

Touched by a Sinner: Was the Woman in Luke 7 a Prostitute or Just Friendly?

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Note = Greek words are transliterated until I can download SBL font to my new computer.

In Luke 7:36-50 the woman who washed and anointed Jesus' feet was labeled a "sinner" by the Pharisaical host. The text does not suggest what type of a sinner the woman was. While some scholars suggest that the text only indicates that the woman was repentant and not necessarily a woman in prostitution, Averin Ipsen's work with women in the sex industry has shed light not only on the nature of the woman but also on her motives for becoming very intimate with Jesus' body.¹ In addition to this it seems that the Lucan author focused less on the identity of the woman, or her "sin," and more on the response of Jesus as well as his host. What were the implications of Jesus' refusal to send her away and his allowing her to continue with, what may have seemed to ancient readers, inappropriate touching of his body?

The story of the "sinful woman" in Luke 7:36-50 has become a popular story involving the mercy and grace of Jesus in the presence of a woman of "ill repute." It has also become a story suggesting that *mercy is well received in the heart of one who is more sinful than another pious or judgmental person of the faith*. When the story is retold through film/media, the sinful woman is represented as an uninvited guest, who barges in during a private meal scene.² She is unwelcome first because she was sinful, second because *she was uninvited*. She became a symbol of courage and determination in the face of rejection, condemnation, and self-righteousness. Jesus offered forgiveness because she, out of her grief or love, honored him with

¹Averin Ipsen, *Sex Working and the Bible* (Oakville, CA: Equinox, 2009).

²James Malcolm Arlandson, *Women, Class, and Society in Early Christianity*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 160; Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 684. Ken A. Van Til stated that she "bursts on the scene." "Three Anointings and One Offering: The Sinful Woman in Luke 7:36-50," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 15:1 (2006): 75. Charles H. Cosgrove indicates that the woman walks to where Jesus was reclining at the table. "A Woman's Unbound Hair in the Greco-Roman World, With Special Reference to the Story of the 'Sinful Woman' in Luke 7:36-50," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124/4 (2005): 675. Carolyn Osiek suggests that the open door of the house made it possible for her to "drop in" unannounced. "Archaeological and Archaeological and Architectural Issues and the Question of Demographic and Urban Forms," *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Approaches*, Ed. Anthony J. Blasi, Jean Duhaime, and Paul-Andre Turcotte (NY: Alta Mira, 2002), 97. Bailey also indicates that the woman would have been able to freely enter from the street. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*, Combined Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 2:5.

her tears and expensive oil. This interpretation also assumes that the woman must have had a previous encounter with Jesus where she was forgiven and felt the need to reward this act.

The story also *provided a challenge to those who were self-righteous*. In Luke's account Simon, the Pharisee, became a man who mysteriously invited Jesus to his home and responded to this woman's advances and boldness by criticizing Jesus, who represented acceptance. The story of the two individuals who had their debts/sins forgiven became a sharp critique of those like Simon, who placed their confidence in themselves rather than God's grace.

While these two lessons have provided countless teachings, parables, and sermons for many, it seems that two issues remain unanswered. First, *why was the woman present?* Her boldness and shameless advances to Jesus provide Midrashic discussions assuming she must have encountered Jesus previously and found salvation or at least an opportunity to be forgiven.³ However, the text does not tell us why she is there, nor does it explain her emotional response to Jesus. Even more her presence should cast suspicion on the host rather than the woman herself.

Second, *one can ask why Simon made no attempt to remove this uninvited guest, especially since she was female and a sinful one as well*. The text, which is quite different from our media representations, gives no indication that she was unwelcome, uninvited, or needed to use any boldness or force to touch Jesus. What she did may have pushed the boundaries of appropriate behavior by any modest female, *but no attempt was made to stop her*. She seemed to freely touch this male in his shameful and honorable zones, yet no critique is made concerning her advances.

³Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 242.

These questions have caused me to take another look at this story not as a discussion of forgiveness and boldness, which is a theme in Luke; but one of conspiracy, conflict, and unexpected grace from a Savior who, regardless of people's actions—can offer forgiveness without any reason.

