

To See or Not to See

Luke · Luke 7:36-50; Isaiah 52:7; Ephesians 2:8; Romans 5:1; Colossians 2:13-14

AT A GLANCE

To see people rightly, we must first see ourselves rightly — as debtors whose sins are many, not few. Simon the Pharisee saw a sinner and missed a saint; the woman at Jesus' feet saw her own debt and loved extravagantly. The question Jesus puts to Simon — and to us — is not whether we notice people but whether we truly see them.

- Awareness of our own many sins is the prerequisite for seeing other people with the compassion Jesus shows.
- The woman's lavish love is not the cause of her forgiveness but the evidence of it — love follows forgiveness, not the reverse.
- Simon's story ends without a recorded response, signaling that we are meant to write the ending ourselves.

“Awareness of our sins improves our vision. It helps us to see people better.”

EXPOSITION

Scripture engaged

Luke 7:36-50 — One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. And behold, a woman of the city who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who was touching him, for she is a sinner. And Jesus answering him said to him, Simon, I have something to say to you. And he answered, Say it, teacher. A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more? Simon answered, The one, I suppose, for whom he canceled the larger debt. And he said to him, You have judged rightly. Then 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 from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with

ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven — for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little. And he said to her, Your sins are forgiven. Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, Who is this, who even forgives sins? And he said to the woman, Your faith has saved you; go in peace.

[Isaiah 52:7](#) — How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, Your God reigns.

[Ephesians 2:8](#) — For by grace you have been saved through faith.

[Romans 5:1](#) — Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

[Colossians 2:13-14](#) — God has forgiven us all our trespasses by canceling the record of debt that stood against us, nailing it to the cross.

The argument

Seeing People Requires More Than Looking at Them — The difference between observation and perception

The sermon opens with two politically charged images — a MAGA hat and a pro-choice sign — and asks what we actually see when we look at them. The preacher's point is not to adjudicate the politics but to expose the gap between visual data and true perception: 'You do not know the story behind the hat. You do not know the story behind the sign. And certainly you cannot see into the heart.' Simon the Pharisee illustrates the same failure at the dinner table. Luke tells us he saw the woman, he saw what she did, and he took offense — but Jesus' question 'Do you see this woman?' indicts him precisely because looking and truly seeing are not the same act.

Insight — Noticing someone is not the same as seeing them; genuine perception requires suspending the verdicts we form from surface data.

The Sinner Teaches the Law-Keeper What Worship Looks Like — Extreme hospitality as theological confession

The woman's actions are not mere sentiment — they are the customary gestures of hospitality pushed to their theological limit. Where a slave might pour water for the feet, she uses tears; where a towel would serve, she uses her hair; where oil for the head was customary, she pours precious ointment on his feet. The preacher anchors this in Isaiah 52:7: feet that bring good news are beautiful, and Jesus' feet — dirty from itinerant travel — are precisely those feet. 'So great is he that she kisses his feet.' Simon, by contrast, offered none of the customary courtesies. The contrast is structural: the law-breaker honors Jesus with her whole body; the law-keeper offers him a suspicious invitation and nothing more.

Insight — The depth of someone's worship is calibrated by their awareness of how much they have been forgiven, not by their religious pedigree.

The Parable Moves the Question from Debt to Love — Why Jesus chose the word 'love' for a story about a moneylender

The parable of the two debtors appears simple, but the preacher surfaces its surprising word: love. 'Who loves a moneylender?' The question is deliberately jarring. Gratitude, relief, even loyalty — these make sense. But love? Jesus plants the word because he is not really describing a financial transaction; he is describing what the woman in the room is already doing. 'Oh, that's why Jesus included the word love in that story — because what he's seeing is love from this woman, love for him, love for God.' Simon answers the riddle correctly but hedges: 'The one, I suppose, for whom he canceled the larger debt.' The word suppose signals his guardedness — he senses a trap. He can judge rightly in the abstract; the question is whether he can judge rightly about himself.

Insight — Love for God is not a religious achievement; it is the natural overflow of knowing how large a debt has been canceled.

