
Luke 7:36-50

³⁶ A Pharisee invited him to dine with him, and he entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. ³⁷ Now there was a sinful woman in the city who learned that he was at table in the house of the Pharisee. Bringing an alabaster flask of ointment, ³⁸ she stood behind him at his feet weeping and began to bathe his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and anointed them with the ointment. ³⁹ 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 woman this is who is touching him, that she is a sinner." ⁴⁰ Jesus said to him in reply, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Tell me, teacher," he said. ⁴¹ "Two people were in debt to a certain creditor; one owed five hundred days' wages and the other owed fifty. ⁴² Since they were unable to repay the debt, he forgave it for both. Which of them will love him more?" ⁴³ Simon said in reply, "The one, I suppose, whose larger debt was forgiven." He said to him, "You have judged rightly." ⁴⁴ Then he turned to the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? When I entered your house, you did not give me water for my feet, but she has bathed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You did not give me a kiss, but she has not ceased kissing my feet since the time I entered. ⁴⁶ You did not anoint my head with oil, but she anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷ So I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; hence, she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." ⁴⁸ He said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." ⁴⁹ The others at table said to themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" ⁵⁰ But he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Context

What is the context for this pericope? While there are many possible outlines for Luke's gospel, let me offer the following:

- Luke 5:1-6:11 Jesus calling and forming his disciples via controversy
- Luke 6:12-49 Jesus instructing his disciples via the Sermon on the Plain
- Luke 7:1-50 Compassionate ministry of Jesus
- Luke 8:1-56 The Word proclaimed – the Word heard and followed

As Joel Green [281] notes, Luke 7 forms a discreet section of the Gospel, bordered on each side by reports of Jesus' teaching (6:12–49; 8:1–18). Luke 7:1, following on the heels of the Sermon on the Plain (Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount) both intimates the completion of Jesus' sermon and denotes a geographical change for the events to follow. Luke 8:1 registers a chronological shift and marks Jesus' return to an itinerant ministry following his activity in Capernaum (cf. 4:42–44).

What role does ch. 7 serve in the narrative? Let's remind ourselves of the outline of Jesus' missionary program:

He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord." Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him. He said to them, "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:17-21 citing the Prophet Isaiah)

Beginning with 4:31, Luke tells of a series of encounters in which the outlines of Jesus' ministry of "release" to the "poor" would be developed further. In 6:20–49, Luke defined in positive terms both the new conditions of existence in his community and the general shape of the behaviors and values that would come to seem natural for those who participate in this community. The message of Jesus' deeds and words now come together in Luke 7, which is comprised of three exemplary stories

- Healing the Centurion's Servant (vv.1-10)
- Raising the Widow's Son (vv.11-17)
- Forgiving the Sinful Woman (vv.36-50)

Each story reveals the character of the salvation made available in Jesus' mission. The quality of Jesus' ministry raises questions about his identity from the disciples of John the Baptist (7:18–19; cf. 7:18–35), a question Jesus answers with reference back to the quality of his ministry (7:21–22, in terms borrowed from Isa 61:1–2; cf. Luke 4:18–19).

In Luke 8, Jesus begins to more pointedly prepare the disciples for mission. It is mission promised in Isaiah that Jesus says in coming to fulfillment in his person. It is the mission Jesus demonstrates in the three encounters of mercy in Luke 7. It is mission Jesus received from the Father that is none other than revealing the very love that gives itself to every person: "Everything in him speaks of mercy. Nothing in him is devoid of compassion" (*Misericordiae Vultus* §8, Pope Francis' papal proclamation of the Year of Mercy).

Pope Francis invites us to realize the overall message contained in these stories and parables of Mercy. He writes: "Jesus reveals the nature of God as that of a Father who never gives up until he has forgiven the wrong and overcome rejection with compassion and mercy. We know these parables well. In these parables, God is always presented full of joy, especially when he pardons. In them we find the core of the Gospel and of our faith, because mercy is presented as a force that overcomes everything, filling the heart with love and bringing consolation through pardon." (*Misericordiae Vultus* §9)

Commentary

How would you title our Gospel narrative? I suspect most would lean towards a title that emphasized the actions of the woman. In part, because we possess parallels to the Lucan account in the other Gospels (Mt 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, and John 12:1-8); although not exactly parallels. All of the other accounts take place in Jerusalem during Holy Week. But in Luke's account Jesus is still in the midst of his Galilean mission. Thus, in Luke's account there is no relation between the anointing and the burial of Jesus. Yet, there are common points of similarity e.g., the alabaster jar. But what is unique about the Lucan account is the development of a relationship between forgiveness and love.

