

Looking at Luke 7

These studies are based on the readings from the Gospel according to Luke chosen for the revised Common Lectionary for Year C, from chapter 7, but they can be used at any time of the year.

1. Luke 7:1-10 – The Centurion’s Slave
2. Luke 7:18-23 – John the Baptist and Jesus
3. Luke 7:36-50 – A Woman Anoints Jesus’ Feet

You can do all three studies or pick only those which interest you.

Each study asks you to read a passage from Luke, offers you a commentary which brings today’s thinking into dialogue with the text, and some open-ended questions for you to use as springboards for your own discussion and action. The questions are deliberately very open, so you can have space to bring your own experience and questions to the text and take it where you need to go, which may differ from group to group.

If you are coming together as a group, make sure

- everyone can see everyone else
- everyone is included and is encouraged to participate as they would like
- there is room for people to agree, differ, be clear or confused, and be accepted
- people are encouraged to value each other’s input, to listen without using that time to work out what you are going to say and without interrupting, and when discussing a question to keep the focus on the question

You will need at least one Bible translation. NRSV is probably best, but others might include NIV or some other new translation.

The sessions are designed to last around 60 minutes and encourage you to explore not only what the texts meant on the basis of the latest historical research but also what they might mean for living today.

Making these studies work for you and your group.

Adapt them to suit your group and its preferences. For instance, you can read the gospel passage and the commentary and then look at the questions *or* you could first read the passage and note anything which popped out for you and then read the commentary, section by section, stopping to talk about anything that arises, *before* going right through to the end and looking at the questions *or* you could start with a general question on the topic *before* doing one of the above *or* you may want to circulate the studies in advance, so that people have already read the passage and commentary *before* they come. Then go through it when you come together in one of the ways mentioned above.

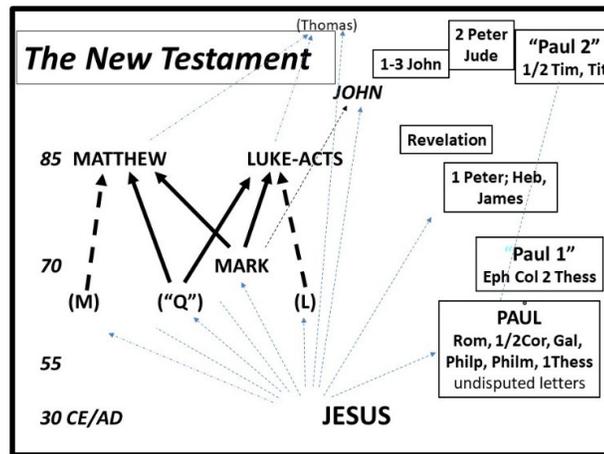
... whatever makes the studies work best for you!

Before we start:

Meet Luke!

Like the other gospels, Luke contains no information about the author. When we move beyond what it actually says to ask when it was written and who wrote it, we are on shaky ground. Luke was a fairly common name. This Luke may be the one referred to as a doctor in Colossians 4:14 and mentioned elsewhere (Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4:11). Luke also wrote Acts and appears to have been associated with Paul at some points on his journeys, though his account of Paul suggests he did not know him well.

Luke tells us at the beginning that he is not the first to write and that he was writing to give people a firm foundation for their faith. He almost certainly knew Mark's gospel, as did Matthew, and both Luke and Matthew apparently also had another common source which has not survived, but which contained, among other things, the Lord's Prayer and the core of the Sermon on the Mount. Luke wrote his gospel probably some 10-15 years after Mark wrote his, so some time in the 80s.



What we have for sure is what he wrote and in that he challenged the people of his day and challenges us. That is our starting point.

Fortunately these three passages tell stories found in the other gospels, so we can have a stereoscopic view and also see how each gospel writer adapted each story.

