

His Mercy Is More

Luke 7:36-8:3

Sunday, October 12, 2025

Some of my favorite books to read for pleasure are biographies and memoirs. I love reading about famous athletes, musicians, presidents, inventors, and other historical figures. It's fascinating to learn how these individuals we know from history or popular culture came to be the people they were. Each person has a unique story that requires a book-length exposition to tell their tale.

When Luke "decided to write an orderly account" (Luke 1:3, NIV) for his friend, Theophilus, he ended up writing more than a biography about the life and ministry of Jesus. Luke's Gospel also tells the story of several people whose lives were impacted by the Savior.

We're coming to the end of Luke 7 this morning. Before we finish the chapter, I want to skip ahead briefly to the opening verses of chapter 8. Luke 8:1-3 serves as a bridge between where we've been in chapters 4-7 and where we're going in chapters 8-9. In verse 1, Luke says,

"Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God," also noting that, "The Twelve were with him" (Luke 8:1, NIV).

"The Twelve" Luke refers to are the twelve men Jesus prayerfully selected from among his followers "whom he also designated apostles" (Luke 6:13, NIV). Their names were,

"Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor" (Luke 6:14-16, NIV).

In addition to these twelve men, many others followed Jesus as his disciples, most of whom Luke never mentioned by name. But notice something curious in Luke 8:2-3. Luke does mention the name of three of Jesus' disciples—three *female* disciples.

"The Twelve were with [Jesus], and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means" (Luke 8:1b-3, NIV).

As we get started this morning, I want us to consider that what we've been reading in Luke's Gospel this year is not merely a collection of Bible stories stitched together into one book. This bridge passage in Luke 8:1-3 reminds us that **there is a story behind every life transformed by Jesus Christ**. Luke doesn't just give us a few names in verses 2-3, but he hints at the fact that these are three women who could personally testify to the transforming power of Jesus Christ. There is a story behind every life transformed by Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, we don't have a book-length or even a paragraph-length biography about these three women. Luke does share that they "had been cured of evil spirits and diseases" (v. 2). The first woman mentioned, "Mary (called Magdalene)," one of several Mary's mentioned in the New Testament, does appear elsewhere in the Gospels, most prominently at Jesus' resurrection.

Luke then mentions a curious detail about the woman named Joanna in verse 3. He emphasizes her connection to Herod's household, the same Herod who imprisoned John the Baptist. Beyond that, she's listed one other time along with Mary Magdalene in Luke 24.

A woman by the name of Susanna is mentioned along with these two, but no other information is given about her. In addition, Luke mentions in verse 3 that these women, "and many others...were helping to support [Jesus' ministry] out of their own means.

So why list the names of these women but not include more of their backstory? Some New Testament scholars believe that Luke mentions these three because they were among the eyewitnesses who recounted to him the things Jesus said and did. In his introduction to this Gospel, Luke mentions that he "carefully investigated everything from the beginning" (1:3, NIV). These women were likely some of those whom Luke interviewed. Certainly, they could testify to the impact Jesus had on their own life. We may not have all the details, and may be curious for more, the fact remains: there's a story behind every life transformed by Jesus Christ.

Let's look at a story of another woman whose life was transformed by Jesus. Turn with me to the end of Luke 7, beginning in verse 36. Though we do not know her name, Luke presents us with the story of a woman whose loving response to Jesus gave evidence of a life transformed.

Throughout his Gospel, Luke narrates scenes where Jesus interacted with members of the Pharisees, a group of lay religious leaders primarily concerned with faithful obedience to God's law. You might recall from last Sunday, Luke said of the Pharisees that they "rejected God's purpose for themselves" (Luke 7:30, NIV) and dismissed the ministries of Jesus and John the Baptist.

We should be careful to not overgeneralize and say that *all* Pharisees rejected Jesus, any more than we would say *all* pastors preach long sermons. Some of us are more guilty than others. That said, few if any of the references to the Pharisees in Luke's Gospel are particularly positive.

Yet, here in verse 36, we see Jesus having been invited to dine in the home of a Pharisee, whose name we later learn to be Simon. We might be suspicious of Simon's motives, but Jesus willingly accepted the invitation. Since we know Jesus had a growing reputation in the region as a healer and a great prophet, it shouldn't surprise us that people came to listen in on the dinner conversation between the prophet and the Pharisee. This was not unheard of in the first century.

