

## Luke: 7:36–50

### From Catena Aurea:

36. And one of the Pharisees desired him that he would eat with him. And he went into the Pharisee's house, and sat down to meat.

37. And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster box of ointment,

38. And stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment.

39. Now when the Pharisee which had bidden him saw it, he spake within himself, saying, This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner.

40. And Jesus answering said unto him, Simon, I have somewhat to say unto thee. And he saith, Master, say on.

41. There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty.

42. And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most?

43. Simon answered and said, I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most. And he said unto him, Thou hast rightly judged.

44. And he turned to the woman, and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head.

45. Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet.

46. My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment.

47. Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.

48. And he said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven.

49. And they that sat at meat with him began to say within themselves, Who is this that forgiveth sins also?

50. And he said to the woman, Thy faith hath saved thee: go in peace.

GREGORY OF NYSSA. (Hom. de Mul. Peccat.) This account is full of precious instruction. For there are very many who justify themselves, being puffed up with the dreamings of an idle fancy, who before the time of judgment comes, separate themselves as lambs from the herds, not willing even to join in eating with the many, and hardly with those who go not to extremes, but keep the middle path in life. St. Luke, the physician of souls rather than of bodies, represents therefore our Lord and Saviour most mercifully visiting others, as it follows, And he went into the Pharisees' house, and sat down to meat. Not that He should share any of his faults, but might impart somewhat of His own righteousness.

CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA. A woman of corrupt life, but testifying her faithful affection, comes to Christ, as having power to release her from every fault, and to grant her pardon for the crimes she had committed. For it follows, And behold a woman in the city, which was a sinner, brought an alabaster box of ointment.

GREGORY OF NYSSA. (ubi sup.) But to mark her own unworthiness, she stands behind with downcast eyes, and with her hair thrown about embraces His feet, and washing them with her tears, betokened a mind distressed at her state, and imploring pardon. For it follows, And standing behind, she began to wash his feet with her tears.

CHRYSOSTOM. (Hom. 6. in Matt.) Thus the harlot became then more honourable than the virgins. For no sooner was she inflamed with penitence, than she burst forth in love for Christ. And these things indeed which have been spoken of were done outwardly, but those which her mind pondered within itself, were much more fervent. God alone beheld them.

TITUS BOSTRENSIS. But the Lord not hearing his words, but perceiving his thoughts, shewed Himself to be the Lord of Prophets, as it follows, And Jesus answering said unto him, Simon, I have something to say unto thee.

GLOSS. (non occ. v. Lyra in loc.) And this indeed He spake in answer to his thoughts; and the Pharisee was made more attentive by these words of our Lord, as it is said, And he saith, Master, say on.

TITUS BOSTRENSIS. As if He said, Nor art thou without debts. What then! If thou art involved in fewer debts, boast not thyself, for thou art still in need of pardon. Then He goes on to speak of pardon, And when they had nothing to pay, he freely forgave them both.

GLOSS. (non occ.) For no one can of himself escape the debt of sin, but only by obtaining pardon through the grace of God.

TITUS BOSTRENSIS. As if He said, To provide water is easy, to pour forth tears is not easy. Thou hast not provided even what was at hand, she hath poured forth what was not at hand; for washing my feet with her tears, she washed away her own stains. She wiped them with her hair, that so she might draw to herself the sacred moisture, and by that by which she once enticed youth to sin, might now attract to herself holiness.

CHRYSOSTOM. (Hom. 6. in Matt.) But as after the breaking of a violent storm there comes a calm, so when tears have burst forth, there is peace, and gloomy thoughts vanish; and as by water and the Spirit, so by tears and confession we are again made clean. Hence it follows, Wherefore I say unto you, Her sins which are many are forgiven, for she loveth much. For those who have violently plunged into evil, will in time also eagerly follow after good, being conscious to what debts they have made themselves responsible.

TITUS BOSTRENSIS. But it more frequently happens that he who has sinned much is purified by confession, but he who has sinned little, refuses from pride to come to be healed thereby. Hence it follows, But to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.

