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INTRODUCTION

The Christian world is saturated by grace—sometimes by cheap grace. In the early 90s, just after I'd finished the first draft of a discipleship course called Sonship, I began to notice that some of our graduates were using grace as an excuse to do what they felt like. Grace was merely a means for feeling good about themselves. The larger secular world is also increasingly dominated by law-less grace, where grace becomes a demand. All of this leaves Christians confused. How does grace work with holiness? Are we still under obligation?

Grace Through the Eyes of Jesus Units 1 and 2 are two nine-lesson interactive Bible studies that immerse you in the world of grace. We look at seven scenes from the gospel of Luke where Jesus either tells stories about grace or models grace in his interactions with people.

The way Jesus embodies grace and receives broken sinners sometimes takes my breath away. For example, when I'm discipling men who are struggling with sexual temptation, I encourage them to repeatedly confess their sin, turning again and again for forgiveness. Most of us shut down from God with repeated sin. When a particular sin captures us, we begin to think we are hopeless. But knowing that you can't out-sin God's grace gives us the courage to keep returning to the battle, to keep picking ourselves up after a failure and set our hearts anew to holiness.

The opposite problem of *underestimating* grace is *isolating* grace from a Christian moral frame. When we isolate grace, lawlessness can creep into the church. Jesus is never merely about grace in the abstract. In the stories Luke tells about Jesus, we see a richly textured world filled with the beauty of God's character. Our universe has a *givenness* to it, an order and design, that reflects the character of God. In the past when our culture was more influenced by Christianity, we all knew the law of God. But now in a post-Christian world, we can't assume people have Judeo-Christian values. We can't teach grace in a lawless vacuum. In *Grace Through the Eyes of Jesus*, we emphasize parts of Scripture we used to presume everyone knew—the Jewish moral frame.

The style of *seeJesus* interactive studies creates an experience around a Bible passage where 15 minutes into the study you are almost living in the scene. So you are overwhelmed not only with grace but with the Person of Jesus. And, as Augustine said, if you get your loves rightly ordered, then everything else works!

PART 1:
A BROKEN WOMAN
AND A GRACE-LESS MAN

LESSON 1: GRACE FOR A BROKEN WOMAN

We will be reading through this whole passage for the next three lessons, but today we will only focus on verses 36–39.

Read Luke 7:36–50

³⁶ One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. ³⁷ And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, ³⁸ and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. ³⁹ Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner."

⁴⁰ And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher." ⁴¹ "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" ⁴³ Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly."

⁴⁴ Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not 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 he who is forgiven little, loves little." ⁴⁸ And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." ⁴⁹ Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" ⁵⁰ And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

**Historical Background: "A Sinner"**

The woman's description as "sinner" likely means she is a prostitute or she has committed adultery in the village.

1. Jesus briefly describes her sin. Did any of you catch it?**2. This woman has likely committed adultery multiple times. What is the effect of adultery or prostitution on marriages and families?**

To further understand Simon's reaction to this woman, we need to look closer at Simon's world.

**Historical Background: Holiness**

- *A Passion for purity.* Simon's primary concern is purity. This passion for purity goes back into the past. Impurity, or a lack of holiness, led Israel into captivity. It is also a passion for the future. A saying in the Talmud said that the Messiah would return if all Israel went one day without a sin.
- *Impure by association.* You become impure by associating with impure people or things. Pharisees like Simon emphasized outer formal impurity and not, like the Hebrew prophets, purity of the heart.
- If you went into the Jewish bookstore in Capernaum, one of the scrolls you would see was "The Book of Sirach" written about 175 BC. The author, Ben Sira, was a devout man of wisdom who lived in Jerusalem. The book (scroll) gives us a feel of Simon's mindset:
 - "So no one pities a person who associates with a sinner and becomes involved in the other's sins" (12:14).
 - "What does a wolf have in common with a lamb? No more has a sinner with the devout" (13:17).
 - "A prostitute is regarded as spittle...." (26:22).



Photo of a mikveh next to the Temple in Jerusalem. Men would enter down the left side, immerse themselves, and come up the right side. The purpose was not physical cleansing but spiritual. Notice the wear on the steps on each side. Archaeologists have discovered 1st century mikvehs are all over Israel.

SECTION 2: The Woman's Present

15 mins

Now that we have a feel for Simon's mindset, let's look more closely at the scene.



Historical Background: Simon's Feast

- It is likely that this feast took place in the Galilean region and Jesus has preached at a local synagogue. It was common to invite a visiting rabbi to the Sabbath meal after he had spoken. A number of the dinners Jesus is invited to in Luke occur after a Sabbath synagogue service.
- The Greek custom at a feast was to lie down at a low three-sided table (a Triclinium) on a cushion with your feet away from the table. This had become common in Jewish culture.
- "The Men's Room" was the actual name for the dining room. This was an all-male gathering.
- Foot washing was very important in those days, because the people wore open sandals and walked along very dusty or muddy roads.
- In this culture bathing was infrequent, and there was no deodorant. But women typically carried a small alabaster jar of perfume around their necks on a string, so that they could perfume themselves. If she is a prostitute, then she would have used this in "plying her trade."



