



Editors Note:

Though many of the articles on our site deal with very practical aspects of evangelism, discipleship, and church life; our underlying passion is the exaltation of Jesus Christ in our lives and in our churches. We want people to discover the surpassing greatness of Jesus and the opportunity that we have to live in deep relationship with Him. This article is one that really expresses well that which is most important for all of us.

I tell you, her sins—and they are many—have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love. But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love.

Luke 7:47

Women have a [large part to play](#) in the New Testament story. They funded Jesus' earthly ministry (Luke 8:1–3). They were also the most faithful of His disciples, staying with Him to the bitter end.

But of all the women mentioned in the New Testament, none can compare with Mary of Magdala.

Magdala was a city along the Sea of Galilee. The town was very unclean—filthy and unkempt—and known for its rampant prostitution. Many of the city's young girls grew up learning how to sin. Mary was one of them.*

*This story is based on Luke 7:36-50. According to most traditional scholars and the testimony of ancient church history, Mary Magdalene is the “unnamed woman” (the prostitute) mentioned in Luke 7. Luke doesn't name her for obvious reasons, but he mentions her by name in Luke 8. Mary Magdalene is not to be confused with Mary of Bethany, who anointed Him near the end of the Lord's earthly life. Some modern scholars question all of this, however. But it's impossible to tell either way. Even if you don't believe that Mary Magdalene is the “unnamed woman” in Luke 7, it doesn't effect the main plot-points of the story. Just insert “the unnamed woman” for Mary and read on . . .

At a young age, Mary learned the dark trade of selling her body for money. She became a harlot, a woman of the night. Little did anyone know that this hopeless, sinful, demon-possessed prostitute was destined to meet the Lover of her soul. And as a result, women and men in every century would herald her. By using a bit of consecrated imagination, I would like us to return to the first century and meet this incredible woman as she encounters her incredible Lord.

Human Desperation Meets Divine Fullness

It is the year AD 28. Like most people in Palestine, Mary of Magdala has heard the grand reports of a miracle-working prophet named Jesus of Nazareth. Everywhere He goes, Jesus heals the sick and casts out demons. Not long ago, Mary moved to the village of Nain in Galilee.

At this point in her adult life, Mary is a desperate soul. Ever since she was a young teen, she has made her living as a prostitute. She suffers from depression and suicidal tendencies.

For years she has been vexed with evil spirits, seven to be exact (Luke 8:2). All of her adult life she has known nothing but torment, degradation, and utter defilement (Matt. 12:45).

The day has come. Mary hears that Jesus has entered the town of Nain. She catches wind of reports that He raised a man from the dead (Luke 7:11–17). Upon hearing this, she looks for Him.

Not far from her home, she sees a large crowd gathered. And she spots Him. She is riveted by the authority with which He speaks. She also detects a graciousness and purity that she has never before witnessed in any man.

Jesus finishes His message and begins praying for the sick who are before Him. Without any timidity, Mary approaches Him. Jesus looks upon her with surprising familiarity.

In a flash of divine revelation, the Lord remembers. He remembers that she was chosen to be part of His glorious bride before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4).

As He puts His hands upon her head, Mary weeps. With uncommon authority, the Lord utters this simple word: “Evil spirits I command you to come out of her, never to enter her again!”

Immediately, Mary lets out a loud wail and collapses before Jesus as if in a coma. Those looking on wonder if she is dead. The Lord assures them that she is just sleeping.

An hour goes by, and Mary awakens. When she rises from the ground, she feels clean and whole.

She can only remember feeling this way in the innocence of her childhood, when she was a little girl. She begins to weep again. Mary looks for Jesus, but He is gone.

She is told that He has been invited to a Pharisee's home for dinner. With tears of deep gratitude and joyful anticipation, she heads off to find Jesus.

She has with her the most valuable asset she owns: a small vial filled with costly perfume that hangs from a leather strap around her neck.

This vial represents her savings account. The money has come from her trade.

Without forethought or deliberation, she wishes to give it to Jesus as a gift, a token of her gratitude.

As she diligently inquires the exact whereabouts of Jesus, someone points to the home of Simon the Pharisee. Simon has invited the Lord to be his guest for dinner.

Let's walk into Simon's home and see what's happening there.

The Scandal of Shameless Love

Simon is quite intrigued by this famous prophet named Jesus. He has heard many stories about Him.

Simon belongs to the class of “nonsinners” called Pharisees.

They are the self-appointed monitors of the kingdom of God. They are the self-proclaimed and self-anointed experts at sin management.

They are beyond sin in their own eyes, and their “ministry” is to make sure that others keep sin to an absolute minimum.

Simon and his Pharisee friends are now afforded the opportunity to interview the Nazarene prophet up close and personal.

Jesus is the guest of honor. Simon, however, ignores all of the common courtesies of an Eastern home.

He fails to greet Jesus with a kiss. He doesn't anoint His head with oil. He also fails to wash His feet.

Note that Simon has in his home the very God whom he has been serving all of his life. Yet he is pathetically unaware of it.

