

LOOSE THE BANDS OF WICKEDNESS¹

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Reputed to be in the oldest profession, prostitutes are singled out in the Bible for considerable attention. They get a bad press, but also a good one. Uncomplimentary things are said about them, but there is also an item of very good news about them: when John the Baptist came preaching his version of the Good News, Jesus said “the prostitutes believed him.” That’s a mark in their favor. It’s more than the Pharisees did!

This meant, Jesus said, that those “prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of God” (Matt. 21:32, 31, GNB). The point is that very great sinners can believe the Good News and when they do, they are transformed by it.

It would do us all good to study the case history of one woman especially. She was of questionable ethics, but she received from Jesus the *summa cum laude*—Mary Magdalene. He spoke more highly of her than of any other sinner in history—that wherever the Gospel is proclaimed throughout the whole world, her story must be told with it.

Her story illustrates two vital truths: (1) The love of Christ can reach the most apparently hopeless person. (2) The definition of faith *which works* is a heartfelt appreciation of what it cost the Savior to save us.

Piecing together the vital facts about Mary as found here and there in the four Gospels, we learn that she had earned the title “a sinner” (Luke 7:37), a euphemistic way of saying that she was known as a lady of ill repute. In fact, she had fallen so low that she was practically a basket case. Two Gospel writers characterize her as having been possessed with “seven demons” (Luke 8:2; Mark 16:9).

An endocrinologist, Dr. Robert B. Greenblatt, in his *Search the Scriptures*, suggests that “Mary of Magdala may well have suffered from a compulsive neurosis known as *nymphomania*. . . . Mary was a woman of rank and means; how else could she afford the expensive alabaster box of ointment which she brought to anoint the feet of Jesus?” (page 93). This woman had somehow drifted beyond the bounds of self-control. How she got that way is an interesting detail of the New Testament story.

Looking at the evidence, we see that the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet in Luke 7:37, 38 was the

¹ Isaiah 58:6-8. 221, 294.

same one described by John as Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha (John 11:1, 2), and the Mary Magdalene of Mark 16:9 as the “one out of whom [Jesus] had cast seven devils.” All the details of the mosaic fit together beautifully.

This means that Mary came from a good home in one of Jerusalem’s better suburbs. Her brother was the highly respected Lazarus, and her sister Martha had earned a reputation for being a super hostess in good society.

Mary probably had as happy a childhood as any girl in Judea. All went well until Simon the Pharisee seduced her. Thoughtful people have identified him as a member of her family, which would mean that what got her started going the wrong way was incest. Jesus’ parable in Luke 7:40-47 clearly implicates him as the man who had originally ruined her life.

Simon, who outwardly was a respected member of the clergy known as Pharisees, secretly was a Don Juan wolf in sheep’s clothing—a breed that has never become wholly extinct. How the evil act took place, we are not told. However, it is known that girls who are led this way regularly lose their self-respect and frequently are plagued by severe inner problems. It’s also common in such cases for the woman to keep the

secret locked up in her heart, where the poison gnaws away.

In this case Simon apparently kept the secret, too. After all, he had a high reputation as a religious leader to preserve.

Judean social circles had a very little redemptive concern for a girl who had gotten caught in such a tragedy. Mary probably had no chance to get good pastoral counseling. Who among the clergy would believe her story? Her seducer was a highly respected religious leader. What could she do?

It seems that Mary earned her title of “Magdalen” by having run away to the village of Magdala in Galilee—as far from home as she could go. As often happens in such cases, where no one cares, Mary in despair threw all caution to the winds. Her nose-dive took her into depths of degradation in which sordid spirits from the abyss ruled her mind and soul. She was a goner, and no one could guess why this fine, intelligent girl plunged to the nadir of immorality. All her self-respect was shattered.

Then It Was Her Good Fortune to Come in Contact With Jesus. Disillusioned and bitter about men (injured women generally are!), she found something different in Him. He was fully human being, for He had

taken upon Himself our flesh and nature. She probably did not realize who He was for some time. He could be the Son of God *incognito*. He cared for her—that she felt; but it dawned on her that His love was not a designing self-interest. Here was a purity that she never had dreamed existed.

His influence on her awakened girlhood dreams. She was more than a thing to be discarded; she was a person. Could she who had fallen so low become a daughter in God's family? Strange little shoots of hope began to blossom in the spring sunshine of a Savior's pure-hearted love. Jesus began building at the right foundation. He rebuilt her self-respect.