Luke's Story and the Other Gospels

I would like to begin with a discussion of Luke's story considering the other Gospels. This story (or its common theme/*chrei*/account) occurs in all four Gospels. Matthew's and Mark's accounts (Matt 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; John 12:1-8) occur after the temple discourse, in preparation for Jesus' death (titled "The Anointing of Jesus" in many English translations), and before the last supper. Matthew, Mark, and John also locate this event at Bethany. Matthew and Mark parallel each other in this story (suggesting that Mark was a source for the writer) closely naming the host Simon (as did Luke) but using the adjective "leper" rather than Luke's "Pharisee." John did not name the host but claimed that Lazarus, Mary, and Martha were present (John 12:2-3). However, Matthew, Mark, and John describe the pouring of oil/perfume upon Jesus' head by the woman (John wrote that Mary did this, while Matthew and Mark leave her unnamed) and explain that the oil/perfume was expensive. The conflict in the story was between the disciples and the woman, claiming that the act was a waste and could have been better served in their benevolence ministry. The host is absent from the discussion as well as the story.

Luke does share some similarities with all three Gospels. As with Matthew and Mark the woman brought an alabaster jar of oil/perfume and anointed Jesus' feet. While John describes her anointing Jesus' feet and head, Matthew and Mark focus the action upon Jesus' head. In the

Lucan account Jesus host neglects to anoint his head, however the woman only uses her oil for his feet.

Luke Timothy Johnson suggests that in the twenty-three points of the common story, Luke only agrees with four of the points in the other three Gospels, whereas the synoptics agree on nine points.⁴ For Johnson, Luke alone has twelve unique points in the story suggesting that Luke's account may describe a different incident.⁵ While this is possible, I will focus upon three major themes in the story.

First, as Marshall suggests, *Jesus' conflict in the story is between he and the Pharisees/religious leaders rather than the disciples.*⁶ Arlandson indicates that this is a tension building theme in Luke which will culminate at the temple in Jerusalem.⁷ The story of the "sinful woman" in Luke 7 continues that theme when Simon the Pharisee neglects and criticizes Jesus due to his behavior during a meal.

Second, *there is a strong contrast between the woman being at Jesus' feet and the host neglecting to honor his head.* Feet (*podas*) is mentioned six times in this text while head (*kephale*) is mentioned only once. The head is a more honorable zone than the feet, however the woman embraces Jesus feet while the host neglects his head. The woman's hair, tears, and perfume are each mentioned twice. Luke seems less interested in the anointing than he does in the act of the woman approaching, repeatedly, Jesus' feet. While this may have been more

⁴Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke, Sacra Pagina* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991), 128-29.

⁵ Ibid., 129. This is also espoused by Darrell L. Bock, *Luke Volume 1:1:1-9:50, Baker Exegetical Commentary on New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 690.

⁶I Howard Marshall, *New International Greek Testament Commentary, Commentary on Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 304.

⁷Arlandson, 158.

appropriate for a woman, rather than anointing Jesus' head, the loosening of her hair suggested inappropriate behavior—as well as kissing his feet.⁸

Finally, *the conflict was not about the poor and valuing Jesus (as with the other three Gospels) but concerned his “allowing” the woman to approach him and touch him in what socially would have been an inappropriate manner.*⁹ It was also a conflict between the dishonorable actions of Simon, as host, who neglected Jesus and the bold actions of the woman who found her own way to welcome Jesus.

Luke's narrative is well placed in his overall epic story concerning Jesus and the new Empire or restored nation.¹⁰ Jesus' synagogue lesson at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-19) indicated that his mission was for those captives in sin or the socially marginalized.¹¹ His reminder to John the Baptist's disciples that he had come to practice ministry among these social outcasts (7:22-23) also indicated that his ministry would exist in the neglected areas of his community. Second, *The Sermon on the Plain* (6:17-49) reminded the reader that divine reversal (the oppressed would be chosen by God) was the mission of the Messiah. Those who had possessions and honor had already received their reward; yet those who were without would be blessed by God. Third, the accusation that Jesus ate with sinners (5:27-38; 7:34; 19:7) and that he preferred feasting over mourning (5:33-6:11) challenged the reader who may believe that access to God was limited to

⁸Bailey, 8-9.

⁹Bock, 696, suggests that the letting loose of the woman's hair would have been grounds for divorce in ancient Jewish culture. *mSot.* 5:9. Bailey, 9.

¹⁰Isaac W. Oliver, *Luke's Jewish Eschatology: The National Restoration of Israel in Luke-Acts* (New York: Oxford, 2021), 23.

