

Lesson 21 Luke 7:1-17
 “*Surprising Faith; Supernatural Power*”
 April 19, 2009

Introduction

A number of years ago now we did a teaching series with the Youth which was called ‘7 Checkpoints’. The whole idea behind the curriculum was that there were some 7 key principles which kept getting repeated through the year in hopes that something sinks in! One of the principles is entitled, “*Authentic Faith*”. The main point in the first lesson read like this:

“If your faith rests on anything other than the person of Jesus Christ, you are building your life upon a fragile foundation.”

This is a remarkably simple statement and I would guess that the majority of us here in this room would give intellectual assent and say – ‘true, true’. But let’s pick this statement apart a little bit...

What is faith – how would you define it? (confidence; trust; belief)

- the illustration that is often used for faith is sitting in a chair – that kind of trust is so implicit that you don’t stop to think about it – its just there
- that is because we know something about chairs – they are designed to be trustworthy!

If I don’t trust for the security of my life in the person and work of Jesus Christ, what are my options? What else is it possible for me to trust in for life? (Financial security; intellectual capacity; scientific progress; my own intuition & insight; academic learning; etc.)

Is it possible for me to slip unconsciously from fully trusting in Jesus as the one in Whom I trust and begin to trust in one of these other items??

It’s been suggested that people’s faith is shaken because of 2 primary reasons

1. **Poor choices** – the habit of choosing to live in a way that is self-centered instead of God centered; sometimes those choices are simply driven out of a spirit of selfishness, sometimes, sad to say, they are driven by perceived inconsistencies in other Christians, and in the Church
2. **Unexplainable tragedy** – how can I believe in a good God when bad things happen; I pray for my mother to get better, but she dies of cancer when I’m a teenager; I pray for my parents to get back together, but they get divorced anyway. I pray for my job to be preserved in the midst of

cut-backs in the company but I get laid off anyway. In the face of such circumstances we might begin to ask, 'is God really trustworthy?' Does He really have the power to fix what has gone wrong? If so, why didn't He?

Let me say at this point that I believe it is very important for us to give ourselves and each other the freedom to be honest in our questions in the face of these things. Faith is not made stronger by ignoring the hard questions of life – it is made stronger as we face the questions and find amazing and unexpected answers in the reality of who God is!

There are a number of us who have either lost a loved one recently or who are facing the harsh reality of disease that is either debilitating or terminal. I am painfully aware that my position allows me the privilege to spend a lot of time in the Word and to process those thoughts with His help and then to stand before you and lead us in our contemplation together of His Word. It is easy to say things in this position that might give you the impression that I have a lot more faith than what I really feel. I am working hard at being honestly aware of my feelings through this journey that Barb & I are travelling. I am not a super-hero of faith. Barb & I have talked about this as well and I can say that she would also want me to say that she is not a super-hero of faith (though she is much closer than I am, I think). This has been a particularly hard week as we received the news of the spread of her cancer now to bone and liver. In my head I know that God is good and yet, to be very honest, I'm not too eager to receive what He seems to be up to at the moment!

I am convinced in fact that God orchestrated it such that these 2 stories that should come before us this week in Luke 7. I believe that if we truly grasp the significance of these stories we will see that what Luke is doing here is giving us overwhelming evidence to suggest that Jesus is absolutely worthy of our implicit trust – even when circumstances might seem to suggest otherwise.

Background

Our series of lessons in Luke has been all about us really trying to 'walk beside Jesus for a while' as we seek to re-discover the wonderful reality of this One who we are calling 'the Central Character of Salvation History'. On many occasions we have remarked on the skill with which Luke writes and he stitches together these various sermons, healings and incidents in a way that cannot help but draw our attention to the wonderful character of this person Jesus.

In particular, let's notice that these 2 stories build directly out of the 'Sermon on the Plain' which He has just preached! Luke records the end of the sermon with the word picture that says that the person who is wise is the one who hears the words of Jesus and puts them into practice - I think that's what faith really is – fully trusting in the words of Jesus to the point where you base your actions on what He says. These people's lives, Jesus says, are like houses built on the rock, a firm foundation, unlike those who do not exercise faith but instead hear the words of Jesus but don't trust Him enough to put them into practice in their lives – these people indeed live with a very shaky foundation.

