

Jesus in a house of criticism. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 19 March 2014.

As you know, we are part way through a series of talks about houses which played a part in the life of our Lord Jesus when He was here in the world. The title for today's talk is 'Jesus in a house of criticism', as we join our Lord in the house of a Pharisee.

This was a very different setting to that we visited last week when Mervyn spoke to us about the occasion when Jesus attended a meal in the house of Matthew, the gospel writer. As Mervyn told us, before Jesus called Matthew to follow Him, Matthew had belonged to a despised class of men who collected custom duties on behalf of the Roman authorities.¹ The man whose house Jesus entered now was a very different kettle of fish. For, as I said, this man – Simon by name (Simon being by far the most popular man's name in our Lord's day²) – this man was a Pharisee. He belonged, that is, to an elite and very strict sect of the Jews.

Whereas, as Mervyn told us, our Lord's visit to the house of Matthew is recorded by each of the first three gospels,³ we are indebted to Luke alone for the account of His entrance to the house of Simon.⁴ The feast which Jesus attended in Matthew's house was provided expressly for Him (the Saviour),⁵ whereas, in the house of Simon, the Lord was one among many guests.⁶ In his gospel, Luke wrote of three separate occasions when our Lord accepted invitations from Pharisees to have a meal with them, and, in each instance, the house He entered soon became, in one way or another, 'a house of criticism'.⁷

Enough from me; Doctor Luke please⁸ ...

And one of the Pharisees asked Him to dine with him. And entering into the Pharisee's house, He reclined to eat. Perhaps I should explain that in Israel then guests wouldn't sit with their feet under the table as we do, but would 'recline' on low couches, leaning on their left elbows, with their feet stretched back behind them.

And behold, a woman in the city who was a sinner (two expressions which, taken together, are generally understood to mean that she was a prostitute⁹ – someone who we might speak of today as 'a woman of the streets'¹⁰) ... **behold, a woman in the city who was a sinner, when she learned that He was reclining in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of sweet-smelling ointment** (Again I should explain that when a Rabbi, a Jewish teacher, such as Jesus was regarded, was invited to a meal, anyone was allowed to attend, although not, of course, to eat. Which explains why this undesirable woman was able to enter the Pharisee's house with no invitation). **And standing behind Him by His feet, weeping,¹¹ she began to wash His feet with her tears,¹²** (and, having no towel to hand,) **to wipe them with the hair of her head** (with the tresses of her hair), **to kiss them, and to anoint them with the sweet-smelling ointment** (very likely, I suspect an essential tool of her trade – expensive ointment purchased originally with the intention of increasing her attractiveness to men, but a recent encounter she had had with Jesus had radically changed her plans – and its use.¹³ I speak of her 'recent encounter' with Jesus because a comparison of the gospels makes it clear that it was only a very short time before that Jesus had issued His now well-known invitation, 'Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest'.¹⁴ It is most likely that this woman had heard that invitation, and driven by her need and drawn by His grace had then, in heart at least, 'come to' Jesus, and, as He had promised, had found true spiritual rest.

Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, (we read) **he spoke within himself, saying, 'This man, if He were a prophet, would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching Him,¹⁵ for she is a sinner'**. Following the recent raising back to life by our Lord of the deceased son of the widow of Nain – an event recorded earlier in the same chapter – large numbers of people had said that Jesus was 'a great prophet'.¹⁶ As a Pharisee, Simon would never have dreamt of having any contact with someone such as this woman who had now presumed to enter his house. And he was confident of two things at least: first, that any genuine prophet would have immediately recognised the sinful intruder for what she was, and, second, that he would have been quick to repel her.¹⁷ But, as Jesus made no attempt to discourage her or to fend her off, Simon jumped to the conclusion that either He didn't know her sinful past, or He didn't care. Either way, to Simon's mind, this settled it: Jesus could not be a prophet.¹⁸

And Jesus answering said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you'. Being Simon's invited guest, Jesus courteously asked Simon for permission to speak directly to him. But, by 'answering' Simon's *unspoken* censure, Jesus proved that He (clearly able to read the inmost thoughts of the human heart) was, at the very least, a prophet. **And he (Simon) said, Teacher, say it'.**

'A certain creditor had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii (that's about 18 months' pay for a general labourer), **and the other owed fifty** (just one-tenth of that amount).