For further information about Luke, see <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/Luke.htm>

Or for a shorter version: <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LookingatLuke>

For weekly commentaries on the revised Common Lectionary readings from the gospels, see my website: <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/lectionaryindex.html>

These studies are prepared by Emeritus Professor William (Bill) Loader FAHA, a Uniting Church Minister and New Testament researcher and teacher. Literal translations in appendices are his own.

Images are Bill's own photos

1. A Greek hoplite/soldier
2. The old Dubbo gaol
3. Aphrodite – British Museum

Session One

Luke 7:1-10 – The Centurion’s Slave

The slavery does not hit you if you use the traditional description, “Centurion’s servant”, but the word for “servant” is the word for “slave” here. The slave was forced to work for this senior soldier, a man in charge of 100 soldiers. The soldier valued him and may even have been fond of him. That has sent the imaginations of some into wondering if that fondness was sexual and the slave a young adolescent boy and so the soldier was a paedophile. Soldiers often were and exploited young boys. That, however, goes beyond what the text says here, which simply calls him a slave with no indication of age.

Matthew tells the same story in 8:5-13 and simply has the centurion approach Jesus directly, himself. One translation simply has Jesus respond: “I will come and cure him”. Alternatively, Jesus’ response might have been one typical of fellow Jews of his day: “Am I to come and heal him?” to which the answer implied is No! Why? Because as a rule Jews were not meant to enter houses of non-Jews lest they be contaminated by their ritually and morally unclean habits. The people who told this story about Jesus and also the story of the Syrophenician woman who asked for help for her daughter, knew the rules and so never have Jesus enter their houses. In both instances Jesus is said to heal from a distance, but in both love has its way and Jesus was prepared to cross such boundaries.

Luke would tell a story of another centurion in Acts, Cornelius, and show that it took a vision from heaven to persuade Peter that it would be acceptable for him to enter Cornelius’ house (Acts 10:9-29).

Luke has added to the story of the centurion’s slave an approach by the Jewish elders who made the case that the soldier was a good man and Jesus should help. Only then, when Jesus was coming near the soldier’s house in Luke’s story, did the soldier himself come and make the statement which we find also in Matthew’s version.

The centurion knows the rules, too! He declares that he is not worthy to have Jesus come under his roof. He is a non-Jew. Jesus just needs to speak a word and then the slave would be healed. He did and the slave was found to be well again.

Such accounts of healing at a distance almost sound like magic, so that we can never really know what actually happened and what is storytelling, but one thing is clear: the story turns the centurion into a model of faith and contrasts this to the lack of faith Jesus found in Israel. The response of outsiders shows up the poor response of the insiders.

Some strict Jews of the time would have said: you should have had nothing to do with the man. It is not hard to imagine how the reasoning might go. He’s a foreigner! He’s also part of the oppressive Roman system. He’s likely to have dirt on his hands and must surely be a sinner, even if some thought he was good for helping fund a Jewish synagogue. In Luke it almost sounds like Jesus responds because the elders argued that he was worthy. No such reasoning in Matthew. Jesus initially recoils at the prospect of having anything to do with him (at least on one reading), but then crosses the boundary.



Love finds a way and breaks through the taboos and fears about the other. Not even a Roman centurion is beyond the pale.

In 8:11-12 Matthew attaches a saying of Jesus which Luke knows, too, but brings elsewhere (13:28-29). It talks of many coming from east and west and sitting at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. There is a place in God's heart and God's kingdom for non-Jews as well as Jews, for people from all nations, for people considered unworthy, and for people who really were bad people, like Zacchaeus the crook taxman. Jesus wrote no-one off and was criticised for it. People always seem to be able to find their good reasons for not letting love have its way. But love is letting go of fear and daring to be open.

It is interesting that the same story takes a different shape in John's gospel (4:46-54). It is still a healing from a distance and still in Capernaum, but the senior soldier is described as an officer of Antipas, who ruled Galilee, and the sick dependant, not as his slave but as his son.

At some stage before John's gospel was written the focus of the story was on emphasising the miraculous. There were some early Christian movements which tried to win converts by telling miracle stories. Accordingly, the story reports that the son was healed at the very moment Jesus spoke the words – wow!