1

*Photos of alabaster jars found in Israel dated 600 BC.
Notice the handles on the smaller jar for carrying it around the neck.*

3. Let's look at all the things the woman is doing in order from the text.

¹ © Erich Lessing Culture and Fine Arts Archive. Used with permission.

Literary Background: Weeping and Kissing

- The Greek word that means “to wet” [*brecho*] is a particularly strong word that is used to describe rain showers in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:45) and in the book of James (5:17). Jesus’ feet were actually being cleaned, she was weeping so much.
- The word for *kissing* is also a particularly strong form of the Greek verb “*kataphileo*” meaning “to kiss eagerly, affectionately or repeatedly.”²
- Even in ancient culture, it was rare to kiss someone else’s feet. There is one reference in the Talmud (the Jewish writings in 3rd-5th century AD) to a freed murderer kissing the feet of his lawyer when he was overcome with gratefulness to the lawyer for getting him off.³

Historical Background: A Woman’s Hair

In the Ancient Near East and most traditional cultures even today, a woman only lets down her hair in private with her husband. “Here are some sayings from this era collected by the scholar Kenneth Bailey, from the Mishna and the Talmud:”⁴

A man may divorce his wife and leave her no financial settlement “if she goes out with her hair unbound, or spins in the street, or speaks with any man.”⁵

Rabbi Meir talks about a “bad man who sees his wife go out with her hair unfastened and spins cloth in the street with her armpits uncovered and bathe [*sic*] with the men.... Such a one it is a religious duty to divorce.”

4. So how might Simon interpret her letting her hair down?

Insight: Letting Down Her Hair

One scholar said, “How completely the woman was overcome by . . . gratitude towards her Savior is shown by the fact that self-consciously she took off her head-covering and unbound her hair in order to wipe Jesus’ feet. . . . Evidently she was so shocked at having bedewed Jesus with her tears, that she entirely forgot her surroundings.”⁶

² Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1993), 847.

³ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus, Second Revised Edition* (London: SCM Press, LTD, 1972), 126.

⁴ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 248.

⁵ The mishna was the oral law written in 220 AD from the teachings of the Pharisees during the Second Temple period (570 BC - 70 AD). Jesus reacts strongly against this, which he calls the “teachings of the elders.” The mishna was written down after Jesus’ time but generally reflects his era

⁶ Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 126.

5. Quick recap: What disgusts Simon about this woman?

SECTION 3: Simon's Reaction to Jesus

10 mins

6. How does Simon relate to Jesus during this opening scene? What has he discerned about Jesus?

7. What does Simon mean when he says, "If this man were a prophet...?"

Listen to the crowd's reaction in Luke 7:16–17 to the raising of the widow's son:

"They were all filled with awe and praised God. 'A great prophet has appeared among us,' they said. 'God has come to help his people.'" This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country."



Historical Background: Prophets Raising Dead Sons

Here's why the crowd said, "A great prophet has risen among us!"

- *Elijah*. The prophet Elijah had raised a widow's son at Zarephath. Just like Elijah, Jesus met the woman at the gate and gave the son back to his mother.
- *Elisha*. Elijah's disciple, the prophet Elisha, also raised a dead son at Shunem, only a mile from Nain.
- *Jesus*. When Jesus raised the widow of Nain's son, he was deliberately reenacting what these two prophets had done. A prophet was someone who saw people from God's viewpoint and spoke to them the words of God and acted with the power of God.

8. So why does Simon think that Jesus isn't a prophet?

9. Let's drill down. What is Jesus doing that so bothers Simon?

10. Simon's disdain of Jesus began even before Jesus' encounter with the woman. How do we know that?



Historical Background: Greeting a Rabbi

A well-known rabbi such as Jesus was to be greeted with a kiss, oil on the head, and foot washing. The neglect of these was the equivalent of a public put-down or slap in the face. It is like inviting someone over for dinner and ignoring them or not greeting them. Simon's greeting of Jesus is rude.



Historical Background: Biblical View of the Person as "A Center of Surprise"

- Simon has put both Jesus and the woman in a box. Simon has inhaled the spirit of paganism that puts everyone in boxes. In paganism you are defined by your past or your family. So if you've committed adultery, then that defines you. For instance, in paganism, the Old Testament Jacob, who is very crafty and deceitful, would be "crafty-Jacob."
- The Bible never traps people in their sin. Jacob, to use the words of the Hebrew scholar Robert Alter, is a "center of surprise."⁷ That is, God doesn't view people as "categories," such as "mentally ill" or "bi-polar," but as persons who can change. The biblical view of the person makes grace possible. We are not fixed in stone. We are not frozen by our birth, status, or past. Repentance can happen.



Modern Culture: The Return of Paganism

Our world is returning to the world of paganism by giving people fixed descriptions. In particular, psychology gives people fixed descriptions that trap people in behavior. Here are some examples: terrible-twos, bi-polar, etc. Scholar David Powlison puts it this way (a summary), "The label seduces us, initially providing identity and understanding, but as soon as you take it on you are trapped, narrowly defined by that label."⁸

⁷ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, NY: Basic Books, A Member of the Perseus Books Group, 1981), 126.