CHRYSOSTOM. (Hom. 67. in Matt.) We have need then of a fervent spirit, for nothing hinders a man from becoming great. Let then no sinner despair, no virtuous man fall asleep; neither let the one be self-confident, for often the harlot shall go before him, nor the other distrustful, for he may even surpass the foremost. Hence it is also here added, But he said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven thee.

THEOPHYLACT. But after having forgiven her sins, He stops not at the forgiveness of sins, but adds good works, as it follows, Go in peace, i. e. in righteousness, for righteousness is the reconciliation of man to God, as sin is the enmity between God and man; as if He said, Do all things which lead you to the peace of God.

AMBROSE. Now in this place many seem to be perplexed with the question, whether the Evangelists do not appear to have differed concerning the faith.

GREEK EXPOSITOR. (Severus Antiochenus.) For since the four Evangelists relate that Christ was anointed with ointment by a woman, I think that there were three women, differing according to the quality of each, their mode of action, and the difference of times. John, for example, relates that Mary, the sister of Lazarus, six days before the Passover, anointed the feet of Jesus in her own house; but Matthew, after that the Lord had said, You know that after two days will be the Passover, adds, that in Bethany, at the house of Simon the leper, a woman poured ointment upon the head of our Lord, but did not anoint His feet as Mary. Mark also says the same as Matthew; but Luke gives the account not near the time of the Passover, but in the middle of the Gospel. Chrysostom explains it that there were two different women, one indeed who is described in John, another who is mentioned by the three.

AMBROSE. Matthew has introduced this woman as pouring ointment upon the head of Christ, and was therefore unwilling to call her a sinner, for the sinner, according to Luke, poured ointment upon the feet of Christ. She cannot then be the same, lest the Evangelists should seem to be at variance with one another. The difficulty may be also solved by the difference of merit and of time, so that the former woman may have been yet a sinner, the latter now more perfect.

AUGUSTINE. (de Cons. Ev. lib. ii. c. 79.) For I think we must understand that the same Mary did this twice, once indeed as Luke has related, when at first coming with humility and weeping, she was thought worthy to receive forgiveness of sins. Hence John, when he began to speak of the resurrection of Lazarus, before he came to Bethany, says, But it was Mary who anointed our Lord with ointment, and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. (John 11:2.) Mary therefore had already done this; but what she again did in Bethany is another occurrence, which belongs not to the relation of Luke, but is equally told by the other three.

AMBROSE. Or, the leper, is the prince of this world; the house of Simon the leper, is the earth. The Lord therefore descended from the higher parts to this earth; for this woman could not have been healed, who bears the figure of a soul or the Church, had not Christ come upon earth. But rightly does she receive the figure of a sinner, for Christ also took the form of a sinner. If then thou makest thy soul approach in faith to God, it not with foul and shameful sins, but piously obeying the word of God, and in the confidence of unspotted purity, ascends to the very head of Christ. But the head of Christ is God. (1 Cor. 11:3.) But let

him who holds not the head of Christ, hold the feet, the sinner at the feet, the just at the head; nevertheless she also who sinned, has ointment.

AMBROSE. Bring thou also repentance after sin. Wherever thou hearest the name of Christ, speed thither; into whatever house thou knowest that Jesus has entered, thither hasten; when thou findest wisdom, when thou findest justice sitting in any inner chamber, run to its feet, that is, seek even the lowest part of wisdom; confess thy sins with tears. Perhaps Christ washed not His own feet, that we might wash them with our tears. Blessed tears, which can not only wash away our own sin, but also water the footsteps of the heavenly Word, that His goings may abound in us. Blessed tears, in which there is not only the redemption of sinners, but the refreshing of the righteous.

AMBROSE. Throw about thy hair, scatter before Him all the graces of thy body. The hair is not to be despised which can wash the feet of Christ.

