longer a sinner, that she had accepted forgiveness. 'A sinner would not act as this woman acts,' he said to Simon, 'she acts like someone whose burden has been lifted. You are wrong to think she is a sinner.'

Our Lord then went on to make two wonderful observations for her benefit. First, 'Your sins have been forgiven' (verse 48). In saying this he made public that fact; and secondly, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace (verse 50). Here Jesus is not using the word 'save' in the sense that she has come to eternal salvation. (That is what verse 48 is saying.) What he is saying, rather, is, 'You have lived a life of rebellion, ruin and tragedy, a life that has degraded yourself and others. But now your faith has saved you; it has made your life worth living again and put you on course for a life of value.'

History does not record as its final judgment that this woman was a prostitute. Scripture shows that she was a worshiper of the Lord Jesus, and that will be her reputation throughout eternity. Simon was wrong in judging Jesus as a fallible prophet. He was acting on outdated information in calling the woman a sinner. She had been forgiven and no longer had to carry about with her the burden of her past reputation.

In saying this, however, Jesus has added an element that is much more subtle. In the story of the two debtors, he said that one owed a lot and one owed a little. When he said that the woman had given evidence by her love for him that she had been forgiven much, he also said (verse 47), 'He who is forgiven little, loves little.' All through the account of his explaining what he saw in this woman's actions he keeps in the forefront the fact that there was another person in this story; one who loved less, one who had not been forgiven much, one who still had a problem. We can sense the appeal of Jesus to Simon, 'Yes, there is a sinner at the table, Simon, but it's not this woman.'

Simon must have grown very uncomfortable as these events unfolded. Jesus had proved by his statements that he was indeed a prophet. Any notion to the contrary was down the drain at this point. In fact, it was becoming clear that he knew a great deal about everybody present at the dinner. The issue now changed from a questioning of Jesus' credentials as a prophet to the incredulous question of verse 49, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?' Suddenly their questions reach a very profound level. It's no longer, 'Is this man worthy of the title spokesman for God?' but, 'Maybe he's worthy to bear the name of God himself.' The dinner party has taken an incredible turn. Instead of basking in the light of having a very interesting dinner guest to entertain him and his other guests, Simon is warned of his own lovelessness, and is treated in his own house with less regard than a woman of the streets! He is being forced to face up to the fact that the sinner at the table is not the woman, but he himself.

Last week marked the tenth anniversary of the resignation of Richard Nixon from the Presidency of the United States. Following the Watergate debacle, for the first time in our history our President had to resign in disgrace, an unindicted co-- conspirator of foul crimes. One of his chief co-conspirators was Charles Colson, one of the inner ring of Nixon's henchmen. But at a certain point in his life, Colson began to deal with God without any regard whatever for what others thought. He realized that eternal issues were at stake. He stopped being concerned for 'damage control' or for his own reputation. Realizing his need for God, he counseled even with those who had been his enemies and learned from them. He went to prison and sought from the Lord what he needed to do. In the same way as this woman acted, Charles Colson stopped wondering what his actions would look like, stopped caring about his reputation in history. Now Charles Colson is rehabilitated. Even non-- Christians recognize that he is a transformed man. On humanitarian grounds alone he is making a contribution to this country. Richard Nixon, on the other hand, has spent most of the past ten years trying to control the damage to his reputation and making moves to reestablish himself. His admissions of guilt are always couched in the language of self-protection. He remains a tragic figure, one whom this nation cannot embrace again. Even those who want to do so can't wholly believe him.

Jesus said there were two kinds of people present at dinner that evening. There was one whose sin had once burdened her, and whose forgiveness had freed her. She had come to him, filled with gratitude and love for him, without regard for how she was coming across to others. But there was another present who was filled with self-- love. He was attempting to deal with his sin all by himself. He, not the woman, was the tragic figure that evening.

I would like to suggest three applications we can deduce from this story. The first thing we should learn from it is that Jesus will not allow himself to be used to promote human pride. If you invite Jesus to dinner, expect him to take over the party. Aslan is not a tame lion. If we try to use the name of Christ, the cause of Christ or the people of Christ to our advantage we will find that to be a singularly unsuccessful endeavor. Jesus always remains in control. If we intend to speak with him, to invite intimacy with him and to follow him we had better do so on his terms, not ours. It's dangerous to invite Jesus to dinner if we don't intend that he be Lord of the dinner.

Secondly, a profound general principle of life is found in verse 47: ' . . . her sins, which are many, have been forgiven . . . ' That fact was evidenced by her love: the one who was forgiven much loves much. ' . . . But he who is forgiven little, loves little.' Jesus is pointing out the correlation between the freedom to love and the depth of forgiveness. That principle operates in every sphere. Jesus told the story about a moneylender and his two debtors, and Simon interpreted the story correctly. That principle is valid even in economics: the greater the debt that is forgiven, the more gratitude the individual who is forgiven feels. Modern psychologists have taken years of study to discover the truth of the simple statement that Jesus made on his own authority: that love relationships are established as forgiveness is extended. Forgiveness and love go together. This is advanced psychology offered for free by Jesus at a dinner in the house of a Pharisee.

Far too often Christian leaders are called upon to minister in marriage and other relationships that have fallen apart. Time and time again, after many hours of discussion with both partners, it becomes obvious to all concerned that love is built on forgiveness, a genuine, from-- the-- heart offering and acceptance of forgiveness. Both hypocrites and blind, misguided people who don't know what they're doing deny this need for forgiveness. They refuse to repent, and they refuse to accept forgiveness because they deny they have a problem.

On the other hand, there are those who proclaim their superiority. They demand what they perceive to be their rights and they refuse to forgive. Even when the one who needs forgiveness is willing to receive it, these are the people who hold back hardheartedly and refuse to extend forgiveness. In either case love is destroyed. Forgiveness offered and forgiveness received is the foundation of love. All who have experienced hurt and uncertainty in love relationships would do well to examine whether they have refused to forgive or to acknowledge that they themselves need forgiveness.

The third application I would like to suggest is an extension of the second, and that is that love and forgiveness are supremely at the heart of our relationship with God. How many of us have recently had 'a quiet time,' a time of intimacy with the Lord that even approaches the experience of this woman of the streets at Simon's dinner party? Have we had a time when cost was unimportant, where we ran to him without reservation, where we totally forgot other people and other circumstances so filled were we with a sense of his presence? We should be willing to ask ourselves why not. 'He who is forgiven little, loves little,' were Jesus' words to Simon. If we have begun to devalue the forgiveness offered to us in the cross of Christ it naturally follows that our love for him will also begin to diminish. Those who, like Simon, have sought to lower the standard of love that the Scripture impresses upon us don't even feel they need to be forgiven. Perhaps there are some among us who feel this way, and thereby place little value on the forgiveness they have received in Christ.

Others deliberately lie to themselves. They don't want their true selves exposed, so they refuse to repent and be forgiven. Yet others love their sin so much they are unwilling to make the changes that always result from real repentance and forgiveness. Then there are those who just can't accept and believe that God loves them. As much as they long to be forgiven, they have such low self-- esteem they cannot believe they are valued enough to be forgiven. In each of these examples, however, the reason behind their lack of intimacy with Jesus is their inadequate sense of what it means to be forgiven their sins. ' He who is forgiven little, loves little.'

The dinner at Simon's house began with the host's musings that Jesus had critical shortcomings as a prophet but by the end of the meal the guests were asking incredulously, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?' They had just observed the phoniness of Pharisaism exposed by a real love relationship between a forgiven sinner and her Savior.

May God grant us the experience of forgiveness for our sins that brought forth such an expression of love.

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