Listen to how Luke narrates the first part of this story, beginning in verse 36.

"When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man

were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner”” (Luke 7:36-39, NIV).

At some point during the meal, a woman, having learned where Jesus was dining, entered Simon’s home. Everyone at the table, whether they knew the woman’s name or not, knew her by her reputation. Luke identifies her as one known to have “lived a sinful life” (v. 37). We might speculate as to the nature of her sin, but that really doesn’t matter. Whatever it was, she was, in fact, a sinner, and a notorious one at that.

This wasn’t a potluck, so the woman didn’t bring a dish to share. What she did bring was “an alabaster jar of perfume,” (v. 37) which she poured over Jesus’s dirty feet, soiled by the roads of Judea.

So much of her behavior sounds strange to us, but this wasn’t completely out of the ordinary for those living in Jesus’ day. There’s a similar story found in the other three Gospels about a woman named Mary, a close family friend of Jesus, who likewise poured out her love for the Lord in this way.

“Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus’ honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume” (John 12:1-3, NIV).

These are two separate instances, but two similar expressions of love for Jesus. It might make sense that Mary, the sister of Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead, would perform such an act of lavish love for Jesus. What didn’t make sense to Simon the Pharisee was why Jesus, one who was rumored to be a prophet, would allow an unclean woman with a sinful reputation to perform such an act.

If this scene were illustrated in a comic book or a cartoon, there might be a silent thought bubble appearing above Simon’s head with his private thoughts in verse 39 spelled out.

“When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner”” (v. 39).

The irony, of course, was that Jesus, the Son of God, not only was well aware of this woman’s sinful reputation, but he could also read the very thoughts Simon was thinking. What a good reminder that it is foolish to think we can hide our thoughts from God!

Look with me at how Jesus addressed Simon’s concern beginning in verse 40.

“Jesus answered him, “Simon, I have something to tell you.” “Tell me, teacher,” he said. “Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he

forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little"" (Luke 7:40-47, NIV).

Jesus' parable isn't difficult to understand, even if he spoke of danarii instead of dollars. But to modernize the illustration a bit, let's imagine two homeowners who are about to default on their mortgages. One was only 10 years into paying back a 30 year loan, and the other had only two years to go before it was fully repaid. For whatever reason, both homeowners were unable to pay, so the bank forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love the bank more?

Simon didn't need to think long and hard to arrive at the obvious answer: the greater the debt forgiven, the greater the response of love. The greater the cancellation, the greater the gratitude. Simon arrived at the right answer, but may have been reluctant to apply the parable's principle.

To be clear, Jesus' point wasn't that this unnamed woman's sin was far more egregious than Simon's. Jesus wasn't trying to quantify sin relative to Simon and his uninvited guest. It was Simon, not Jesus who perceived that his failures were far fewer than this woman of ill repute.

What kind of person could be this shortsighted and perceive their own wickedness as being far less repugnant to a holy God than that of another sinner? Who could be so self-delusional about their sin? I'm that kind of person. You're that kind of person. That's what sinners like you and me do. We relativize our sin. And when we relativize our sin, we expose our pride.

Don't believe that this is our natural tendency? Take a minute and make a list of names of those people whose sin you find most deplorable. Who makes your list of worst sinners ever? Now double-check to see if your name is listed. It should be at the top with no other names below.

When writing to his coworker, Timothy, the Apostle Paul shared his own worst-sinner-ever list.

"Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen" (1 Tim. 1:15-16, NIV).

Notice how Paul's honest self-evaluation led him not to wallow in his wickedness, but to glorify God for his grace. That's what the woman at Jesus' feet was doing. That's why Jesus pointed Simon to her expression of love for the Lord as a living parable of God's forgiveness. She was responding to God's amazing grace with lavish love for her Savior.

In verses 44-47, Jesus emphasizes the obvious contrast between how the woman showed love to Jesus and how Simon the Pharisee failed to do so. It's worth unpacking this contrast for a moment so that we can make proper self-application.