AMBROSE. But she is of no slight merit of whom it is said, From the time that she entered has not ceased to kiss my feet, so that she knew not to speak aught but wisdom, to love aught but justice, to touch aught but chastity, to kiss aught but modesty.

AMBROSE. Blessed is he even who can anoint with oil the feet of Christ, but more blessed is he who anoints with ointment, for the essence of many flowers blended into one, scatters the sweets of various odours. And perhaps no other than the Church alone can bring that ointment which has innumerable flowers of different perfumes, and therefore no one can love so much as she who loves in many individuals. But in the Pharisee's house, that is, in the house of the Law and the Prophets, not the Pharisee, but the Church is justified. For the Pharisee believed not, the Church believed. The Law has no mystery by which secret faults are cleansed, and therefore that which is wanting in the Law is made up in the Gospel. But the two debtors are the two nations who are responsible for payment to the usurer of the heavenly treasury. But we do not owe to this usurer material money, but the balance of our good deeds, the coin of our virtues, the merits of which are estimated by the weight of sorrow, the stamp of righteousness, the sound of confession. But that denarius is of no slight value on which the image of the king is found. Woe to me if I shall not have what I received. Or because there is hardly any one who can pay the whole debt to the usurer, woe to me if I shall not seek the debt to be forgiven me. But what nation is it that owes most, if not we to whom most is lent? To them were entrusted the oracles of God, to us is entrusted the Virgin's offspring, Immanuel, i. e. God with us, the cross of our Lord, His death, His resurrection. It cannot then be doubted that he owes most who receives most. Among men he perhaps offends most who is most

in debt. By the mercy of the Lord the case is reversed, so that he loves most who owes most, if so be that he obtains grace. And therefore since there is nothing which we can worthily return to the Lord, woe be to me also if I shall not have loved. Let us then offer our love for the debt, for he loves most to whom most is given.

### **From Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture:**

#### **7:36 The Lukan Framework of Persons, Place and Time**

##### **The Business of Heaven.**

Peter Chrysologus: You perceive that Christ came to the Pharisee's table not to be filled with food for the body but to carry on the business of heaven while he was in the flesh. Sermon 93.

##### **Luke's Version Compared with Matthew's.**

Ambrose: Matthew depicts this woman pouring ointment upon Christ's head, and perhaps therefore was reluctant to call her a sinner. According to Luke, a sinner poured ointment on Christ's feet. She cannot be the same woman, lest the Evangelists seem to have contradicted each other.... If you understand this, you will see this woman, and you will certainly see her blessed wherever this gospel is preached. Her memory will never pass away, since she poured the fragrances of good conduct and the ointment of righteous deeds on the head of Christ. Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 6.14–15.

#### **7:37–38 The Woman Washes, Dries, Kisses and Anoints Jesus' Feet**

##### **The Woman as Church and the Pharisee as Synagogue.**

Peter Chrysologus: "And behold," it says, "a woman in the town who was a sinner." Who is this woman? Beyond any doubt, she is the church....

She heard that Christ had come to the house of the Pharisee, that is, to the synagogue. She heard that there, that is, at the Jewish Passover, he had instituted the mysteries of his passion, disclosed the sacrament of his body and blood, and revealed the secret of our redemption. She ignored the scribes like

contemptible doorkeepers. “Woe to you lawyers! You who have taken away the key of knowledge.” She broke open the doors of quarrels and despised the very superiority of the Pharisaical group. Ardent, panting and perspiring, she made her way to the large inner chamber of the banquet of the law. There she learned that Christ was betrayed amid sweet cups and a banquet of love. Sermon 95.

### **Anointing Shows Great Love.**

Ambrose: Blessed is one who can anoint the feet of Christ even with oil. Simon had still not anointed him, but more blessed is she who anoints with ointment. The grace of many flowers gathered into a bouquet scatters different sweetness of fragrance. Perhaps none but the church alone can produce that ointment. The church has innumerable flowers of different fragrance. She fittingly assumes the likeness of a prostitute, because Christ also took upon himself the form of a sinner. Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 6.21.