¹¹Ron Clark, *Jesus Unleashed: Luke's Gospel for Emerging Christians* (Eugene: Cascade, 2014), 42.

those who were deemed socially righteous. Finally, Jesus' inclusion of women in his ministry (8:1-3) also brought suspicion to his work and social status.¹²

It is not surprising that during these stories of conflict; Jesus was invited to a home to eat with a religious leader where a “female sinner” was not only present but given access to his body. The conflict in this story would be a natural climax to his seemingly “disregard” for social norms and religious customs of his community.¹³ While Johnson and Bock may be correct in that Luke's account is different from Matthew, Mark, and John, I would suggest that the conflict is uniquely Lucan in this narrative.

Questions Concerning the Text

First, the text gives no indication that the woman was uninvited. In 7:45 Jesus stated, “You did not kiss me, but she “since I have come, has not ceased kissing my feet.” This verse indicates that the woman was present from the time that Jesus entered the home. While Fitzmeyer suggested that instead of “I come” the word *eiselthon* be understood as “she came” Luke has already used the word for Jesus (7:44) in reference to *his* entry into the home.¹⁴ The pattern of 7:44-47 is:

- 7:44 = I came...you did not...but (*de*) she did
- 7:45 = You did not... but (*de*) she did (has not ceased)...since I entered
- 7:46 = You did not... but (*de*) she did...

¹²Johnson, *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church: The Challenge of Luke-Acts to Contemporary Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 138.

¹³Notice the Lucan text's use of others (*allos*) in 5:29-30, followed by the Pharisees' description with sinners (*hamartolos*). Clark, 25.

¹⁴Fitzmeyer, 691.

The text suggests that Jesus was the unwelcomed guest. The woman was present when he arrived and welcomed him, while Simon the Pharisee, his host, did not.¹⁵ The contrast was not on the woman boldly entering the home but on her role as host, rather than Simon. Her presence behind Jesus may also suggest that she was a servant at the dinner party, or that she took on the servant role.¹⁶

Secondly, the issue did not concern her presence in the dinner room, because people do not crash ancient dinner parties. Since scholars suggest that Jesus' dinner invitation would have been to a type of *Symposium*, she would have taken on the role of dinner servant, regardless of the host's actions.¹⁷ At these *Symposia*, females and young males were many times present for sexual favors.

Third, while the tension was between Jesus and Simon, the woman became a byproduct of the tension and the object of illustration. It seems that Luke focused less on the boldness of the woman and the lack of response of Simon. She faded into the background. This is also evident in the difference between Matthew's and Mark's accounts where the disciple's criticized the woman and were rebuked by Jesus. Like the Lucan female host, this woman's actions were to be shared wherever the Gospel was preached.

The text also suggests that the "feet of Jesus" are significant in the story. If the feet are the "shame zone" of people in the ancient world, and Luke clearly avoids addressing the anointing on Jesus' head, why does this "foot fetish" story heavily suggest that what this woman did was

¹⁵ Bailey, *Jesus*, 244; Robert L. Brawley, *Luke-Acts and the Jews: Conflict, Apology, and Conciliation* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1987), 100-01.

¹⁶ Bailey, *Jesus*, 245-46; *Poet*, 15. Bailey also suggests that the woman was there to witness Jesus' humiliation from his host and felt the need to properly welcome him.

¹⁷ Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 253. Corley and Ipsen.

honorable? Nolland wrote that the woman's action was an intimate act, but Luke is not suggesting that this was appropriate.¹⁸ In addition the loosing of her hair was also inappropriate for a "modest woman."¹⁹ One question that should be asked in addition to inappropriate behavior, would be if her actions could be interpreted as sexual.²⁰ Cosgrove indicated that letting her hair down was more a sign of her respect for Jesus, but coupled with her closeness and touching Jesus suggests to me that what she was doing was culturally inappropriate.²¹

Behold the Woman

The woman is simply identified as a woman of the city/from the city (*etis en en te polei*) who was a sinner (*hamartolos*).²² Barbara Reid suggested that, "If one is predisposed to see this woman as a prostitute...one's imagination would not have to be pressed far."²³ Kathleen Corley indicated that this term was commonly used by the Jewish nation for women who were in prostitution.²⁴ In addition to this Martha Roth and Phyllis Bird believe that the prostitute was distinguished from the "adulteress," by location (the adulteress was located in the home and the prostitute a woman of the streets).²⁵

¹⁸John Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary: Luke 1-9:20* (Dallas: Word, 1989), 355.