Some Preliminary Remarks. One needs to be cautious not to place too many assumptions on the Lucan account based on what we have come to believe about Pharisees, the motivations of the woman, the focus and attention of Jesus during the narrative, and some points about "timing." Luke alone has this encounter well apart from Holy Week and the similar account from the other gospel writers. It is a good thing to ask if this account makes sense in this spot given the rhetorical intent of Luke's larger story.

In the chapters leading up to Luke 7 we have seen a growing divergence of thoughts about Jesus among the Jews and their leadership. We are also beginning to see that others, thought to be less astute about things messianic, are showing remarkable insight – e.g. the Gentile centurion (7:1–10). This is also true in our gospel, as this woman, thought to be a very public sinner, exercises remarkable insight into the nature of Jesus' mission. These two stand in contrast to those who are tasked with exercising leadership in the community of faith.

In addition, consider the trajectory of the scenes that characterize salvation as forgiveness of sins (5:1–11, 17–26, 29–32). That same trajectory is promoted here. In addition, this pericope continues the emphasis of Jesus as the one whom eats with sinners and is their friend (7:34).

The Lucan telling of this encounter with Jesus is not a relocation of the Holy Week event. It seems it is a story known only to Luke, is well placed in the flow of the Gospel, and has an intention other than foreshadowing Jesus' death.

This Pharisee. Too often in the modern sensibility, the entry of a Pharisee into a gospel scene is to present the antithesis of Jesus. Many commentaries pay scant attention to this particular Pharisee, rather they reduce him to just another legalistic, judgmental, and uncompassionate religious whom Jesus is condemning. These same commentaries do not stop to ponder why his name is recorded. While scripture itself gives no hint, one can only wonder if this is a Lucan parallel to Nicodemus in the Gospel according to John. Like Nicodemus, Simon the Pharisee seems open to Jesus as the Prophet who was to come – he invites him to a banquet indicating openness and perhaps shares a positive disposition to Jesus. Like Nicodemus, the conversation with Jesus takes a direction never imagined, and like Nicodemus, Jesus directly challenges Simon's presumptions about what he thinks he knows. Many commentators assume vv.40-41 are a repudiation to Simon's silent and unfolding judgment. But it is equally understood as an encounter between teacher and student: "*Simon, I have something to say to you.*" "*Tell me, teacher,*" he said. And maybe – just maybe – in the end, like Nicodemus, Simon comes to believe and thus his name is recalled in the memory of the first generation of believers.

The Setting. As Brian Stoffregen notes, Luke is fond of picturing Jesus in meal-time situations:

- Levi's banquet (5:29)
- Feeding the 5000 (9:12-17)
- At Mary and Martha's house (10:38-42)
- At a second Pharisee's house (11:37-41)
- At a third Pharisee's house (14:1-6)
- The Party for the Son(s) (15:11-32)
- The Passover Meal (Last Supper) (22:7-23)
- The Meal at Emmaus (24:13-35)
- The Meal in Jerusalem (24:36-43)

It is this very practice of fellowship that has been and will be called into question by other Pharisees:

- "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" (5:30)
- "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." (15:2)

Just before our text, Jesus is apparently quoting his critics:

- "The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" (7:34)

Though Jesus is willing to dine with outcasts (5:29), he does not reject invitations from the well-to-do (11:37; 14:1). And like every other meal setting, there is something to be learned from Jesus – and it is rarely in a private, one-on-one setting.

While there are a variety of scholarly conjectures, there seems to be a plurality of scholars who hold that a banquet meal between well-know individuals would be held in a forum that was partially open to the public. They would not participate in the meal, but were allowed close enough to listen into the dialogue. This is Joel Green's position. Green [306-7] offers an understanding of the banquet setting for Luke's Greco-Roman readers. "Luke has often cast his meal scenes in the form of Greco-Roman symposia, wherein conversation, perhaps even lively debate, follows the meal itself. Within the topos of the symposium a certain decorum was expected; hence, for example, apropos 7:36–50, philosophical conflict might be expected in the "talking party" following the meal, even to the extent that the chief guest would best his host, but this would (and should) not involve a breach of the basic rules of hospitality."

