

LUKE 7:36–50. (EHV)

A certain one of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him. Jesus entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. Just then a sinful woman from that town learned that he was reclining in the Pharisee's house. She brought an alabaster jar of perfume, stood behind him near his feet weeping, and began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she began to wipe them with her hair while also kissing his feet and anointing them with the perfume. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would realize who is touching him and what kind of woman she is, because she is a sinner." Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." He said, "Teacher, say it." "A certain moneylender had two debtors. The one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he forgave them both. So, which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one who had the larger debt forgiven." Then he told him, "You have judged correctly." Turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house, but you did not give me water for my feet. Yet she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but she, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with perfume. Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; that is why she loved so much. But the one who is forgiven little loves little." Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins have been forgiven." Those reclining at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" He said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

There is an interesting theory in the field of communication called Expectancy Violation Theory. The theorists who deal with this theory study what the result is when people violate what is expected of them when communicating with others. We do have certain unspoken rules we follow when communicating with others, don't we? When I'm having an ordinary conversation with you any one of you one on one, I am supposed to talk in a certain volume, I'm supposed to keep a certain distance, and I'm supposed to maintain a certain level of eye contact. If I violate those expectations and talk at an annoyingly loud volume three inches from your nose, or turn the other way whenever you say something to me, you'll probably only be able to pay attention to my violations and not to the message that I'm actually saying.

On the other hand, there are instances where the violation can make a positive impact. Maybe the unspoken rule is that Dad doesn't ever cry, he's short on words, and he doesn't show much affection. So when he drops you off at college and hugs you tightly and tells you at length through tears how much he wants you to behave and how much he'll miss you, that will likely make whatever he says more memorable and meaningful than usual.

Are you already thinking about how this theory can be applied to this evening's Gospel? There are really three main expectation violations. Jesus is reclining on a dining couch with a certain Pharisee named Simon, presumably at Simon's house. And while he's reclining, a woman with a notoriously sinful past brings an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, stands behind

him near his feet weeping, and begins to wet his feet with her tears. Then she begins to wipe his feet with her hair while also kissing his feet and anointing them with the expensive perfume.

There are two expectation violations here. The first is that a woman with this kind of past is publicly and openly associating and interacting with a religious leader. There was an expectation that so-called holy men—and of course Jesus was actually a holy man—wouldn't interact with those kinds of people, at least not publicly and openly. There might be an appropriate place for them to converse more privately, but not in a public meal setting like this, especially when we get the impression that she wasn't even invited to the meal and she is the one initiating this public interaction.

The second violation is that this woman is so effusive in her interaction. Even in our eyes today, it seems like she's going overboard. She doesn't actually say a word to Jesus, at least not one that is recorded, but she stands behind his feet weeping, weeping to such an extent that she is able to wet Jesus's feet with her tears. The original Greek gives the impression that she is essentially raining tears onto his feet. She then uses her hair to wipe his feet dry, while also kissing his feet and anointing them with the expensive perfume she had brought along, so that the whole house was filled with the fragrance. By now people were probably used to unusual interactions to a certain extent when they were around Jesus. But this is unusual even by the usual unusual standards. There is a display of emotion and tenderness here that even makes us uncomfortable, and imagine what this display did to the meal Simon was hosting. Do you think there was much meaningful conversation taking place?

So Simon probably was not the only one saying to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would realize who is touching him and what kind of woman she is, that she is a sinner."

But even though Simon is saying it to himself, thinking it to himself, Jesus, who knows all, responds to it out loud. "Simon, I have something to tell you."

Simon said, "Teacher, say it."

"A certain moneylender had two debtors," Jesus said. "The one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he forgave them both. So, which of them will love him more?"

Simon answered, "I suppose the one who had the larger debt forgiven."

Jesus told him, "You have judged correctly."

Now we have the third expectation violation. As I mentioned before, normally when you are talking with someone, you are expected to maintain a certain amount of eye contact with them. There are obvious exceptions. For instance, if you try to talk to someone while they are in the middle of an activity that requires their focus and attention, it's not surprising if they don't turn to look at you when they respond. But the only activity Jesus is in the middle of is talking to Simon—a conversation he himself has initiated. But listen to what Jesus does now: "Turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman?'"

