

*Break the Chains Bible Study, Session 3*

By Mylinda Baits

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## **Break the Chains Bible Study Series**

### **Session 3**

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**The Break the Chains** Bible study series is designed to help you explore the complex issues surrounding today's global slave trade as you prayerfully consider the biblical message of God's redemptive work through saving love. Some of the passages you will be asked to reflect upon may make you feel uncomfortable and challenge your thinking, but we encourage you to be open to the surprises God has for you in the Word.

Please begin and end each study with prayer and reflection. Think about your present life situation and ask God to be present in your study, as well as show you how to act on what you discover. If you are studying in a group, read each section aloud and allow all willing participants to share their insights; if you are using this study as an individual, keep a journal of your thoughts and feelings as you ponder the biblical story, information, and personal stories that you read.

May God's spirit fill you, challenge you, free you and transform you in and through your study.

### **Sacrificial Love**

Luke 7:36-50

#### **Background**

As in the case today, so in the Palestinian context of Luke's gospel message, most prostitutes were impoverished, unskilled women. Found mostly in cities, they often lived in brothels or houses connected with a temple. Prostitutes usually were slaves, daughters who had been sold or rented out by their parents, wives who were rented out by their husbands, poor women, abandoned girls, the divorced and widowed, single mothers, captives of war or piracy, or women bought for soldiers: in short, women who could not derive a livelihood from their position in the patriarchal family or those who had to work for a living but could not engage in middle- or upper-class professions. In the Palestine of Jesus' day, torn by war, taxation, and famine, the number of such women must have been great. Sadly, not much has changed in our world today.

The notion of "sinner" that we find in this account can have a whole range of meanings. It can characterize people who did not keep the Torah, either in the strict way of the Sadducees or in the wider Pharisaic sense; those who were criminals (in Israel, political and religious law were one and the same); or those who worked in disreputable jobs such as fruit-sellers, pig-herders, garlic peddlers, bartenders, seamen, public announcers, tax collectors, pimps, prostitutes, servants, and other service occupations, all of which were deemed "polluting" or "unclean" by interpreters of the Torah. Sinners were in one way or another marginal people who were badly paid (with a few rare exceptions such as Zacchaeus) and often abused.

The inclusiveness of Jesus as seen in this story ran counter to everything previously thought to be the will of God revealed in the Torah and Temple. The inclusive practices of Jesus and his disciples, welcoming into table fellowship not only women but even notorious and well-known sinners, offended the religious sensibilities not only of their fellow Jews, but also of later Christians. Sinners, prostitutes, beggars, tax collectors, the ritually polluted, the crippled, and the impoverished—in short, the scum of Palestinian society—constituted the majority of Jesus' followers. These are the last that have become first, the starving who have been satisfied, the uninvited who have been invited. Jesus knew exactly what kind of woman was anointing his feet and, ironically, he called others to be just like her.

Maseo Takenanka and Ron O'Grady say, in *The Bible Through Asian Eyes* (Pace Publishing/Asian Christian Art Assoc., 1991): "Jesus behaved in unorthodox ways for a Jewish man of his day. His attitude of friendship and acceptance of the despised and rejected people in society must have made a strong impression on this woman who entered the Pharisee's home to anoint Jesus' feet. Knowing how upright citizens denounced prostitutes, she nevertheless had the courage to enter, uninvited, to perform a sacrificial act of love—pouring out expensive ointment upon the feet of Jesus and drying them with her hair, oblivious or uncaring of the disapproval of the other people present."

### **Entering the Story**

As you read Luke 7:36-50, pay attention to what the different characters might be feeling. Think about the expressions on their faces, the positions of their bodies, the thoughts going through their minds as the story unfolds.

The arts have an especially great power to represent the deepest aspects of our experience and faith. One artistic interpretation of the forgiven woman in Luke's gospel was created by Wu Yuen-kwei, a contemporary Chinese artist who works in Nanjing. You may find the painting entitled "Her Sins Are Forgiven" in *The Bible through Asian Eyes* (Takenanka, Maseo and O'Grady, Ron, Pace Publishing/Asian Christian Art Assoc., 1991), or at this link: <http://www.elca.org/scriptlib/CO/WebArt/gallery.asp?Start=391>.

Study the painting and ask yourself the following questions:

- What do I feel as I look at the painting?
- What do I notice first in the picture? What seems to be happening?
- What objects stand out most to me? What do the facial expressions, direction of gazes, light and shadows, and empty spaces express to me?

### **Responding with Our Story**

Think about a time when you have felt uninvited, out of place, unseen, and looked down upon because of your gender, race, language, educational level, economic situation, past history, mistakes committed, or whatever other reason you can remember. How did you respond to those feelings? What does it feel like to know that Jesus knows all about you, understands and accepts you, forgives and welcomes you home?

Reflect on the positive characteristics that Jesus saw in the woman who entered the Pharisee's house: courage, hospitality, affection, care, healing, generosity, gratitude, and sacrificial love.

Think about the times when you, too have expressed these same qualities.

- Thank God for the gift of courage to walk into unwelcoming places.
- Thank God for the gift of welcoming others into your home to offer hospitality.
- Thank God for the gift of showing affection and care to those you love.
- Thank God for the gift of nurture and healing attention to those who are hurting.
- Thank God for the gift of giving of your time, talent, and treasures.
- Thank God for the gift of gratitude for his grace given in Jesus.
- Thank God for the gift of love, the greatest of all gifts.

Reflect, also, on the following questions: How do I relate to the woman in this story? How have I been like the others in the story? How can I be more like Jesus in the story?

### **What Can We Do?**

We can learn a number of spiritual lessons from "the kind of woman" that we read about in Luke's account as well as the modern day women loved by Jesus who fill the brothels and red light districts in every major city in our world. There is a story of a young woman who was assaulted and left naked and bloody by her attacker. She wandered a bit dazed through the streets while passers-by only stared and wondered what kind of crazy person she was. She soon wandered into a church prayer meeting where she was hastily escorted out by an offended congregant. Finally nearly fainting at the door of a busy brothel, she was carried in by the working girls, cleaned up, given clothes and a meal and listened to by a group of people who understood. Healing happened in the least expected, but most likely, welcoming place.

Be like "that kind of woman".

Be aware of "that kind of woman" who needs your friendship, acceptance, and prayers.

Be bold and enter places uninvited because Jesus invites you to come.

Be expressive and love in tangible and touchable ways.

Be excessively generous.

Be grateful for grace and move forward in forgiveness.