

**+ Luke 7:36-50 + My Questions, Jesus' Answers: Will He Forgive Me?¹ +
+ 4th Sunday after Pentecost + 16 June 2013 +**

What's the hardest sentence to say? It's not "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers" or some other tongue twister. It's not some technical sentence loaded with complex jargon that describes a basic function with specific, complicated terms. In fact, the hardest sentence to say isn't complicated at all. It's only three words long—"I forgive you."

Why is it so hard to say "I forgive you"? It's easy to read off the page. In and of themselves, the words aren't complicated, but yet it's so hard to sincerely and honestly forgive someone who has wronged you. It's so hard to forgive because the reason for even saying it is so hard to forget. You might have trouble remembering what to buy at the grocery store, yet when you're told to "forgive and forget", your mind seems to have perfect clarity when remembering how a person wronged you. It's hard to forget how poorly someone treated you even many years later. It's hard to forget how they broke your trust or failed to come through or even sided against you.

Then you have deal with the consequences. Consequences can last long after the sin has been committed, and can have long-lasting effects a large number of people. Consequences are what remind you again and again of that damaging sin.

Perhaps "I forgive you" is so hard to say because you know the track record of the person to whom you're speaking. Will she do it again? Will he fall back into the same old pattern of sin? Will they really turn from their sins and live in repentance? Often it seems like our forgiveness falls on deaf ears and hard hearts. So you and I hesitate when it comes to forgiveness. Maybe you don't want to forgive that person because they've hurt you so badly or failed you so often or even some vengeance lingers in your heart.

Those three simple words are hard to say, but who am I to not want to forgive another person? Deep down inside, I know how desperately I need God's forgiveness. Yet I'm so slow to forgive, so hesitant, so unwilling that the question begs to be asked of the only One who has the power to grant forgiveness. If I don't forgive, **WILL HE FORGIVE ME?**

In today's Gospel lesson from Luke 7, Jesus confronts us with the example of two people who desperately needed his forgiveness. They were real, ordinary people like you and me. One was a Pharisee named Simon. He was like every other Pharisee—extremely devoted to the ceremonial laws of the Jewish faith and the teachings of the rabbis. He made sure to avoid anything that appeared like work on the Sabbath. He dutifully gave to the Lord 10% of everything he had, even his leftovers. He made sure that the food he ate, the clothes he wore, and the company he kept were ceremonially "clean".

Like most Pharisees, he was quick to look down his self-righteous nose at the "sinners" in his community—the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the unclean. Like most Pharisees, he also had some questions about the rabbi named Jesus who was shaking their world, yet unlike the others, Simon invited Jesus to his home for dinner. Perhaps it was the popular thing to do. Perhaps Jesus had helped or healed him. Perhaps he simply wanted Jesus to answer some of those lingering questions that Simon had. Above all, Simon needed to realize how desperately he needed a Savior no matter how righteous he thought he was, but Simon didn't realize how needy he was.

So Jesus arrived at the dinner party, but someone else had showed up too. She was the polar opposite of Simon. Luke doesn't get into too many details, but he simply describes her in this way—"***a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town***". Based on the other Gospel accounts, there is some reason to believe that this woman was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, the woman who later sat at Jesus' feet and listened to the Word.

Whether it was Mary or not, the woman Luke describes had a soiled reputation in their small town. Her "***sinful life***" was likely adultery or even prostitution. In fact, her sinful lifestyle likely ruined the reputations and lives of her family. Imagine being her brother or sister. In her town, she was "unclean". That prohibited her from entering the temple area in Jerusalem, celebrating the festivals, and offering sacrifices.

She was a "sinner" to her neighbors, but more importantly, she was spiritually dead in her sins and headed toward eternal death in hell, that is, until she met Jesus. Somewhere along the way she heard him teach, and

¹ A special thank you to Pr. Nathan Biebert who recently shared insights re: this text @ <http://www.breadforbeggars.com/2013/06/10/a-kiss-on-the-feet-a-gospel-commentary-by-nathan-biebert/>.

she realized how desperately she needed a Savior. Through that Word she heard, the Holy Spirit created faith in her heart. No longer would she be an adulteress or a prostitute, because Jesus gave her life through him.

Simon would not have wanted her to come into his house. She was definitely not on the guest list, but when she ***“learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume...”*** As was the custom, Jesus was reclining on a small couch facing the table with his feet behind him. The woman had been waiting for Jesus in the shadows, ***“and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears.”*** She was overcome with tears of profound joy because she knew that Jesus was the Savior who had come to save her. She tried to wipe her tears off of his feet with her long hair, and she kissed his feet. She understood that she owed her life and eternity to Jesus, her Savior. It was a kiss of profound thankfulness and humble indebtedness, and then she remembered the alabaster jar of very expensive perfume that she had brought along. She cracked it open and poured out its entire contents on his feet, wiping it with her long hair and continuing to kiss his feet. The whole house filled with the fragrance of her thankoffering.

