

THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL COMPASSION

(Luke 7:1-17)

3.7.21

INTRODUCTION

I have always loved magic. One of my parents' best friends was a magician. I still remember them having him over to the house, and him calling me over to watch him make a coin disappear and then "pull it" out of my ear. A simple trick, sure, but I was still in awe that somebody could do that — but that's what magic in that context is: A performing art that uses tricks, effects, or illusions to accomplish seemingly impossible feats.

As I grew older, my favorite magician was illusionist David Copperfield. He had some amazing TV specials: In one of his shows, he made a Lear Jet disappear — with people holding hands in a ring around the plane. In another, he walked "through" the Great Wall of China. The one that blew my wife away (I was working) was when he made the Statue of Liberty disappear. Incredible stuff to watch — but again, it was all an illusion, designed for an audience's entertainment.

Today we're going to be talking about a couple of miracles that Jesus performed. As opposed to magicians and illusions, what Jesus was doing was the real deal — a reflection of His very real power as the very real Son of God. These parts of the "Radical Rabbi" are such an awe-inspiring part of His ministry, and also, so essential to presenting God's message to everybody around Him. So, as we begin this look at these two special moments, let's start with a moment of prayer.

TEXT AND ANALYSIS (Luke 7:1-17)

We are going to be looking at these miracles through the lens of the gospel of Luke. Now one of these miracle stories is shared by Matthew so we'll use his account for some added insight, while the other story is exclusive to Luke's gospel, so let's begin:

When Jesus had finished saying all this to the people who were listening, He entered Capernaum — Luke 7:1.

This is a transition from the hillside where Jesus had been teaching to returning to His home base of Capernaum. It is possible that many of those who had been following Jesus and listening to His Sermon on the Mount were remaining with Him as He came into Capernaum. Remember that that the Bible tells us that they had been amazed at His teachings, so it's possible that they may not have wanted their time with such an incredible man to end — but it's about to get even better.

There (Capernaum) a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick [paralyzed, suffering terribly — Matthew 8:6b] and about to die. The centurion heard of Jesus — Luke 7:2-3a.

A centurion was an officer in the Roman army, and his title suggests that he was in command of 100 men. They were known too generally be intelligent, well paid and highly motivated. It was the effectiveness of the centurions upon which the Roman army depended to fulfill their various missions. They were also loyal; they typically remained in the army beyond the normal 20-year enlistment. Once their service came to an end, they would receive a large bonus.

Now history tells us that every Roman military unit had some level of physician or medical staff with them. That likely would have been the first place this centurion would have turned to help his servant, for whom he had developed a great affection. The Greek explains that, for this man, his servant was held in honor; he was dear, even precious to him, to the point that he would do anything to bring his servant back to health.

Now we know that, as Jesus ministered, *[n]ews about Him spread all over Syria, and people brought to Him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them.* [And as a result] *Large crowds from [all over] the region . . . followed Him — Matthew 4:24-25.* In this period of history, “news about Him spread” could mean only one thing: People were talking. In fact, they couldn’t stop talking about Jesus of Nazareth — the things He said and the things He did. And as it was in Rome’s interest to be aware of what was happening out in the community, it should come as no surprise that, eventually, this Roman army officer would have heard about Christ. And as the news he heard included these amazing accounts of people being healed, and as his own staff seemed unable to stop his servant’s suffering, he came to the conclusion that maybe this Nazarene could help him, too. In fact, Jesus might be his last chance.

[The centurion] sent some elders of the Jews to Him, asking Him to come and heal His servant. When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with Him, “This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue.” So Jesus went with them — Luke 7:3-6a.

Now this particular account of this moment in Christ’s ministry is coming to us through Luke. Remember how he prefaced his gospel? He wrote: *Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us* (telling us there were a number of accounts of Christ’s life and ministry that had been written), *just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you . . . so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught — Luke 1:1-4.* In other words, Luke is approaching this from what today we’d call an “investigative reporter” viewpoint. I’m going to carefully investigate everything, he says, so that he can know what really happened, what was really going on.

