

Luke 7.1-17
“God has Visited His People”

In our passage today in Luke 7 we see two very different sorts of people. On the one hand, we have a Roman Centurion—a figure of *strength*. On the other hand, we have a grieving widow, who just lost her only son—a figure of *weakness* and *frailty*.

But they’re both visited by the merciful restoring power of Jesus.

And that’s quite appropriate here, because remember what Jesus just got done teaching his disciples in chapter 6. Love and do good to everyone, *regardless* of who they are or what you can get back from them. And that’s just what he does here.

And these two accounts we’re looking at today are closely connected in at least 3 ways:

1. In each case, notice, it’s not the person Jesus heals who’s at the center of the narrative. Jesus heals the Centurion’s *servant* and the widow’s *son*. But his *focus* isn’t on the ones he heals. Instead it’s on the Centurion and the widow.

2. These 2 people Jesus focuses on are opposites *both* in who they are *and* in what they do.

The one, a powerful Centurion—a man with command of a company of 100 Roman soldiers, who has a number of servants. The other, a grieving widow who just lost her only son, and is now *all alone*.

In the first, the Centurion takes all the initiative and sends messengers to Jesus. But in the second, the widow is entirely passive. But Jesus takes initiative and comes to her in compassion.

3. These two scenes each evoke events from the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, which Jesus referenced as antecedents to his own ministry back in chapter 4.

In healing the Centurion’s servant, Jesus ministers to a commander of a Gentile army, just like Elisha did with Naaman, commander of the *Syrian* army in 2 Kings 5.

And in raising the widow's son, he does something very similar to what Elijah did in 1 Kings 17, when the Lord through Elijah raised the only son of the widow of Zerephath.

1. The Kingdom Comes to the Powerful: The Centurion and His Servant (vv. 1-10)

So, coming now to verse 1 of our text, we see that Jesus has *at this point* finished his teaching and has gone back into Capernaum.

And as he comes back into Capernaum, he's met by this group of Jewish elders who bring a report about a Centurion whose servant is sick and on the brink of death.

Now, given this report the elders give about him in verses 4 and 5, we *could* see this Centurion as sort an example of someone who loves people who'd normally be considered his enemies.

Because the Jews were *ruled over* by Rome. And the centurion is a powerful Roman army commander. But look at all the good he did for these Jewish people in Capernaum.

These Jewish elders tell Jesus that he's a worthy man who *loves* their nation. He built them their synagogue. And they respected and loved him for it. This is a man who fears God, *even though* he's a foreigner.

And while Jesus has met opposition from the leading Pharisees and Scribes, it seems here that not all the leaders are *entirely* opposed to him. For it's the elders of the Jews who come to him on behalf of this Centurion. And there's really no hint of opposition in what they say.

Nevertheless, verses 4-5 might indicate some misunderstanding of Jesus' mission. Because what they say there sort of *implies* that whether or not Jesus should show favor to this Centurion is contingent upon what the Centurion has done *for them*.

They basically say, "*He's worthy to have you heal his servant because he loves our nation.*" But that's really the exact opposite of what Jesus just taught in chapter 6, *isn't it?* We're to do good and be merciful to everyone *regardless* of what they've done or will do for us.

Well, be that as it may, that's not emphasized here *as much as* the Centurion's *character*. He's sort of an example of what Jesus talked about in the last chapter about a good tree producing good fruit, *isn't he?*

Could he have been one of the soldiers who went out to John the Baptist back in chapter 3? Remember, John preached to the crowd that came out to him, "*Bear fruit in keeping with repentance*" (3.8).

And then in verse 14 of chapter 3 we're told that *soldiers* came to John and asked what they should do. And John replied, "*Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusations, and be content with your wages.*"

But this Centurion went above and beyond that. Much more than simply not extorting money from people and being content, he also gave freely of his own time and resources to the Jews in Capernaum by building their synagogue.

And by doing that he exemplified Jesus' teaching in the last chapter. Because he feared the God of Israel, he showed love and mercy to people who'd normally be considered his enemies.

And, further, he also loved his servants. Luke tells us in verse 2 that he highly valued this servant who's sick. Now, it *could be* that he just valued his service. But from what we know of the man, we should assume that he also valued him as a person.

And this whole scene sort of serves as a guard *against* misunderstanding Jesus' rebuke of the rich and powerful in the previous section.

Because, here we have a Roman Centurion of some financial means and worldly power. He's a Roman citizen, a commander in the most powerful army in the world. And he has a number of servants. Yet, he's also humble and of high character. And Jesus commends him for his faith.

So, Jesus' condemnation of the rich and powerful in chapter 6 wasn't directed toward having money or power *per se*. But people who abuse

those things and live their lives only to accumulate more and more, and mistreat other people in order to get their own way.

And given that he loved the Jewish people and built their synagogue, it's probably safe to assume that he believed in the God of Israel in some way. He *at least* had some attraction to Judaism.

Of course, as a Gentile was still never circumcised. But there had to be some substance to his faith, because, when he heard the reports about this Jesus of Nazareth, he apparently believed that Jesus was a man who had spiritual authority.