In the hands of the author of John's gospel the story now serves to show Jesus as the source of life and to have him confront people who are always looking for miracles: "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe!" (4:48). Earlier he had said that when people believed in Jesus' name because of the miracles, Jesus did not believe in them (2:23-25). Similarly, he has Jesus challenge Nicodemus' faith, who described Jesus as having come from God because of his miracles, telling him: "Unless you are born from above, you will not see the Kingdom of God" (3:3).

In other words, miracles are not denied, but they are not the main thing. People need an ongoing relationship with God which is characterised by love for God, love for others and love for self. That message makes sense for all peoples.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. The models of faith are not the ones one would have expected then. Why? Who are your models of faith?
3. What kind of barriers are you aware of which operate in your wider community, intended or unintended and what experiences have you had in trying to cross them?

The Centurion's Slave		The Official's Son
Matthew 8:5-13	Luke 7:1-10	John 4:46-52
<p>When he entered Capernaum a centurion approached him, asking him (6) and saying, "Sir, my slave is laid low at home paralysed, in severe distress." (7) He said to him, "Am I to come and heal him?" [or: "I will come and heal him"] (8) In response the centurion said, "Sir, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof; but just say a word and my slave will be healed. (9) For I, too, am a person under authority, with soldiers subject to me, and I say to this one, 'Go!' and he goes and to another "Come!" and he comes and to my slave, "Do this" and he does it." (10) When Jesus heard this he was amazed and said to those following him, "Truly I tell you, I have not found such faith from anyone in Israel. (11) And I tell you, many will come from east and west and will recline at table with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven; (12) but the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into outer darkness and there will be weeping and grinding of teeth. (13) And Jesus said to the centurion, "Go, let it happen to you as you have believed"</p>	<p>When all these words had been spoken in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. (2) And a certain centurion's slave who was dear to him was sick and was at the point of death. (3) Hearing about Jesus he sent Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and save his slave. (4) They came to Jesus and asked him to come quickly, saying that he was worthy that he do so; (5) "for he love our nation and himself built us our synagogue." (6) Jesus went with them, already when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent his friends, saying to him, "Sir, don't bother yourself; for I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof. (7) That is why I did not count myself worthy to come to you; but say a word and let my slave be healed. (8) For I, too, am a person set under authority, with soldiers subject to me, and I say to this one, 'Go!' and he goes and to another "Come!" and he comes and to my slave, "Do this" and he does it." (9) When Jesus heard this was amazed at him and turning to the crowd following him said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."</p>	<p>And there was a certain royal official whose son was sick in Capernaum. (47) Hearing that Jesus had returned from Judea to Galilee, he sent off to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, for he was about to die. (48) Jesus said to him, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe!" (49) The official said to him, "Sir, come down before my child dies." (50) Jesus said to him, "Go, your son is alive." The man believed the word which Jesus said to him and went. (51) Already while he was on his way his slave came to meet him saying, "Your boy is alive". (52) He inquired from them about the hour in which he got better. They said to him. "Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him. (53) Accordingly the father realised that it was at that time that Jesus said, "Your son is alive". And he came to faith along with his whole household. (54) This again was the second sign which Jesus performed when he came from Judea to Galilee.</p>

Session 2

Luke 7:18-23 – John the Baptist and Jesus

When Luke took Mark's gospel as the core of his own gospel, he made some significant changes and additions. One of those additions was to put stories of the conception and birth of John the Baptist and Jesus at the beginning his gospel. Mark had no such stories. Luke brings them, complete with "music", or at least songs on the lips of Zechariah, John's father and Mary. These songs only loosely relate to the individual stories. They are basically freedom songs.

