

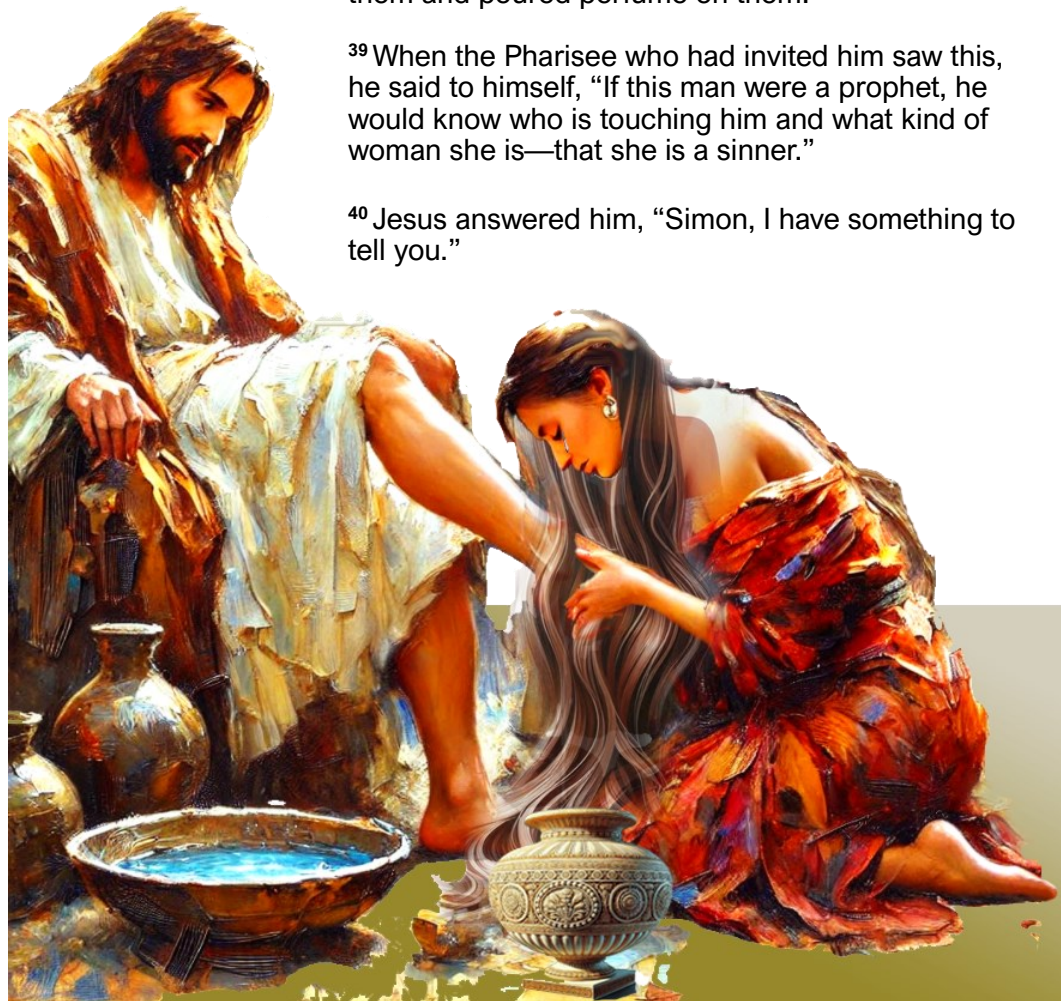
Unexpected Responses of Jesus—9

Luke 7:36–43 (NIV)

³⁶ When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. ³⁷ A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. ³⁸ 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.

³⁹ 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 people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii,^a and the other fifty. ⁴² Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

⁴³ Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven."

"You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

-0-



Jesus' parable: A moneylender forgiving debts

Four Friends Take a Walk in the Countryside

On a leisurely walk through the countryside four friends. Tim, a Christian theology student carries a small backpack stuffed with books. He felt that neither he nor most of his teachers appeared to have much of a contemplative perspective in their own lives or teaching. Eager to learn, he liked hanging out with his more contemplatively-inclined friends.

