

Series: Gospel Women

March 8, 2015

Title: Sinner

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Text: Luke 7:36-50

Sinner

To touch or not to touch?

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Late last March the CDC made its first official pronouncement on an emerging Ebola epidemic in West Africa. It reported that there were 86 suspected cases, with 59 deaths, in Guinea, as well as reports of cases in Sierra Leone and Liberia. By mid-summer the epidemic had exploded across the region, spread by contact between family members or health workers with infected individuals.

What made the Ebola outbreak so terrifying was that:

1. it kills up to 90% of those infected, particularly in less-developed countries,
2. even a very small amount of virus will cause the disease. It was found that *one* virus particle was sufficient to cause the infection in primates.
3. There is at this time no vaccine to offer protection from the disease.

As a result, health workers found it necessary to refrain from *any human contact* with their patients. We're all familiar with the images of health care workers fully gowned, gloved, hooded and masked, wearing multiple layers of protection with no skin exposed. And even then, people contracted the virus!

Imagine the heartbreak of not being able to so much as touch your sick child or loved one for fear of catching the disease that is ravaging their bodies. Even after death, the bodies of loved ones remained unimaginably infectious, resulting in untold sickness and death for those who were simply trying to show their last respects to their family members who had died.

To touch or not to touch? When it came to Ebola "to touch" was out of the question.

A Dinner Invitation:

Luke tells a story that raises the same question in terms of a different kind of infection – the infection of sin and moral corruption.

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The story takes place very likely on a Sabbath afternoon, in the house of a Pharisee. The Pharisees were a religious group that attempted to attain moral and ceremonial purity before God. Virtually every action in their lives was scripted according to strict laws governing the avoidance of evil. Their approach was to avoid contamination by any means possible. For them, that meant not having any social or physical contact with people who did not adhere to the same standards as themselves. In their world you were either *righteous* before God or a *sinner*. There was no “in between.”

Picture the scene at the Pharisee’s house that day. The guests were reclining on their sides around a table. The food – all of it properly prepared and served in ritually pure containers – was arrayed before them. No doubt, their conversation would have been about the Scripture readings in the synagogue earlier that morning. If ever there were a place safe from sin and sinners, this was it.

That is, until an unexpected guest showed up.

The Sinner

Luke tells us:

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Luke 7:37 NIV

A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume.

Imagine what would happen if a fully infected Ebola patient somehow crawled out of bed and staggered into the hospital cafeteria! All it would take is for one person to whisper to someone else, “Isn’t that the Ebola patient from isolation?” That would be the end of normal in the cafeteria – and the rest of the hospital, for that matter. All over one patient who was eminently “untouchable.”

Now picture a woman of ill-repute crashing a Pharisee’s dinner party, walking in with a jar of perfume. Once in the room she found Jesus and touched Him:

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Luke 7:38 NIV

As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

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She had planned to anoint His head with the perfume. But when she found herself in His presence, she broke down in tears. Then, as her tears fell on His feet, maybe she felt embarrassed and let down her hair to dry them off. After drying His feet, she kissed them and lavished her perfume on them.

It was all too much for the Pharisee:

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Luke 7:39 NIV

When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner."

If being in the same room with a "sinner" could contaminate you, you would be in really big trouble when a prostitute let her hair down – a shocking breach of morals in and of itself – and wiped her tears off your feet! You should know better than to let your guard down like that, especially if you were supposed to be a prophet who spoke for God!

To touch or not to touch: what would Jesus say?

A Prophet's Story

A Prophet's Story:

Jesus responds with a little story:

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Luke 7:40-43 NIV

Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you."

"Tell me, teacher," he said.

⁴¹ "Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

⁴³ Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven."

"You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

A Different Reality:

Imagine what it would be like – and hopefully *will* be like – if there were a fail-safe vaccine for Ebola. Imagine what it would be like to know that you could not catch Ebola from someone else, no matter how sick they were. You would be able to offer medical care with no fear of getting sick. You could serve them food, take their temperature, hold their hands – all without having to live in terror of a stray virus particle invading your body.

This is the reality that Jesus described to Simon the Pharisee in response to Simon's condemnation of the woman's daring to touch Jesus' feet. Jesus was announcing a radically new reality. When God's Kingdom comes, we no longer have to live in terror of being contaminated by sin; we experience God's forgiveness – the ultimate vaccine against the ultimate agent of death.

The Old and the New:

Jesus explains to Simon that while he has been acting and thinking out of the old way of dealing with sin and moral corruption, the woman has discovered something brand new: the Kingdom of God:

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Luke 7:44-47 NIV

Then he turned toward the woman and said to 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.

⁴⁵ You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet.

⁴⁶ You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet.

⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little."

Yes, she was a "sinner," as contaminated and corrupted by sin as anyone in the whole community. But she had accepted forgiveness from God for her sins. She was a new person, no longer the infamous town sinner, but a person newly created as a member of God's family. What else could explain the love that she displayed when she came to Jesus?

Forgiven

What kind of prophet, anyway?

In a sense, this story began with Simon questioning Jesus' credentials as a prophet:

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Luke 7:39 NIV

When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner."

It ends with the same question. Jesus turns to the woman and says,

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Luke 7:48 NIV

"Your sins are forgiven."

And that causes the rest of the guests who were present to ask their own question:

Luke 7:49 NIV

The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"

There it is: the choice between the old reality and the new reality. The customary view of a prophet was of a holy man who would never get within arm's reach of sin or sinners. In fact, his supernatural gifts would warn him even when others had no idea that a sinner was in their midst.

But Jesus is operating in a totally different dimension: God's New Creation. Instead of quarantining sin and sinners, Jesus has come to destroy sin at its source. He brings God's complete and total forgiveness. He brings the one thing that can neutralize evil: God's love.

"Go in peace!"

Jesus' final words are to the woman who came to anoint Him with perfume:

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Luke 7:50 NIV

Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

The woman dared to step into that new reality. She dared to believe that God was doing a new thing, and that God had come in Jesus to forgive, not condemn. She dared to believe

that the old rules no longer applied. She – a forgiven and transformed person – could even crash the party and reach out and touch Jesus.

It was her faith alone that made the difference. It saved her! And now she could go in peace. As Paul would write a few years later:

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Romans 5:1-2 NIV

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.

Like the woman in the story, Paul tells us that our *faith* gives us *access* to God; He has declared us innocent. And the result is that like that unnamed woman, we “go in peace.