With being possessed of seven demons, no psychiatric treatment could help her like a prayer of Jesus. She heard Him pour out His soul in impassioned pleadings for her deliverance. Prayer saved her. She became free.

All went well for a time, but temptation apparently caught her off guard, and she fell. And no fall hurts so much as the one that comes after you think you are converted.

The Humanness of This Woman.

Mary felt devastated. Despair threw her right back where she had been. But again Jesus prayed for

her, and again she was delivered. And then again she fell. This seems to have gone on and on. She was the classic "new convert," which staid and cynical church members repeatedly say won't last.

Christ's disciples obviously lost all patience with her—this is evident from the way Mark tells the story. One can almost hear them advising Jesus, "Let her go—she's had it. Don't waste any more time on her!"

But the seventh time Jesus prayed for her, she was delivered. That last demon was cast out, the last root of unbelieving despair eliminated.

The mind and heart that had been a habitation of devils found genuine and lasting deliverance in believing Good News about herself about her Savior, instead of the Bad News that had caused her such darkness of mind.

You can't blame Mary for wanting to say thank you in some tangible way. Figuratively, she had been to hell and come back, and her new obsession was how to show her gratitude to her Deliverer.

Realizing distinctly what she had been saved *from* and what she had been saved *to*, Mary's soul blossomed into the full meaning of discipleship. Henceforth no measured, restrained, "balanced" devotion would do for her. Our common "neither cold

nor hot” lukewarmness became forever impossible for this daughter of Bethany. Something began brewing in her soul that would shatter for all time and eternity our restricted concepts of human capacity for devotion. Mary was on the way to earning world respect as a special person, but in a way to humble our human pride as nothing but Calvary has ever done.

She had picked up some snatches of conversation which the Twelve seem to have missed in their common preoccupation to secure the highest place in the kingdom. Jesus told them He was to die, and He repeated this to them on several occasions. But they wouldn’t let the thought stay in their minds. You remember, Peter had rebuked Him for even thinking of dying.

But Mary had something called prescience; at least, she had ears to listen to what the Lord had said. Knowing that He was going to die, she wanted to do something to show her gratitude for delivering her from her life of utter darkness—but there seemed to be no way. Well, she could at least prepare His body for death!

The shopkeeper who sold ointment for the dead could be expected to offer her a special as a bargain,

not knowing of course what she had in mind. One can hear her asking, “Have you something better?”

“Yes, but you can’t afford it, Mary; it’s for very wealthy people.”

“Let me have it,” she replies. But before paying the price, she asks again, “Have you something still better?”

Stunned, the apothecary would naturally ask, “Who do you want this for? I do have one ‘alabaster jar of perfume’ that is intended for a king. It’s the finest in the world, maybe for King Herod someday, or Governor Pilate, or possibly—who knows?—the great Cæsar overseas. It’s imported from the Himalayas, and costs a fortune—three hundred *denarii*, the silver coins representing a working man’s wage for a full day (see Matt. 20:1).

“That’s a fortune! Forget it, Mary; take my bargain special.”

“No, I want the best,” she says, and pays the price, possibly her life savings.

We don’t know how long she dreamed and brooded over her secret scheme to show her love for the Savior. But she still wasn’t satisfied. Anoint His *dead* body? He’d never know of her gratitude that way. What *could* she do?

Then came a day when Simon the great Pharisee would throw a feast in honor of Jesus. He had never been happy since his affair with Mary. Men also know what guilt and shame are, even though they try to hide their remorse. Simon felt a sting of guilt that only the seducer can know better than the seduced. There was no one he could talk to about it, and the poison had penetrated deep into his soul.

Trying to repress his guilt, Simon put on a brave front as a respected religious leader, like King David going about his royal business after his affair with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband. But the inward burden weighed so heavy that Simon's health broke. Often carrying a hidden load of guilt will do that to us, which is why that weakest organ of our body breaks down.

The great Simon succumbed to leprosy, then universally regarded as the curse of God. Tortured with remorse and now feeling that God had forever forsaken him, Simon as a leper was a wreck of a man.

But then he too had been fortunate enough to meet up with Jesus, and the Saviour had cleansed him of his leprosy.

