

## How Much?

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Malachi 3:6-12; Luke 7:36-50

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### INTRODUCTION

Ten years ago (April 27, 1999) a young man named Van Fletcher suffered a sudden brain hemorrhage and was rushed to J- W Hospital on Richmond's Southside. He underwent emergency surgery and began recovering in the hospital's ICU (**intensive care unit**). Van is a friend of our family because he and his fiancée were UNC college classmates of our oldest daughter. In fact, Anne, Van's fiancée, was one of our daughter Leah's roommates and teammates during her first year in East Asia. Anne rushed home as soon as flights permitted and arrived in Richmond on Sunday, April 30.

When Anne reached the hospital she found Van heavily sedated and experiencing severe headaches. So she began a daily regimen of sitting with him for hours rubbing his head to give relief from those intense headaches. Occasionally Van would wake a little bit, recognize her and purse his lips together as if to say, *"Give me a kiss."* Being a dutiful nurse and devoted fiancée Anne would lean forward to oblige him. Because he was in such a delicate condition I'm sure she kissed Van softly and tenderly.

The next day Anne was giving one of those soft and tender kisses when the surgeon walked in. He cleared his throat to announce his presence and looked somewhat sternly at Anne. She introduced herself and said that she understood that this was the ICU--the *intimate care unit* and that she was doing her part. The good doctor (missing her bit of humor) grudgingly admitted that the stimulation of kisses might be good for Van and said he would allow it.

Van's mother thought the encounter was hilarious and began kidding the neurosurgeon every time he appeared. *"Oh, Anne is following your advice and giving Van good care. But she is getting worn out from all those kisses!"*

Now it occurred to me that Anne proved to be a surprise instructor for this serious-minded physician. His excellent surgical skill and follow-up care were greatly appreciated. He knew what medicines and treatments were in order. But perhaps, he learned a little bit about humor and personal care from this young fiancée.

I tell this little story to prepare you for another story--a Bible story that features an unlikely **hero**---a surprise instructor and unusual mentor. Listen to the story!

*Now one of the **Pharisees** invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. {37} When a **woman** who had lived a **sinful life** in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought **an alabaster jar of perfume**, {38} and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her **hair**, kissed them and poured perfume on them.*

Notice the **contrast**: the *sinful* woman and the *righteous* Pharisees  
And consider the woman's impropriety, her emotional act (letting her hair down).

*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**." {40} Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," he said. {41} "Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him **five hundred** denarii, and the other **fifty**. {42} 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?" {43} Simon replied, "I **suppose** the one who had the bigger debt canceled." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said.*

Notice the irony of Jesus showing he **is** a prophet by discerning thoughts... and then going on to tell a parable within this encounter. How about Simon's answer? Simon's "*suppose*" shows his caution—he knows he is cornered, do you think?

*Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. {45} You did not give me a **kiss**, but this woman, from the time I entered; has not stopped **kissing my feet**. {46} You did not put oil on my head; but she has poured **perfume** on my feet.*

Note the three contrasts (*water--tears*, *kiss--kiss*, *oil—perfume*) in hospitality shown by the two characters. Simon was not discourteous but hardly measured up to the example of the woman's affection and devotion--gratitude expressed by love. And how did Jesus receive her love? Did he accept it?

*{ 47} Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven--for she loved **much**. But he who has been forgiven little loves **little**. Please note that her love was the result not the cause of forgiveness. Her love does not make her forgivable; she has turned from her ways because she received God's grace. Forgiven and accepted, now she is free to show love and gratitude.*

Have you ever heard of the book by Gary Chapman, Love Languages? The author says there is more than one love language—more than one way to express love and to receive it. Perhaps you like to be shown love by receiving gifts. Perhaps your spouse prefers receiving words of affirmation.

Maybe you like to go out for a special dinner and perhaps your kids would rather eat that fancy dinner at home. When you show love, have you taken the time and trouble to learn the language of the one you are seeking to love?

You might say that the woman in Luke 7 apparently spoke Jesus' **love language**. Her love expressed to Jesus was an active love--a gift-giving love. She did not simply think kind thoughts. She went beyond saying words of devotion. In fact, how many words did she say

according to Luke? None. She did not say a word. But did she send a message? Did she show love?

Yes, she is forever remembered not for her *sinful past* but for her *loving example*. **Mary**, or whoever she was, steps out of the pages of Luke's gospel to become our mentor in loving Jesus. And we need her to teach us!

Her love for the Savior is intentional. She comes to the dinner **prepared** with an expensive gift in hand "*wrapped*" in an expensive alabaster jar. She did not carry the costly *spikenard* perfume everywhere--she brought it with her for the particular purpose of anointing Jesus (she may have intended to anoint his head but ended up anointing his feet).