The Woman. The open forum offers an explanation of how the “sinful woman” was present: *Now there was a sinful woman in the city who learned that he [Jesus] was at table in the house of the Pharisee.* Stoffregen notes that throughout Luke, Jesus has positive regards for “sinners.”

- He invites **sinful** Peter to follow him (5:8ff).
- He eats and drinks with **sinners** (5:30; 7:34; 15:2; 19:7)
- He came to call not the righteous but **sinners** to repentance (5:32)
- He relates the heavenly joy over repentant **sinners** (15:7, 10)
- He presents a **sinner** as an example of proper praying (18:13)
- Yet, he will be handed over to **sinners** to be crucified (24:7)

In addition, every time in Luke that the word *hamartia* = “sin” is used (11 times), it is being forgiven by Jesus.

What is her sin? Scripture is silent on the sin, only saying that she was sinful – and judging by Simon’s reaction, her sin was publicly known. Although there is no exegetical evidence for the conclusion, the assessment is that she was a known prostitute. Thus the dynamic is set. “Jesus has entered this home in order to participate in a formal banquet. This means, on the one hand, that the Pharisee has sufficient trust in Jesus’ ritual purity to share a meal with him, and, on the other, the woman’s presence has introduced a powerful contagion, ritual impurity, into these goings-on.” (Green, 308)

It was and is easy enough to dismiss this sinful woman as unclean and deviant, without grappling with the social realities faced by a woman, perhaps a freedwoman, forced into the marketplace by her lack of attachment or identification with a man, who prostitutes herself in order to live according to one of the very few options available to her. It was not unheard of that a woman or girl was sold into prostitution by her parents on account of economic misfortune. In short, this unnamed woman belongs to a category of persons who qualify as “the poor,” for whom Jesus has been anointed to bring good news (4:18–19; 7:22). This is true even if she has been successful enough in her occupation to possess “*an alabaster flask of ointment*” (v 37).

Action, Reaction. *Bringing an alabaster flask of ointment,*³⁸ *she stood behind him at his feet weeping and began to bathe his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and anointed them with the ointment.*³⁹ *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 woman this is who is touching him, that she is a sinner.”*

Because of our familiarity with the woman who anoints Jesus’ feet during Holy Week, we perhaps move too quickly to *she...anointed them with the ointment*. If we are careful readers, we see that the first action was *she stood behind him at his feet weeping*. Why was she weeping?

It is a medieval axiom that what is last in action is first in intention. That being said, it would seem the woman came to anoint Jesus; why? Was it to honor a holy man she had never met? Was it to give thanks to a holy man whom she had met and was indebted? Scripture leaves us to speculate, but whatever her intention, clearly the moment carries much emotional content – content that seems to overwhelm her and bring her to tears. One can almost imagine the spontaneous moment when she realizes her tears are cleansing feet that should have been washed but were not. So, she cleans them with her hair and then accomplishes the task for which she came.

The woman's act violated social conventions. Touching or caressing a man's feet could have sexual overtones, as did letting down her hair, so a woman never let down her hair in public. Moreover, the woman was known to be a sinner. Assuming she was unclean, she would have made Jesus unclean by

touching him. As the host, Simon the Pharisee, has to be taken aback and appalled – and would have begun to have serious reservations about Jesus.

It is important to know that one subtext in the chapter that precede our gospel account is Luke’s portrayal of Jesus in his prophetic role first articulated in 4:16–30. One finds (1) Jesus exercising his prophetic ministry on behalf of a Gentile soldier, just as Elisha had done (4:27; 7:1–10); (2) Jesus exercising his prophetic ministry on behalf of a woman and her son, just as Elijah had done (4:25–26; 7:11–17); (3) Jesus performing in ways that closely parallel the missionary program provided by Isa 61:1–2; 58:6 (4:18–19; 7:22); and, in a way consonant with intervening episodes concerned with sinners, (4) Jesus articulating the “release” of 4:18–19 in a way that spells forgiveness for a sinful woman (7:36–50). [Green, 282]