And when they had nothing with which to pay him back (both men being equally insolvent), he freely forgave them both. Which of them will love him more?’

Simon answering said, ‘I suppose the one to whom he freely forgave more’. And He said to him, ‘You have judged correctly’.

And turning to the woman, He said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? I entered into *your*¹⁹ house.²⁰ You *gave me* no water for my feet, but this woman has *washed* my feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head.

You gave me no *kiss*, but, from the time I came in,²¹ this woman has not ceased to *kiss* my feet *fervently*.²²

You did not anoint *my head* with *oil*,²³ but this woman has anointed *my feet*²⁴ with *sweet-smelling ointment*.²⁵

For which reason I tell you, her *many sins have been forgiven*²⁶ (what a lovely expression; it reminds me of the words of a psalm read here last Sunday evening: ‘Bless the Lord, O my soul ... who forgives *all* your iniquities²⁷), *because she loved much* (you may safely conclude, Simon, that ‘her *many sins have been forgiven*’ from the fact that she loved *much*). **But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little’.**

And He said to her, ‘Your sins have been forgiven’.²⁸ Putting His seal on her earlier forgiveness, and now giving her the assurance that she was already pardoned.²⁹

And those who were reclining with Him began to say within themselves, ‘Who is this, who even forgives sins?’³⁰

But He said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you.’³¹ Go in peace’.

‘Your faith has saved you’, were His words, thereby making it clear that, although love for the Saviour is the *fruit* of a sinner’s forgiveness, faith is its only *root* ... that love for the Lord Jesus is not the *cause* but the *effect* of a sinner’s forgiveness.³²

That is, believers are not pardoned because they love the Saviour. Rather, they love Him because He first pardoned them. Although, as the Lord clearly implied, for those of us who trust in Him, our love for Him does grow in direct proportion to the increase in our appreciation of our own sinfulness³³ and therefore of His free pardon.

The illustration Jesus gave to Simon tells us that, although forgiveness *comes through* faith in Him (the Lord Jesus) alone, it is *demonstrated by* our love for Him – which in turn is shown by our giving Him *the service that we owe Him*.

Today, the 19th of March, is the birth-date of David Livingstone,³⁴ the famous pioneer medical missionary and explorer in Africa in the 19th century – almost certainly the first European to view the Victoria Falls and who gave them their name in honour of the then-Queen.

When speaking at Cambridge University during his first visit back to the UK, Dr. Livingstone said, and I quote, ‘People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. *Can that be called a sacrifice which is simply paid back as a small part of a great debt owing to our God, which we can never repay?* ... I never made a sacrifice. Of this we ought not to talk, when we remember the great sacrifice which He made who left His Father’s throne on high to give Himself for us’.³⁵

Footnotes

¹ See the article 'Tax; taxing' in ISBE. Note the extract, 'in the imperial era the direct taxes were not farmed out, but collected by regular imperial officers in the regular routine of official duty. The customs or tolls levied upon exports and imports, and upon goods in the hands of merchants passing through the country, were sold to the highest bidders, who were called publicans ... The tax-gatherer, if a Jew, was a renegade in the eyes of his patriotic fellows. He paid a fixed sum for the taxes, and received for himself what he could over and above that amount.'

² See 'Jesus and the Eyewitnesses', by Richard Bauckham, pages 70-71. We know of about 250 men who lived about the turn of the era who bore the name 'Simon'. There are nine Simons mentioned in the New Testament alone, and twenty in Josephus. Note, for example, Simon the Pharisee, Luke 7. 36; Simon the Zealot, Luke 6. 15; Simon the leper, Matt. 26. 6; Simon the Cyrenian, Mark 15. 21; Simon the magician, Acts 8. 9, Simon the tanner, Acts 10. 6.

³ Matt. 9. 9-13; Mark 2. 14-17; Luke 5. 27-32.