These 2 stories follow immediately after this teaching and bring it to life. In the first story we are introduced to someone who is not even a Jew – he doesn't have the privilege of knowing the Law of Moses and the prophets – and yet he displays such a deep level of faith and trust in the healing power of Jesus that even Jesus is amazed.

The 2nd story is very different – in this story no human person exercises faith. As Jesus comes upon this funeral procession of a widow on the way to bury her only son, His heart is filled with compassion and He does something which causes a huge stir among the people – something He does on only 3 occasions during His ministry – He reaches across the threshold of death and bring this boy back to life! Our reaction needs to be the same as the people in the funeral procession – they stood in awe and marveled at the kind of Person Jesus was and the extent of His power and authority.

Let us read each of these stories in turn, make a few observations about them and then as we come to the end of the 2nd story we want to enter into a time of joyful response as we stand in awe of this One Whom indeed we can fully put our trust with confidence no matter what our circumstances might be telling us!

Story #1 – Surprising Faith

Luke 7:1-10

"1When Jesus had finished saying all this in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. 2There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. 3The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. 4When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, 5because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." 6So 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. 7That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed.

8For 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."

9When 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." 10Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well."

Let's make 1 observation and then suggest 2 lessons or challenges we might learn.

1. **Observation: this man is a Roman centurion who displays excellent character in more ways than one.**
 - a. He cares for his slave enough to find help for him; he obviously cared for the people over who he was put in charge.
 - b. The Jews highly respect him for the good work he has done by building a synagogue in their town;
 - c. He also is a man who understands and is sensitive to the dynamic between Jews and Gentiles – he knows that for Jesus to come into his house would have made him ceremonially unclean and so he shows respect for Him by simply asking Him to do the work without actually coming to his house.
 - d. Luke presents him to us as a truly remarkable individual...
2. **Lesson 1: faith always takes action**
 - a. We don't know all the details about how he had found out about Jesus specifically or what he knew, but he obviously knew enough about Jesus and his work that he decided it was time to take action – and so he sent to delegation. His trust led him to the action.
 - i. This is exactly the point of the word picture regarding the wise man building his house on the rock! It is all about hearing the Word and then putting it into action!
 - b. The Apostle James later confirms this principle when he tells us that 'faith without works is dead'. Hebrews talks about faith as being 'certain of what we cannot see'.
 - c. If we truly trust God in our lives, then our decisions of life will reflect that deep sense of trust in the character of God.
3. **Lesson 2: faith understands the nature of God's authority**
 - a. This is remarkably illustrated as the centurion gives an example from his own life – how in his military career he had people under him whose responsibility it was to live under his authority.
 - i. Somehow, he had come to realize that Jesus carried authority. Do you remember what the rumor was about the teaching of Jesus?? "He spoke as one with authority"

- ii. Just before He left the earth after His resurrection, He said to His disciples, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me...”
- b. What would our lives look like if we really grasped this reality in the way this centurion did?? We would become ‘hearers’ and ‘doers’.
- c. The problem is that we have grown to understand authority and submission in negative terms.
 - i. The authority that Jesus carries is not repressive or stifling – in fact it is the very opposite – it is life-giving! Instead of being restrictive and controlling, submitting to the authority of Jesus brings freedom and fulfillment.
 - ii. This life-giving authority is dramatically lived out in this next story!

Story #2 – Supernatural Power

“11 Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. 12 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. 13 When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, “Don’t cry.”

14 Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” 15 The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.

16 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.” 17 This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country.”

Let’s make a few observations:

- Verse 11 starts, “soon afterward”. This ties this event in with the previous one which in turn ties itself directly to the Sermon on the Plain – Jesus is in the middle of some pretty intense teaching moments with his disciples.
- The turning point of the story comes in the middle of verse 13 where we find Jesus responding to the plight of this woman with a deep expression of compassion. The NIV translates this, ‘His heart went out to her’; the New Living Translation says, ‘His heart overflowed with compassion’.
 - All of this is translating a word in Greek which refers to a deep response of compassion which the old translators used to call ‘bowels of compassion’.
 - Why is Jesus responding like this? What does He see?
 - This is a **picture** of a funeral procession in Uzbekistan. Sadly, I was not able to find the picture that I wanted – namely the one that shows them actually carrying the funeral bier on their shoulders. This is a fairly common sight – it is the whole community grieving together

and showing their respect by taking turns to carry the brier along the road – even if you are riding in taxi and you come across one of these processions, the taxi will stop, pay his respect to the family by taking his turn at carrying the brier before hopping back in to resume work.