Melissa, a lover of mystical writings, holds a well-worn copy of St. Teresa's works. Miranda underwent occasional calm pauses that reflected her Centering Prayer contemplative

practice. They were Christians, too. Their Islamic friend Saleh carried a small string of Sufi prayer beads passed down in his family.

The group was walking along a winding path in the countryside. As they stroll, they begin reflecting on the motives of Jesus in his unexpected response to Simon the Pharisee. Tim had proposed this Gospel episode to them for today's discussion. He wanted to learn their insights about it, as he was thinking of writing an essay on that episode

1. Reframing Judgment into Self-Reflection

The group rested for a few moments at the top of a small hill, enjoying the view.

Miranda paused under a tree with eyes half-closed, a habitual sign of her contemplative focus. "Well, Tim, Jesus was affirming and respecting the woman's love and her change of heart. Indirectly he's saying to the Pharisee 'she is the lesson for you, Simon.' Jesus almost always speaks on more than one level and always shows great divine wisdom. So I'm wondering what he's trying to do with the Pharisee, Simon."

Tim adjusted his small holiday backpack of theology texts. "I suppose the most obvious purpose of Jesus is that he wanted to redirect Simon from judging the woman to looking into his own heart. By telling that parable about the debtors, Jesus is basically showing Simon that forgiveness and gratitude are linked."

Saleh fingered his Sufi prayer beads. "That resonates with the Sufi principle of focusing on our own hearts first. My grandfather used to say, 'Before pointing a finger, see how many fingers point back to you.'"

Miranda said, "Exactly. In contemplative prayer, we often become aware of our hidden judgments. We realise how easily we condemn others, and yet that very condemnation reflects our own unacknowledged needs."

Melissa, thumbing through her dog-eared volume of mystics' writings, said, "It reminds me of something I read from a Christian mystic: our unguarded moments reveal the judgments we hide. When we bring those to God in silent prayer, we can discover a new spaciousness in the heart."

Tim replied, "That's why Jesus's parable invites Simon to self-reflection. He wants Simon—and us—to see that our interior posture matters far more than our external critiques."

2. Illuminating the Nature of Love

Miranda tucked her hair behind her ear, reflecting on her recent prayer retreat. She



paused a little, taking in the magnificent green scenery. Beauty, she thought, and abundance. God's love. "The second motive relates to how Jesus reveals love's true nature: that forgiveness actually increases our capacity to love."

Melissa smiled at Saleh. "Precisely, Miranda. Sufi mystics—correct me if I'm wrong, Saleh—say that when divine mercy washes over us, our hearts awaken in gratitude and expand with love. The 'sinful woman' experienced a profound healing, which is why she responded so tenderly. This is a Christian insight also."

Saleh said, "Yes, in Sufism, we say that once forgiven, the heart becomes like fertile ground ready for seeds of compassion. A forgiven heart naturally overflows with love, especially toward the most vulnerable."

Tim nodded thoughtfully. "And that's the same idea Jesus points out: the one who is forgiven much, loves much. In contemplative Christianity, that experience of God's mercy frees us to love without reserve."

Just then, a sparrow alighted on a nearby branch, studying the four friends with interest. To everyone's delight, the bird skipped onto Tim's shoulder, and then onto the edge of his raised hand, watching his face. Tim looked on incredulously while they all stood unmoving and held their breath for fear of scaring it away. Time stood still.

3. Reversing Conventional Wisdom on Who Is Wise

Melissa said, "Jesus reveals that the woman who was called sinful has achieved a deeper spiritual understanding than the religiously re-



spected Pharisee. Jesus also repeats the lesson on other occasions in the Gospels. He says, 'the last will be first' in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And he says, 'Blessed are the meek' and 'Blessed are the poor in spirit' in the Beatitudes in Matthew.

Tim wrote that point, too, in his journal.

Miranda said, "So compassionately, Jesus protects the dignity of the woman while teaching this lesson to Simon. And so wisely, he reveals divine wisdom while maintaining the human relationships.

4. Teaching Sacred Unworthiness

Miranda said, "You know there is a similar and related point about the nature of love that we might want to consider as a separate motive for Jesus, for I'm sure he deliberately wanted it to make an impact on Simon. The point may

be called 'sacred unworthiness,' and it is this. Those who are most acutely aware of their spiritual poverty often have the greatest capacity for divine love.