Reserved and cautious about honoring the Man his fellow Pharisees despised, Simon sought a way to

say thanks to his Benefactor through polite outward amenities. Hence the social feast at his house, with Jesus and His disciples the guests of honor.

Mary crashes the gate. She came, working her way in uninvited, a new and secret idea birthed in her soul. Bringing her "alabaster jar of perfume," she would anoint the Saviour while He was still living!

Pressing in to the dining room unobserved, she impulsively broke the seal on the precious flask of ointment, anointing His head while He reclined at the table, and then evidently pouring the rest of it over His feet. As the rich and unusual ointment ran to waste on the floor, its fantastic fragrance suddenly filled the room. The buzz of conversation ceased, and all eyes turned to discover what had happened.

Mary was sobbing, a hidden fountain of grateful tears burst open. She seemed driven to her deed. A language beyond words was pouring forth in tears—"Thank You, Lord, for saving my soul!" She had not thought to bring a towel (only fussy Martha would plan so carefully), so she took His feet in her hands and dried them with her long flowing hair which she had shamelessly let down.

It was as a catharsis to her. At last her pent-up soul had found expression. She probably didn't realize

that she was center stage by now and was unprepared for what was coming.

Mark respectfully tells us that “some” became angry at her deed, but politely he doesn’t tell us who they were. We are left wondering if they might have been the Gentile guests present. But no, Matthew spills the beans and tells us frankly that the critics were none other than the ordained disciples of Jesus. And then John completes the story by telling us that these ridiculous complaints were coming from that supposedly wonderful man that everybody thought was a star—Judas Iscariot, the savvy business-man disciple of Jesus.

“Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages and the money given to the poor,” Judas is ranting. Mark tells us that the eleven got caught up in his complaints and readily seconded his motion of censure: “And they rebuked her harshly” (Mark 14:4, 5, NIV). Think of it, Jesus own disciples had no patience with this woman.

Mary Was Devastated. The sweetness in her soul was about to turn to the gall of disappointment. Yes, why hadn’t she thought to sell her precious ointment, and make a more magnificent gift for Judas, the honorable treasurer of the group? Come to think of

it, Jesus had indeed many times pleaded for the cause of the poor. That *would* have been a better idea! Oh, why hadn’t she thought of it?

In her embarrassment and humiliation, she was about to bolt for the door, but Jesus’ words caught her and held her: “Leave her alone,” He said, probably looking Jesus square in the eye. (There’s no record that He had ever previously rebuked Judas, as He had often rebuked Peter.) “She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could” (Mark 14:6-8, NIV). “When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial” (Matt. 26:12, NIV).

As in a dream, Mary heard the commendation. This was no half-hearted gesture in her behalf. Jesus’ whole soul was aroused, and He rebuked Judas and the eleven with a passion they would never forget. In fact, Judas was so stung by the rebuke that he left the party determined to betray Him (see Matt. 26:14-16).

Why Did Jesus Praise Her So Highly? He read and warmly appreciated the secret purposes of Mary’s soul—she had prepared Him for His burial. She, “a sinner,” had anointed the body of the Son of God, and had given Him a perfumed memory to carry in His

heart through the darkness of Gethsemane and right on up to Calvary, until that last conscious moment when He should cry out, “It is finished!”

No angel could do as much. Let Satan wring His soul with fierce temptations as He hung on His cross. Why give Your life a ransom for these unfeeling, ungrateful humans? Look, Your own people have despised and rejected You; one of Your chosen Twelve has betrayed You; another has denied You with most unpious cursing and swearing; all have forsaken You and fled. Wipe the bloody sweat from Your brow and come down from that horrible cross. If You are the Son of God, You can! Why waste Yourself like this?

We may never sense how almost overmastering that temptation was to the divine-human Savior in His weakest moment.

But then there steals into His consciousness a fragrant memory: the anointing by the daughter of Bethany. Here was *one* whose human soul had been stretched outside to appreciate His outsized sacrifice. The offering on Calvary may seem wasted for the many millions of planet earth, even perhaps for the eleven (or so it seemed temporarily); but it is worthwhile for Mary Magdalene, the fallen soul. The

sacrifice of God in Christ has elicited from one sinner its true complementary sacrifice—“a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart,” which God, unlike the disciples, will “not despise” (Ps. 51:17).