### **Symbols of the Lord’s Teaching.**

Clement of Alexandria: That woman had not yet entered communion with the Word, because she was still a sinner. She paid the Master honor with what she considered the most precious thing she had, her perfume. She wiped off the remainder of the perfume with the garland of her head, her hair. She poured out upon the Lord her tears of repentance. Therefore her sins were forgiven her.

This is a symbol of the Lord’s teachings and of his sufferings. The anointing of his feet with sweet-smelling myrrh suggests the divine teaching whose good smell and fame has spread to the ends of the earth. “Their sound has gone forth to the ends of the earth.” Moreover, those anointed feet of the Lord (not to be too subtle) are the apostles. The sweet odor of the myrrh prefigures their reception of the Holy Spirit. I mean that the figure of the Lord’s feet is to be understood of the apostles, who journeyed about the whole world preaching the gospel. Christ the Educator 2.8.

### **Like the Woman, the Church Responds to Jesus in Faith.**

Peter Chrysologus: With her hands of good works, she holds the feet of those who preach his kingdom. She washes them with tears of charity, kisses them with praising lips, and pours out the whole ointment of mercy, until he will turn her. This means that he will come back to her and say to Simon, to the

Pharisees, to those who deny, to the nation of the Jews, "I came into your house. You gave me no water for my feet."

When will he speak these words? He will speak them when he will come in the majesty of his Father and separate the righteous from the unrighteous like a shepherd who separates the sheep from the goats. He will say, "I was hungry, and you did not give me to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me no drink. I was a stranger, and you did not take me in." This is equivalent to saying, "But this woman, while she was bathing my feet, anointing them and kissing them, did to the servants what you did not do for the Master." She did for the feet what you refused to the Head. She expended upon the lowliest members what you refused to your Creator. Then he will say to the church, "Your sins, many as they are, are forgiven you because you have loved much." Sermon 95.

### **7:39–40 The Pharisee Misjudges the Woman's Actions**

#### **The Woman, Not the Pharisee, Was the Believer.**

Ambrose: See the organization of the house. The sinful woman is glorified in the house of the Pharisee. The church is justified in the house of the law and the prophet, not the Pharisee. The Pharisee did not believe, but the woman believed. Then he said, "If he were a prophet, he would know surely who and what manner of woman this is that touches him." Judea is the house of the law that is written not on stones but on the tablets of the heart. The church is justified in this as already greater than the law, because the law does not know of the forgiveness of offences. The law does not possess the mystery in which secret sins are cleansed; therefore, what is lacking in the law is perfected in the gospel. Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 6.23.

#### **Submissive to the Justice of God.**

Augustine: She will not think that she has been forgiven little and so love little, and, ignorant of the justice of God and seeking to establish her own, not submit to the justice of God. Simon was ensnared in this vice, and the woman, to whom many sins were forgiven because she loved much, surpassed him. She will more safely and more truly consider that all the sins that God preserved her from committing should be accounted as though they are forgiven. Holy Virginitly 41.



### **Impure Lips Made Holy by Kissing Jesus' Feet.**

Ephrem the Syrian: Our Lord worked wonders with common things so that we would know the things those who scorn wonders are deprived of knowing. If such healing as this was snatched from his hem in secret, he was most certainly capable of the healing that his word worked in public. If impure lips became holy by kissing his feet, how much holier would pure lips become by kissing his mouth? With her kisses, the sinful woman received the favor of blessed feet that had worked to bring her the forgiveness of sins. She was graciously comforting with oil the feet of her Physician, who had graciously brought the treasury of healing to her suffering. The One who fills the hungry was not invited because of his stomach. The One who justifies sinners invited himself because of the sinful woman's repentance. Homily on Our Lord 13–19.

