Homily - On the Sinful Woman

Ephrem the Syrian (c. AD 306–373)

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I. Hear and be comforted, beloved, how merciful is God. To the sinful woman He forgave her offences; yea, He upheld her when she was afflicted. With clay He opened the eyes of the blind, so that the eyeballs beheld the light. To the palsied He granted healing, who arose and walked and carried his bed. And to us He has given the pearls; His holy Body and Blood. He brought His medicines secretly; and with them He heals openly. And He wandered round in the land of Judea, like a physician, bearing his medicines. Simon invited Him to the feast, to eat bread in his house. The sinful woman rejoiced when she heard that He sat and was feasting in Simon's house; her thoughts gathered together like the sea, and like the billows her love surged. She beheld the Sea of Grace, how it had forced itself into one place; and she resolved to go and drown all her wickedness in its billows.

2. She bound her heart, because it had offended, with chains and tears of suffering; and she began weeping(with herself): "What avails me this fornication? What avails this lewdness? I have defiled the innocent ones without shame; I have corrupted the orphan; and without fear I have robbed the merchants of merchandise, and my rapacity was not satisfied. I have been as a bow m war, and have slain the good and the bad. I have been as a storm on the sea, and have sunk the ships of many. Why did I not win me one man, who might have corrected my lewdness? For one man is of God, but many are of Satan." 3. These things she inwardly said; then began she to do outwardly. She washed and put away from her eyes the dye that blinded them that saw it. And tears gushed forth from her eyes over that deadly eyepaint. She drew off and cast from her hands the enticing bracelets of her youth. She put off and cast away from her body the tunic of fine linen of whoredom, and resolved to go and attire herself in the tunic the garment of reconciliation. She drew off and cast from her feet the adorned sandals of lewdness; and directed the steps of her going in the path of the heavenly Eagle. She took up her gold in her palm and held it up to the face of heaven, and began to cry secretly, to Him who hears openly: "This, O Lord, that I have gained from iniquity, with it will I purchase to myself redemption. This which was gathered from orphans, with it will I win the Lord of orphans."

4. These things she said secretly; then began to do openly. She took up the gold in her palm, and carried the alabaster box in her hands. Then hastily went she forth in sadness to the perfumer. The perfumer saw her and wondered, and fell into questioning with her;

and thus he began to say to the harlot in the first words he spoke: "Was it not enough for thee, harlot, that thou hast corrupted all our town? What means this fashion that thou showest today to thy lovers-that thou hast put off thy wantonness and hast clothed thyself in modesty? Heretofore, when thou camest to me, thy aspect was different from today's. Thou wast clothed in goodly raiment, and didst bring little gold; and didst ask for precious ointment, to make thy lewdness pleasant. But lo! today thy vesture is mean, and thou hast brought much gold. Thy change I understand not; wherefore is this fashion of thine? Either clothe thee in raiment according to thy ability, or buy ointment according to thy clothing. For this ointment becomes not or is suited to this attire. Can it be that a merchant has met thee, and brings great wealth; and thou hast seen that he loves it not, the fashion of thy lewdness? So thou hast put off thy lewdness and hast clothed thyself in meekness, that by various fashions thou mayest capture much wealth. But if he loves this fashion because he is a chaste man in truth, then woe to him! Into what has he fallen? Into a gulf that has swallowed up his merchandise. But I give thee advice, as a man that desires thy welfare, that thou send away thy many lovers who have helped thee nought from thy youth, and henceforth seek out one husband who may correct thy lewdness."

5. These things spake the perfumer, in wisdom, to the harlot. The sinful woman answered and said to him, to the perfumer after his discourse, "Hinder me not, O man, and stop me not by thy questioning. I have asked of thee ointment, not freely, but I will pay thee its value not grudgingly. Take thee the gold, as much as thou demandest, and give me the precious ointment; take thee that which endures not and give me that which endures; and I will go to Him who endures, and will buy that which endures. And as to that thou saidst, about a merchant; a Man has met me today Who bears riches in abundance. He has robbed me and I have robbed Him; He has robbed me of my transgressions and sins, and I have robbed Him of His wealth. And as to that thou saidst of a husband; I have won me a Husband in heaven, Whose dominion stands for ever, and His kingdom shall not be dissolved?"She took up the ointment and went forth.

6. In haste went she forth; as Satan saw her and was enraged; and was greatly grieved in his mind. At one time he rejoiced, and again at another he was grieved. That she carried the perfumed oil, he rejoiced in his inward mind; but that she was clad in mean raiment-at this doing of hers he was afraid. He clave then to her and followed her, as a robber follows a merchant. He listened to the murmurs of her lips, to hear the voice of her words. He closely watched her eyeballs(to mark) whither the glance of her eyes was directed; and as he went he moved by her feet(to mark) whither her goings were directed. Very full of craft is Satan, from our words to learn our aim. Therefore our Lord has taught us not to raise our voice when we pray, that the Devil may not hear our words and draw near and become our adversary. So then, when Satan saw that he could not change her mind, he clothed himself in the fashion of a man, and drew to himself a crowd of youths, like her lovers of former times; and then began he thus to address her: "By thy life, O woman, tell me whither are thy footsteps directed? What means this haste? For thou hasteth more than other days. What means this thy meekness, for thy soul is meek like a handmaid's? Instead of garments

of fine linen, lo! thou art clothed in sordid weeds; instead of bracelets of gold and silver, there are not even rings on thy fingers; instead of goodly sandals for thy feet, not even worn shoes are on thy feet. Disclose to me all thy doing, for I understand not thy change. Is it that some one of thy lovers has died, and thou goest to bury him? We will go with time to the funeral, and with thee will(take part with thee) in sorrow."