As Jesus makes the main point of his parable to Simon, he doesn't look at Simon at all! He looks only at the woman while he speaks to Simon! Now of course Jesus wouldn't do this if it would only cause everyone to focus on his violation and to miss his message. In this case, he knows it will strengthen his message. Simon and others in the room think that this woman already had shame and that she is bringing even more shame on herself by conducting herself in this way. But Jesus is shifting the shame. He focuses his attention on this woman behind him and

won't even look at his host reclining in front of him. And by continuing to talk to Simon as he does so, he is actually honoring this woman in one of the most satisfying ways imaginable: He is letting her overhear his compliments, as it were. People can compliment you to your face for a variety of reasons, some good and some bad. But if you overhear someone speaking well of you to someone else, you know that the compliment is meant.

Listen to Jesus speak to Simon as he looks at the woman: "Do you see this woman? I came into *your* house. You did not give me water for my feet. But she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but she, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with [expensive] perfume. Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; that is why she loved so much. But the one who is forgiven little loves little."

Then Jesus finally spoke to her as he looked at her: "Your sins have been forgiven."

Did you catch why Simon didn't show as much love to Jesus, even though he was hosting him? It was because he didn't have as much gratitude or thankfulness as the woman did. The woman, like the debtor who was forgiven five hundred denarii in Jesus's parable, knew that she had *many* sins that had been forgiven through Jesus. So she couldn't help but be grateful toward Jesus, and she couldn't help but show great love for Jesus.

It happens at pastors' conferences that the presenting pastor will make a good, biblical point about how we should be doing things as a pastor versus how we tend to do them. And what is our instinctive reaction? We bristle. We want to defend ourselves and justify why we did things the usual way. We do the same thing with ourselves. If we didn't make the time to make the shut-in visits we wanted to make or have the conversations we wanted to have, whether difficult ones or easy ones, we make excuses.

Do you do the same? Let me ask you this: If you get pulled over by an officer when you are speeding, is your instinctive reaction to admit you were speeding and take the consequences, or to make excuses to the officer, or at least to yourself? If your parents get on your case to do something they already told you to do hours ago, is your instinctive reaction to apologize and admit your guilt or to make excuses, or even to lie? ("I was just about to do it!") Our instinctive reaction is to make excuses and defend ourselves. Oh sure, we'll say in general, "Well, I'm not perfect." But then if someone starts asking us about specific things we said or did, our instinct is to defend why it was the right thing to say or do in the moment. So we end up giving the impression that we are perfect, that we are always in the right.

But if we're always trying to show how we were in the right, does that lead to gratitude? Does that lead to showing more love to God and others? Are people who think they are always in the right grateful people? Martin Luther still gets a lot of grief for telling a friend once in a letter to be a sinner and sin boldly. But in the context, he wasn't saying that we should just stop trying to fight sin and yield ourselves to it and give in to all our sinful impulses. He was saying the same thing Jesus is saying here. We are going to be better, more thankful, more loving people the more we are honest with ourselves and especially with God about our wrongdoings and just how sinful we are. It isn't the person with the small debt forgiven who is filled with gratitude and love. It's the person with the big debt forgiven.

Do you want to have a happy Thanksgiving this year? Do you want to be more thankful in general? Do you want to be a more loving person, a better human being? Then stop making

yourselves out to be better than you are. Stop making excuses and defending yourselves at every turn. Relearn the art of examining yourselves in the light of the Ten Commandments with Luther's biblical explanations. You will see the debts start to pile up.

But then you will see something else too: You will see the One who is sinned against the most violate all expectations. You will see him freely forgive and wash away that whole huge pile of debts—not with his tears, but with the blood of his Son. You will see everything squared away between you and God. You will see God happy with you. And you will realize: This is not what I deserve, but it is what I have been given. And you will be thankful. And you will want to show more love.

“Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; that is why she loved so much. But the one who is forgiven little loves little.” If you have the tradition of going around the table and saying something you're grateful for, consider violating expectations this year: “I'm thankful that Jesus has forgiven my many, many sins.” You might make some people uncomfortable, but it will be the good kind of violation, the kind that makes the occasion more meaningful and memorable. They will see the truth on your face: Your sins have been forgiven. You are happy. You are grateful. You love your Savior. Amen.