⁸ Personal conversation with Dr. David Powlison.

11. How does Jesus relate to the woman in the opening scene? Focus on Jesus' response to her, not on what she is doing.

12. What does human touch convey?

13. What are some of the things human touch can convey between members of the opposite sex?

-100 (Embarrassed) _____ 0 _____ +100 (Honored)

14. Why would they be embarrassed? What would they be concerned about?

15. What kind of man is willing to receive love from a despised woman and even count it an honor in this all-male gathering? What kind of man would not be bothered by her undoing her hair and wiping his feet with it?

16. What is the difference between Jesus' view of purity or holiness, and Simon's view?

SIMON	JESUS



Insight: Jesus' View of the Person

Simon's view of the person was frozen. The sinful woman was defined by her sinfulness. In contrast, Jesus treats her (and us) with dignity by leaving space for us to emerge. He doesn't overwhelm our personhood. He respects our dignity.

SECTION 5: Jesus' Silence

15 mins

17. Why don't we know what his attitude is?

18. What is the effect of Jesus' silence? That is, if you were one of the disciples with Jesus, how are you feeling? What questions are on your mind as the woman washes Jesus' feet?



Insight: Jesus Creates Ambiguity

What Jesus is doing is not clear. Jesus is present, but seemingly disengaged. Jesus often deliberately creates situations where he is present but seemingly not in control.

Here are a few examples of other stories from Jesus' life where he does that:

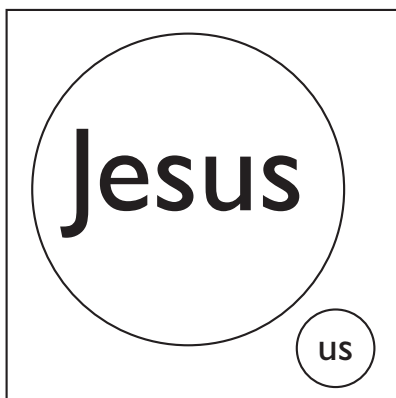
- After the disciples have been rowing all night on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus walks on the water past them in the boat, deliberately not going to them. The disciples are afraid until Peter calls out to Jesus (Mark 6:45–50, Matthew 14:22–33).
- After his resurrection, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene but doesn't tell her who he is (John 20:11–18).
- When Lazarus is sick, Jesus deliberately delays until Lazarus dies, creating anguish for his two sisters, Mary and Martha (John 11:1–7).

19. Why do you think Jesus does this? Why does he remain hidden?

Read John 11:14–15

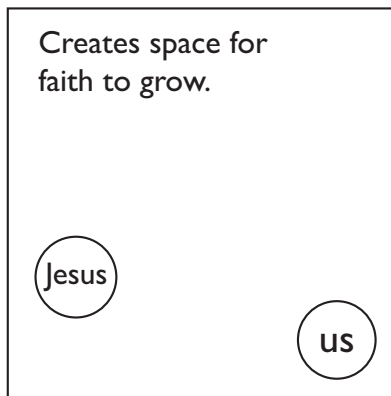
Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”

We want to see...



We want a big Jesus, constantly, visibly present so we never have to worry.

What God shows us...



Jesus in the corner—his presence is subtle, at the edge. He doesn't overwhelm our space. That creates space for a real relationship.



Insight: Space Creates Room for Us to Grow

We instinctively want Jesus to fill the space, to constantly be visible so we just follow wherever he leads or do whatever he says. But if that happened, there'd be no room for relationship, we wouldn't depend on him or ask him for anything. We would never grow.

20. Have you ever seen Jesus do that in your life, give you a tough situation where he is seemingly silent?

LESSON 1 APPLICATION

Reflecting on categorizing or stereotyping people.

1. Can you recall a time when someone judged you or put you in a box? What was it like? Give a specific example.
2. Are there ways that you categorize or freeze yourself?
3. Do you have a sin in the past that freezes you, that you just can't get over?
4. How does Jesus' declaration, "Your sins are forgiven," liberate you to be like this woman?



Person of Jesus Insight: Let Jesus Love You

Picture yourself, with whatever sin you are dealing with now, at Jesus' feet weeping, receiving his forgiveness, his blood washing over your past, and healing you.

5. Why do you think we are so quick to freeze people, including ourselves?

6. How do you be both discerning of people and yet not put them in a box?



Modern Culture: Secular-Liberalism

Secular liberalism tries to be the person of Jesus without 1) Jesus' atonement (the cross), 2) Jesus' presence (The Holy Spirit), and 3) Jesus' body (the church). It always fails. It ends up creating a law out of compassion that is used to marginalize people. In other words, the secular-liberal culture determines a set of rules about how to be compassionate, what caring for people looks like. But if someone disagrees with those "rules," then they are marginalized, put in a box, called names, or "cancelled."

Reflecting on the silence of God.

7. Has God ever been distant or hidden in your life?

8. What does it feel like when God is hidden or silent?

9. What kinds of things is God doing during that silence?

10. Can you think of a time (or relationship) where you tend to be quieter? What is the value of that?

11. What do you do with your spirit that wants to talk or “fill the space”?