7. The sinful woman answered and said to him,(even) to Satan, after his speech: "Well hast thou said that I go to inter the dead, one that has died to me. The sin of my thoughts has died, and I go to bury it." Satan answered and said to her,(even) to the sinful woman after her words: "Go to, O woman, I tell thee that I am the first of thy lovers. I am not such as thou, and I place my hands upon thee. I will give thee again more gold than before."

8. The sinful woman answered and said to him, even to Satan after his discourse: "I am wearied of thee, O man, and thou art no more my lover. I have won me a husband in heaven, Who is God, that is over all, and His dominion stands for ever, and His kingdom shall not be dissolved. For lo! in thy presence I say; I say it again and I lie not. I was a handmaid to Satan from my childhood unto this day. I was a bridge, and he trode upon me, and I destroyed thousands of men. The eyepaint blinded my eyes, and(I was) blind among many whom I blinded. I became sightless and knew not that there is One Who gives light to the sightless. Lo! I go to get light for mine eyes, and by that light to give light to many. I was fast bound, and knew not that there is One Who overthrows idols. Lo! I go to have my idols destroyed, and so to destroy the follies of many. I was wounded and knew not that there is One Who binds up wounds; and lo! I go to have my wounds bound." These things the harlot spake to Satan in her wisdom; and he groaned and was grieved and wept; and he cried aloud and thus he spake:-"I am conquered by thee, O woman, and what I shall do I knownot."

9. As soon as Satan perceived that he could not change her mind, he began to weep for himself and thus it was that he spake: "Henceforth is my boasting perished, and the pride of all my days. How shall I lay for her a snare, for her who is ascending on high? how shall I shoot arrows at her,(even) at her whose wall is unshaken? Therefore I go into Jesus' presence; lo! she is about to enter His presence; and I shall say to Him thus: "This woman is an harlot." Perchance He may reject and not receive her. And I shall say to Him thus: "This woman who comes into Thy presence is a woman that is an harlot. She has led captive men by her whoredom; she is polluted from her youth. But Thou, O Lord, art righteous; all men throng to see Thee. And if mankind see Thee that Thou hast speech with the harlot, they all will flee from Thy presence, and no man will salute Thee."

10. These things Satan spake within him- self, nor was he moved. Then he changed the course of his thought, and thus it was that he spake. "How shall I enter into Jesus' presence, for to Him the secret things are manifest? He knows me, who I am, that no good office is my purpose. If haply He rebuke me I am undone, and all my wiles will be wasted. I will go to the house of Simon, for secret things are not manifest to him. And into his heart I will put it; perchance on that hook he may be caught. And thus will I say unto him: By thy

life, O Simon, tell me; this man that sojourns in thy house is he a man that is righteous, or a friend of the doers of wickedness? I am a wealthy man, and a man that has possessions, and I wish like thee to invite him that he may come in and bless my possessions."

11. Simon answered and thus he said to the Evil One after his words: "From the day that (first) I saw Him I have seen no lewdness in Him, but rather quietness and peace, humility and seemliness. The sick He heals without reward, the diseased He freely cures. He approaches and stands by the grave, and calls, and the dead arise. Jairus called Him to raise his daughter to life, trusting that He could raise her to life. And as He went with him in the way, He gave healing to the woman diseased, who laid hold of the hem of His garment and stole healing from Him, and her pain which was hard and bitter at once departed from her. He went forth to the desert and saw the hungry, how they were fainting with famine. He made them sit down on the grass, and fed them in His mercy. In the ship He slept as He willed, and the sea swelled against the disciples. He arose and rebuked the billows, and there was a great calm. The widow, the desolate one who was following her only son, on the way to the grave He consoled her. He gave him to her and gladdened her heart. To one man who was dumb and blind, by His voice He brought healing. The lepers He cleansed by His word; to the limbs of the palsied He restored strength. For the blind man, afflicted and weary, He opened his eyes and he saw the light. And for two others who besought Him, at once He opened their eyes. As for me, thus have I heard the fame of the man from afar; and I called Him to bless my possessions, and to bless all my flocks and herds."

12. Satan answered and said to him, to Simon after his words: "Praise not a man at his beginning, until thou learnest his end; hitherto this man is sober and his soul takes not pleasure in wine. If he shall go forth from thy house, and holds not converse with an harlot, then he is a righteous man and no friend of them that do wickedness." Such things did Satan speak in his craftiness to Simon. Then he approached and stood afar off, to see what should come to pass.