	Elijah/Elisha	Isaiah	Luke
the blind	2 Kgs 6:17	29:18; 35:5; 42:18; 61:1 (LXX) 35:6	4:18; 7:21 (cf. 6:39–42) 14:13, 21; 18:35
the lame			14:13, 21
the lepers	2 Kgs 5:1–14		5:12–16; 17:12–19 (cf. 4:27)
the deaf		29:18; 35:5; 42:18	11:14
the dead	1 Kgs 17:17–24	26:19	7:11–17; 8:40–42, 49–56
the poor	61:1	4:18; 6:20; 14:13, 21; 16:19–31; 18:22; 19:8; 21:1–4	

Luke has previously reported interior monologue and Jesus’ knowledge of what others were thinking (5:21–22; 6:7–8). So too, here we learn Simon’s thoughts. “*If this man were a prophet, he would know who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, that she is a sinner.*” Culpepper notes that the Pharisee makes two assumptions that imply two further inferences. First, he assumes the woman is a sinner, as the narrator has reported in v. 37. Second, he assumes that if Jesus were a prophet he would know what sort of woman she was. From these assumptions, both of which appear to have been correct, he draws two false inferences. First, he infers that if Jesus knew what sort of woman was touching him, he would not allow it. Second, he infers that since Jesus has done nothing to stop the woman, he is not a prophet. The Pharisee’s assumption, therefore, is expressed as a condition contrary to fact: “*If this man were a prophet [which he is not], he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him [which he did not because he did not stop her].*” Simon overlooks his own sinfulness and misunderstands Jesus’ prophetic ministry. The moment then becomes a “teachable moment” when *Jesus said to him in reply, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” “Tell me, teacher,” he said.*

Jesus does know who the woman is, but Simon does not even “see” her until challenged by Jesus (“*Do you see this woman?*”). To open his eyes, Jesus tells the parable of the creditor and the debtors.

The Parable. .⁴¹ “*Two people were in debt to a certain creditor; one owed five hundred days’ wages and the other owed fifty.*”⁴² *Since they were unable to repay the debt, he forgave it for both. Which of them will love him more?*”⁴³ *Simon said in reply, “The one, I suppose, whose larger debt was forgiven.” He said to him, “You have judged rightly.”*

The gist of the parable centers on the creditor who becomes a gracious benefactor, cancelling the debts of his clients. The clients have done nothing to repay debt – both seem beyond the capacity of the clients to payback. The dynamics of creditor/debtor would have been something well familiar to Simon (as it appears he is relatively wealthy in throwing a public dinner affair). He would have been quite

familiar and comfortable in the quid pro quo to invitations, reciprocal invitations, and the inherent social status implied in the dynamic. The cancellation of such debts, strips away the “rules” by which interpersonal interactions were managed.

Jesus moves the parable to a new footing when he asks, not about indebtedness, but about love. Which of the two debtors will love more? I would suggest, that Simon, to his credit, engages the question honestly. Some commentators claim he is edging his bets with “*The one, I suppose...*” indicating a begrudging response or a cautious reply while he considers the implications. I would offer that because Jesus is moving the foundation of the relationship from honor/indebtedness to love, Simon is simply moving reflectively on this new foundation. His earlier response, “*Tell me, teacher*” is an honest one. Simon has taken a place, at least momentarily, as a student. And the teacher affirms him “*You have judged rightly.*”

Jesus continues his lesson: *Then he turned to the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? Green [312] writes that as Jesus turns to the woman “while speaking to Simon momentarily reduces her from the role of central actor to that of object lesson. This is important for the rhetoric of the narrative, however, for in this way Jesus hopes to persuade Simon to adopt Jesus’ own view of matters concerning this woman. He wants to transform Simon’s view of the world and so to have Simon reconsider his premature judgment regarding this woman. Jesus’ opening query, “Do you see this woman?” is an invitation to enlightenment, the consequence of which would be acceptance of both her (i.e., no longer viewing her as a ‘sinner’ but as one who loves extravagantly) and of new behaviors modeled on those of this woman.”*

Our narrative began, not with Jesus’ reception into Simon’s house, but with the scandalous actions of the woman. It is only now that we learn about Simon’s actions – and in comparison to the woman’s. *When I entered your house, you did not give me water for my feet, but she has bathed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair.*⁴⁵ *You did not give me a kiss, but she has not ceased kissing my feet since the time I entered.*⁴⁶ *You did not anoint my head with oil, but she anointed my feet with ointment.*