Jesus makes no mention of Simon's neglect as a host. Instead, He graciously reclines at the table with Simon and his friends.

The door opens, and in walks Mary of Magdala. She is uninvited.

Yet she enters unashamedly.*

*Private life was virtually unheard of in Jesus' day. The doors of homes were often wide open for friends, beggars, and even the curious to march in on a whim.

As Mary enters, she quickly spots Jesus. And she begins to weep.

She walks straight over to Him and positions herself in the highest place possible, *at His feet*.

As she kneels before Jesus, her tears fall upon His feet. She opens the vial of valuable perfume that's suspended from her neck and pours it out upon the feet of Christ. She anoints His feet with the perfume, mixing it with her tears.

She then does something outrageous. Scandalous even. She begins to kiss His feet. And she does not stop. (In the Greek, the thought conveyed is that she "smothers" His feet with kisses.)

What happens next horrifies both Simon and his fellow Pharisees.

She unbinds her hair and turns it into a towel. She then proceeds to wipe the Lord's feet with it.

(In that day for a woman to unbind her hair in public was no small scandal. It would be akin to a woman going topless in our day.)

The Pharisees are in shock. They are mortified. Her attire makes clear that she is a prostitute. A sinner. There's no question about it. And they are livid.

Why? Because Jesus, this so-called prophet, does not stop her from engaging in what they consider to be shamelessly erotic acts: unbinding her hair and kissing His feet.

Please note: *Jesus never rebukes her.*

The Pharisees think to themselves that Jesus cannot possibly be a prophet. If He were, He would not allow this sinner to perform such disgraceful acts upon Him.

Jesus perceives their thoughts. But He doesn't seem to care what they think. The Lord knows exactly who she is. She is part of His glorious bride, chosen in Him before creation.

And she is doing what the bride was designed to do: She is loving Him shamelessly. She is loving Him passionately. She is loving Him extravagantly.

And your Lord is not offended.

Never in His entire ministry has the Lord been loved like this. What is Mary doing? She is simply returning the love that He poured upon her earlier that day.

What are Simon and the other Pharisees doing? They are passing judgment upon her.

To their feeble minds, they are in a different class than this woman. She is a sinner. They are nonsinners.

They are also engaging in something far worse: They are unwittingly passing judgment on the God whom they are trying to serve.

Jesus launches into a parable: "There are two men who owed money. One owed a great deal; the other owed very little. The money lender had a wide heart, and he forgave them both."

Jesus then turns to Simon and presses him with this query: "Simon, which one will love the most?"

Simon answers reluctantly: "I suppose the one who owed more."

Jesus commends Simon for a correct answer. He then proceeds to reprove him: "I came into your home, and you did not greet Me with a kiss. This woman not only kissed Me. But she has kissed My feet, and she has not yet stopped. Simon, you didn't anoint My head.

But this woman has anointed My feet with her life's fortune.

Simon, you didn't wash My feet. But this woman has washed My feet with her tears and she has dried them with her hair. This woman's many sins are forgiven. So she loves much. But the person who has been forgiven little will love little."

In this little parable, Jesus turns the tables on this Pharisee. Simon is the one whom God doesn't approve of. Simon can't appreciate God's love even when it's sitting at his own table.

Herein we are faced with one of the great truths of the gospel: If you are not part of the class called "sinner," then you are out of favor with God.

This story gives us great insight into the heart of a Pharisee.

A Pharisee is someone who is completely out of touch with the fact that he is a sinner.

A Pharisee sits in the seat of the Almighty and judges others as being sinners.

A Pharisee does not view himself as a sinner, though he is guilty of the greatest of all sins, self-righteousness and judgmentalism.

Nothing can bring salvation but repentance. And for the spiritually smug, that's quite a hard commodity to come by.

Thus there is no salvation for a Pharisee, unless he comes to grips with the fact that he is a sinner. For only sinners have a chance in the kingdom of God. The self-righteous forfeit it altogether.

The Greatest of All Sins

A careful survey of the Gospels will reveal this one penetrating truth: Jesus Christ was the friend and defender of sinners.

It was the tax collectors, the thieves, the prostitutes, and the adulterers that He welcomed into His kingdom.

And it was to the highly religious, the self-righteous, and the morally upright (and uptight) that He leveled His severest criticisms. For such had disqualified themselves from the kingdom of God.

Your Lord was a specialist at inducing the fury of the self-righteous, religious elite. Presumably, this is the reason why the stories in the Gospels (let alone the Old Testament) are not peopled with the morally upright. We're quite hard-pressed to find moral heroes in most of them.

Now let's put a modern Christian in that room with Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and the Pharisees. A self-righteous Christian, mind you.

"Um [cough] ... Lord Jesus, did she ask You to forgive her? I didn't hear her say she was sorry for living as a prostitute. How do we know if she has *really* repented, Lord? Do You mind if I interrogate her for a bit, please?"

Such is the spirit of a Pharisee. And we have not so learned Jesus Christ.

Repeat: The greatest sins above all else are self-righteousness and judgmentalism. These will bar one from entrance into the kingdom.

