

## **Luke 7 Sermon**

Let me ask you a question out of the blocks: have you ever had that feeling you're missing something? You're kind of walking around the house and you end up in the kitchen or something, and you're like, "Why am I here again?" Or maybe you leave the house and you get that niggles in the back of your brain. Have I forgotten something? Maybe I forgot to lock the door. Did I leave the gas on?

We can sort of be like that in our Christian lives, kind of walking around going, "Now I'm sure I'm supposed to do something, with someone, maybe?" So I'll ask you:

What are you missing?

It might be a bit of a hard question to answer because you usually don't know what you're missing. Otherwise you would have found it or be at least looking for it. So think about that question as we look at our passages. And I'm going to have a look at them the opposite way around. First we'll have a look at the story of this unnamed widow, which ends up as something more than an account of miraculous healing: it's an exploration of the question on everyone's lips at the time.

### **Main Point 1**

#### **State**

Who is this Jesus guy, anyway?

Let's look back at our passage.

#### **Show**

11 Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry." Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. They were all filled with awe and praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. "God has come to help his people."

#### **Explain**

Now, let me take you back to the distant land of Jesus' time, one where there were no government benefits, no pension, where a woman's worth and ability to exist depended entirely on the men around her. Normally, until she was of marrying age, she would be under the care of her father, being a burden on the household until she met some nice young man, or one would be arranged for her, and she became his responsibility. Thereafter, her job would be to essentially run the household and have babies. All the income for the household would come from her husband and, when they grew to be old enough, her sons.

So we come to this woman. Already deprived of her husband, all she had to rely on was her one son, but with him gone, she was looking at a slow death of scraping charity on the margins of society. Note here too that the Jews of that day would bury their dead as quickly as they could because of the hot climate. She had just lost her son that day. Imagine what her heart felt like. Everything is ashes. Everything is hopeless. And then this man comes along and says, “Don’t cry.” Don’t cry? If anyone deserved to cry, it was her.

But we know what happens next. This section has the title in our Bibles “Jesus Raises a Widow’s Son”, but as I said it’s not really a story about the son at all. This is her story. Perhaps it should be “Jesus Raises a Widow” because what happens to her son is in fact a direct parable to what happens to her. Jesus brings her back from certain death. But there is even more to this story. Let me read to you something from 1 Kings.

1 Kgs 17:17 Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing. She said to Elijah, “What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?” “Give me your son,” Elijah replied. He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his bed. Then he cried out to the Lord, “Lord my God, have you brought tragedy even on this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?” Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried out to the Lord, “Lord my God, let this boy’s life return to him!” The Lord heard Elijah’s cry, and the boy’s life returned to him, and he lived. Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, “Look, your son is alive!” Then the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth.”

Sound familiar? There’s also a similar account starring Elisha in 2 Kings. What this account here in Luke does is show Jesus to be a great prophet, a great man of God like Elijah and Elisha, and so say all the people.

### **Illustrate**

But, tell me, have you ever seen someone that you thought you knew down the street or something, and you’re like, “Oh, that’s Ben!” Only it’s not, it’s someone else. Hopefully you didn’t charge up to them and say, “Ben, mate! Haven’t seen you in ages!” and go to give them a hug. That’s just awkward.

The same kind of thing is going on here. It looks as if Jesus is a prophet like those other guys, but there are clues that the person we’re looking at is a whole lot more. First, we have Jesus touching the bier. Usually touching something that had to do with a dead person made you unclean, according to the law. If you remember back to Ben’s talk on atonement from Leviticus, he described God’s holiness as a powerful, all-consuming bleach that destroys whatever is unclean. So if people wanted to be part of the worship community and approach God, keeping themselves from being unclean was important. But this isn’t apparently a problem for Jesus. What he’s in fact doing is actually destroying the taint of death through his own body, and then destroying the root problem of death.