Saleh's eyes lit up. "Yes, Miranda! What you've just said may be related to the Sufi concept of *fana* (which means the dissolving of the ego in God's presence) leading to *baqa* (The abiding of the self in that divine presence, once the ego has been transcended). The woman's profound sense of unworthiness, with her ego not insisting on being centrally important, becomes the very magnet, the very vessel for sacred encounter.

5. Confronting Unspoken Assumptions about 'Social Purity'

Saleh recalled stories his father told him of Sufi sages and saints. "Another motive Jesus might have had is to challenge Simon's unspoken assumption—that holiness requires distancing oneself from sinners."

Tim said, "Right. Simon thought that a real prophet shouldn't associate with people of questionable reputation. But Jesus flips that assumption by welcoming the 'sinful woman.'"

Miranda spoke, reflecting on her experiences, "You know, in silence, it often comes to me how we subconsciously assume we must 'earn' God's favour. Yet Jesus demonstrates that the divine meets us where we are. Holiness isn't about avoiding imperfection but about transforming it."

Melissa said "And that's true across spiritual traditions. The Absolute, or God, is never 'tainted' by our flaws. Instead, God's love can sanctify us if we're open."

Saleh fingered his prayer-beads. “The Sufi path teaches that Divine Love does not diminish by touching our weaknesses. Rather, it makes our weaknesses radiant by its own light. That’s precisely what Jesus is trying to show Simon.”

6. Showing that Grace is Unconditional and Boundless

They had come to a large oak tree, Tim sets his backpack down. They all sat among the acorns, feeling pleasantly accepted in each others’ company. Nature seemed to be sharing their enjoyment.

Tim picked up a perfect polished acorn for his study-desk, admiring its shades of brown. “Here’s another motive, I think. Jesus wants to emphasise that grace is universal—nobody ‘earns’ it. It’s pure divine generosity.”

Saleh asked, “How is that, Tim?”

Tim said. “Well, the parable of the debtors shows that forgiveness doesn’t come through merit. It’s freely bestowed. The more one realises they’ve been forgiven, the more their heart is moved to love in return.”

A few moments of silence came upon the group. Miranda felt that a friendly Presence was equally in their quiet fellowship and in their link with the oak tree and the rest of nature. She inhaled the smell of the soil and the flowers slowly in a brief contemplative pause. “Exactly. In contemplative traditions, we say that surrender is key. The more deeply we surrender to God’s mercy, the more powerfully we awaken to divine love.”

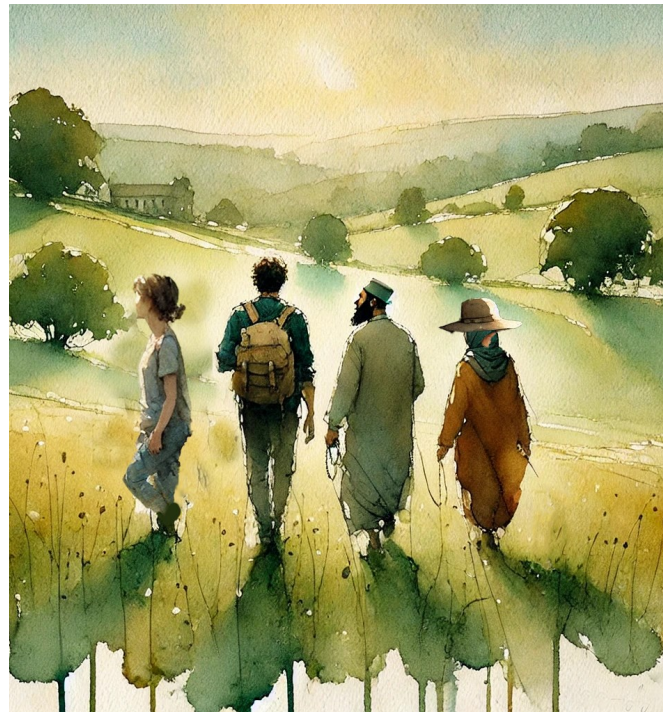
Melissa replied, “I love that. When we pray in silence, we may sense that every breath is

sustained by a mercy we didn’t earn. It opens our hearts to serve others without strings attached.”

