

2 | The Parable of the Two Debtors (Lk 7:36–42)

Context (Lk 7:36–39)

36 One of the Pharisees invited Jesus to eat with him and he went into the Pharisee's house and sat at the table. 37 Behold, a woman in the city who was a sinner, when she knew that he was reclining in the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of ointment. 38 Standing behind at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and she wiped them with the hair of her head, kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment. 39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "This man, if he were a prophet, would have perceived who and what kind of woman this is who touches him, that she is a sinner."

Jesus Responds with a Parable (Lk 7:40–42)

40 "Simon, I have something to tell you." He said, "Teacher, say on." 41 "A certain lender had two debtors. The one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they couldn't pay, he forgave them both. Which of them therefore will love him most?" 43 Simon answered, "He, I suppose to whom he forgave the most." He said to him, "You have judged correctly." 44 Turning to the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered into your house, and you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head. 45 You gave me no kiss, but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss my feet. 46 You didn't anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47 Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little." 48 He said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." 49 But those who were at the table with him began to say amongst themselves, "Who is this that even forgives sins?" 50 And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Enlightening for understanding the parable's construction is that part of the Joseph story in Genesis 43 focused on the banquet Joseph arranged for his brothers. The setting in Genesis is a special dining occasion when the brothers, poor shepherds, were unexpectedly invited to Joseph's home in Egypt to eat with the latter in his capacity, no less, as governor of that nation. In Luke, on hearing that Jesus is present, a woman unexpectedly turns up in the house of the hospitable Pharisee. In both the parable and the Genesis story, we have an unusual mixing of low- and high-status persons take their seat at a grand meal. Joseph dines with the poor shepherding brothers in his residence; the woman in Luke, by all accounts known to be a prostitute, joins Jesus and the hosting Pharisee at his home.

Furthermore, a similar unexpected display of wealth takes place on both occasions. Joseph's banquet in his mansion would have had a rich and plentiful array of quality food set before the guests, and he had no less than five abundant portions of food delivered to Benjamin's place at table. The woman's alabaster vessel and fine anointing oil is also a lavish display of wealth.

Debt is a fundamental focus both in Genesis and in the parable. In Genesis, money was twice passed between Joseph and the brothers in return for grain, and both times he surreptitiously slipped their payment back into their grain sacks (Gen 42:25; 44:1). This move on Joseph's part caused the brothers great distress on account of the large debt they had unwittingly accumulated. In the parable, one debtor owes 500 denarii, which is a very large sum. The other owes 50.¹ The question of who would be most grateful at having a debt forgiven can be seen as an echo of what happened to the brothers' debt in Genesis. Overshadowed by the jubilant family reunification, the debt was never mentioned – thus forgiven – and they never did pay for the grain they had received.

As for money, in both story and parable in complicated ways money is tainted. When Joseph twice returned the brothers' payment he was acting deceptively and the brothers were distressed, not relieved, to find their

¹ A single denarius is generally reckoned to be a daily wage for an ordinary laborer at this period. See I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke (The New International Greek Testament Commentary)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 310 on 7:4; also, Johnson, *Gospel of Luke*, 127 n 41.

money. The woman in the parable had earned the money she paid for the vessel and oil by sinful means. Nevertheless, all the sinning parties, the murderous and lying brothers, the vengeful and deceitful Joseph, and the sinful woman, are ultimately forgiven.

Forgiveness on a deeper level beyond debt is a significant topic in both texts. In Genesis, Joseph eventually forgave the sins of his brothers (throwing him into a pit, thinking of killing him or selling him). In the parable, Jesus forgives the sinful woman. Each story has an inspiring ending, and the element of love is closely connected with the forgiveness of sins. The lifting of the burden of the brothers' sins was followed by the joyful restoration of brotherhood within Jacob's family. In Genesis love and forgiveness are closely aligned, and the same is true in the parable. Jesus comments that "her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much," to be followed by, it is implied, her reentry into the honored House of Jacob.

The role of sinning in each story is especially highlighted. The parable focuses on a sinning woman. In Genesis, at one of its major turning points, Joseph a second time duped his brothers when again he had money they had paid for grain furtively placed back into their grain sacks. From the viewpoint of ethical conduct in business affairs, there is a real sense in which Joseph, in his role as administrator in charge of all the Egyptian grain and the Egyptian treasury, deliberately and wrongly caused the brothers to become seriously burdened debtors.² Recall that the brothers too had committed sins against Joseph, and also against their father (leading him, falsely, to believe and lament the loss of his son, Joseph).