### **7:41–43 The Parable of the Two Debtors**

#### **Two Debtors Represent the Jews and the Gentiles.**

Ambrose: Who are those two debtors if not the two peoples, the one from the Jews, the other from the Gentiles, in debt to the Creditor of the heavenly treasure?... We do not owe this Creditor material wealth but standards of merits, accounts of virtues. The weight of seriousness, the likeness of righteousness, and the sound of confession measure the worth of this wealth. Woe is me if I do not have what I have received. One can pay off the whole debt to this Creditor only with difficulty. Woe is me if I do not ask, "Remit my debt." The Lord would not have taught us to pray for the forgiveness of our sins if he had not known that some would be worthy debtors, only with difficulty. ... There is nothing that we can worthily repay to God for the harm to the flesh he assumed, for the blows, the cross, the death and the burial. Woe is me if I have not loved! I dare to say that Peter did not repay and thereby loved more. Paul did not repay. He certainly repaid death for death, but he did not repay other debts, because he owed much. I hear him saying, because he did not repay, "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" Even if we were to repay cross for cross, death for death, do we repay that we possess all things from him, by him, and in him? Let us repay love for our debt, charity for the gift, and grace for wealth. He to whom more is given loves more. Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 6.24, 26.

### **Jesus Tells the Parable to Bring About Reconciliation with Simon.**

Ephrem the Syrian: Our Lord devised a statement that was like an arrow. He put conciliation at its tip and anointed it with love to soothe the parts of the body. He no sooner shot it at the one who was filled with conflict, than conflict turned to harmony. Directly following the humble statement of our Lord, who said, "Simon, I have something to say to you," he who had secretly withdrawn responded, "Speak, my Lord." A sweet saying penetrated a bitter mind and brought out fragrant fruit. He who was a secret detractor before the saying gave public praise after the saying. Humility with a sweet tongue subdues even its enemies to do it honor. Humility does not put its power to the test among its friends but among those who hate its display of its trophies. Homily on Our Lord 24.2.

### **7:44–48 Jesus Forgives the Woman's Sins**

#### **Jesus the Physician Brings Miraculous Healing to the Woman's Sins.**

Ephrem the Syrian: Healing the sick is a physician's glory. Our Lord did this to increase the disgrace of the Pharisee, who discredited the glory of our Physician. He worked signs in the streets, worked even greater signs once he entered the Pharisee's house than those that he had worked outside. In the streets, he healed sick bodies, but inside, he healed sick souls. Outside, he had given life to the death of Lazarus. Inside, he gave life to the death of the sinful woman. He restored the living soul to a dead body that it had left, and he drove off the deadly sin from a sinful woman in whom it dwelt. That blind Pharisee, for whom wonders were not enough, discredited the common things he saw because of the wondrous things he failed to see. Homily on Our Lord 42.2.

#### **To Kiss Christ.**

Ambrose: A kiss is a mark of love....

He truly kisses Christ's feet who, in reading the Gospel, recognizes the acts of the Lord Jesus and admires them with holy affection. With a reverent kiss, he caresses the footprints of the Lord as he walks. We kiss Christ, therefore, in the kiss of Communion: "Let him who reads understand." ...

The church does not cease to kiss Christ's feet and demands not one but many kisses in the Song of Songs. Since like blessed Mary she listens to his every saying, she receives his every word when the Gospel or the

Prophets are read, and she keeps all these words in her heart. The church alone has kisses, like a bride. A kiss is a pledge of nuptials and the privilege of wedlock. Letter 62.

### **Christ Anointed with Oil as the Church Anoints the Lowly and the Least.**

Ambrose: The church washes the feet of Christ, wipes them with her hair, anoints them with oil, and pours ointment on them. She not only cares for the wounded and caresses the weary, but she also moistens them with the sweet perfume of grace. She pours this grace not only on the rich and powerful but also on those of lowly birth. She weighs all in an equal balance. She receives all into the same bosom. She caresses all in the same embrace.

Christ died once. He was buried once. Nevertheless he wants ointment to be poured on his feet each day. What are the feet of Christ on which we pour ointment? They are the feet of Christ of whom he himself says, "What you have done for one of the least of these, you have done to me." The woman in the Gospel refreshes these feet. She moistens them with her tears when sin is forgiven of the lowest of persons, guilt is washed away, and pardon is granted. The one who loves even the least of God's people kisses these feet. The one who makes known the favor of his gentleness to those who are frail anoints these feet with ointment. The Lord Jesus himself declares that he is honored in these martyrs and apostles. Letter 62.