Saleh smiled, recalling his father’s words. “From a Sufi viewpoint, the ocean of divine grace is boundless. All rivers flow into it, no matter their origin. My dad would say: ‘Once you taste that boundlessness, your love, too, must flow without borders.’”

Melissa said, Jesus also tried to transmit this sense of boundlessness of the divine gifts. This reminds me of Meister Eckhart’s idea that God even gives us God’s own generosity. We’re swept into a love that truly belongs to everyone.”

7. Warning About The Cost of Condemnation



They passed an ancient stone wall, its surface blanketed in moss and wildflowers. Tim trailed his fingers along the stones, wondering aloud how many travellers had taken comfort against its sturdy presence over the years. The thought that they too were part of a long human story of seeking wisdom lent an extra warmth to their conversation.

Miranda shared a new thought, “Simon’s lack of compassion for the woman reveals his own spiritual blindness.”

Tim folded his arms, deep in thought. “One of the striking things about this episode is the irony: Simon can’t see the woman’s transformation, and that blinds him to his own need for forgiveness! So it seems that Jesus had another motive here—to show Simon the cost of condemning others, even in his own mind. While the woman’s failings might have been obvious, Simon’s pride and failure to love remain hidden—even from himself.”

Melissa said, “Right. By emphasising her outpouring of love, Jesus actually exposes the Pharisee’s lack of it. Simon’s judgment of her keeps him from recognising his own unacknowledged debts.”

Miranda said, “It reminds me of what Father Thomas Keating said about the ‘false self.’ The ego, with its tendencies to insecurity, subtly tries to maintain control and esteem. If we’re stuck in that trap, we can’t embrace the humility that leads to true freedom. And in the contemplative life, we become aware of how easily the ego overshadows spiritual insight. Whenever we catch ourselves looking down on others, it’s time to return to prayerful humility. It’s that danger of the ego: thinking we stand on higher ground. But in the silence of prayer, we see our shared fragility. Humility

then becomes our safeguard against judging and condemning.”

Saleh said, after a pause in the conversation, “In the Sufi tradition, a teacher might say, ‘Casting a shadow on another’s path is forgetting that the sun of love shines on us all.’ My Sufi teachers often warn us about spiritual arrogance. When we look down on someone else, we shut ourselves off from the grace that could transform us, too.”

Melissa recalled a recent social work lecture. “Exactly. Repeatedly surrendering our illusions clears our vision, so we see the transforming presence of God in everyone—especially those labelled as sinful. Yes, and once we recognise our own need for mercy, we’re less inclined to condemn others. In our social work training, one of our lecturers kept emphasising the need for humility. I guess now I’m appreciating that lesson more. When working with the poor or marginalised, that humility keeps our hearts soft and welcoming.”

Miranda nodded. “And that’s crucial for serving vulnerable people. If we nurture genuine humility, we won’t walk into situations with pride or judgment, but with open hearts.”

Saleh continued the idea. “Yes, because when we stop comparing merits, we allow divine radiance to show us our own need for mercy. Then compassion naturally follows, and we recognise that we’re all fellow travellers returning to the One.”

Tim agreed. “... True. Once we recognise our own need for mercy, we’re less inclined to condemn others.”

A gentle breeze swept through the meadow, causing the tall grass to sway in waves. The

friends paused momentarily, the rhythmic rustle offering a soothing backdrop to their reflection. Saleh closed his eyes, recalling how, in his grandfather’s village, they believed the wind carried whispers of divine guidance.

8. Reframing Questions to Address Deeper Issues

Tim, zipping up his backpack after making a small note in his theology journal, said, “There’s another motive, I think. The eighth, right? Jesus reframes Simon’s assumptions and questions, opening the door to deeper truths about grace and forgiveness.”

Melissa tapped her finger on her book as she speaks. “It’s sheer genius how Jesus uses a simple parable to unlock Simon’s heart. By making Simon answer the question—‘Who will love more?’—he’s inviting Simon into his own self-discovery.”

Miranda’s voice was gentle, reflecting her contemplative practice. “In contemplative prayer, that’s exactly what happens: the Holy Spirit nudges us to see our hidden barriers to love. The more we see, the more we can open to divine compassion.” As Melissa gestured while speaking, a tiny ladybug landed on her finger. She grew perfectly still, delighted by this vivid spot of red on her hand. The others leaned in silently, sharing the sense that even the smallest parts of creation were involved in their life journey.