But if you’ve ever watched any of the modern police/detective investigation shows on TV, you might hear words like this from one of the investigators: “As we dug into this, there were a number of things that just weren’t adding up.” I see that in Luke; if you’re following this story according to the norms of the culture of that day, there were a number of things that, likewise, just weren’t adding up:

1. First, the centurion asks some guys for assistance in reaching out to Jesus. He was a Roman centurion; he either could have ordered that Jesus be brought to him or he could have arranged to go to Him and demand that He help him. But instead, he uses emissaries to make his request.
2. Second, the guys he asks to go to Jesus aren’t connected with the Roman army at all. Instead, he asks “elders of the Jews” — local civic and religious leaders — to perform this task on his behalf. Really? Jews representing a Roman? Even if this was basically a mission of mercy, many Jews despised the Romans; they were, after all, the occupiers of their land. And the Romans didn’t exactly have a bunch of warm fuzzies for the Jews, either. Their land was a notoriously difficult place to govern.
3. Third, note the centurion’s tone: He is not demanding Jesus come; instead he is “asking” Him to come. For a leader of an occupying force, representing an empire that was all about power and authority, to be asking anything of a subject people was way outside the norm.
4. Fourth, notice that when these emissaries came to Jesus, Luke tells us that they “pleaded earnestly” with Christ to come with them. The Greek tells us that not only did they ask

with a strong sense of desire and urgency, but they also encouraged Christ to accept, pleading his case by pointing out that this centurion had shown love to the nation by building them a synagogue. But this is still a group of Jews presenting a case on behalf of an agent of Rome.

It all worked. Upon hearing his plea through these emissaries, Jesus agreed to go with them. But the norm-shattering surprises aren't over yet — not by a long shot.

[Jesus] 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 — Luke 7:6b-7a.

Think about this for a moment: This is an officer of the Roman army, conquerors of virtually all of the known world at that time. This was a man who was a living, breathing personification of all that Rome stood for. This is also a man who is desperate for Christ’s intervention in the terrible illness that is ravaging his most beloved servant. And yet, when considering this itinerant rabbi from Nazareth, he saw himself not as a superior, or even as an equal, but rather as one unworthy even to be his host. Listen to those phrases: “I do not deserve.” “I do not even consider myself worthy.” Those are the words of a man who has come to understand not only who Jesus is, but what Jesus is. And then he says something that even the Lord marvels at.

“But [just] 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” — Luke 7:7b-8.

This Gentile, with far less experience and exposure to the truths of Scripture, nevertheless understood that Christ had authority over all things — including, in this case, a disease that couldn’t be stopped, as well as a distance that had not yet even been traveled. If Jesus was who He seemed to be, then this centurion could place his complete faith in Him without hesitation. And then he put that faith into action through his wondrous words: “Just say the word, and (based upon the authority and power you have, Jesus) my servant will be healed.” Remember the definition of faith in Hebrews 11? ***Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see — Hebrews 11:1.*** This Roman centurion is what that looks like — and Jesus Christ who he was placing that faith in.

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” — Luke 7:9.

Did you know that there are only two times that the gospels say that Jesus was amazed, or marveled, in matters of faith? One time He marveled at the lack of faith shown by the village of Nazareth, and then there’s this one — where Christ is not only marveling at this man’s faith but even, according to the Greek, admiring it. His reaction to this Gentile display of faith versus His own people makes one mindful of John 1, where John wrote: ***He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him — John 1:11.*** And it is the centurion’s singular focus on Jesus as the object of his faith that reflects the same faith required for the salvation made available through Christ that is on its way.