Perhaps too much is made of the demands of hospitality: water with which to wash his feet, kiss of welcome, and oil for anointing his head. None of these was required, but they were gracious gestures of hospitality attested elsewhere (foot-washing: Genesis 18:4; 19:2; Judges 19:21; 1 Samuel 25:41; John 13:3–5; a kiss of greeting: 2 Samuel 15:5; Luke 15:20; 22:47–48; anointing with oil: Psalms 23:5; 133:2; Mark 14:3). None of them were expected of the woman, but she was the one who provided them. We should not think, however, that the woman’s actions simply substituted for Simon’s. Instead, her ministrations on Jesus’ behalf are notable for their lavishness. Why?

The focus is not on fulfilling requirements, but gratitude as the foundational reason for the action. The effect of Jesus’ words is to connect the Simon’s right answer to Jesus’ parable to Simon’s wrong judgment of the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet. [Culpepper, 172]

Each of the people in the narrative – Simon and the woman – are debtors, and Jesus then makes clear that the parable is not about the reconstruction of social norms or first century economics, but about sin, forgiveness, and love.

The Parable Revealed.⁴⁷ *So I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; hence, she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”*

Verse 47 is ambiguous in the Greek. Scholars mount many arguments about how to translate the verse. The ambiguity comes in the word *hoti* which can be translated “because” or “hence.” If “because” is selected by the translator, then in English we have an implied causality: love was required to precede

forgiveness. But if “hence” is the choice, then the later actions are the consequence of a forgiveness already received. Most scholars opt for “hence.”

- Culpepper [172]: “Did the woman love because she had been forgiven, or was she forgiven because she loved Jesus? Verse 47 draws together the riddle and the two responses to Jesus, showing that the Pharisee has responded as one who has been forgiven little, while the woman has acted as one who has been forgiven much. The difficulty lies in the causal clause at the end of the first half of v. 47. Some have taken it to mean that the woman was forgiven much because she loved much, but the logic of the riddle, its application to the woman’s act, and the parallel with the second half of v. 47 each dictate that the woman’s loving act is evidence that she has been forgiven much. By implication, the woman’s preparation in bringing the alabaster flask in the first place suggests that she has experienced acceptance and forgiveness prior to this event.”
- Green [313-14]: “When had she been forgiven? . . . we are never told when or how. What we are told is that she had already been forgiven. Jesus’ affirmation of her forgiveness is told in the third person, still addressed to Simon. Simon is not aware of her new status; he still regards her as a sinner with whom a man of God ought not to associate. Jesus’ affirmation is thus for Simon’s sake, in order that he might realize her condition and embrace her in the community of God’s people.

The sense then would be, “Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have already been forgiven, (and I can tell you this) because she has shown great love and gratitude.” There is another lesson implicit within: “It is not that the Pharisee had less for which to be forgiven than the harlot. Rather, because he did not recognize his need for forgiveness he received less. And she, because she recognized her need and received forgiveness joyfully, received more.” [Culpepper 172]

If the woman had already received forgiveness and her gracious, loving response is the consequence of that forgiveness, how are we to understand v.48: *He said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”* Some are tempted to think that she needs this assurance of her forgiveness. The presence of v 49 encourages another reading. *The others at table said to themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?”*

Jesus’ words were unnecessary as far as she as an individual was concerned; she has already been forgiven and has acted in accordance with her new-found freedom. Others, however, are unaware of her new state and, like Simon, will continue to regard her as a “*sinful woman in the city.*” She does not now need forgiveness from God for her past, but she does need recognition of her new life and forgiveness among God’s people. As important, the people already understand that only God can forgive sins. This then leads to their response: ⁴⁹ *The others at table said to themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?”* They need to answer the question: Is Jesus liar, lunatic, or Lord. It is a question that will linger in Luke 8 and 9.