Saleh said, “I like your point when you said, ‘the more we see our own barriers, the more we are open to the heart of the Beloved’. Indeed, in Sufi practice, the teacher often asks an open-ended question rather than giving a direct rebuke. The lesson always hits harder when a person comes to the understanding

through their own mind’s working. It helps the seeker realise truths from within. Jesus acting as a masterly guide here, guiding Simon to face his inner obstacles.”

Tim said, “We learnt about this way of teaching last week. It’s used in various religious traditions. reflects a profound spiritual pedagogy found in many traditions. Like a Zen koan or a Hasidic tale, the parable of the debtors creates in Simon what psychologists call ‘cognitive dissonance’ forcing him to arrive at truth through his own reasoning rather than having it imposed externally.”

Miranda speaks again. “And let’s not forget: the woman whose reputation was so tainted becomes the shining example of humility, gratitude and love. She shows us the Kingdom of God turning human hierarchies upside down.”



Summarising

The four friends slowed down just before reaching their picnic spot. Tim had been taking brief notes on his journal along the way. He now had enough ideas for his essay.

He shared his notes, “Wow! Thank you, guys. Eight motives! Here’s a quick summary of what we have found. Jesus’ purposes in telling the parable to Simon appear to be:

1. Reframing Judgement into Self-Reflection
2. Illuminating the Nature of Love
3. Reversing Conventional Wisdom on Who Is Wise
4. Teaching Sacred Unworthiness
5. Confronting Unspoken Assumptions about ‘Social Purity’

6. Showing That Grace Is Unconditional and Boundless
7. Warning about The Cost of Condemnation
8. Reframing Questions to Address Deeper Issues”

Miranda smiled. “It’s clear Jesus wanted Simon to move beyond outward judgment into an encounter with transformative love. And for that love, Simon, if he only knew how to accept, had two teachers: the sobbing and loving woman, and Jesus himself.

Melissa said, “Yes, Jesus highlights how forgiveness increases love, challenges our assumptions, and calls us into universal grace.”

Saleh had been silent for a while. “This is the thought that’s coming to me: in showing us the danger of judging, Jesus reminded us that true holiness is linked to compassion and self-awareness. We might say that Jesus invites us

to reframe our questions—the questions we ask of ourselves and the questions we should ask—in such a way that we can detect and welcome the deeper reality of grace in us, offering us a window into divine love that shatters our narrow views. I feel privileged to be having this encounter with you all!

The four friends prepared for the picnic meal by making a silent prayerful pause while still standing, and then making a tight circle, each person holding the shoulders of the persons on their left and right. In this they bowed in love and respect to one another in recognition of the sacred within.

-o-

The Knock (A Sufi Story)

A Sufi dervish sitting in solitude heard a gentle knock at the door of his humble cell late one night. Rising at once, he opened it, only to find no one there. Puzzled, he returned to his prayer rug. But soon, the same knock sounded again—soft yet insistent.

Upon opening the door a second time, he still found no one. Realizing this was a test of spiritual vigilance, he did not resume his meditation; instead, he stood ready by the door, heart fully awake. When a third knock sounded, the dervish threw open the door instantly—and an overwhelming sense of presence filled the space.

In the silence, he knew the One had come, answering his watchfulness with an invisible but potent grace. From that night on, he taught his disciples, “Whenever you hear the faintest knock at your heart’s door, rise at once. For the Beloved arrives in the stillness of night, seeking those who stay alert in love.”

-o-



Vessels of Grace

she in wisdom of love's folly
has strength to yield to love
finds purity in imperfection
the sacred in unworthiness—
for grace rewrites
the script of shame

he fails through judging
but accepts gentle rebuke
re-turning to light
revealed in shadow—
for grace provides
unearned love

we forgive, to give birth
to divine and boundless
freedom of mercy
freely given
delightedly found

tony macelli



Interview with a Sufi Master

Sufism is regarded by many as the mystical side of Islam. Looking at the Gospel episode from the perspective of a Sufi master will help to emphasise the depth of divine wisdom of Jesus, and will also help us to see some of the valuable treasures in other faiths. The document “Nostra Aetate” of the 2nd Vatican Council encourages, Christians should “*acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among Non-Christians, as well as their social life and culture*” (NA, 2). One of the best ways to do this, perhaps, is to try and see things from the point of view of an adherent member or a teacher of the other faith. Here is a fictional account of how a Sufi master might share Sufi perspectives on the Gospel episode.