In this connection, there is only one person in the universe who has the right to be self-righteous. It is Jesus Christ. And there is no such spirit within Him.

Thank God that our Lord is not self-righteous. For if He were, none of us would have any hope.

I am deeply impressed that the Lord demanded nothing of Mary. Instead, He received her shameless act as proof of her love for Him.

Mary loved Jesus at great cost. She loved Him in the presence of judgmental Pharisees, in *their* home, uninvited.

She “pressed into the kingdom of God violently” and loved her Lord unabashedly and without shame (Matt. 11:12; Luke 16:16).

But what I find even more jolting is that Mary was completely confident that Jesus would receive her act of adoration. She had no fear of Him, only love. This observation alone is quite telling.

Luke closes the curtains on this scene with the Lord saying to Mary, “Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Throughout the many years that I have been a Christian, I have made the following observation: You’ll never know if self-righteousness is in your heart until something tragic happens to a fellow Christian that you know.

When somebody you know (or know of) falls short, makes a mistake, or is the subject of an ugly rumor, it is at that moment that a self-righteous spirit—if it exists—will rear its head.

To be self-righteous and judgmental is to disqualify yourself from the kingdom of God. It is to deny the fact that you are a sinner who is hanging by a cobweb of grace, just like the rest of us.

If you get in touch with your humanity, you will make an important discovery: You are just as fallen as everyone else and just as undeserving of God’s mercy as everyone else. Such a revelation should remove any judgmental bone in your body.

I find this story so very encouraging on many levels. But the point that I am most impressed with is in who Mary Magdalene was.

To my mind, she embodies the very depths of the fall. She was a harlot, sold into sin, possessed by seven devils. Yet despite all of that, she was chosen to be part of the spotless

bride of Christ.

Even more startling, despite her tragic condition, she believed that she was worthy to love the Lord Jesus Christ.

Somehow, Mary touched His grace. Somehow, she saw in His eyes the love He had for her. And with an unbridled audacity, she accepted His forgiveness and she loved Him with a blind passion.

Mary's love for her Lord was but a reflection of His unconditional love for her.

The story ends with the Lord telling her to "go in peace." And in peace she went. In fact, she followed the incarnation of peace for the rest of her life (Eph. 2:14). For she became one of the Lord's most faithful disciples (Luke 8:1–3).

Undying Devotion

The devotion that Mary had for the Lord Jesus is remarkable. For it lasted beyond the Lord's earthly life. After Jesus dies, we find her loving Him beyond the grave.

All that remained was the lifeless corpse of the God whom she loved. Yet this devoted woman was following Him still. Blindly and just as passionately. Though He was dead, she was still taking care of Him (Mark 16:1).

What a lesson for us who do not see Him. She loved Him even though He was dead. Perhaps this is the reason why she was given the high privilege of being the first witness to the resurrected Christ (John 20:13–16).

Indeed, Mary of Magdala is a study in undying love.

I ask you: What provoked such unending devotion? It was simply this: *Mary believed the Lord's opinion of her.* She took His opinion of herself rather than her own. In so doing, love was awakened within her own heart for Christ.

The resurrection scene contains strong echoes of the garden of Eden. The first Adam found his bride in a garden. When she came forth from his side, Adam named her "*Woman*" (Gen. 2:23). But by his sin, the first Adam ended his life in a grave (Gen. 2:17; 5:5).

The Last Adam, Jesus Christ, was put in a grave, but He was raised in a garden (John 19:40—20:15). In His resurrected state, the first eyes to see Him were Mary's. And His words to her are revealing. He said, "*Woman*" (John 20:15). When Mary recognized the Lord, she sought to embrace Him. But it wasn't yet His wedding day, so He restrained her (John 20:16–17).

What a beautiful picture. The first Adam found his bride—the first *woman*, in a garden, but he turned that garden into a grave. The Second Adam found His bride, the second *woman*, in a garden, which was once a grave.

Who, then, is Mary Magdalene? *She is you and she is me.* Deeply fallen vessels. But chosen in Christ before time, holy and without blame, a part of the loveliest girl in the world. If Mary of Magdala could love her Lord and enjoy His presence boldly, flagrantly, extravagantly, shamelessly, and without inhibition, then so can you. And so can I.

Therefore, the next time you feel condemnation over your past, please remember this one thing: The first person to lay eyes upon the resurrected Lord was a former prostitute.

God chose Mary Magdalene from the foundation of the world, knowing the kind of life she would live. And He chose you and me from the foundation of the world, knowing full well all the mistakes we would make this side of the veil.

You have a Lord who wishes to cherish you. Neither your fallen nature nor your sins are an obstacle for Him. He has dealt with them thoroughly, completely, and willingly by His death and resurrection.

Never forget: This God of yours allowed a prostitute to love Him extravagantly in the house of a Pharisee.

Such is the wonder of the sacred romance into which every believer has been swept up.

So go in peace, and love your Lord like Mary did.

Frank Viola

This post is Chapter 8 of [From Eternity to Here](#) . If you enjoyed it, the rest of the book is written in the same style.

<http://frankviola.org/2012/03/12/christianwomen/#more-7912>