It is not clear how Simon’s guests will respond to the woman, though v 49 gives us little hope that they will embrace and extend friendship to her. Speaking to themselves (cf. 2:35; 5:21–22; 6:8; 7:39), they raise questions about Jesus’ authority to speak on God’s behalf and, more specifically, to forgive sins (cf. 5:21). Had they known who Jesus was, they would have accepted his authority—as the centurion had done (7:1–10), and as this woman had done. Moreover, had they come seeking forgiveness, they too would have had their debts canceled (vv.41–42) and been able to respond lovingly rather than in judgment.

Restored. *But he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”* That Jesus’ concern is also with this woman’s restoration to the community of God’s people. This is suggested, first, by the fact that she is presented as already behaving in ways that grow out of her new life. In addition, Jesus

addresses her with words usually reserved for the conclusion of miracles of healing: “*your faith has saved you*” (8:48; 18:42; 17:19); and he sends her away “in peace.” Such language cannot be limited to “spiritual” well-being or even, in other co-texts, to “physical” vitality, but speaks of a restoration to wholeness, including (even if not limited to) restoration to the full social intercourse from which she has been excluded.

Luke closes the curtains on this scene before the action is completed. It is one thing to have Jesus proclaim her forgiveness in order that her renewed status might be recognized by the community; it is quite another for that community actually to accept his pronouncement and to extend kinship to her. How will they respond? Will they adopt the merciful view of the world that Jesus displays in his interactions in this episode? Will they learn to be merciful and the Father is merciful (Luke 6:36)? Will they come to see God as one who cancels debts and invites others to do the same so that all might behave toward one another with love unfettered by the constraints of past behaviors, reputation, and reciprocity? Will they recognize Jesus as God’s authorized agent to pronounce forgiveness and to bring restoration? How will they respond? How will Simon respond? And how will Luke’s readers respond?

Notes

Luke 7: 36-50 In this story of the pardoning of the sinful woman Luke presents two different reactions to the ministry of Jesus. A Pharisee, suspecting Jesus to be a prophet, invites Jesus to a festive banquet in his house, but the Pharisee's self-righteousness leads to little forgiveness by God and consequently little love shown toward Jesus. The sinful woman, on the other hand, manifests a faith in God (Luke 7:50) that has led her to seek forgiveness for her sins, and because so much was forgiven, she now overwhelms Jesus with her display of love; cf the similar contrast in attitudes in Luke 18:9-14. The whole episode is a powerful lesson on the relation between forgiveness and love.

Luke 7:36 *reclined at table*: the normal posture of guests at a banquet. Other oriental banquet customs alluded to in this story include the reception by the host with a kiss (Luke 7:45), washing the feet of the guests (Luke 7:44), and the anointing of the guests' heads (Luke 7:46).

Luke 7:37 *an alabaster flask of ointment*: The word *alabastros* denoted a globular container for perfumes. It had no handles and was furnished with a long neck which was broken off when the contents were needed. The container was not necessarily made of alabaster. Jewish women commonly wore a perfume flask suspended from a cord round the neck, and it was so much a part of them that they were allowed to wear it on the sabbath (*Shabbath* 6:3). The extensive use of perfumes may be gathered from the fact that the Sages allotted a certain woman an allowance of 400 gold coins for perfume (*Ketuboth* 66b)

Luke 7:38 *she stood behind him at his feet*: People reclined on low couches at festive meals, leaning on the left arm with the head towards the table and the body stretched away from it. The sandals were removed before reclining. The woman was thus able to approach Jesus’ feet without difficulty.

Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and anointed them with the ointment: Wiping Jesus’ feet with her hair is a significant action given that Jewish women did not unbind their hair in public. There are examples of the kissing of the feet of a specially honored rabbi (e.g. *Sanhedrin* 27b), but it was far from usual. Finally she anointed Jesus’ feet with the ointment (probably not the best of translations since in our time modern ointments are pastes/solids). Normally this would have been poured on the head. To use it on the feet is probably a mark of humility. To attend to the feet was a menial task, one assigned to a slave. One might well speculate that Jesus had turned this woman from her sinful ways and that all this was the expression of her love and gratitude.

Luke 7:39 *If this man were a prophet*: The form of conditional sentence he used implies in the Greek (a) that Jesus was not a prophet, and (b) that he did not know who and what sort of woman was touching him.

Luke 7:40 *Jesus said to him in reply*: Given that Simon the Pharisee had not spoken aloud (v.39) Jesus shows that he knew Simon's thoughts thus indicating what kind of man he was indeed.