Christian Friend (F):

Master, I’ve been reflecting on the passage in Luke 7:39–43, where a Pharisee judges a woman anointing Jesus’s feet. From your Sufi perspective, how do you see this scene and its deeper meanings?

Sufi Master (SM):

My friend, in the Sufi way of knowing, we understand God as the all-encompassing Beloved. We seek continual intimacy with this Divine Beloved through love, remembrance, and surrender. By doing so, we aim to move beyond the confines of ego—what we often call the *nafs* or ordinary self—so that the spiritual heart becomes a clear mirror reflecting the Divine. Because of this, we learn to see each person as a reflection of the One, cultivating compassion and unity in all our relationships.



In this approach, everything in the world is seen as a mirror of our inner states and also a pathway through which the Divine Beloved unveils hidden wisdom. The episode in the Gospel of Luke—the teacher who was Jesus, the judging host, and the tearful woman—illustrates a profound interplay between outward appearance and inward reality. In Sufism, these distinctions between external labels and the truths hidden in the heart are vital. I would be glad to share some thoughts with you about how we interpret this scene, point by point.

The Inner Alchemy of Remorse and Love

F: I see. Could you speak more about the woman who weeps at Jesus’s feet and anoints them with costly perfume?



A Sufi from the order of dervishes, founded by Rumi. One palm turns up towards heaven, while the other turns down towards the world. The dance integrates heaven and earth.

SM: Yes. When this woman enters the house with her sorrow and her precious perfume, she becomes a perfect emblem of how, in Sufi teaching, remorse and longing can transform a so-called sinful heart into a sanctuary of love. Outwardly, people may judge her by her reputation; inwardly, she has awakened as a lover of the Divine.

The Veil of Judgment

In Sufi tradition, we often speak of *tawba*, or repentance, not just as regret for wrongdoings but as a turning of the heart away from whatever veils it from God. Her tears, in this sense, are more precious than any worldly perfume

because they arise from the deepest chamber of her heart. As Rumi says:

“Break your heart until it opens.”

This breaking of the heart—manifesting as tears and the outpouring of something valuable—reveals her sincerity and genuine love. In Sufi terms, sincerity or *ikhlas* is the key that can take a single teardrop and turn it into an ocean of intimacy with the Divine.

F: What about the host who silently judges her? How do you see his role?

SM: The host’s unspoken criticisms show a recurring Sufi theme: the *nafs*—our lower self—can obscure the truth that God’s reality resides in every person. When we label another as “sinful” or “unworthy,” we fail to see the ever-present possibility of Divine grace and transformation. We forget that each person’s journey is unique, and that the Beloved’s Mercy can erase entire lifetimes of wrongdoing in a single instant of sincere turning.

A wise teacher, in this case Jesus, looks beyond outward flaws and into the hidden condition of the heart. In the Sufi path, we say one should look at the world with the “eye of mercy,” never the “eye of blame.” It is taught in our tradition that the Divine mystery is concealed within human hearts. Therefore, when we honor the spark of the Divine in each being, we begin to see everyone’s potential for spiritual transformation, no matter how thick the dust may be on the mirror of the heart.

Forgiveness and the Expansiveness of Love

F: Jesus then tells a parable of two debtors,

and asks who would love the moneylender more after being forgiven. How do Sufis interpret this theme of forgiveness?

SM: In Sufi stories and poetry, forgiveness is not just a moral act but a fundamental quality of the Divine Reality. We often speak of forgiveness as an ocean that can absorb every sin and every misstep. The story of the two debtors beautifully highlights that those who experience great forgiveness will have an expanded heart, overflowing with gratitude and deeper love for the One who forgives.