Using the past tense they praise God who has dethroned the mighty and lifted up the lowly, and who has liberated Israel from its foreign rulers. What these songs speak of in the past tense is really what they hope will soon happen in their own time. The Jews longed for liberation from the Romans. Anna the prophetess was looking the liberation of Jerusalem (2:38). So, later, were Joseph of Arimathea, who was longing for God's kingdom to arrive (23:51), and the disciples on the road to Emmaus (24:21).

When the risen Jesus was finally parting from them and they asked him: "Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:7), Jesus did not correct them. Instead he told them not to worry about the timing, but get on with doing the job of witnessing to him and his message (1:8). Jesus had already told the crowds in Jerusalem that they might soon be able to lift up their heads and see their freedom coming (21:28). Hope for liberation from oppressive rulers, for justice and peace, good news for the poor, for God's rule and kingdom, was high on the agenda. 2000 years later we can no longer realistically expect some immediate divine intervention, but we can still embrace such future hope as a vision and agenda for ourselves and recognise that Holy Communion prefigures it. Jesus' meals with his disciples, especially his last one were ways of celebrating in advance the hope that Jesus so often depicted as a generous and inclusive meal celebrating togetherness.

Jesus and John played a key role in their time in keeping these hopes alive and preparing people for their fulfilment which they apparently expected to be fulfilled in what was their near future. Such expectations were common. We know from the other gospels, too, that Jesus and John were closely connected. After all, Jesus went to John to be baptised, to allow himself to be immersed in the waters of God's love and generosity. Both spoke of the near future and called people to change their ways and turn to God. Matthew even uses identical words to summarises the message of John and Jesus: "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near!" (3:2; 4:17).

However, Matthew and Luke tell of a problem, which was preserved already in the common source they were using. For John and Jesus were also different. John announced that the good news included that God would send a judging figure to burn up the wicked and cut them down like trees which didn't bear fruit. When Jesus announced the good news, he did not use such fiery threats.

Matthew and Luke tell us that John thought Jesus was that one to come and was then dismayed that Jesus did not live up to the task. Where was the fire? Where was the judgement? Had John got it wrong? Or had Jesus failed to live up to his mission? Our passage reports that John, therefore, sent some of his disciples to find out what was going on.



Jesus' response in the passage alludes to what Jesus had been doing.

Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. ²³*And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me (7:22-23).*

Luke arranged his account of Jesus' ministry in a way that makes these allusions very clear and helps us see that Jesus had different priorities from John when it came to hope. One of the ways that Luke did this was by taking an episode from Mark which appears well into Jesus' ministry (Mark 6:1-6) and turning it into the opening scene of Jesus' ministry (Luke 4:16-30). Gospel writers felt free to rearrange the sequence of events because mostly what came down to them and their sources were single episodes without a timeline. Luke took Mark's story and expanded it.

Thus in Luke's gospel the first main scene of Jesus' ministry is now what he said and did in his hometown synagogue at Nazareth. Thus, Jesus stands up, opens the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and announces his mission using and adapting the words he found in Isaiah 61. He announces:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4:18-19)*

It is noteworthy that Luke stops at this point and does not include the words which follow: "and the day of vengeance of our God" (Isaiah 61:2). The next chapters in Luke show Jesus fulfilling this mission. He liberates a man from a demonic spirit (4:31-37), heals Peter's mother-in-law (4:38-39), a crowd of sick people (4:40-42), a leper (5:12-16), a paralysed man (5:17-26), a man with a withered hand (6:6-11), a centurion's slave (7:1-11), resuscitates a widow's son (7:11-17) and heals the blind (7:21). These match the list given in Jesus' answer to John the Baptist (7:22-23), which also includes that he proclaimed good news to the poor. Luke shows him doing so in 6:20-21.

*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.*

Jesus' response refers John to what he has been doing, underlining a main difference in their approach. In effect Jesus shifted attention away from just major intervention of God in the future, as John preached, and put the focus on change in the present. The future hope still remains. To follow Jesus is to share the vision of future change and to pray, "Your kingdom come!", but it is also to be engaged in the present in letting God change us and bring change through us in our world.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Can we still sing Luke's Jewish freedom songs about hope and change? Or should we see them as merely symbolic of spiritual salvation like being freed from sin?
3. What could we point to today as fulfilling the mission of Jesus in Luke 4 or in other words, how would we answer John the Baptist's question on the basis of our experience?