Jesus recognized her actions as grateful thanksgiving coming from a heart full of trust in her Savior, but Simon not so much. Simon thought to himself, ***“If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of a woman she is—that she is a sinner.”*** What self-respecting prophet of God would allow such a sinful woman to make him ceremonially unclean with her touch? The all-knowing God sitting at Simon’s table knew what he was thinking, so he told Simon a story.

Two men owed money to a certain loan shark. One owed him about a year and a half’s worth of wages. The other man owed him about a month and a half’s worth of wages. Both sizable amounts, but ***“neither of them had the money to pay him back...”*** Unexpectedly the loan shark ***“canceled the debts of both.”***

Jesus asked Simon, ***“Now which of them will love him even more?”*** Simon knew the answer, but he hesitated to say it. ***“I suppose...the one who had the bigger debt canceled.”*** ***“You have judged correctly,”*** Jesus responded. Simon needed to realize why this “sinful” woman was kissing Jesus’ feet and why Simon himself should be kissing Jesus’ feet.

In no uncertain terms, Jesus told 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—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.”*** Simon didn’t realize that like the sinful woman, he owed his life and eternity to Jesus. He didn’t realize how desperately he needed Jesus’ forgiveness, and it showed in his lack of hospitality toward Jesus.

Simon needed to realize that this woman was forgiven, not because of what she had done (as Simon thought he had to do), but because of the surprising mercy and grace that Jesus showed toward her. ***“Then Jesus said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’”*** This Jesus was much more than a prophet, but the people could only wonder about this “prophet”, this “rabbi” who forgave sins with the authority of God himself.

Do you realize how desperately you need Christ’s forgiveness? Is it easier for you to be a self-righteous Pharisee lovelessly condemning those “sinners out there” in the world while stroking your ego with your Christian accomplishments? Or are you like the woman, knowing what you’ve done or failed to do, knowing how your sins have affected the lives of loved ones and how you still face the consequences of your actions every day?

Whether we care to admit it or not, the answer is “both”. There are times when I am a self-righteous Pharisee and times when I feel the crushing burden of my sins and their relentless consequences. For a Christian, life is a pendulum swinging back and forth between self-righteousness and near despair. Jesus’ words cut each and every one of us to the heart because none of us deserve anything from the hand of our God, let alone forgiveness. At times, you’re tempted to think that you don’t really need much forgiveness, while at other times, you’re tempted to think your sins are so great that even Jesus can’t forgive them.

...But yet he does. He has every right to withhold his forgiveness, but he still comes to forgive the Simons and the Marys of our world, including you and me, whether your self-righteousness is so bad it blinds you or your “big” sin seems to great that it crushes you. Jesus still comes to forgive you with his own perfect life. He did what you did not and did not do what you have done, but he did it all for you in your place. Jesus still comes to forgive you with his innocent death on the cross. He paid the price for every single one of your sins. Jesus still

comes to forgive you with his amazing resurrection on Easter morning. Jesus still comes to forgive you through his Word, through water and the Word, through a meal of his own body and blood with bread and wine. Jesus still comes to forgive you freely and fully no matter how great or small your sins might seem.

How do you respond to that full and free forgiveness for your sins—the big ones and the little ones, the public ones and the secret ones? We dare not be like Simon taking Jesus and his forgiveness for granted because after all, we're WELS Lutherans who may have even been Christian from birth. No, in humble thankfulness, we **"kiss his feet"** like the sinful woman.

While you can't physically kiss his feet and bathe them in perfume, you can say, "Thank you!" with your life and words and actions. You kiss Jesus' feet in thanksgiving when you use your best gifts to honor and thank him, whether that's your money and stuff, your talents and abilities, or your time. You kiss Jesus' feet when you share the fragrant news of his forgiveness with people you know and people you don't. You kiss Jesus' feet when you forgive those who have wronged you and ask God to help you let go of your ill will towards that person. You kiss Jesus' feet when you ask others to forgive your wrongs. You kiss Jesus' feet when you rejoice in his forgiveness day after day—freely receiving it and freely sharing it.

Will Jesus forgive you? He already has. His cross and empty tomb guarantee it. He continues to forgive you day after day, and someday he will free you from the burden of all your sins in the glories of heaven. Rejoice in that forgiveness. Revel in that forgiveness, and like Mary, love much, because your Savior has forgiven you so much. Amen.