

The Women with the Alabaster Jars

By Lynn Warner

Near the beginning of Jesus' ministry, a Pharisee invited Him to dinner. As He was seated, a woman of the city, a sinner, appeared with an alabaster jar. She *"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"* (Luke 7:38).

The Pharisee, in his heart, judged both Jesus and the woman. He reasoned that if Jesus were truly a prophet, He would know who and what manner of woman had touched Him, for she was a sinner. Jesus answered his reasoning by relating an example of two debtors in Luke 7. One debtor owned 500 pence and the other owed 50 pence – neither could pay. The creditor forgave both debtors. Jesus asked, *"Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him most?"* Simon the Pharisee answered, *"I suppose that he to whom he forgave most."* Jesus said, *"Thou hast rightly judged."* Then Jesus judged Simon's neglect of the etiquette of hosting his guest. He did not wash or dry Jesus' feet, nor did he greet Jesus with a kiss of greeting or anoint His head with oil. Yet the woman, a sinner, had washed His feet with her tears, dried them with her hair, kissed and anointed them with oil. Jesus told him, *"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"* (Luke 7:47). To the woman, he said, *"Thy sins are forgiven"* (Luke 7:48). And He said to the woman, *"Thy faith hath saved thee, go in peace"* (Luke 7:50). Meanwhile those at the table began to say within themselves, *"Who is this that forgiveth sins also?"*

The woman ministered to Jesus with what she could; Jesus explained her motivation with the example of the two debtors. Her good work, the beautiful thing she did, sprang from her love of Jesus, because her many sins were forgiven. John describes her motivation, which we desire to be our motivation to good works: *"We love Him because He first loved us"* (1 John 4:19). God will continue the good work He begins in us: *"Being confident of this very thing, that He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ...and this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and all judgment. That ye may approve things that are excellent, that ye may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ. Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God"* (Phil. 1:6, 9-11).

The second woman with an alabaster jar appears near the end of Jesus' ministry. He was in Bethany, in the house of "Simon the Leper" and *"as He sat at meat, there came a woman having an alabaster box of ointment of spikenard very precious; and she brake the box, and poured it on His head. And there were some that had indignation within themselves, and said, Why was this waste of the ointment made? For it might have been sold for more than three hundred pence, and have been given to the poor. And they murmured against her. And Jesus said, Let her alone; why trouble ye her? she hath wrought a good work on Me. For ye have the poor with you always, and whensoever ye will ye may do them good: but Me ye have not always. She hath done what she could: she is come aforehand to anoint my body to the burying. Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also that she hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her. And Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, went unto the chief priests, to betray Him unto them"* (Mark 14:3b-10).

Again, a woman ministered a good work unto Jesus because of love for who He was, and what He was about to do. She knew He was facing death, and she did what she could to acknowledge that and honor Him. Both women were judged and criticized by those dining. The

contrast between the first woman, a sinner, and the Pharisee who believed he was righteous but did not love Jesus, was striking. The Pharisee loved his place and position; he did not love Jesus. He had his lists of good works, but did not have the love of God that comes by recognizing we are sinners and need forgiveness through Jesus—*“to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little”* (Luke 7:76). He did not believe Jesus had the power to forgive sins. The contrast between the second woman and “Simon the Leper’s” guests is also striking, for immediately afterwards, Judas left to betray Jesus. In their response to the woman, the other disciples showed they did not understand when Jesus had taught them He must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes—be killed, and after three days rise again. Mark 8:32-33 states: *“And He spake that openly. And Peter took Him and began to rebuke Him. But when He had turned and looked on His disciples, He rebuked Peter, saying, Get thee behind me Satan, for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but the things that be of men.”* He then declares that *“whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it, but whosoever shall lose his life for My sake and the gospels’ the same shall save it...whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation: of him also shall the Son of Man be ashamed when He cometh in the glory of His Father with the holy angels”* (Mark 8:34b-35, 38).

Both women in these situations denied their lives in honor of Jesus. The very costly precious ointment in the alabaster jar represented each woman’s earthly and probably future security – their “life.” Each woman broke the bottle and poured out the ointment. Both were harshly judged and criticized by the men. But Jesus corrected the men. The women were not ashamed of Jesus and they honored Him with their lives. They loved Him because He first loved them. They were forgiven, accepted by God. They had no fear, because *“there is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love”* (1 John 4:18).

Later in Mark, the disciples contrasted themselves with the women when they asked Jesus for position and power. In Mark 10:37, James and John came to Jesus: *“They said unto Him, Grant unto us that we may sit, one on Thy right hand and the other on Thy left hand, in Thy glory.”* However Jesus’ reply was that *“whosoever of you will be chiefest will be the servant of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be ministered to, but to minister, and to give His life and ransom for many”* (Mark 10:44-45).

The disciples seemed to be as interested in place and position as the Pharisees. They had not yet experienced being forgiven much, thus loving much. The Pharisees and disciples loved themselves and the world more than God, more than Jesus. They did not have righteous judgment, having judged Jesus and the two women wrongly. And Jesus corrected both the Pharisees and the disciples, who minimized, denied, suppressed, and rejected Jesus’ revelation of who He was and what good work He had come to earth to accomplish.

The lesson of the two women with the alabaster jars is that our motivation and good works arise out of the revelation that our sins are forgiven because Jesus loved us so much He gave His life for us - *“We love him because he first loved us”* (1 John 4:19). And Jesus said in Luke 7:47b, *“to whom little is forgiven the same loveth little.”* God has begun a good work in us and will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ. Paul prays of this work (and let it be our prayer, too): *“That your love may abound more and more in knowledge and all judgment, that ye may approve the things that are excellent, that ye may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruit of righteousness by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God”* (Philippians 1:9-11).

Note: Jesus said, "*Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God*" (Matthew 19:17b). Therefore good works must follow or come from the only source of Good – God! If you perform a good work, you are living in God's righteousness at that moment. When we see, know, and recognize that Jesus is righteous, we are drawn to that righteousness – as the officers of the Pharisees said, "*Never man spake like this man*" (John 7:46). Being drawn to that righteousness is our first steps of love.