Luke 7:41 *days' wages*: one denarius is the normal daily wage of a laborer.

Luke 7:42 *forgave*: The Greek word used is *charizomai*. It is a verbal form of the noun *charis* = "grace, kindness, mercy." This word is used only three times in Luke: twice in our text (vv. 42-43) and earlier in the chapter when we are told that Jesus has been giving sight to many who were blind (7:21). There are two Greek words that refer to "canceling" a debt. Although they overlap in meanings, the verb in these verses implies more a sense of "to being gracious towards" = "giving something that isn't deserved." The other term -- *aphiemi* -- a word that is frequently translated "to forgive" (see 7:47, 48, 49) -- implies more of a "releasing from" something, e.g., canceling financial obligations or releasing from (punishment for) sins = "forgiveness".

Luke 7:43 *I suppose*: Simon's response seems begrudging at best -- perhaps indicating that his own attitude had been revealed in Jesus' telling of the parable.

Luke 7:44 *Do you see this woman?*: Clearly Simon had seen the woman, but Jesus' question is contextualized by the parable. Jesus proceeded to contrast her attitude with that of his host. It now comes out that, though Simon had invited Jesus to his home, he had not given him the treatment due to an honored guest. It would have been expected that the host would have provided water for his guest's feet (cf. Gen. 18:4; Judg. 19:21). Jesus had not received this courtesy, but he had had his feet washed with the woman's tears. Similarly in place of the kiss of welcome that might have been expected from the host (cf. Gen. 29:13; 45:15) he had received kisses on his feet. And finally, whereas Simon had not anointed Jesus' head (cf. Pss. 23:5; 141:5), the woman had anointed his feet (oil is olive oil, which was plentiful and cheap; there is a contrast with ointment, which was rare and expensive perfume).

Luke 7:47 *her many sins have been forgiven; hence, she has shown great love*: literally, "her many sins have been forgiven, seeing that she has loved much." Jesus does not gloss over those sins: they are many. That the woman's sins have been forgiven is attested by the great love she shows toward Jesus. Her love is the consequence of her forgiveness. This is also the meaning demanded by the parable in vv. 41-43. By contrast, "*But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little*". It is natural to think of Simon. He certainly had shown little love and the implication is that he had not been forgiven very much.

There is an ambiguity in the Greek of verse 47. It would be possible to translate, "Her many sins have been forgiven because she has shown great love," understanding her love as the basis for receiving forgiveness. This, however, contradicts both the parable, where forgiveness leads to love, not vice versa, and the final statement in verse 47 (little forgiveness leads to little love). It seems necessary then, to understand "because she has shown great love" as providing the reason why Jesus is sure that she has been forgiven, connecting this phrase with the beginning of the sentence, "therefore, I tell you." The sense then would be, "Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven, (and I can tell you this) because she has shown great love." Simon is being shown the value of the woman's experience, not just for her but for him. It is valuable not because Simon also has many sins (no such accusation is made), but because Simon can learn about the depth of God's forgiveness and its powerful effect through the experience of the woman. If Simon can accept her, the woman's experience can revitalize Simon's understanding of God.

Luke 7:48–50. *Your sins are forgiven:* (cf. 5:21–24). Luke tells us that this provoked a discussion among the guests. The forgiveness of sins was a divine prerogative. “*Who is this who even forgives sins?*” But Jesus completely ignored them. His interest was with the woman: “*Your faith has saved you.*” This is important as showing that the love spoken of earlier was the consequence, not the cause, of her salvation. As elsewhere in the New Testament it is faith that is the means of receiving God’s good gift. Jesus dismissed her with “*go in peace*” (cf. 8:48). The Greek is literally ‘go into peace’ and it may be worth noting that the rabbis held that ‘Go in peace’ was proper in bidding farewell.

Sources:

R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel of Luke*, New Interpreter’s Bible vol. 9, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004) 168-73

Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997) 305-15

Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, vol. 3 of *Sacra Pagina*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991) 336-85.

Jerome Kodell, “Luke” in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, eds. Dianne Bergant and Robert J. Karris, (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1989). 951-52.

Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952) 232-37

Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995)

Brian Stoffregen, Scripture Commentary at <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian>

Scripture quotes from *New American Bible* by Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, DC. © 1991, 1986, 1970