Whatever Simon's motive was in inviting Jesus to dinner, the Lord was to be the guest of honor. Simon's failure to have someone wash Jesus' feet, greet the Lord with a kiss, and anoint his head with oil was at best insensitive, and at worst a violation of cultural norms. However, Jesus' point wasn't to call out Simon as a rude host. The point of the parable, followed by the contrast between Simon's behavior and the woman's, was intended to emphasize one thing: *evidence*.

In contrasting these two "debtors," whose behavior gave evidence of an accurate understanding of sin, an awareness of need for forgiveness, and an abundance of love and gratitude?

Jesus wasn't prescribing a particular behavior. That would be empty moralism. The goal wasn't mere behavior modification. That's what the Pharisees excelled at—behavior modification. They worked hard to do all the right things to be considered righteous in God's eyes. That's our natural human inclination, to try and do what is good in order to gain God's favor. The fancy term for this *propitiation*: to appease someone so that they act favorably toward you.

But think back to Jesus' parable. If you owed two-thirds of your mortgage, but you were so far in debt you had no ability to repay the loan, what could you possibly do to earn the bank's favor? What right would you have to ask the bank to act propitiously on your behalf? None!

Why could Jesus turn his attention to the woman in verses 48 and 50 and say to her,

"Your sins are forgiven. ...Your faith has saved you; go in peace"? (Luke 7:48, 50, NIV).

It wasn't because she had turned things around and cleaned up her lifestyle. It wasn't because she started living by the teachings of the Pharisees. It wasn't even because she washed and kissed Jesus' feet, and anointed them with perfume. Nothing she did, nor anything she could do would cause the Lord to act favorably toward her. She could not repay her own debt.

As I said at the beginning of this sermon, *there is a story behind every life transformed by Jesus Christ*. This woman's story could be summed up in three chapters:

Chapter 1: The Woman Who Repented of Her Sinful Past as Evidenced by Her Humility.

Chapter 2: The Woman Who Recognized Her Present Status as Evidenced by Her Love.

Chapter 3: The Woman Who Rested in Her Secure Future as Evidence by Her Peace.

We're we to try and write this woman's biography, I don't think we could do better than what author Rebecca McLaughlin says in her excellent book, *Jesus Through the Eyes of Women: How the First Female Disciples Help Us Know and Love the Lord*.

"How do we see Jesus through this woman's eyes at this moment? We see him as the source of her forgiveness and the object of her love. We see him as the one for whom it is worth humiliating herself before a crowd. We see him as the one for whom it's worth sacrificing both her money and her dignity, as she pours out expensive ointment on his feet and wipes them with her hair. Jesus is so far above her that she cannot abase herself enough in his presence. But through her eyes, we also see Jesus as the one who stands with sinners like her—and like you, and like me. ... And even as this sinful woman of the city bends down, we see Jesus lift her up as a shining, tear-stained paragon of love to humble the self-righteous Pharisee."¹

If someone were to write your biography someday, what would the title be? What would you title the chapter(s) that tell the story of your faith?

In your memoir, would there be a chapter describing the people and events in your life that led you to humbly turn to God in repentance. Would you tell your readers how you came to grips with your total inability to live the righteous life a holy God has called us to? Or would your pages be filled with lists of people whose sin and wicked behavior made you look good?

If one day we pick a copy of your biography, what evidence would there be within its pages of a life transformed by Christ and shaped by his gospel? Would the fruit of the Spirit infuse every paragraph, especially love for God, love for one another, and love for one's enemies? Or would the story contained in your biography reveal a heart of selfishness, self-centeredness, and self-righteousness?

When the final chapters of your biography are written, will it reveal an uncertainty about where you stand with God, because to the end you've wondered if you've done enough to make it to heaven, if indeed such a place exists? Or will your story conclude, echoing the words of Jesus,

"[My] faith [in Christ] has saved [me]; [because of his forgiveness and grace, I have] peace." (Luke 7:50).

I invite you to pray with me.

¹ Rebecca McLaughlin, *Jesus Through the Eyes of Women: How the First Female Disciples Help Us Know and Love the Lord* (Austin, TX: The Gospel Coalition), 135.