Session Three

Luke 7:36-50 – A Woman Anoints Jesus' Feet

There are four versions of this story, one in each gospel. By comparing them you can see how storytellers creatively adapted the story to bring out emphases which would speak to their own situations. Mark's is the earliest version (Mark 14:3-9). Matthew has taken over Mark's version with very little change (26:6-13). Both have the event take place in Bethany just outside Jerusalem in the house of Simon the leper when Jesus was approaching his final, fateful visit to the city. John also locates it in Bethany, but in the house of Mary, Martha and Lazarus (12:1-8). Luke, however, locates it much earlier in Jesus' ministry, when Jesus was hosted by a Pharisee, but that Pharisee was also called Simon. All four accounts tell of a woman who breaks open a container of sweet smelling myrrh and uses it on Jesus.

Beside the many common features there are some differences in the way the story came to be told. In Mark and Matthew an unidentified woman uses the perfumed oil to anoint Jesus' head. Mark, followed by Matthew, may have been seeing this in part as a symbol of recognising Jesus as Messiah. "Messiah" means "Anointed". Kings were anointed on their heads. But they may also have seen it as foreshadowing Jesus' death after which his body would be taken down from the cross and anointed with oil following customary practice.

Both John and Luke have the woman anoint Jesus' feet. In John that may foreshadow Jesus' washing his disciples' feet (13:1-11). In Luke the focus is not so much on the anointing, but on the woman's tears. That brings us to another difference. In John Mary is the woman and the act is an act of affection. In Mark and Matthew the woman is apparently a stranger. In Luke she is a sinner, whose tears express either repentance and to whom Jesus declares forgiveness or they express gratitude for having been forgiven, as the parable suggests. Later legend identified her with Mary Magdalene, but Luke does not do this, nor does any other gospel.

Each version mentions objections from those present to what the woman was doing. In Mark it was simply "some who were there". In Matthew it was "the disciples". In John it was Judas and in Luke it was the Pharisee playing host to Jesus.

The story has obviously been on its own adventure! At one point it celebrates Jesus as Messiah. At another it points to his burial. At another it highlights how out of step people, including disciples, could be with Jesus. And in Luke's version it highlights God's forgiveness. Did Mark or Mark's sources link it to Jesus' last days, subsequently influencing where Matthew and John locate it, and Luke preserve its original context? Or was Luke being creative and perhaps shifting the focus to sin, perhaps to make it more respectable? We may never know.

Behind the story is probably an event in Jesus' ministry that caused a stir. Onlookers were taken aback: what was this woman doing? Perfumed oil in the hands of a woman approaching a man would have had some wondering if she was a prostitute, since they used such oils for massage. Luke's version of the story may well assume this and was certainly read in this way later. John's version clearly does not see it this way.



One likely response would have been similar to what we find in Luke, namely that if Jesus was a holy man he should not let himself be approached let alone touched by such a woman. For some, women were seen as dangerous, especially because men might find them attractive and typically men then blamed women for being a source of temptation. Holy men should therefore keep their distance, especially from women outside their family, and women should cover themselves up and be tightly controlled, so that they could not endanger men.

Behind the various versions is probably an incident in which Jesus did not conform to such expectations, did not see the woman as endangering him, and was prepared to encounter her without fear. Her sexuality was not something to be feared, nor her approach, nor her touch. Nor was he about to take advantage of her vulnerability, but, warding off the grumbling men beside him, he shows her respect. She may have needed forgiveness, if Luke's version is right, or she may have just needed acceptance, the more likely original scenario.

