

# Sermon

Two debtors, a wild woman and a rusty bolt.

Luke 7:36–50. Sunday 9 May 2021

## Introduction

In the centre of each front wheel of my mini were two large nuts. These attached the drive shafts to the wheels. One had a left-hand thread – the other right-hand. They were designed to get tighter the more you drove. Great until you wanted to remove them

I spent a Saturday afternoon struggling. Eventually I took the car to a garage.

The mechanic heated up the first bolt. Squirted it with penetrating oil. Picked up his spanner. Put a three-foot length of pipe on the handle and gave an enormous heave.

There was an ear piercing shriek and the nut came undone.

This passage from Luke is the shrieking bolt passage. Even things which look stuck for ever can be freed.

And it's a reminder that just as Jesus would have received blank looks if he's told the parable of the wheel bearing, we have to use our imaginations to unlock the meaning of his parables.

## Short Passage

This was a short reading. Fourteen verses.

The parable itself – the parable of the two debtors – is only two verses. I'll read it.

*“Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii,<sup>[c]</sup> and the other fifty.<sup>42</sup> 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?”*

*<sup>43</sup> Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.”*

*“You have judged correctly,” Jesus said.*

Unlike many of the other stories Jesus used – Julie gave an in-depth look at the Lost Son last week – this parable hardly needs any explaining.

Why include it?

## Luke

The Prayer Book prayer for Luke's Saints Day sums up Luke.

*Almighty God, who calledst Luke the Physician, whose praise is in the Gospel, to be an Evangelist, and Physician of the soul: May it please thee that, by the wholesome medicines*

*of the doctrine delivered by him, all the diseases of our souls may be healed; through the merits of thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Luke sees the impact Jesus is having on hearts and souls.

Let's look at the build up to this story. We have three vivid scenes.

### Centurion

The Centurion with the sick servant. A tale of delegated authority. The Centurion says to Jesus – I know you have the delegated authority of God. Jesus almost says, and because of your faith I delegate my healing power to you. When you get home your servant will be well.

### Widow's Son

The next story is the widow's son. Jesus meets a huge funeral procession filing out of the Nain town gate. There is no way of getting past.

Jesus touches the coffin and the dead boy sits up and climbs out.

The procession has file all the way back – rejoicing. Jesus has turned around death.

### Sinful Woman

And now Jesus being anointed by the sinful woman.

Centurion = authority. Funeral = death. Woman anointing Jesus is what? Embarrassment.

Is it?

It's in this context that Jesus tells his parable. In the midst of a social catastrophe.

Jesus tells his story of the two debtors.

Simon the Pharisee is trying to work out why on earth Jesus is telling the story in a crisis.

One nice point of style with look is we never talks down to his audience. He never says – this means Jesus can forgive sins. He always puts the words in to the mouths of the crowd.

“Who is this who even forgives sins?”

Pharisees.

That's the point my rusty nut shrieks.

This has been the huge sticking point – particularly with the Pharisees. What to do about sin. What is it? How does it work?

Mind Games

You can imagine the academic debates. Maybe the story Jesus told was a popular riddle. How should we respond to being wronged. How do you work out how

serious a sin is? Is there a table you can look up matching sin with response? Should the response always be punishment.

Jesus's twist – both debtors have their debts cancelled is a novel twist.

You can almost hear the puzzled response from Simon the Pharisee. It's obvious that the one owing the larger debt will be most grateful. Why ask me now in the middle of my crisis.

Then Simon the Pharisee drops his eyes from Jesus to look at the woman at his feet.

## Message 1

And then Jesus delivers his message.

Sin is not a concept to be debated. It's not just about what the law says. It's not something to be assessed. Measured. Matched punishments.

It's real. It hurts people. It messes up lives. It's about poverty. It's about class. It's about social norms. It taints everything – even your dinner party. It is literally the worst thing you can imagine.

In your case – Simon the pharisee – it's even worse than embarrassment.

Just look at what this woman has done and you have not done.

## Message 2

And if that's not enough of a revelation for one day, I can fix it because I am God – says Jesus.

## The Good News

So here we have a story within a story. A two-verse parable which packs an enormous punch because of its setting.

In Luke's Gospel the Good News is not the person of Jesus – it is the Good News that the Kingdom of God is arriving this very minute.

Sickness is no obstacle. Death is no obstacle. Sin is no obstacle.

## What Happens Next

What happens next in this world where the stuck bolt of sin has at last started to move?

We don't know if Simon the Pharisee got the message. He might be telling his friends, "It was so embarrassing, I almost died".

The woman off the street might be telling her friends, "I thought I had died but now I can see life".

For the rest of us, be we the onlookers 2000 years ago or the audience of today, there are many messages.

The universality of God's salvation. No sin is too great.

The consequences of sin – the consequences of sin are the worst things you can imagine. Sin is messy. Sin is catastrophic. Sin is embarrassing. It is not a concept.

There's a message too about obstacles to the coming of God's Kingdom. Social norms. Mindsets. Fear of looking a fool. Having inflated opinions of ourselves. Not being brave enough to go against convention.

It's a long list.

And for me – of course – there is the sound of the stuck bolt beginning to turn.

For God it is the coming of his Kingdom. A Kingdom built on the response of people whose eyes have been opened to both the consequences of sin and the amazing grace of God.

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