¹⁹Ipsen's work with sex workers and their input found that the woman's actions were common traditions of these women in preparing males for sex. The use of oils/creams, massages, and open robes/hair are designed to make the experience more sensual and, in some cases, somewhat spiritual, 141-44. Bock, 41.

²⁰Ipsen also gives evidence that ancient Attic comedies concerning prostitutes suggests that the head and feet were euphemisms for the male phallus and that anointing the head and feet had erotic associations. This is also present in Greek art. Ibid., 141, 145.

²¹Cosgrove, 679.

²²Reid criticizes those who explore "what type of sinner she is" since few worry about Simon Peter's sins as he also claims to be a "sinful man," (Luke 5:1-12). Barbara E. Reid, "Do You See This Woman? A Liberative Look and Luke 7:36-50 and Strategies for Reading Other Lukan Stories Against the Grain." *A Feminist Companion to Luke*, Ed. Amy- Jill Levine (NY: Sheffield, 2002), 113.

²³Ibid., 117.

²⁴Kathleen E. Corley, *Private Women, Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), 124.

²⁵Martha T. Roth, "Marriage, Divorce, and the Prostitute in Ancient Mesopotamia," and Phyllis A. Bird, "Prostitution in the Social World and Religious Rhetoric of Ancient Israel," *Prostitutes and Courtesans in the*

While the assumption of her past sins has been the subject of many discussions, I believe that there are some key points in the text which may suggest that the woman would be considered a prostitute or sex worker, and that her forgiveness was based on her actions at the dinner as compared to the neglect of the dinner host.

First, *women in prostitution were typically present at symposiums, banquets, and intimate dinner parties*.²⁶ Ancient sources suggest that in many incidents respectable women were not present at a meal with the males (and would especially not be allowed to touch them) and typically dined in a separate room. Her presence at the meal, since she did not barge in as an uninvited guest, suggests that she was allowed to be in the room with Jesus. Her stance behind Jesus indicates that she was taking the role of a servant.²⁷ Simon's unwillingness to confront her for her actions also suggests that what she was doing was not unwelcome at the dinner. The question we must ask is, "Was her present actions a reflection of her sinful past or her forgiveness?" However, her presence suggests that she was inappropriately in a place for any women.

Second, the use of myrrh/oil/perfume was common with prostitution in the ancient world.²⁸

While the perfume was costly it was common for women in prostitution to possess this product, but the head and feet were commonly anointed by them to prepare for sexual activity.

The verb *chriei* is used for erotic banquet head anointing, even in the Jewish author Josephus. Since the anointing of head and feet both have strongly erotic associations

Ancient World, Ed. By Christopher A. Faraone and Laura K. McClure (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 2006), 47, 249. This is also evident in the Proverbs 5:3-11, 20; 6:24-29; 7:10 (here the adulteress is dressed like a ZNH and is in the streets—but seduces the young man to her home).

²⁶Reid, 113-14; Ipsen, 140.

²⁷Ipsen, 126; Bailey, *Jesus*, 245-46.

²⁸Corley, 104; Bailey, 8; Ipsen, 141.

whatever the verb, it does not necessarily matter which one is original for the behavior to be labeled sexual.”²⁹

The very service which she performs for him carries sexual connotations. According to ancient Greek customs, anointings were regularly performed by wives for their husbands before and after sexual intercourse, and the alabastron was therefore often portrayed in private scenes with women. *Hetaerae* are likewise pictured with such vessels. Moreover, the oil that this woman uses...may have been the sort that was used by women of “luxury”.³⁰

The conflict over the use of the oil in the previous Gospels involved its financial value and best use of the money. In Luke’s story the use simply showed acceptance of Jesus, or, as Bailey suggests, her desire to play the proper role of host to Jesus.³¹

While this evidence does not conclusively suggest that the woman was a prostitute, the language used would indicate, to the ancient reader, that the woman was an invited guest and exhibiting behavior inappropriate for modest women with another male, namely Jesus.

