

The walls of our hearts

A reflection on Luke 7:36–50

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The purpose of walls


In Indonesia, houses usually have fences or walls. People erect them to protect their house from potential external threats. However, the question is, Do fences or walls protect the house from those threats if they are coming?

I never forget one story that happened in 2015. A big house in an elite real estate area with high walls was robbed. Ironically, it was not because the robbers could climb the high walls. The robbers infiltrated their friend through a domestic servant channeling agency, which provides housemaids mostly for elite families.¹ This story and many other

similar stories make me rethink the purpose of fences or walls again. If they never assure the certainty of our protection, then what are they for?

Texas Tech University philosopher Costica Bradatan, reflecting on the collapsed of the Berlin Wall and how many people there still feel the division, says this is because the wall is not just about the physical structure. It is mostly about our human mentality. He writes, “Walls are built not for security but for a sense of

security.”² Rather than build the wall for the outsiders that are perceived as threats, people build the wall to protect them from their fears.



Walls separate us from reality with all its beauty, challenges, and opportunities. The higher and thicker the walls we make, the more limited is our view to recognize the reality out there.

1 Mei Amelia R, “Jadi Buronan, Ini Pembantu Yang Ikut Merampok Rumah Mewah Di Kebon Jeruk,” *detiknews*, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-3085316/jadi-buronan-ini-pembantu-yang-ikut-merampok-rumah-mewah-di-kebon-jeruk>.

2 Costica Bradatan, “Scaling the ‘Wall in the Head,’” *Opinionator*, November 27, 2011, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/27/scaling-the-wall-in-the-head/>.

However, there is another danger from the wall: it separates us from reality with all its beauty, challenges, and opportunities. Our interpretation of those realities heavily relies on our own experiences inside the wall. The higher and thicker the walls we make, the more limited is our view to recognize the reality out there. In his famous allegory of the cave in book 7 of the *Republic*, Plato illustrates this situation as prisoners that are trapped in a cave since their birth and never see realities outside the cave. As a result, they cannot differentiate shadow from reality. They even reject someone from among them who managed to get out of the cave and return to tell them that all that they perceive is just their perception. The ultimate irony is found in the last part of the conversation, when Socrates asks, “And if they can get hold of this person who takes it in hand to free them from their chains and to lead them up, and if they could kill him, will they not actually kill him?” Glaucon answers him, “They certainly will.”³

The wall of prejudice

Since the wall is not just about a physical structure but is mainly about what is happening in our mind and perception, “the wall” here could be anything that efficiently produces prejudice against and stereotyping of those outside our circle. The wall could be manifested in identity exclusivity, cultural superiority, and even religious claims. As Christians, our dogmatic beliefs often draw a strict demarcation line between the sinners and the saints, outsiders and insiders, the chosen and the reprobate. Often our spiritual activities are merely efforts to strengthen and enhance the walls. We are used to labeling others that differ from us with various terms: liberal, progressive, evangelical, fundamentalist, conservative, and so on.

This is exactly what Luke does through the story of a sinful woman who anoints Jesus’s feet. From the beginning, Luke informs us of the identity gap between the two figures involved in the story—Simon the Pharisee and the sinful woman—and highlights the contrast. The impression Luke leaves is one of high and thick walls between these two.

The word “Pharisee” likely derives from the Hebrew word *Parus*, which means “to divide,” “to separate,” or “to make distinct.”⁴ This emphasizes

3 Plato, “The Allegory of the Cave,” *Republic* 7.514.a.2–517.a.7, trans. Thomas Sheehan, <https://web.stanford.edu/class/ihum40/cave.pdf>.

4 Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 533.

the distinctiveness and specificity of this group in religious matters. Josephus, a Jewish historian, writes in his *Wars of the Jews* that the Pharisees were “the most accurate interpreters of the laws.”⁵ The sinful woman’s identity, in contrast, is not clear. Her name is not mentioned. The only identifier for this woman is her moral corruptness. While it is unclear what causes this woman to be labeled a “sinner,” the phrase “publicly a sinner”⁶ indicates that this woman has a reputation for doing depraved things. Interpreters tend to associate this woman’s sin with prostitution.⁷

Building bridges, not walls

Luke highlights the unbridgeable identities of Simon and the sinful woman. While Simon represents a religious, esteemed, and commendable group, the sinful woman represents unclean and worthless people. Luke tells us that these two figures met on one occasion because of Jesus (v. 37). Predictably, the Pharisee is disturbed. Verse 39 tells us something more surprising: the Pharisee is not only disturbed and anxious by the presence of the sinful woman but even more so by Jesus’s attitude toward the sinful woman.

At the time of their meeting, a controversy had arisen about the identity of Jesus, especially after he raised a young child in Nain (7:16). People began to conclude that Jesus was not just a teacher of the Torah; he was a great prophet sent by God. However, Simon the Pharisee was troubled. How can a prophet behave like Jesus? In the Old Testament, it is clear that the prophets are those who oppose sin and even destroy sinners. Prophets are YHWH’s envoys to define the firm line between sinners and saints. Here, Jesus seems blurred the line.

It is not easy to take a stance like Jesus’s, especially in the middle of our world today that is easily divided by identity issues. Doing what Jesus did is dangerous and controversial. Just look at what Jesus experiences in this passage. When he tries to be a bridge between the Pharisee and this woman, he is not only misunderstood; he is also judged and demeaned (v. 49).


5 Louis H. Feldman, *Jewish Life and Thought among Greeks and Romans: Primary Readings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 241.

6 John Nolland, *Luke. 1–9:20*, Word Biblical Commentary 35A (Dallas: Word, 1989), 350.

7 Nolland, *Luke. 1–9:20*, 353.

Jesus as the bridge

In contrast to Simon, the sinful woman has a different attitude. Even though she was hurt by the community through the label that they gave to her, her fears and hatred do not conquer her heart. On the contrary, consciously and bravely, she solidifies her heart to step into Simon's house. As the renowned sinner in the city, this woman must be known by Si-



Jesus's acceptance, love, and forgiveness break down the wall of suspicion and fear in the sinful woman. The woman's encounter with Jesus is at the same time a radical step to make peace with others—even with those who hate her.

mon,⁸ just as Simon, as a wealthy and famous Pharisee,⁹ must also be known to this woman. We can conclude then this woman not only wants to meet Jesus. If she only wants to meet Jesus, why doesn't she meet him at another place that does not invite controversy? Stepping into Simon's house is risky and threatening.

That is precisely the purpose of her arrival. Her arrival is a revolutionary symbolic sign of an effort to bridge the gap between herself and the Pharisee. It is an effort of reconciliation, which the religious leaders failed to make but

which the sinful woman carries out. How is she able to do this? Because of Jesus! Commentators usually say this woman had already experienced forgiveness by Jesus.¹⁰ Jesus's acceptance, love, and forgiveness break down the wall of suspicion and fear in her. There are no more insulating walls. The woman's encounter with Jesus is at the same time a radical step to make peace with others—even with those who hate her.

About the author

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8 Richard Bolling Vinson, *Luke*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2008), 232.

9 For Vinson, Luke's Pharisees were wealthy and powerful (*Luke*, 229).

10 Nolland, *Luke*. 1–9:20, 353.