### **The Woman Sees Jesus as God; The Pharisee Sees Him as a Man.**

Ephrem the Syrian: She, through her love, brought into the open the tears that were hidden in the depths of her eyes, and the Lord, because of her courage, brought into the open the thoughts that were hidden in the Pharisee.... Our Lord, standing in the middle, worked out a parable between the two of them, so that the sinful woman might be encouraged through his pronouncing the parable and the Pharisee may be denounced through the explanation of the parable. Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron 7.18.

### **7:49–50 Go in Peace**

#### **Jesus Shows He is the Prophet by Forgiving Her Sins.**

Cyril of Alexandria: He came that he might forgive the debtors much and little and show mercy upon small and great, that there might be no one whatsoever who did not participate in his goodness. As a pledge and plain example of his grace, he freed that unchaste woman from her many iniquities by saying, "Your

sins are forgiven you.” A declaration such as this is truly worthy of God! It is a word joined with supreme authority. Since the law condemned those that were in sin, who, I ask, was able to declare things above the law, except the One who ordained it? He immediately both set the woman free and directed the attention of that Pharisee and those who were dining with him to more excellent things. They learned that the Word being God was not like one of the prophets, but rather far beyond the measure of humanity although he became man. Commentary on Luke, Homily 40.

### **He Forgives Repeatedly.**

Origen: A first forgiveness is the one by which we are baptized “for the remission of sins.” A second remission is in the suffering of martyrdom. The third is the one that is given through alms. The Savior says, “But nevertheless, give what you have and, behold, all things are clean for you.” A fourth forgiveness of sins is given for us through the fact that we also forgive the sins of our brothers. The Lord and Savior says, “If you will forgive from the heart your brothers’ sins, your Father will also forgive you your sins. But if you will not forgive your brothers from the heart, neither will your Father forgive you.” He taught us to say in prayer, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” A fifth forgiveness of sins is when “someone will convert a sinner from the error of his way.” Divine Scripture says, “Whoever will make a sinner turn from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.” A sixth forgiveness comes through the abundance of love. The Lord himself says, “Truly I say to you, her many sins are forgiven because she loved much.” The apostle says, “Because love will cover a multitude of sins.” There is still a seventh forgiveness of sins through penance, although admittedly it is difficult and toilsome. The sinner washes “his couch in tears,” and his “tears” become his “bread day and night.” Homilies on Leviticus 2.4.5.

### **One Loves More Who Has Been Forgiven More.**

John Cassian: It happens that, whatever state of life a man has reached, he sometimes can offer pure and devout prayer. Even in the lowliest place, where a man is repenting from fear of punishment and the judgment to come, his petitions can enrich him with the same fervor of spirit as the man, who attained to purity of heart, gazes upon God’s blessing and is filled with an overwhelming happiness. As the Lord said, “The one who knows he has been forgiven more begins to love more.” Conferences 2.9.

### **Christ is Our Love Who Forgives Sins.**

Ambrose: Christ is our love. Love is good, since it offered itself to death for transgressions. Love is good, which forgave sins. Let our soul clothe herself with love of a kind that is “strong as death.” Just as death is the end of sins, so also is love, because the one who loves the Lord ceases to commit sin. For “charity thinks no evil and does not rejoice over wickedness, but endures all things.” If someone does not seek his own goods, how will he seek the goods of another? That death through the bath of baptism, through which every sin is buried, is strong and forgives every fault. The woman in the Gospel brought this kind of love. The Lord says, “Her many sins have been forgiven her, because she has loved much.” The death of the holy martyrs is also strong. It destroys previous faults. Since it involves a love not less than theirs, death that is equal to the martyrs’ suffering is just as strong for taking away the punishment of sins. Isaac, or The Soul 8.75–76.