The good news, then, for men and women, was that Jesus apparently did not feel that women had to be kept at a distance. They could be involved and engaged as much as men. Women were generally seen by men as less experienced and mature. In part this was because most people were married and most marriages were between a man and a woman barely little more than half his age. So men drew their (false) conclusions about the nature of women.

Despite a few exceptions women's leadership was confined to the home and its administration and men's to leadership beyond it. Jesus' choice of 12 men as disciples, symbolising the leadership of Israel's 12 tribes, reflects this division of labour, but clearly women were also among his broader group of disciples who travelled with him. Jesus did not have a problem with women. He affirmed and accepted them and some of them became close disciples, indeed stayed by his side when the men fled, and in the Easter stories were there to witness to the message of his resurrection.

These days age at marriage and roles in work and households are different. The ancient patterns no longer apply, but the ancient basis for discrimination still persists in many parts of our society. Gospel values transcend and challenge such patterns, so that what Jesus affirmed by his response to this woman has rightly come to be a foundation for all relations between men and women and their roles and status in society. It has been good for women but also for men to do away with ancient prejudices based on fear and affirm women and men as equal in their distinctiveness.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. What is your experience of the persistence of the male fallacy about women's inferiority?
3. In what ways can we today undo the prejudices of the past in relation to men and women?

A Woman Anoints Jesus

Matthew 26:6-13	Mark 14:3-9	John 12:1-8	Luke 7:36-50
<p>When Jesus had come to Bethany in the house of Simon the leper,</p> <p>a woman approached him with an alabaster box of myrrh of nard highly priced and poured it on his head as he was reclining at table.</p> <p>(8) But when the disciples saw this they were angry and said, "Why has this waste occurred? For it would have been possible to sell this at a high price and for the money to be given to the poor."</p> <p>(10) Knowing this Jesus said to them, "Why are you bothering this woman? She has done me a good deed. For you always have the poor with you, but you won't always have me.</p> <p>In applying this myrrh to my body she has prepared me for my burial.</p> <p>(13) Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, also what this woman has done will be talked about in her memory.</p>	<p>While he was in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper and was reclining at table a woman came with an alabaster box of myrrh of nard very expensive and breaking the box open poured it on his head.</p> <p>(4) Some who were present reacted angrily saying to each other, "Why has this waste of myrrh occurred? (5) For it would have been possible to sell this myrrh for more than 300 denarii [denarius = a day's wage] and for the money to be given to the poor" and they growled at her.</p> <p>(6) But Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why are you bothering her? She has done me a good deed. For you always have the poor with you and you can do them good whenever you please, but you won't always have me. (8) She has done what she could.</p> <p>She has anointed my body for burial in advance.</p> <p>(9) Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, also what this woman has done will be talked about in her memory.</p>	<p>Six days before Passover Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. (2) They made a dinner for him there and Martha was serving, and Lazarus was one of those reclining at table with him.</p> <p>(3) Mary taking a litre of myrrh of nard, very expensive, anointed Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the aroma of the myrrh.</p> <p>(4) But Judas Iscariot one of his disciples, the one who was about to betray him, said: "Why wasn't this myrrh sold for 300 denarii and the money given to the poor.</p> <p>(6) But he said this not because he was concerned for the poor, but because he was a thief and used to carry the bag and steal what was put into it.</p> <p>(7) So Jesus said, "Leave her alone, so she may keep it for my burial.</p> <p>(8) For you always have the poor with you, but you won't always have me."</p>	<p>A certain Pharisee asked him to have a meal with him. And entering the Pharisee's house he took his place reclining at table. (37) And behold a woman, a sinner in the city, finding out that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, bought an alabaster box of myrrh (38) and standing behind his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wipe them away with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed him with the myrrh.</p> <p>(39) When the Pharisee who invited him saw this he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman she is who is touching him, namely that she is a sinner."</p> <p>[Jesus then tells the Pharisee, whom he addresses as "Simon", a parable about forgiven debtors to show that the one forgiven most was the most grateful, contrasting her response with the Pharisee's. Jesus then announces to the woman that her sins are forgiven]</p>