And it's that belief in Jesus' *authority* that Jesus is talking about in verse 9 when he says, "*not even in Israel have I found such faith.*"

Because this *isn't* just a vague belief in Jesus' ability to perform miracles. I mean, Look at what the Centurion says at the end of verse 6 through verse 8:

I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. ⁷ Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed. ⁸ For I too am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me: and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

You see, his Centurion is a man who has authority. But he humbled himself and accepted the *far greater* authority of Jesus.

And the authority of Jesus is an authority of an entirely different kind than the authority of the Roman Empire. And the Centurion recognizes that by faith.

Jesus' authority is an authority beyond that of this world. It's the authority of the Kingdom of God. And here we see the power of that Kingdom now extending out to *even* to the households of Gentiles, *without* Jesus ever even meeting or entering the house of this Centurion.

In Acts 10, there'll be another prominent Roman Centurion whose house is visited by the power of the Kingdom of God. After Jesus is

crucified and raised, Cornelius will send for the Apostle Peter after being visited by an angel.

Peter went and preached the gospel to Cornelius and his family, and the Holy Spirit came upon everyone in his house, and they were all Baptized and believed the gospel.

We see an anticipation of that here in the ministry of Jesus. The Kingdom is going out to the Gentiles. The power of God for healing and salvation is going out from Jesus and entering into Gentile homes.

But from a Jewish perspective, that's perplexing, *right?* Because, think back to chapter 1. There were prophecies by Mary and Zechariah about being delivered from the hands of their enemies. And Rome was the enemy!

Israel was God's people *weren't they?* Weren't they the people of faith? Well, according to Jesus, *not* in comparison with this Gentile soldier, they weren't. "*Not even in Israel have I found such faith.*"

And think about Luke's Gentile audience. *Theophilus*, the man Luke's writing this account to, was a Gentile who'd *never seen* Jesus. But he heard reports about him, and was taught about him and his teaching, by Jewish believers.

And for those, like *Theophilus*, who haven't seen Jesus, this account serves as a picture of what Jesus says to Thomas in John 20.29, "*Blessed are those who have not seen and have yet believed.*"

Because this Centurion *never even saw* Jesus. He only heard the report about him. But he humbled himself and believed anyway.

What about you? A lot of people say things like, "*If only God would show himself to me, then I'd believe.*" Don't make that mistake. The Centurion believed in Jesus on the basis of the report he heard about him. And his household was blessed on account of his faith.

2. The Kingdom Comes to the Weak: The Widow and Her Son (vv. 11-17)

Well then in verses 11-17, we see that shortly after the healing of the Centurion's servant, Jesus went on from Capernaum to a town called Nain.

And here we move from the *strongest* of society, in a Roman Centurion, to the *weakest* of society, in a *widow* whose only son just died.

Now, Nain was a town in Galilee located around 6 miles *southeast* of Nazareth. And Jesus went there in order to heal this woman's son, and break the power of grief and pain over her.

And it's *really appropriate* that we come to this passage on Mother's Day (though I didn't plan it that way). Because the whole account is pervaded with the theme of a mother's love for her son.

Is there any form of human love *greater* than a mother's love for her children? *I don't think so*. I mean, I don't know who or where I'd be today without my mother's loving influence in my life and her constant concern for my well-being.

And so, this woman in our text is a woman who loves her son. And she's in *severe grief*. She's *already lost* her husband, we don't know how long before. And her one and only son just died as a *young* man.

So, she's in extreme mourning for her beloved son, *overcome* by grief. And she really epitomizes the poor, weak, and outcast of society. Because on top of her sorrow, now without a husband or a son, she also lost her means of support.

As there weren't really any opportunities for women in that culture to support themselves. Here's a woman who cannot give Jesus anything in return for his kindness. She's in a *vulnerable* state. She's lost her means for living—first her husband, and now her son.

But Jesus looked on her with compassion. He has mercy upon her and gives to her *without regard* for what he might get in return from her.

And so he *exemplifies* here the very things to which he called his disciples in the sermon he just preached in chapter 6.

And notice, at the end of verse 11 and the end of verse 12, we see that there are two large crowds here. There's the crowd that entered the city with Jesus, and there's the crowd that's leaving the city with this funeral procession. There's quite a large audience for this event.

And so, as *this* large crowd proceeds, carrying the body of *this* young man outside the city, his mother is crying. And Jesus, right in the middle of everything and everyone, approaches her and says, “*Do not weep!*”

Wait, “*Do not weep!*” What do you mean, “*Do not weep!?*” This is a widow who just lost her only son! That seems like a calloused thing to say, *doesn’t it?*

But Jesus only says it because he knows what he’s about to do. He’s about to turn her weeping *into* laughing. You see, this is a picture of what Jesus just said the kingdom of God brings those who weep, back in 6.21 “*Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.*”

So then, after speaking to the mother, He approaches the body of the young man and touches the bier. He simply speaks the words, “*Young man, I say to you, arise.*”

And with that, the man sits up and starts talking! And Jesus presents him to his mother! Just imagine it. Picture being there. What must that have been like?