Secondly, note the difference between the Elijah story and this one. Elijah pleads with God, stretches his body out on the boy's in an attempt to revive him. Jesus, though, just uses a word. He is the direct source of life here, taking the role that God played in the Elijah account. What's more, lastly – you might have noticed it just sneaking in there in verse 13 – we have “the Lord” who saw her. Interesting.

### **Apply**

But have a look at the crowd here. Because that's us, that's who we're relating to when we read it. That's how we would respond, but it raises the question of if that really is how we should respond.

See, the big problem we have with Jesus is that often he's not who we want him to be. It's not like a political party where you get say, “Oh, I don't agree with blah policy, but I agree with the overall vibe.” We need to really look and see who Jesus is and follow him. The real him. Not just some nice man who helped the poor, or a doer of amazing stuff, or even a profound teacher. He is who he is, whether we like it or not. So far we've seen him as a man who has compassion on the poor and needy, on the marginalised and heartbroken, but also as someone who acts as God acts, who has the same power as God's power. Here is God, showing his love and grace to his people right there the flesh. He is inescapably these things. If you want to follow Christ, you have to come to terms with the real Christ. If you don't like something about him, you can't ignore it. You have to change.

### **Transition**

Which brings us to our next bit, the centurion and his dying servant. Now, here is a man who gets Jesus, who understands him, but there's a few problems that result from this meeting. So the question here is

### **Main Point 2**

#### **State**

What about when it's hard?

To remind ourselves what this is all about, let's look back at our passage.

#### **Show**

7.1 When Jesus had finished saying all this to the people who were listening, he entered Capernaum. There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant... So Jesus went with them. He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: “Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, “I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.”

## Explain

Now, that sounds really cool to Gentile ears like ours, especially seeing as, like us, this guy has faith even though he's never even seen Jesus. It's actually pretty encouraging. But to Jewish ears of that day, this was seriously uncool. After all, Gentiles were the enemy. Let me explain why. Mostly it's this guy's fault, Alexander the Great. If we go back a few hundred years from Jesus, you might remember the Israelites had been taken into captivity by the Babylonians. Then the Babylonians got invaded by the Persians, and the Persians let the Israelites go back home to rebuild the temple and whatnot. But then the Persians suddenly had this guy knocking at their door, and in 11 years he had conquered the known world. But with the Greeks came Greek ways. It was all about going to the gymnasium and listening to philosophers, and not following the Jewish law. And when the Romans came and took over about 60 years before Jesus, things didn't really change. This is the sort of stuff the Pharisees and a lot of other people were against: the Gentile oppressors infecting the land with their ungodly ways. And this centurion was part of the problem.

Again this story is not really an account of healing but an account of what the people involved here are like, and what that means. Let's look at the centurion, because this story is really about him. Thanks to Luke's narrative, we can understand him a bit better as a person, rather than just as a bad guy. Firstly, he was obviously a military man. But more than that: writers at the time stated that centurions had to be "men who can command, steady in action and reliable; they ought not to be over-anxious to rush into the fight; but when hard-pressed they must be ready to hold their ground and die at their posts". They were reliable, full of integrity, and respected by their men.

Secondly, we learn that he is wealthy, but he's also a sincerely religious man. To build a synagogue shows that this man was not simply tolerant of the local beliefs, he was keenly interested, a man who sought God.

Thirdly, and importantly, he's humble. Now, humble doesn't mean you bow and scrape to everyone and don't think much of yourself. It means soberly and straightforwardly understanding where you are in relation to other people, not big-noting yourself. He knows he's above his soldiers and his slaves. He knows he's below higher authorities, his commanding officers. And he understands through his knowledge of how the world works and what he's heard of Jesus that he's below someone of Jesus' authority as well. This is why he says he's not worthy to have Jesus in his house. This isn't false modesty, this is just simply the facts.

This isn't what the Jews thought of a Gentile as a rule, but then what Jesus does isn't what anyone would expect of a Jew. The centurion sends his contingent of Jewish elder friends as a gesture of respect, because Jews wouldn't normally associate with Gentiles. But the elders were thinking they were more of a negotiation party. Because of the good that the centurion had done them, they felt under an obligation to help him, and they figured that, by asking Jesus for help, the centurion was likewise putting Jesus under that obligation.