Then Matthew’s version of this story adds some useful but ominous insight into the outcome of the displays of faith he has seen up to this moment: ***“I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 8:11-12.***

These are consequential words indeed, for Jesus is telling His Jewish audience in no uncertain terms that taking one's place in the kingdom of heaven will have nothing to do with simply being a Jew. It must have been very insulting to hear that this soldier of the hated Roman army, this Gentile, had greater faith than anybody in Israel, and then that insult is compounded by hearing that, while Jesus is implying this Gentile will be found in the kingdom of heaven, that members of God's chosen people will somehow be on the outside, in a horrific place of weeping and great pain reflected in their "gnashing of teeth." But clearly Jesus is telling them in no uncertain terms that becoming a part of the kingdom of heaven is not about family, but rather about faith — exactly the kind of complete trusting in Christ alone that this centurion has just shown.

Matthew then finishes his version of this story with Christ's words: ***Then Jesus said . . . , "Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that moment — Matthew 8:13.*** And then Luke completes the story: ***Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well — Luke 7:10.***

Imagine the joy of those men when they returned to the centurion's home and found his beloved servant completely healed and well. What a joyous celebration must have embraced that home! And what a wonderful affirmation for that centurion and his household — that believing in Christ was the only thing necessary to believe. And for those standing around Jesus, listening to this moment, they may have been brought back to one of their own Scriptures, from the psalms: ***He sent out His word and healed them; He rescued them from the grave — Psalm 107:20.***

And then, as if that wasn't enough, we are quickly introduced to another miraculous moment. But hang on to that verse from Psalm 107; it's going to be playing out again.

Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and His disciples and a large crowd went along with Him — Luke 7:11.

Now the village of Nain is only mentioned this one time in the Bible, and it ain't exactly what you'd call "in the neighborhood." In fact, it was about 25 miles from Capernaum, so we are talking a pretty serious hike here that would have taken the better part of a day. But Jesus and his disciples weren't alone on this walk; we see that a large crowd decided to make the journey with them. But that wouldn't be the only crowd we'd find this day.

Luke continues: ***As [Jesus] 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 — Luke 7:12.***

Jews buried their dead the same day so, considering the distance of the journey, it is likely that Christ arrived at Nain late in the afternoon of the same day that this son passed away. And look at the contrasts in the two crowds: One is rejoicing in what they've seen and heard from the Lord, and one is mourning in the death of a young man. One is celebrating the newness of life that Christ has been presenting, and one is agonizing over the loss of life that death is presenting.

When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry" — Luke 7:13.

I read recently a wonderful definition of this kind of moment, telling me that compassion can be defined as "your pain in my heart." And that's what Christ is doing here: "His heart went out to her." The Greek tells us that He was moved with compassion literally down to His innards; in other words, He was deeply moved by her pain, her sorrow, and her situation. She has already lost her husband, and now she has lost her son, meaning, in that day and age, in addition to the pain and loss that any mother would feel, that now she was virtually all alone in a society that really didn't have the resources, the social "safety net," to care for her. Jesus was deeply moved by her

circumstances, as nobody knew better than Him that her present suffering was a consequence of the sin and death in this world. But His response didn't just end with His compassion for her. Instead, He did something about it.

Then [Jesus] 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!" — Luke 7:14.

One thing we will notice about this radical rabbi is that normal prohibitions don't seem to get in His way. For instance, lepers were considered grossly unclean, yet Christ had no issues either touching or being touched by them. And here, to touch the dead rendered the one doing the touching unclean (Numbers 19:11-13). But Jesus is far above and beyond disease, or death, or any human calamity. In fact, this whole episode is a wonderful metaphor of what Jesus came to do to us — to bring life to those who are dead, just like that verse from Psalms says: ***[H]e rescued them from the grave — Psalm 107:20b.*** And so He does here, telling the young man to get up. Since he was being carried on what essentially amounted to a stretcher, versus a closed coffin like what we use today, his sitting up was no problem — unless of course you remember that this young man WAS DEAD!

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." This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country — Luke 7:15-17.