One objection to this conclusion suggests that only *pornea* would be used for a woman in this lifestyle. However, Corley has mentioned above that *hamartola* was used for these women.³² A second objection would be that a Pharisee would not play host to this type of meal or “ungoldly” banquet. Cosgrove objects to defining this dinner party as a Symposium or as the woman being a prostitute because he claims that the woman was not supplied by the dinner host or that this was

²⁹Ipsen, 141. Van Til offers the belief that her use of oil and pouring it on Jesus’ feet suggested that she was offering worship to him. Jesus’ forgiveness and parable on forgiveness of sins also surprised people because he was playing the role of God or of the temple. Van Til, 74, 77.

³⁰Corley, 104.

³¹The oil may have already been present at the home. The text indicated that having recognized/realized (2 Aorist Active Participle *epignousa*) she took/cared for (1 Aorist Active Participle *komisasa*) myrrh in an alabaster. Here the text does not indicate that the woman “heard that Jesus was at the home and went to him,” nor does it indicate that she went and “purchased an alabaster of myrrh” for Jesus. It indicates that while in the home she understood/recognized Jesus reclining and took the oil/ointment. It is possible that she was a regular guest for Simon and chose to use expensive oil that was already on hand during the dinner. Her recognizing Jesus’ reclining may only suggest that she was expected by the host to attend to him. Her tears, kisses, and anointing may have suggested repentance but could also have been her service to Jesus. She welcomed him as she knew how. However, it was still better than the Pharisee’s welcome.

³²Ibid. As mentioned above the woman of the city, even the sinful woman of the city, would suggest she was a woman who served the community as a prostitute.

a “Pharisee’s dinner party, not a morally lax Greco-Roman banquet.”³³ However, would it surprise the reader that the Pharisee/dinner host might be dishonest, corrupt, or morally lax? Luke’s Gospel clearly indicates that the nation was being ruled by a king who was in an adulterous relationship with his brother’s wife (Luke 3:19-20), the leaders were greedy and loved money more than people (Luke 16:14), and that the religious leaders were spiritually corrupt (Luke 11:37-52). To assume that a Pharisee would not host a true symposium would be denying the evidence that Judea, as with any other political nation, had the potential to have corrupt leadership.³⁴ Even more the host intentionally dishonored Jesus, his guest, by not attending to him in the traditional manner of welcoming dinner guests.³⁵ Finally the assumption that Jesus would not allow a prostitute to touch him is also one made without understanding the depth of what it meant to associate and eat with sinners (Matt. 21:31, “I tell you the truth, the tax collectors *and the prostitutes* are entering the Kingdom of God ahead of you...”). Luke’s previous section ended with a critique of Jesus eating with sinners but moves to his eating with a Pharisee and accepting and forgiving a sinner.

What if She Really Is a Prostitute/Sex Worker?

If we follow this thought and suggest that the woman was a prostitute the story can take a different turn, from the more common interpretation. First, the assumption that she experienced forgiveness in a previous encounter and therefore burst on the scene to express this does not fit

³³Cosgrove, 688.

³⁴As a minister and abuse advocate who has worked with women and males who have left the sex industry, I have heard many stories of city, government, and religious leadership who have solicited males and females for sex. See also the sons of Eli in 1 Sam. 1-2.

³⁵Bailey, *Poet*, 14-15.

into the story. We are assuming too much if we suggest something that the text does not tell us, nor alludes to teach us.

The story assumes that before the drama opens, the woman had heard Jesus proclaiming his message of grace for sinners. The entire account makes no sense without this assumption.³⁶

Scholars have regularly noted that the woman's approach to Jesus seems to presuppose a prior experience of forgiveness. Whatever we make of this in the tradition, in the Lukan text vv29-30 may encourage us to view the woman as coming to Jesus to express gratitude to him for the forgiveness already proleptically bestowed on her by John (cf. at 3:3).³⁷

However, her actions and motives are not the focus of the story, as they might have been with the narrative (different or similar) in the other three Gospels. While she may have been propositioning Jesus, the response of the Lord is the focus of Luke's story.

"If this man were a prophet, he would know who was touching him..." This comment by the Pharisee, while to some suggesting that Jesus should be able to know her hidden life, may also support Luke's theme of exile and restoration. The common metaphor for Israel was the **ZNH**, as Yahweh through the prophets condemned the nation for adultery and prostitution and is used often in the prophetic texts. Jesus, as a prophet, according to Simon, should understand that this woman represents the very metaphor used to condemn the nation. However, Jesus accepts the **ZNH** because she honors him, but the representative for the people of Israel neglects him. The reader will understand that the **ZNH** has changed. Once again the captives were being freed, embraced, and accepted by their God. Jesus' behavior not only displayed the grace and mercy of Yahweh, rather than the faithfulness of the marginalized **ZNH**, but the willingness to welcome sinners even though his host failed to offer proper hospitality to the Lord.