But the centurion's motivation isn't calling in a favour, it's approaching someone who he knows will help, who has the authority to be able to do something that's out of his field of expertise. And Jesus doesn't go to help him because he's under that obligation the elders are, he's going because, just like with the widow at Nain, he feels compassion for someone who is in need, no matter who they are.

And Jesus turns to the crowd and says, “Nowhere in Israel have I seen so much faith,” which must have been a bit of a kick in the teeth for the disciples. But what is Jesus getting at? Simply this: this man has heard about Jesus and acted on it. His faith is the recognition of God’s power and our unworthiness before it, but then is also trusting in God’s care. “This man gets me,” Jesus is saying. “See what he’s done.” And there the crowd stand: they’ve also heard about Jesus. They’re right there with him. Now what are they going to do?

### **Illustrate**

Jesus has totally set them up here. It’s like he’s the head coach of a junior football team. He’s shown the kids how to kick the ball. He’s drawn up the game plan nice and clear, explaining where players should be and what they should do. And here he’s even shown them a video of professional players actually doing it properly. Then on match day all the kids run onto the pitch, and you can bet the coach will be yelling at them, encouraging them to remember what they learned and directing them if they’re looking lost. But in the end it’s still up to the kids whether they’re going to just run around in a clump, or stand there picking their nose, or maybe, just maybe play in positions, kick the ball to each other and maybe score some goals.

Jesus’ challenge here goes back to what he’d been saying to the crowd in chapter 6:

“But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

Jesus talked the talk and now walked the walk. What are they – and what are we – going to do?

### **Apply**

We still have the same sorts of hang-ups as the crowd back then. It may not be along Jew/Gentile lines, but we do have trouble reaching out to people who aren’t like us. Maybe they are of a different nationality. Maybe they’re from a different age group. Maybe they have some hobby that we’re not too sure about, or maybe they just look wrong. But see what Jesus did here. He showed compassion to a widow at the height of her loss, but he shows the same compassion to someone at the totally opposite end of the social spectrum, because both of them needed his life-giving message of love. He understands that just because someone has money doesn’t mean they’re immune to pain and loss, that not even the richest, most powerful person in the world can buy a mended heart. That even the wealthy need compassion.

It looks so simple for Jesus. So what makes it so hard for us? I think sometimes our problem is that we feel we can’t love. True, we can only do so much, but it can get to a stage that we stop caring at all, where we do nothing. We get bombarded with so many problems that we get numb. Maybe we feel we should care, but we’re too scared. We’re scared of being uncomfortable. We’re scared that we might get rejected or hurt, or that being emotional would make us look weak. Knowing is the easy part; it’s the doing that’s difficult.

So what do we do when it's hard like that? The good news is that we follow Jesus, and not just by example. Look at his character here in both these accounts. Here we see a man coupling compassion with power, humility with authority. It can often be hard to reach out to people, but the key is not to rely on ourselves but to rely on that person with power and authority. Jesus is the one we follow and Jesus is the one who equips us to respond to him in faith, and to respond to others in love.

So there are two things that we need to do. Number 1: seek to have a heart like Jesus. Consider your attitude to others and compare it to his. Number 2: be ready to act on your faith. If someone asks for your help, give it. If you see a need, take hold of Jesus' power for courage to do the first and hardest step: ask them if you can help. They might say no, but don't get offended. It can be an encouragement just to know that someone is there for them. Sometimes the way a person is drawn to God is through the indication that God can cross any sort of boundary to touch and change a heart. And don't be scared. After all, perfect love – the sort of love Jesus is on about – drives out fear.

Perhaps in the end these are the answers to what you're missing. After all, if you don't really understand who it is you're following, you're going to be without direction. And if you don't have a compassionate heart for the broken and lost, your faith is going to be without purpose.