APPLICATION

I love the Bible's "miracle stories" — and these are two of the best. But notice some of how these two stories differ: First, the centurion had people pleading with Jesus on behalf of his dying servant. Nobody, including the widowed mother, pleaded for the son. Second, while the centurion had reasonable hope as his servant was still alive, the widow would seem to have no hope at all; her son was dead. Third, the centurion (through his emissaries) came to Jesus while, in Nain, Jesus came to the widow. Fourth, the centurion was a man of power and prestige. The widow woman in Nain was viewed in that society as a relative nobody.

But far beyond what differences separate these stories, something so much more important highlights what these two amazing moments have in common — and that is God's power clothed in God's grace. In both cases, the power of God through His Son brought healing and joy to these two very different situations. And in both cases, the infinite grace of God brought Jesus alongside each individual circumstance to show the compassion and grace that brought God's one and only Son into the world.

But all that said, there are some very important ideas to take to heart from these two moments in Christ's ministry:

First, the paralyzed and dying servant reminds us that dying is the condition of an unrepentant world. The world is sin-sick, paralyzed in their sins and spiritually dying. But just as God sent His Son to offer to change that, so we are sent to proclaim God's offer through His Son to change that — to proclaim God's opportunity to be healed from that disease called sin, and to be restored to the relationship God desires with everybody. And Jesus Christ is the one and only path to that healing. After Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians of the sinners they had been before salvation, He reminds them of the healing that they had experienced through Jesus: ***But you were***

washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God — Paul, I Corinthians 6:11b.

Second, the widow's son reminds us of what God through Jesus Christ offers to do: To bring life where there was no life, to change people from being dead in their sins to being alive in Him. And again, Jesus Christ is the one and only path to that life. As Paul reminded the Ephesian Christians: *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins . . . [b]ut because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions . . . And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages He might show the incomparable riches of His grace, expressed in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus — Paul, Ephesians 2:1, 4-5a, 6-7.*

Third, as ambassadors of that gospel, that “good news,” we are to seek the fruits of the Spirit, not the attitudes of the world. As an unfortunate consequence of the world in which we live, character traits such as compassion or empathy or mercy or grace seem to be thought of as weakness — especially if you show them to somebody who doesn't seem to deserve that response. Folks, that's wrong. If Almighty God in human form displayed these characteristics, who are we to do anything less? If “love one another as I have loved you” means anything, it's only because compassion and empathy and mercy and grace is what Christ showed us — and what the Spirit offers: *[T]he fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, [patience], kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit — Paul, Galatians 5:22-25.*

Fourth, as ambassadors of the good news, we are to rejoice in our opportunities to serve others on behalf of our Master. Obviously, when her son was raised, this widow from Nain must have exploded in joy. But did you ever think how much Jesus must have enjoyed this moment? As God's Son, I'd be willing to bet serious money that there was an incredible joy in His heart as well — and likely one very large smile on His face. But we need to be reminded. Hey, leaders: Do you rejoice in serving others, in doing good for them? Hey, Christians: Do you enjoy serving and doing good for others? Think about it, because that's what God says about Himself through the prophet Jeremiah: *“I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them . . . I will rejoice in doing them good . . . with all my heart and soul” — God speaking, Jeremiah 32:40a, 41a.*

CONCLUSION

And last, always be looking to tie whatever ministry or work or conversation you're involved with back to the greatest miracle of all — the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to accomplish God's plan of salvation. The son of the widow of Nain is just a perfect example of this: He was dead; life was over. Then Jesus “entered” into his life, not because of him but by the power and grace that were all clothed in the person of Jesus Christ. What was once dead came back to glorious life. Christ called and new life began. That miracle, which has played out in the lives of all Christians, remains ready to play out again in the life of anybody and everybody whose life is currently “dead” in sin. Oh, what an awesome God we serve. May our each and every day find us praying for opportunity to tell the story of the Son who came clothed in the power and grace of God to save the world from their sins. Let's pray!