

Who was Simon the Pharisee?

We meet Simon the Pharisee in the Gospel of Luke when he welcomes Jesus into his home for dinner. The meal is interrupted by a sinful woman who anoints Jesus with an expensive jar of perfume. This account is the only place Simon the Pharisee is mentioned in the Bible.

In Luke 7:36-50, Jesus was invited to dine at the home of Simon the Pharisee. While the Lord was reclining at the table in the customary pose, an uninvited guest arrived—an anonymous woman known only for her sinfulness. She brought with her “a beautiful alabaster jar filled with expensive perfume” (verse 37, NLT). The woman kneeled at the feet of Jesus, crying great tears, which fell onto His feet. Then, taking down her hair, she wiped away her tears, kissed the Lord’s feet, and anointed them with her perfume.

When Simon the Pharisee saw what was happening, he was shocked that Jesus would allow such an immoral woman to touch Him. The Pharisees, who were outwardly pious and religiously hypocritical, prided themselves on their separation from anything unclean and sinful. Simon thought to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him. She’s a sinner!” (Luke 7:39, NLT). Reading the man’s thoughts, Jesus demonstrated that He was much more powerful than just a prophet. He said to Simon, “I have something to say to you.”

Jesus told Simon a brief parable: a banker loaned money to two people—a massive sum to one and a modest sum to the other. Neither person could repay the debt, so the banker showed mercy, forgave both, and canceled their debts. Then Jesus asked Simon the Pharisee a crucial question: “Who do you suppose loved the banker more after that?” Simon answered, “The one with the larger debt” (Luke 7:42-43).

Jesus acknowledged that Simon had answered correctly. Then He turned to the sinful woman and began to compare her—a humble, gracious, and generous-hearted worshipper—to the proud and ungracious Pharisee. Simon had neglected to perform the basic hospitable courtesies extended to houseguests in those days. He didn't offer water for Jesus to wash His feet before dinner. Yet the woman had washed His feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. Simon hadn't greeted his guest with a fond kiss on the cheek, but the woman had showered His feet with kisses. The Pharisee hadn't even spared olive oil to anoint the Lord's head—an act that showed respect and courtesy to a guest—but the woman had anointed the Lord's feet with her priceless perfume.

Finally, Jesus came to the point of his comparison: “I tell you, her sins—and they are many—have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love. But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love” (Luke 7:47, NLT).

Simon the Pharisee had been revolted by the woman's sinfulness, but Jesus accepted her with love, allowing her to touch, wash, kiss, and anoint Him. Her debt had been massive, and Jesus had forgiven her much. As a result, she poured out her love for God with an extravagant display of passion that Simon the Pharisee could not comprehend. Then Jesus assured the woman of God's forgiveness (Luke 7:48).

The men at the dinner table wondered, “Who is this man, that he goes around forgiving sins?” (Luke 7:49, NLT). Jesus was revealing to them that He Himself was God. Through this encounter with the sinful woman, Jesus was also showing them that their love for God was profoundly lacking. Simon the Pharisee was the debtor in the parable whose canceled debt was minimal and whose love for God was stingy at best. The episode went

right to the heart of Christ's ongoing controversy with the self-righteous Pharisees.