

PART 8: LEARNING TO DANCE, LEARNING TO WEEP

By Ricky Stephen

Luke 7

You Should Be Dancing

When the wedding dance starts, and everyone hugs the walls, those of us who love to dance are more than a little disappointed. At the center of Luke 7:18-35, Jesus quotes an old riddle about playing the pipe and no one dances, or singing a dirge and no one weeps (*Luke* 7:32).

Jesus criticizes those who have the wrong response to the wonderful things He is doing, comparing them to wallflowers at a wedding dance.

How do we respond to what Jesus is doing?

Luke 7 gives us three portraits:

- *John the Baptist*, confused and asking honest questions.
- *The 'sinful woman'* pouring outrageous hospitality on Jesus.
- *Simon the Pharisee*, skeptical and judgmental.

Not What You Expected?

Emotionally, this chapter in Luke has some hard cuts. We turn from the awe of Jesus healing someone at a distance (*Luke* 7:1-10) to the celebration in a small town when Jesus raises a widow's son (*Luke* 7:11-17).

Hard cut to John in prison, asking his disciples to question Jesus: 'are you the one we were waiting for?'

John may have expected Jesus to bring judgment, as John had described earlier (*Luke* 3:16–17). He may have expected the Messiah to free Israel from Roman rule. Or, facing prison and likely death, he may have wondered whether he had given his life to the right cause.

We don't know exactly why John questions Jesus. But John expected Jesus to do something, and Jesus wasn't meeting those expectations.

In AA, there is a proverb:

"*Expectations are premeditated resentments*".

Sometimes, in our relationship with Jesus, our missed expectations can be buried. When buried, they build in pressure and become resentments.

John doesn't bury it, he asks Jesus an honest question. Jesus' response is twofold:

He answers John slyly. Stating He is the Messiah outright could have been risky to the plans Jesus had for His life.

So, he answers with a string of quotations from Isaiah:

The blind receive sight (*Isaiah* 35:5; 42:7, 16, 18), the lame walk (*Isaiah* 35:6), those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear (*Isaiah* 35:5; 42:18), the dead are raised (*Isaiah* 26:19), and the good news is proclaimed to the poor (*Isaiah* 61:1).[1]

Most likely, this is a reference to a well-known document circulating at the time of Jesus and John which was a checklist about what the Messiah would do.[2]

After answering John, Jesus then speaks to the crowd about John and praises John's ministry.

What starts with John asking '*are you the one*', ends with Jesus saying He believes in John.

We cannot be fully satisfied unless we risk being totally disappointed. In our relationship with Jesus, and our relationships with each other, burying our expectations is avoiding the risk love requires.

Prayer is the mechanism by which we make our expectations known to Jesus and make room for Him to answer us. He welcomes our questions and doubts.

The least in the Kingdom

The chapter continues with the story of Simon the Pharisee and the 'sinful woman' (*Luke* 7:36-50). Luke has set us up for how scandalous this story could sound with the beatitude:

"*Blessed is the one who does not stumble on account of me.*" - Luke 7:23

Jesus is challenging what his watchers would be comfortable with—Jewish men didn't speak to or get touched by women who weren't their spouses or family, letting hair down was almost seen as undressing, coming in as a known sinner would be like coughing on someone when you're sick.

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Silently, Simon undermines Jesus for this scandal and Jesus answers the hidden question of Simon's heart. Simon did not provide water for Jesus' feet, a greeting kiss, or oil for his head. The woman, by contrast, has washed Jesus' feet with her tears, kissed them, and poured perfume on them (*Luke* 7:44–46).

By accepting the woman's outrageous hospitality, Jesus is demonstrating He deserves such a radical welcome. The scene seems like a commentary on Jesus' earlier words:

"*…among those born of women there is none greater than John; yet the one who is least in the Kingdom of God is greater than he.*" - Luke 7:28

We tend to see someone as great if they are correct about theology, morally good, and skilled in life. This woman seems to fail on all three counts. But she is presented as 'greater than John', not because there is anything wrong with John, but because she exemplifies the values of the Kingdom of God now come.

She is at the center of the story, between her and Simon is Jesus. Jesus is asking us to see her through Him. To see how she is right about the only thing that matters, who Jesus is. She is good at the only thing that matters, devotion to Jesus.

She is great in the Kingdom, by being the least.

Learning to Dance, Learning to Weep

Simon's response to the 'sinful woman' can remind people who went to youth group in the nineties about how they wished they had exciting testimonies. Some people read Jesus' lesson 'whoever has been forgiven little loves little' (*Luke* 7:47) like we're cursed not to be good Christians if we don't get saved from deep sin.

Simon might have thought he did not need much grace. As a Pharisee, he is an exemplar in piety. Simon hasn't been forgiven little, though.

Simon hasn't been forgiven at all.

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This is not just a prophet at Simon's table. God is the only one who forgives sins and saves people.

The roles reverse. Simon is not the host, Jesus is. Jesus offers more than food, He offers the Bread of Life. Simon seems to be too good to see it. He's too caught up in his own way of thinking. His response teaches us:

We are only forgiven little if we think little of Jesus.

Comparing Simon's sin to the woman's is not what Jesus wants us to do. Jesus wants us to see the radical gift of forgiveness being offered. His hospitality is the focus, not our failure.

We only love little if we think little of Jesus.

In the words of a well-known commentator:

"As *long as divine love is appreciated as something that flows from ethical excellence, the sinful ego [rules], and the freedom and sovereignty of God are denied.*" [3]

When following Jesus becomes about being right and good and skilled, Jesus is shrunk down to the size of a stone we can stumble on. We stumble on Him because we forget He was even there. But when He gets to be God, and we get to be people, He goes from a stone we trip on to the refuge we rest in. We're freed to love, because we're loved and held by Him.

We only love little if we think little of Jesus.

Rather than try to conjure the right response, rather than expect we will know when it is time to dance or time to weep, Jesus invites us to receive His hospitality. Like the woman, our love flows from His forgiveness.

Our greatness flows from being little in comparison to Him.

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Open Up

Can you remember a time—maybe when reading the Bible, or maybe in your own life—when Jesus has really surprised or shocked you?

Dig In

Read **Luke 7:18-35**

- How were questions and doubts about Jesus treated in your upbringing?
- What questions or doubts do you currently have?
- What experiences have you had bringing these questions and doubts to Jesus?

Read **Luke 7:36-50**

- Have you had an experience where you've felt the deep love and forgiveness of Jesus? What was it like?
- What do you do to keep Jesus bigger than what you think theologically or the morals you follow?

Pray

Take time to pray specifically for any questions, doubts, or disappointments each of you have with Jesus or your lives. Pray honestly for Jesus to reveal Himself to each of you. Pray also for any other requests.



[1] See Joel Green, The New International Commentary on the New Testmanet: Luke, pgs. 295ff
[2] See the Dead See Scroll 4Q521 Messianic Apocalypse.
[3] Bishop Robert Barron, The Word on Fire Bible, entry on Luke 7:36ff.