13. The sinful woman full of transgressions stood clinging by the door. She clasped her arms in prayer, and thus she spake beseeching:-"Blessed Son Who hast descended to earth for the sake of man's redemption, close not Thy door in my face; for Thou hast called me and lo! I come. I know that Thou hast not rejected me; open for me the door of Thy mercy, that I may come in, O my Lord, and find refuge in Thee, from the Evil One and his hosts! I was a sparrow, and the hawk pursued me, and I have fled and taken refuge in Thy nest. I was a heifer, and the yoke galled me, and I will turn back my wanderings to Thee. Lay upon me the shoulder of Thy yoke that I may take it on me, and work with Thy oxen." Thus did the harlot speak at the door with much weeping. The master of the house looked and saw her, and the colour of his visage was changed; and he began thus to address her, (even) the harlot, in the opening of his words:-"Depart thou hence, O harlot, for this man who abides in our house is a man that is righteous, and they that are of his companions are blameless. Is it not enough for thee, harlot, that thou hast corrupted the whole town? Thou hast corrupted the chaste without shame; thou hast robbed the orphans, and hast not blushed, and hast

plundered the merchants' wares, and thy countenance is not abashed. From him thy heart [and soul] labour [to take]. But from him thy net takes no spoil. For this man is righteous indeed, and they of his company are blameless."

14. The sinful woman answered and said to him, even to Simon when he had ceased "Thou surely art the guardian of the door, O thou that knowest things that are secret I will propose the matter in the feast, and thou shall be free from blame. And if there be any that wills me to come in, he will bid me and I will come in. Simon ran and closed the door, and approached and stood afar off. And he tarried a long time and proposed not the matter in the feast. But He, Who knows what is secret, beckoned to Simon and said to him:-"Come hither, Simon, I bid thee; does any one stand at the door? Whosoever he be, open to him that he may come in; let him receive what he needs, and go. If he be hungry and hunger for bread, lo! in thy house is the table of life; and if he be thirsty, and thirst for water, lo! the blessed fountain is in thy dwelling. And if he be sick and ask for healing, lo! the great Physician is in thy house. Suffer sinners to look upon Me, for their sakes have I abased Myself. I will not ascend to heaven, to the dwelling whence I came down, until I bear back the sheep that has wandered from its Father's house, and lift it up on My shoulders and bear it aloft to heaven.

Simon answered and thus he said to Jesus, when He had done speaking:-"My Lord, this woman that stands in the doorway is a harlot: she is lewd and not free-born, polluted from her childhood. And Thou, my Lord, art a righteous man, and all are eager to see Thee; and if men see Thee having speech with the harlot, all men will flee from beside Thee, and no man will salute Thee. Jesus answered, and thus He said to Simon when he was done speaking:-" Whosoever it be, open for him to come in, and thou shall be free from blame; and though his offences be many, without rebuke I bid thee [receive him]."

15. Simon approached and opened the door, and began thus to speak:-"Come, enter, fulfil that thou willest, to him who is even as thou. The sinful woman, full of transgressions, passed forward and stood by His feet, and clasped her arms in prayer, and with these words she spake:-"Mine eyes have become watercourses that cease not from [watering] the fields, and to-day they wash the feet of Him Who follows after sinners. This hair, abundant in locks from my childhood till this day, let it not grieve Thee that it should wipe this holy body. The mouth that has kissed the lewd, forbid it not to kiss the body that remits transgressions and sins. These things the harlot spake to Jesus, with much weeping. And Simon stood afar off to see what He would do to her. But He Who knows the things that are secret, beckoned to Simon and said to him:-"Lo! I will tell thee, O Simon, what thy meditation is, concerning the harlot. Within thy mind thou imaginest and within thy soul thou saidst, 'I have called this man righteous, but lo! the harlot kisses Him. I have called Him to bless my possessions, and lo! the harlot embraces Him.' O Simon, there were two debtors, whose creditor was one only; one owed him five-hundred [pence], and the other owed fifty. And when the creditor saw that neither of these two had aught, the creditor pardoned and forgave them both their debt. Which of them ought to render the greater thanks?

He who was forgiven five hundred, or he who was forgiven fifty? Simon answered, and thus he said to Jesus, when He had done speaking:-"He who was forgiven five hundred ought to render the greater thanks. Jesus answered and thus He said: "Thou art he that owes five hundred, and this woman owes fifty. Lo! I came into thy house, O Simon; and water for My feet thou broughtest not; and this woman, of whom thou saidst that she was an harlot, one from her childhood defiled, has washed My feet with her tears, and with her hair she has wiped them. Ought I to send her away, O Simon, without receiving forgiveness? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, I will write of her in the Gospel. Go, O woman, thy sins are forgiven thee and all thy transgression is covered; henceforth and to the end of the world."

May our Lord account us worthy of hearing this word of His:-"Come, enter, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom made ready for all who shall do My will, and observe all My commandments." To Him be glory; on us be mercy; at all times. Amen! Amen!

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.