- The picture is that much more tragic when the brier is a small one signifying the death of a child. We don't really know if this was a child (Jesus calls him a young man) but I suspect that this is something like the scene that Jesus would have come across. He hears the story of the woman and no doubt hears the wailing that accompanied the procession.
- As noted above the curious thing about this story is that his initiative to bring this young man back from the dead comes right out of the heart of Jesus – no human person is recorded as asking for Jesus to do this – He simply responds with deep compassion to the need of this dear widow who without her only son to look after her would have been in desperate straits.
- What we sometimes miss by our vague familiarity with this story is the magnitude of what Jesus does here!
 - We have observed before in our study of this Gospel that Luke does not leave us the option to look at Jesus as simply a good orator and someone who cared for people and did good things.
 - One cannot read this incident without facing some very tough questions! Who is this Man who has the power to reach across the death barrier and pull this young man back to this earth?? Certainly no ordinary human! Luke leaves us no option but to believe that Jesus really did come from the Father; He really is the One who is the fulfillment of the OT prophecies! He is the Son of God!
- And so, Luke records that Jesus goes over and touches the coffin; speaks to the young man who in turn sits up and begins to talk – a certain sign that he is no longer dead.
 - The Gospel's will record 2 other instances where Jesus reaches across into death and brings 2 other people back to life before He Himself would rise from the dead.

What do we learn from story #2?

As we try with all of our senses to look hard and **Jesus** and discover what kind of Character He is, I believe we see a contrasting picture here: on the one hand He is the One who has the **supernatural power** not only over sickness and disease as we've already seen, but now also over death itself! At the

same time Jesus is characterized by a **deep compassion** and love for the downcast; for the grieving widow.

Yesterday we had a Memorial Service for Dayna Oak's father. In that service we were reflecting on Psalm 23 and observing that the picture drawn by King David in that psalm is a surprisingly tender picture of God Almighty. The Creator God of the Universe is also the One whom David describes as 'my Shepherd' who tenderly watches over His people; who provides for their needs; Who even walks with them through the valley of the shadow of death.

THIS is the picture that Luke paints of Jesus here – He is One who on the one hand possesses all supernatural power and authority – even to raise the dead – and yet He is also the One whose heart breaks for a widow who has just lost her only child.

What do we learn from both stories together?

If we take a moment to put both of these stories together we are struck with the picture of Jesus Who simply speaks a word from a distance in response to the faith of this sincere Roman officer and then we have Him simply responding out of the kindness and compassion of His heart to restore a young man back from the dead! Even if we were only to take these 2 stories we would have much reason to completely put our faith and trust in this kind of Person. But then if we take and add these stories to all that Luke has said up until this point we realize that he is unmistakably convincing us that Jesus is absolutely trustworthy – He is Good; He is all powerful; He is compassionate; He is worth trusting.

This is very good news especially at a time when life circumstances are confusing and hurtful.

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Conclusion

I want to conclude our discussion by observing how the people responded to these incidents in Jesus' life.

NIV translation

"16They were all filled with awe and praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. "God has come to help his people." 17This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country."

New Living Translation

16 Great fear swept the crowd, and they praised God, saying, "A mighty prophet has risen among us," and "God has visited his people today." 17 And the news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding countryside.

Both in His teaching and in His actions, Jesus was breaking apart their boundaries – they didn't have a category in which to place Him and so they call Him a great prophet.

But notice especially the next phrase: "God has come to help His people" or as the NLT puts it: "God has visited His people".

It is my prayer that by means of observing these 2 amazing stories in the life of Jesus that our hearts too would overflow with praise; that we would say with a renewed heart of faith and trust, "God has come to help His people." What an amazing God we serve!