³⁶Bailey, *Jesus*, 242.

³⁷Nolland, 354.

“This woman accepted me, you did not...” seems to be the stronger theme of the text. Whether the woman was inappropriate with Jesus or sincerely repentant does not seem to be the issue. Her tears may have shown remorse, may have reflected sadness for Jesus’ humiliation, or they could have been tears of sadness for her role in the Symposium. However, her motive does not seem to be the issue. She treated Jesus with more honor than Simon, reflecting the previous condemnation that the leaders had rejected John’s baptism while the people had embraced it (Luke 7:29-30).

Second, Luke offers many stories that suggest forgiveness, healing, and salvation without judging the motives of the recipient. This is clear by the characters who speak to themselves and in the Gospel of Luke, seem to suggest selfishness rather than genuine concerns for honoring God. The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:17-20) sought safety because he was without. The Rich Fool/Farmer sought to build bigger barns (12:16). The unrighteous judge offered justice because he did not want to be shamed or bothered (18:14). The unjust steward used favors to gain friends and avoid being homeless (16:3). These characters (excluding the Rich Farmer), regardless of their motives, become models for God’s people. In many places Luke only focuses on doing the right thing despite one’s motives. This seems to suggest that salvation is dependent on God, not people. God/Jesus came to free the oppressed not because of their morality, but because of who Yahweh is.

Third, Jesus provides a model for manhood in the ancient world. His embracing females in his ministry suggest that he practices acceptance without sexual manipulation (8:1-3). While he may have been accused of inappropriateness with females in his ministry, stories such as “Simon and the Sinful Woman” seem to reflect his relationship and boundaries. As mentioned earlier the woman in the story is not the focus. The issue involves Jesus and his host. She is simply one who

is, like many of Luke's victims, oppressed and manipulated by males. Her presence at the meal and Simon's lack of preventing her from being close to Jesus, suggest that suspicion must rest on the host, not the guest (whether welcome or unwelcome). If she was a prostitute, then the message is clear—Simon was trying to entrap Jesus by using people. Luke has provided examples where the religious leaders try to entrap Jesus by inviting him to a meal where those who are suffering are present. This theme should not surprise us as Luke's Gospel, and the other Gospel writers, clearly suggest that the corrupt religious and political leaders desired to destroy Jesus, as they have tried to do to Yahweh for centuries. People were used as pawns to further fulfill the desires of a corrupt leadership and this woman would have been no exception.

Jesus' response, however, was not only to offer forgiveness, but safety. He would not further oppress, dishonor, or reject her. While her advances may not seem appropriate, his response was. While the dinner host may have been providing inappropriate entertainment, he was also neglecting to fulfill his cultural role as host. Simon's greed and control prevented his relationship with Jesus/God to be a blessing, however the woman was able to receive that blessing because she did what she only knew to do.

Today little has changed. In our work with women in prostitution and now those who solicit individuals (known as Johns) I find that the story still resonates with our current context. As with current sex workers the females (victims) are visible while the males stand in the shadows, while the opposite is true in real life. We want to know the motives of the women, their lifestyle, and their sins. However, we do not ask why these men have these women available, why men buy women and children, or how men can live in harmony with females while this oppression exists. We assume that these women boldly invade our safety and sexuality; however, we forget that they have always been there—because men wanted them readily available. We assume that they

must express tears of remorse rather than ourselves acknowledging our own shame for failing to honor them as victims and accept their lives. We are uncomfortable when they kiss the feet but we are content to watch and encourage other males to do the same. We forget that offering honor to all guests includes them. Even more we become uncomfortable that the creator of the universe allows them in the divine presence, while we shun them and label them as deviant.