Each wound or brokenness within us becomes an avenue for tasting the infinite compassion of the Beloved. When Jesus asks, “Who do you think loved the moneylender most?” and the host replies correctly, it’s not merely an intellectual point. Rather, it is a direct insight: the more deeply we feel our vulnerabilities, our mistakes, and our need for mercy, the more fully we can savour the vastness of Divine compassion, and thus respond with a profound devotion and gratitude.

Returning to the Centre: Love as the Criterion

F: And what about Jesus’s acceptance of this woman, despite her past? How does that resonate with Sufi teachings on love?

SM: Central to Sufism is the conviction that love—what we often call *ishq*—is the real measure of spiritual life. Notice how Jesus, by allowing the “sinful woman” to anoint his feet, neither condemns her nor denies her past. Instead, he welcomes her present longing and heartfelt offering.

This act personifies how divine love embraces everyone. Our human judgments so often appear narrow by comparison. The vision of a spiritually awakened heart perceives both our capacity for transformation and the essential worthiness of each soul. Sufis are taught to cultivate that same vision: to see each person in the light of Divine possibility, rather than in the shadows of their history.

Watchfulness: The Call to Self-Awareness

F: He then turns the parable on the host, showing how we all might be that Pharisee. Is there a Sufi practice that encourages this kind of self-examination?

SM: Certainly. Sufism emphasizes a practice we call *muraqabah*, or inner watchfulness—an ongoing self-awareness, or self-reflection as in a mirror. In this Gospel scene, Jesus essentially holds up a mirror to the host without harsh reprimand. Instead, he uses a story and a gentle question: “Who do you think loved more?” The Pharisee would have lived much better if such a mirror had already become part of his internal furniture!

This question invites all of us to consider: which debtor am I? Have I *recognized* my own inner poverty sufficiently that I might be forgiven much? If so, then I must also love much, having experienced the Divine generosity. Through *muraqabah*, we learn that condemning others often disguises our own need for mercy. Realizing our debts leads to humility, gratitude, and a more expansive, inclusive heart.

F: So this may be what Jesus in the Gospels calls several times for watchfulness! For ex-

ample in Matthew’s Gospel (Mt 24:42) Jesus says, “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.”

SM: Yes, the idea here is to maintain a state of readiness—*muraqabah*, in Sufi terms—knowing that the spiritual call can arise at any moment, and we should strive to keep our hearts open and awake.

F: And in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus teaches: “Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come.” He likens it to servants awaiting their master’s return. (Mark 13:33–37)

SM: Exactly. For Sufis, this translates to inner vigilance, mindful that life’s moments are precious opportunities to draw nearer to the Divine.

F: There is something similar in the Gospel according to Luke, as well. Jesus urges, “Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning,” akin to always having oil in their lamps so that when the Beloved knocks, we can joyfully open the door. (Luke 12:35–40)

SM: As you say, the oil in the lamp means readiness of heart—it mirrors the Sufi emphasis on keeping the “flame of remembrance of God”, and love, alive, never growing complacent. In each of these teachings, Jesus beckons us to remain spiritually awake. Through Sufi eyes, this mirrors our practice of perpetual *dhikr* (remembrance) and *muraqabah* (self-watchfulness), ensuring that every breath is aligned with divine presence.

The Overall Lesson?

F: This Sufi perspective is wonderful. Many Christians have very similar perspectives on

this episode, I’m sure. Could you share a final reflection on how Sufis might distil the essence of this story?

SM: From a Sufi point of view, this entire episode offers a luminous teaching about how the depth of remorse—and the willingness to pour out one’s most precious ointment of love—can open the door to profound forgiveness. Meanwhile, the host’s silent judgments stand as a reminder of what happens when our hearts become sealed by external appearances and rigid notions of piety.

Ultimately, this story shows us a universal truth: sincere love dissolves all barriers. We see a wise, compassionate teacher—Jesus—who leads by subtle example and acceptance. He invites every soul, whether labelled “sinner” or deemed “upright,” to discover the fathomless ocean of mercy and forgiveness that awaits within the embrace of the Beloved.

F: Thank you, Master. Your perspective helps me see this passage in a new light. But it has also helped me to appreciate common ground that Christians have with Sufis.

SM: You are most welcome, my friend. May this vision of love and mercy deepen our devotion and expand our compassion toward one another.



-o- Images: edited after DALL-E AI

tony macelli may be reached on imaginetonny@gmail.com