⁴ Luke 7. 36-50.

⁵ Luke 5. 29.

⁶ Luke 7. 49; cf. Luke 14. 1, 7.

⁷ Luke 7.36-50; 11. 37-44; 14. 1-24.

⁸ This story illustrates the accusation made in Luke 7. 34.

⁹ Cf. Matt. 9. 11; 11. 19 with Matt. 21. 31-32.

¹⁰ Jesus violated social taboos to reach out to those marginalized not only racially (Luke 7. 1–10), economically (7. 11–17) and religiously (7. 24–35) but also morally (7. 36–50).

¹¹ There are two weeping women in the chapter – in two stories told only by Luke. The first shed tears of grief, Luke 7. 13, and the second of gratitude.

¹² That she must have wept profusely is evident from the fact that her tears were sufficient for her to wash Jesus' feet.

¹³ Both in Luke 7 and in John 12 we read of women who anointed our Lord, and both occasions took place in houses belonging to a Simon, Matt. 26. 6. In the language of our Lord, the woman of Luke 7 had been forgiven as a "five hundred denarii" debtor; whereas the woman of Matthew 26 was commended as a "three hundred denarii" worshipper.

¹⁴ Matt. 11. 28. In Matthew's account, this invitation follows directly after our Lord's comments about John the Baptist, Matt. 11. 1-24. (Note the connecting words, 'At that time', Matt. 11. 25.) The parallel account in Luke's gospel occupies verses Luke 7. 18-35.

¹⁵ Compare the woman with the issue of blood, who later 'touched' Him, Luke 8. 44-47.

¹⁶ Luke 7. 16.

¹⁷ Even though one of the greatest Old Testament prophets had declared long before that those which say, 'Stand by yourself, come not near to me, for I am holier than you' were 'a smoke in (God's) nose', Isa. 65. 5.

¹⁸ Simon didn't know either the Saviour or the woman. To Simon, He less than no prophet, and she was still only 'a sinner' – whereas, in truth, Jesus was more than a prophet (for He could forgive sins) and she was now a forgiven sinner.

¹⁹ The 'your' (Greek σου) being placed first gives emphasis to the Lord's rebuke.

²⁰ Those things which Simon ought to have done but didn't, the woman didn't do either. In each case, she did much more.

²¹ Clearly she entered very soon after the Saviour; cf. 'when she learned that He was reclining in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask ...'.

²² The intense word of Mark 14. 45 – kataphileō.

²³ With common oil.

²⁴ To anoint the feet was regarded as an extreme luxury (Pliny, H. N. XIII. 4).

²⁵ Bestowed precious ointment.

²⁶ Simon remembered what she had been – Jesus knew what she had become.

²⁷ Psa. 103. 3.

²⁸ The words, 'your sins have been forgiven' were easy to say, but they were not cheap words; they cost Him dearly on the cross.

²⁹ Although the woman does not say a word in the entire account, her actions speak volumes about her contrite heart. She does not speak, but her tears, etc., are more eloquent than speech, and they are understood by Jesus.

³⁰ Luke says three times over that she is a sinner (Luke 7. 37, 39, 47), and three times over that Jesus is the forgiver of sins (Luke 7. 47, 48, 49). He had earlier proved that He had authority to forgive sins, by curing a man sick of the palsy, Luke 5. 17-26. Now He declares the forgiveness of a woman.

³¹ ἡ πίστις σου σέσωκέν σε. The same phrase as in Luke 8. 48; Luke 17. 19; Luke 18. 42.

³² Not the ground of forgiveness, but the consequence of it.

³³ With the Pharisee it seems that his need never crossed his mind. When he does think about sin, it is not his own but the woman's sin.

³⁴ 19 March 1813 – 1 May 1873.