The statement that Simon made to himself calls us to understand what it means to be prophetic. “If this man were a prophet...” For some today to be a prophet means to know people’s hearts, their sins, and the things they hide from us and from God. However, with those in the sex industry nothing is hidden. Even more, because it is in the open and exists, we stand condemned. As Phyllis Bird wrote, prostitution was not supposed to exist in ancient Israel, but it did. They were “legal outlaws.”³⁸ In fact, it existed as a necessary evil. Roth suggested that people believed that men needed it to avoid adultery and continue as law abiding citizens.³⁹ Prostitution exists not because of “sinful women” but because of men who lack the ability to have healthy relationships with their fellow humans. To be a prophet in Luke 7:36-50 did not mean one could see the dark hidden sins of another, it means that we see people and those who exploit them. It means that we embrace the metaphor that once marginalized others and offer mercy.

I am offering a different reading to this text. Instead of this being a story of a self-righteous good guy not understanding that sinners need forgiveness, I am offering that this is a story about men, the oppression of women, and that we can live together with acceptance, and respect.

³⁸Bird, 42.

³⁹Roth, 29.

Appendix

Translation of the Text with Notes

He was invited⁴⁰ by a certain Pharisee to eat with him.⁴¹ Coming into⁴² the house of the Pharisee he reclined.⁴³ A woman who was a sinner in/of the city, recognizing⁴⁴ him reclining⁴⁵ in the house of the Pharisee, received/took⁴⁶ a jar of myrrh. Standing⁴⁷ behind his feet and weeping, her tears began to wet his feet,⁴⁸ she wiped his feet with the hair from her head, and anointed and kissed them. The Pharisee who had invited him, seeing this, said to himself, “If⁴⁹ he were a prophet he would know what sort of woman was touching⁵⁰ him; a sinner.” Jesus said to him, “Simon, I have something to say.” Simon said, “teacher, say it.”⁵¹

“Two debtors owed a certain lender. One owed five hundred denarii and the other fifty. Not having the ability to repay him he forgave them. Which one loves him more?” Simon answered and said, the one who was forgiven more.” He [Jesus] said, “You have answered correctly [you have given me an orthodox answer].” Turning to the woman he said to Simon, “You see this woman? *I came into your home; you did not give water for my feet* but her tears wet my feet and she wiped them with her hair. You did not give me

⁴⁰*Erwtaw*, 3P Singular Imperfect Active Indicative. From to ask, but here to be asked, invited.

⁴¹*Tis auton ton* is unique to Luke in the New Testament. John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20, Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, 1989), 593. ἀνθρώπος τις, ‘a certain person,’ occurs in the NT only in Luke’s writing. It appears in the introduction of...seven of the Lukan parables (12:16; 14:16; 15:11; 16:1; 19:12) and two miracle stories (14:2; Acts 9:33).” John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, 592. Notice Jesus had recently been called “an eater” and immediately was invited to “eat” with a Pharisee (Luke 7:34, 36).

⁴²Aor Participle (having come)

⁴³Aor Pass (he reclined)

⁴⁴*Epignousa* (Aor Active Participle) recognizing, knowing, understanding.

⁴⁵Present Middle/Passive Indicative, as he was reclining.

⁴⁶Aorist Active Participle of *komizw* = not the traditional understanding of “bought,” but cared for, took, brought, received, took.

⁴⁷Aorist Active Participle

⁴⁸Present Active Participle

⁴⁹Blomberg suggests that this is a 2nd Class condition meaning that the statement is contrary to the fact. “If Jesus were a prophet, which he is not, he would...” Craig L. Blomberg, “Conditional Clauses Matter,” *Devotions on the Greek New Testament*, edited by J. Scott Duvall and Verlyn D. Verbrugge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 53.

⁵⁰The word here *aptetai*, suggests touching, meddling, getting involved, or in 1 Cor. 7 having sexual relations. Here the Pharisee seemed to be suggesting that the woman was becoming intimate with Jesus.

⁵¹Extra note = notice that Jesus in v44 turns around (*strapheis*) to talk to the woman (who was at his feet). Also *eiselthon* is used in v44 and v45. While it is a 2 Aor which could be 1 sing or 3 sing, the context concerns how Jesus was being treated as a guest, the one who came into the house and how he was treated.

a kiss [greeting] *but since I came*, she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she anointed my feet with myrrh (perfume). I tell you her sins, and they are many, are forgiven since she loved much. The one who has a little forgiveness loves a little bit.” Then he said to her “your sins are forgiven.”

Those who were reclining with him said to themselves, “who is this who forgives sins?” He said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you, go in peace.”