Mary has anointed *Him* to His cross, not just His body. What an honor for her! We owe to the virgin Mary the human birth of our Lord; but perhaps we owe to this other Mary a debt of gratitude for encouraging His tempted soul in the crucial hour of His sacrifice when the fate of the world trembled in the balance.

Jesus’ encomium of praise was His *summa cum laude* bestowed on this redeemed soul. It seems to border on extravagance: “I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her” (Mark 14:9, NIV). Something is driving us, to fulfill that prophecy. What she did was “beautiful,” Jesus said (Greek *kalos*, fantastically neat, brilliantly conceived, gorgeous). Mary has preached a sermon that will reverberate to earth’s ends and even be remembered in eternity. Not even Peter at Pentecost was half so eloquent.

Such are the immeasurable results that flow when one apparently hopeless person makes a choice to *believe* the Good News.

God Saves Even Self-righteous People If . . . (He loves them just as much!) It surprises us, but it's true—the Bible teaches that God has a comparatively easy time saving repentant prostitutes and self-confessed criminals. His most difficult task is saving “saints” who have forgotten that they are sinners.

There are plenty of these, church-goers who may never have “fallen” as did Mary Magdalene or King David, but whose hearts have become calcified. They have held on to the dangerous idea that they are pretty good people in themselves and can't see why they need repentance. (At least not like “bad” people do.)

What makes it difficult for the Lord to help such “saints” is that they feel no need. Worse still, they have gotten beyond feeling truly thankful for Jesus' sacrifice. This is to be expected; they feel they deserve salvation by being more righteous than the wicked.

Now comes the Good News that Jesus can find a way to help even such lost “saints.” He knows how to penetrate the shell behind which they have built up around themselves, unaware of their true condition. We discover this Good News in the story of how Jesus handled Simon the Pharisee at his party.

Something good had already happened to Mary. Her heart had undeniably been changed, but Simon's

was still like a stone. Jesus assured her directly, “Your sins are forgiven” (Luke 7:48, NIV). Then He added one more thing, a lesson that will stop us cold in our tracks, if we'll just let His point sink in.

In a lightning flash illumination, Jesus revealed something that for nearly two thousand years theologians have debated and argued: *what is faith?* Jesus defined it when He said to Mary, “Your *faith* has saved you; go in peace” (verse 50, NIV). *What Mary had is true faith.*

When do you and I dare to claim that we have faith? In effect, Jesus' answer is this: only when we have what Mary Magdalene had—a heart-moving appreciation of the love of Christ. Nothing less is worthy of the name, because nothing less can melt our hard hearts.

“You mean I must run the gamut of abandonment like she did, and virtually go to hell first?” No, for you may never find your way back like she did. But we can have *the faith* that Mary had, if we will simply realize the truth that were it not for the grace of Christ, hell itself is the only dimension of the ruin we would know.

Not one of us is innately any more righteous than Mary was in her lostness. Not one is saved part way by Christ—He saves 100 percent, or not at all. If all the

unknown factors that have shaped our lives were realized, we would see that *we are Mary*. Our coldness is the consequence of our not knowing the truth about ourselves and about Him.

Simon the Pharisee was afflicted with that blind ignorance, a condition worse than his former leprosy. How could Jesus reach him? If it is true that Jesus “was in all points tempted as we are” (Hebrews 4:15), we can assume that He was tempted to sigh and say to Himself, Mary has made it, but I’ll just abandon this hopeless man; he is too difficult to reach. We can be grateful that Jesus decided to do something to help even him.

Can we learn the secret of how Jesus saved Simon? The Savior must have gotten up early that morning to pray and ask His Father for wisdom for all the problems He would meet that day. Note how the Father answered His prayer:

Simon saw all that Mary had done in anointing Jesus and had heard His words of appreciation for her. He couldn’t help taking it all in. But very dark thoughts were coursing through this “respectable” man’s mind.

Having witnessed the most beautiful deed ever performed by a repentant sinner, the best this poor soul could do was to congratulate himself on his own

savvy for not accepting Jesus as his Messiah and Savior. Luke tells the story: “When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, ‘If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner’” (7:39, NIV). I *know* this woman, Simon said to himself. Genuine prophets associate with better people than she is! My fellow Pharisees surely are right—Jesus of Nazareth must be a phony!

His reverie is interrupted by his Guest. “Simon, I have something to tell you.”

“Tell me, Teacher.” He has to be polite.

“Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii [silver coins], and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”

Simon was probably too intelligent not to realize that the Savior was groping for some way to reach his heart. He had to respond, “I suppose the one who has the bigger debt canceled.” Could a ray of light already have pierced this poor man’s darkened soul? Could he be on the way to seeing how he was the greater sinner of the two?

“You have judged correctly,” Jesus assured him. He probably gave the uncomfortable man a knowing look that told him that his Guest understood all. The divine Surgeon must operate, but He will wield His scalpel very skillfully and mercifully.

Jesus did something strange. It appears that He turned His back on Simon now, for “He turned toward the woman” while He continued to address Simon. “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet.” Simon, think! You were too ashamed of Me before your fellow Pharisees to show the elemental courtesy of having your servant wash My travel-weary feet with ordinary water, or even give Me some to do it Myself. But this woman whom you despise—she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.

But this is not all. “You did not give me a kiss,” like you do your peers; “but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet.” The Master probably paused, to give this time to probe Simon’s conscience, now burning like fire.

Jesus went on: “You did not put oil on my head,” not even a teaspoonful of the cheapest variety, for something like that is always accorded guests of honor; “but she has poured perfume on my feet,” of

such a quality that you have heard how our financial expert Judas Iscariot has reckoned its astonishing monetary value.

Mary is still kneeling. All seven devils are gone now, no trace left even of bitterness toward Simon for what he had done to her. He can doubtless sense the reality of her forgiveness of him, which makes it easier for him at last to receive God’s forgiveness.

Jesus didn’t need to slash Simon’s miserable heart with the public announcement that He knew how he was the incestuous seducer. By now Simon himself is frantically computing the difference between owing five hundred denarii and owing only fifty.

He begins to realize that he is in the presence of One whose love and compassion are infinite. His Guest could have walked out on him in high dudgeon, manifesting a much-deserved contempt. Thanks, Simon, for inviting me; but I have to leave before the dessert. Goodbye!

No. Simon can be inexpressibly thankful that Jesus did not mercilessly expose him to his guests; any ordinary prophet, such as Nathan before King David or Elijah before Ahab, could well have humiliated him. Some therapeutic tears could already be trickling down Simon’s face as he hears the Savior add,

“Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little” (see Luke 7:37-47, NIV). The principle holds true in all ages.

The Good News That Hurt, But Also Healed. Love drove the point home with the force of a sledgehammer. Simon began to see his condition as he had never seen it before. Despising the woman who had been troubled by seven devils, he now saw himself possessed of an eighth—a self-righteousness and hypocrisy that now suddenly appears abhorrent to him. A Savior’s infinite love has turned a double tragedy (tragedies are seldom single!) into a dual conversion.

When Jesus said to Simon, “Do you see this woman?” He was in effect setting her forth as a demonstration of what it means to be truly saved. While it is true that we are saved only by faith, not always has faith itself been intelligently understood. Mary provides us with its true definition. In a very real sense, this formerly dissolute woman sympathized “with Christ” in His grand sacrifice. The content of her faith was the heart fellowship she knew with Christ in His sacrifice; that enabled her to reflect His.

Why Did Jesus Praise Mary So Highly? Jesus saw something that Mary could not see. He foretold for her memory the worldwide proclamation of her deed until the end of time, because it illuminated in a special way His deed in our behalf. I used to wonder why Jesus was so enthusiastic in His praise of Mary. It involved a sharp rebuke to Judas and even to the eleven who joined him in his criticism of her. Why didn’t He soothe the ruffled feelings around the table by praising Mary a bit more conservatively? *I* would have; wouldn’t you?

He could have said something like this in order to make peace all around: Mary, I appreciate your desire to say “thanks” for saving your soul, but really—now don’t cry—Judas and the disciples are right in principle. Think of all the poor people those three hundred silver coins could have helped. You could have spent say ten (that would be a lot!) on a mere spoonful of ointment for anointing My head (never mind My feet), and then you could have brought the 290 denarii into our treasury, so Judas our honorable treasurer could have dispensed it to the poor. I know you meant well, Mary, and I give you credit for good intentions, but next time you’ll know better, won’t you? Now, there . . . don’t cry.

No way! He praised her to the skies. She is lifted up as His model follower. No one else had eyes to see her strange, apparently irrational act as He saw it. He was intensely happy that at last here was someone who at least was beginning to appreciate what He was doing.