In Genesis, not only is there lacking any explicit explanation why the "lender" Joseph, through his steward, chose to ignore the two debts that were owed by the brothers. To all appearances Joseph had no intention of receiving back the money he had deposited in their sacks. When the brothers directly tried to return it, Joseph's steward dissemblingly told them that he had received the money (Gen 43:23). Wiping out a debt is a common factor of both stories. In Genesis, a confusing situation was deliberately set up. Joseph acted deceptively by twice returning money the

² There is no information about the amount involved, but it would have been considerable, possibly even approaching the large sums of money lent to the two debtors in the parable.

brothers paid for grain back into their sacks. His concocted, indirect aim was to have them recall their sins against him when he was a youth. Back then they had sought to sell him for money. They failed but nonetheless caused him to be sold for money as a slave in Egypt after traders had taken him from a pit into which his brothers had thrown him and sold him there. Joseph's return of the money to their sacks was intended to have them recall their sins against him and to evoke their repentance. Joseph's aim, however, in so acting was not just about eliciting recognition of their sins; it was also to effect a positive result by restoring harmonious relations within Jacob's family. In Luke, Jesus used the forgiveness of debt as the topic of a question testing the Pharisee Simon's moral judgment. Simon, though replying uncertainly, "I suppose to whom he forgave the most," was told he gave the correct answer.

Commentators have not been aware of the contribution of the Joseph story to this parable's composition, particularly in regard to sin, love, and forgiveness. Critics puzzlingly comment that "respect for Jesus [is] the consequence, not the cause, of the forgiveness of her debt [sin]."³ They seem to have reversed the sequence of events. In Luke 7:37–38 the woman demonstrates love for Jesus via supplicatory gestures (tears, washing his feet, anointing him). Then, after recounting her loving actions to his host Simon, Jesus forgives the woman: "Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much (Lk 7:47)." Although the sequence of events is apparent in the text, it is nevertheless possible for scholars to propose that forgiveness engendered "respect" rather than the other way around.⁴ The lack of clarity in the matter is a widely recognized one, but the Joseph story proves illuminating.

Joseph's placement of his brothers' money back into their sacks was motivated by a dubious aim. Although he was genuinely seeking to restore harmony within the family to overcome the antagonism between the brothers and himself, Joseph's ploy with the money, while in some sense

³ See J. Duncan M. Derrett, *Law in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979), 278; Marshall, *Commentary on Luke*, 313, 314; also, Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 127 n 41.

⁴ Creed, *Gospel According to St. Luke*, 110, 111; Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 127, n 44, 128 n 47; Marshall, *Commentary on Luke*, 310 on 7:41.

a sinful act, was directed to a positive, restorative end. It was, in fact, no less than an act of love on the part of Joseph. In the parable, Jesus' kindly treatment of a publicly despised woman is a response to her deferential actions. Although the money she earned was tainted (as was the money Joseph planted in his brothers' sacks), Jesus recognized and granted her need for forgiveness. In Genesis, the money planted by Joseph also led to a positive end, both the overcoming of previous wrongful action ("do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here," Gen 45:5) and family reunion.

The contrary sentiments of acting sinfully yet being intent on forgiving had triggered Joseph's treatment of his brothers in Egypt when he deposited money back into their sacks. However indirectly and deceitful, he had been acting lovingly to the end that his brothers might recall and repent of their previous bad treatment of him when they had all lived as a family back in Canaan (Gen 42:21, 22). In a climactic moment in Egypt, Joseph forgave his brothers, having recognized that he wished nothing more than to be united in fellowship with them. The situation within Joseph's family presented this coming together of sin, love, and forgiveness. Joseph's love of his brothers caused him to forgive their sins against him, and in Luke the sinfulness of the woman and her deep regret about it (demonstrated by the tears she shed) prompted Jesus to forgive her past wretched behavior and show love to her.

As for scholars who propose that forgiveness engendered respect, had they recognized the role of the Joseph story in the background of the Lukan parable, they might have been able to strengthen their claim. They could have noted that after Joseph revealed himself and declared all that happened to be God's will, thereby forgiving them their bad behavior toward him, all the brothers engaged in loving embrace. The argument in my analysis focuses on an earlier starting point than the hypothetical one about forgiveness engendering respect. Beginning with the sins of the brothers and of Joseph, the latter's loving but also devious actions of planting money in the brothers' sacks prompted Joseph's ultimate forgiveness of their offenses against him.