And I think we have to say that her love was courageous. She did not fit in that well with the other dinner guests. She stuck out. People stared at her and murmured things about her. I still wonder how she got in and how she got so close to Jesus. She definitely was radical and risky in showing up at the dinner party and by edging closer to Jesus and by touching the rabbi. She easily might have been thrown out into the street--she did not know if Jesus would accept her devotion.

Thirdly, you cannot help notice that her love was costly--sacrificial. The spikenard perfume came from flowers grown in the Himalayas. Alabaster jars were expensive containers. The cost of such a jar of perfume was easily a year's wages. No doubt it was her most precious possession and one of the tools of her former way of life. By the way did you know that the *worth* of the perfume is comparable to the 500 denarii owed by the debtor in the parable?

A woman who had experienced true forgiveness for her many sins was deeply grateful to Jesus. And she then expressed her gratitude by showing Jesus love--intentional or *calculated* love, uninhibited or *courageous* love, sacrificial or *costly* love. **Love**—calculated, courageous and costly.

**Simon**, the Pharisee (the religious person, the good man) is quite the contrast. He should be the one to be steeped in good manners; as host, he ought to lead the way in hospitality. But because he sees himself as good he also sees himself as only a "*little sinner*" needing minor forgiveness and therefore in his heart he carries only minimum gratitude. As a result he shows little love.

So what shall we conclude? With whom might you and I identify? Has Jesus forgiven us much or little? And here is the real question that comes at the end of truly hearing this story--**how much do you love Jesus?** And how will you show it?

Let's go back for just a moment and then I'll ask you the question again. How does this woman now identified as our teacher and example **love** Jesus? She shows her love but how? By giving Jesus gifts. What kind of gifts? The costly perfume, of course. But I see other gifts in this encounter. I see her giving Jesus *attention* and *allegiance* and *affection*. I see in her courageous actions the *devotion* of a disciple. She is much more than a stand-in-the-back of the room admirer. She pushes through the crowd to get near Jesus. She listens carefully, hanging on his every word. His presence reminds her she is a sinner and that his grace forgives her.

True love shows itself in the **giving** of **gifts**. Think of the people you truly love. Don't you show your love with gifts? I don't mean just *material* gifts. With the people you love you give yourself---your time, your attention, your affection, your allegiance, your care, your concern, etc.

Now let's go back to the question. **How much do you love Jesus?** And what kind of gifts are you giving to Him? Do you give Him your first-place allegiance? Do you pay attention to what He has said? Do you love Him with your obedience, your service, and with your financial gifts?

Today we mark our **stewardship** season. This time each autumn we remind ourselves of God's grace and our opportunity to be grateful & generous Jesus- followers. Stewardship season coincides with the end of the year and plans to build a budget for the upcoming year. Your financial pledges help to build that budget. So do I have to give financial gifts in order to prove my love for Jesus? Is such giving mandatory or is it an option? Don't we live by *grace* rather than *law*?

Let me clarify. I would never ask you to give *merely* to a stewardship campaign nor *primarily* to a church budget. Stewardship is about living as God's stewards and giving honor to God. All our gifts given to the work of ministry are gifts given to God. The **budget** is how the elders distribute the gifts of God's people responsibly to offer ministry... But you and I really do NOT give to a budget or a campaign. *We give to God through our community of faith.*

If you really love Jesus you are, by definition, his disciple, his follower. His disciples are becoming like Him--*more* like **givers** and *less* like **takers**. Givers rejoice at opportunities to give. They look for avenues and channels for their gifts. Givers know that stewardship campaigns and mission projects and hurricane relief are the means for grateful disciples to show Jesus how much they love Him.

**Example:** donor fatigue (*tsunami, hurricane, earthquakes—Katrina?*)

Did you ever think of yourself in those categories? Givers and Takers. Which are you? Are you a **giver** or a **taker**? When you come here on Sunday morning are you thinking of receiving or

giving—or both? What would those people who know you best say about you? "Oh, yes, she's a \_\_\_\_\_."

The woman who anointed Jesus brought all of herself to Jesus. She brought the leftover tools of her trade (perfume) and even her bad habits (letting down her hair) and she laid them all at Jesus' feet. And Jesus accepted her gifts and he accepted her. The declaration he made to her, "*Your sins are forgiven*," is the ultimate acceptance statement from God. It is the **gospel!**

After weeks of recuperation **Van Fletcher** had a final appointment with his doctor. The serious minded neurosurgeon removed Van's staples and told him that he had made wonderful progress. He handed him a fistful of written prescriptions and wished him a speedy recovery. When Van and Anne got to the car they took a closer look at the prescriptions. They found one to be especially interesting. Here is what it said. "*Prescribed for comfort and relief of pain: one kiss from your fiancée every ten minutes or as often as needed!*"

The serious minded doctor evidently learned a bit about humor and about the benefits of a fiancée's loving care (Van and Anne are married with children today and living in Raleigh). A disciple is a learner and we all have some more lessons to learn—miles to go before I sleep and lessons to learn this side of heaven. May we learn today from the woman who anointed Jesus and showed him great love.