³⁵ The longer quote reads, "It is deplorable to think that one of the noblest of our missionary societies, the Church Missionary Society, is compelled to send to Germany for missionaries, whilst other Societies are amply supplied. Let this stain be wiped off. The sort of men who are wanted for missionaries are such as I see before me; men of education, standing, enterprise, zeal, and piety.... I hope that many whom I now address will embrace that honourable

career. Education has been given us from above for the purpose of bringing to the benighted the knowledge of a Saviour. If you knew the satisfaction of performing such a duty, as well as the gratitude to God which the missionary must always feel, in being chosen for so noble, so sacred a calling, you would have no hesitation in embracing it.

For my own part, I have never ceased to rejoice that God has appointed me to such an office. People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. Can that be called a sacrifice which is simply paid back as a small part of a great debt owing to our God, which we can never repay? Is that a sacrifice which brings its own blest reward in healthful activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind, and a bright hope of a glorious destiny hereafter? Away with the word in such a view, and with such a thought! It is emphatically no sacrifice. Say rather it is a privilege. Anxiety, sickness, suffering, or danger, now and then, with a foregoing of the common conveniences and charities of this life, may make us pause, and cause the spirit to waver, and the soul to sink; but let this only be for a moment. All these are nothing when compared with the glory which shall hereafter be revealed in and for us. I never made a sacrifice. Of this we ought not to talk when we remember the great sacrifice which He made who left His Father's throne on high to give Himself for us; 'who being the brightness of that Father's glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high.'... I beg to direct your attention to Africa: I know that in a few years I shall be cut off in that country, which is now open; do not let it be shut again! I go back to Africa to try to make an open path for commerce and Christianity; do you carry out the work which I have begun, I LEAVE IT WITH YOU!". From 'Dr. Livingstone's Cambridge Lectures' (published 1858), page 23. Delivered before the University of Cambridge, in the Senate-House, on Friday, 4th December, 1857. Downloadable from :

<http://www.archive.org/stream/drlivingstonesca00livi#page/22/mode/2up/search/%22never+made+a+sacrifice%22>

(Clearly these words were *not* entered by David Livingstone in his journal of 1851-1853! Contrary to the impression given by John MacArthur on Romans 12. 1, together with a host of other sources!)

Also, correctly reported and dated in THE PERSONAL LIFE OF DAVID LIVINGSTONE, LL.D., D.C.L. CHIEFLY FROM HIS UNPUBLISHED JOURNALS AND CORRESPONDENCE IN THE POSSESSION OF HIS FAMILY. BY W. GARDEN BLAIKIE, D.D., LL.D. Chapter 11.

Part of this reads as follows:

'Among the visits paid by him toward the end of 1857, none was more interesting or led to more important results than that to Cambridge. It was on 3rd December he arrived there, becoming the guest of the Rev. Wm. Monk, of St. John's. Next morning, in the senate-house, he addressed a very large audience, consisting of graduates and undergraduates and many visitors from the town and neighbourhood. The Vice-Chancellor presided and introduced the stranger. Dr. Livingstone's lecture consisted of facts relating to the country and its people, their habits and religious belief, with some notices of his travels, and an emphatic statement of his great object--to promote commerce and Christianity in the country which he had opened. The last part of his lecture was an earnest appeal for missionaries

... In a prefatory letter prefixed to the volume entitled Dr. Livingstone's Cambridge Lectures, the late Professor Sedgwick remarked, in connection with this event, that in the course of a long academic life he had often been present in the senate-house on exciting occasions; in the days of Napoleon he had heard the greetings given to our great military heroes; he had been present at four installation services, the last of which was graced by the presence of the Queen, when her youthful husband was installed as Chancellor, amid the most fervent congratulations that subjects are permitted to exhibit in the presence of their Sovereign. But on none of these occasions "were the congratulations of the University more honest and true-hearted than those which were offered to Dr. Livingstone. He came among us without any long notes of preparation, without any pageant or eloquence to charm and captivate our senses. He stood before us, a plain, single-minded man, somewhat attenuated by years of toil, and with a face tinged by the sun of Africa.... While we listened to the tale he had to tell, there arose in the hearts of all the listeners a fervent hope that the hand of God which had so long upheld him would uphold him still, and help him to carry out the great work of Christian love that was still before him".

Source ... http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13262/13262-h/13262-h.htm#CHAPTER_XI.