Forgiveness Precedes Love; It Is Not Purchased by It — Correcting the grammar of verse 47

The preacher is careful to clarify the logical sequence in Jesus' pronouncement: 'The reason her sins have been forgiven is not because she loves. It's the evidence that her sins have been forgiven — that's why she loves.' Her love is posterior to forgiveness, not the grounds of it. This matters because Simon appears to love little, and the question Jesus plants is whether Simon believes he has been forgiven little — not whether his actual debt is small. 'No, his sins are many, as evidenced in his response to the woman.' The one who thinks his debt is small will love little; but the smallness is in his perception of himself, not in the ledger God holds.

Insight — Self-assessed moral adequacy does not reduce one's debt before God; it only reduces one's capacity for love.

The Story Without an Ending Is an Invitation to Write It — Simon's silence as the reader's assignment

The narrative closes with Jesus speaking to the woman and the bystanders asking 'Who is this, who even forgives sins?' — but Simon disappears from the text without response. The preacher treats this deliberately: 'It's a story without an ending, which means that we are supposed to see ourselves in Simon the Pharisee and we can write the ending ourselves.' The invitation is not primarily to identify with the forgiven woman — though that too — but to sit in Simon's seat and answer the unanswered question. 'Do you see this woman? Yes — I see her with new eyes, in light of my own sins.' Awareness of personal sin is what converts the question from an accusation into a liberation.

Insight — The open ending of Simon's story is Scripture's device for making every reader the one who must answer Jesus' question.

Cross-references

- [Isaiah 52:7](#) — Used to ground the woman's foot-kissing theologically: feet that carry the good news are beautiful, making her gesture a confession about who Jesus is.
- [Ephesians 2:8](#) — Cited to explain 'your faith has saved you' — salvation is by grace through faith, with faith as the human response that participates in God's act.
- [Romans 5:1](#) — Cited to fill out 'go in peace' — peace with God through justification by faith is the content of the peace Jesus pronounces over the woman.
- [Colossians 2:13-14](#) — Read as the New Testament lens on the debt-cancellation parable: God cancels the record of debt by nailing it to the cross.

DEVOTIONAL

There is a kind of seeing that is really a verdict. Simon looked at the woman the moment she entered the room and the case was closed: sinner, untouchable, the wrong kind of person at the wrong kind of table. He had eyes, and he used them — Luke says so explicitly. But Jesus turns toward her and asks Simon, Do you see this woman? The question is a scalpel. It cuts between the act of looking and the harder act of perceiving, between the data the eye collects and the story only God can read. The woman, for her part, was not looking around the room for the approval of the guests. She had already seen something that undone her — she had seen herself, and she had seen Jesus, and the combination had produced this extraordinary, embarrassing overflow of tears and hair and ointment and kissing. Sheldon Van Auken's wife Davey saw the same thing sitting alone in a quiet room: not just what she had done, but what she was, parading before her ghastly and mocking, and all of it measured against the holiness of God. And it broke her open. That brokenness is not a wound to be managed; it is the precise organ by which we begin to see other people as Jesus sees them. The debt that felt enormous to Simon — two months' wages, perhaps — is nothing compared to seventeen months. But both are impossible to repay. The difference between the two debtors is not moral; it is perceptual. One knows the size of what was canceled. The other does not. And only the one who knows can love the moneylender. Only the one who knows can look across a Pharisee's dinner table and see a person rather than a category. The question Jesus leaves open is not whether your sins are many — they are — but whether you know it well enough to see.

Reflection

- When you encounter someone whose politics, lifestyle, or reputation tempts you toward a quick verdict, what is the story you are not seeing — and what would it take to stay curious

long enough to find out?

- Sheldon Van Auken's wife saw not only what she had done but what she was, measured against God's holiness. Where in your own life might that same honest inventory be overdue, and what are you afraid it would reveal?
- Simon's story ends without a recorded response, leaving the ending for us to write. How would you finish it — and what does the ending you write tell you about how you currently see yourself before Jesus?

Closing prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for your Spirit breathing out this narrative, and for the way we see ourselves in it. We see ourselves in Simon the Pharisee. We hope we see ourselves in the woman too — recognizing that our sins are many. We know, Lord Jesus, that you speak to us: that our sins are forgiven when we acknowledge them and confess them to you. Search our hearts now. Surface anything that needs to be surfaced, so it can be dealt with, so we can know that we are forgiven. And then help us, Lord, to see people differently — with the eyes that come only from knowing how much we ourselves have been forgiven. Amen.