This follows the same pattern of the healings we’ve seen to this point in Luke’s Gospel. Just like Simon’s mother in law in chapter 4, and the paralyzed man in chapter 5, this guy immediately gets up. No recovery time needed. He’s *fully restored, at that very moment*

But whereas the centurion’s servant in the last section was at the *brink* of death, and all the other people were in a bad condition, *this guy* was *actually dead*. This is perhaps the most striking of Jesus’ miracles yet.

And then, look at the response of the people in verse 16, “*Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, ‘A great prophet has arisen among us!’ and ‘God has visited his people!’*”

Now, this sort of response to the raising of a widow’s son isn’t anything new. When Elijah raised up the son of the widow from Zerephath, she replied, “*Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.*”

The sign demonstrated the authority of the one who gave it. The widow of Zerephath *knew* that Elijah was a prophet because through him, God raised up her son from the dead.

And the widow from Nain and everyone present that day *knew* that Jesus was a great prophet, and that God had visited his people, because of the raising of her son.

And so, verse 17, *“the report about him spread throughout the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country.”* Jesus’ fame is spreading more and more. A great prophet has come! We’ve seen him performing miracles! Even raising the dead!

But, wait. Is that all they were really looking for? I mean, Elijah and Elishah did the very same things, *didn’t they?* Where did that get them? Israel and Judah were still exiled because of their wickedness.

And at this time in the first century during Jesus’ ministry, they were still in exile—ruled over by a foreign enemy. And that’s why in the very next passage, John the Baptist sends messengers to ask Jesus, *“Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”*

You see, John heard the reports. And he’s thinking, *“Miracles, well that’s great I guess. But I’m still in prison over here! We’re still ruled over by the Romans. We’re still in exile!”*

Are you really the one who’s coming to deliver us once and for all, Jesus? Or are you just a great prophet like the prophets of old? I know you’re a prophet. But are you really the Messiah? The Deliverer?”

You see, Jesus did come to deliver the people from their enemies. But not the way they expected him to. He came to deliver us from the bondage of sin and death. The ministry of the prophets *anticipated* this. But Jesus came as the fulfillment.

And we can see that here in Luke 7, *precisely in the differences* between what Jesus does here in raising *this* woman’s son and what Elijah did in the raising of the son of the widow from Zerephath in 1 Kings 17.

Now, for sure, both are incredibly miraculous. But, notice how 1 Kings 17 describes what Elijah did:

He cried to the LORD, "O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by killing her son?" ²¹ Then he stretched himself upon the child three times and cried to the LORD, "O LORD my God, let this child's life come into him again." ²² *And the LORD listened to the voice of Elijah.* And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. And Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper chamber into the house and delivered him to his mother.

In each case, the dead person is raised and given to his mother. But what a *stark contrast* the way the miracle happens in 1 Kings is to what Jesus did in Luke 7. Jesus merely touched the bier, and said to him, "*Young man, I say to you, arise.*"

No physical exertion. No prayer. Elijah spoke to God. But Jesus spoke to the corpse. Jesus gave life to the dead by his very authoritative word.

You see, comparing 1 Kings 17 and Luke 7 is telling, *not so much* for their *similarities*, but for their *differences*.

For Elijah *didn't* by his *own power* raise the widow's son in 1 Kings 17. Rather, *God granted* to Elijah to respond to his prayer to raise the dead. *But God was present* as our Lord Jesus, who gave life out of his *own power* and by his *own authority*.

The one who rose the dead in 1 Kings 17 was the Lord—"And the LORD listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again." The one who raised up the dead in Luke 7 was Jesus of Nazareth, *who is the Lord* in the flesh—"Young man I say to you, arise."

So by comparing the stories, we see that Jesus fulfills the part played in 1 Kings 17, not by Elijah, but by God. Or, perhaps better, he converges both characters *into one*—*God and Man; Lord and prophet*.

Because, once again, as has been the pattern of his healings from the beginning, and here with raising a man from the dead, *simply* a word *spoken on his own authority*, and the man rises.

Friends, Jesus *is* the resurrection and the life. This is the power of the Kingdom to raise the dead. And it is the power of Jesus himself. He has the keys of life. And he gives life to whomever he will.

And so, he's *much more* than a prophet. He is a prophet, *to be sure*. But he's *so much more*. Luke even hinted at that in verse 13, where he called Jesus, "*the Lord*." For He *is* the Lord of glory. God in the flesh.

And we, too, are made alive at his word. In John 5.25-26, our Lord Jesus said,

"Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. ²⁶ For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. ²⁷ And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.

You see, the people at Nain were right when they said in verse 16, "God has visited his people." That's just what Zechariah proclaimed way back in 1.68 when he prophesied after the birth of his son, John the Baptist.

But it's *not clear* that these people in chapter 7 quite grasped *just how close God really was* to them that day. For they also said, "*A great prophet has arisen among us*."

And sure, that was true. Jesus of Nazareth *was* a great prophet. But he was *much more* than simply a great prophet, or even the *greatest* of the prophets. Jesus of Nazareth *was and is the Lord of life*.

And he bids us all come to him, that we too may have life and the hope of the resurrection of our own bodies, and eternal life.