

JESUS AND FAITH

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By Pastor Stan

Luke 7:11-23

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SERMON SERIES: WALKING WITH JESUS: STORIES ABOUT JESUS FROM THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

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INTRO.

-- I'm starting today a series that I hope will prepare us mentally, emotionally and spiritually for the Easter season, which is only seven weeks away. I'm calling the series "Walking with Jesus: Stories about Jesus from the Gospel of Luke." In the coming weeks we will be walking with Jesus, accompanying Him as He travels around Israel in Luke's Gospel and eventually journeys to Jerusalem to be crucified, buried and raised from the dead.

-- We start this journey today in Luke chapter 7. There are four very different encounters with Jesus described in this chapter; yet each encounter gives us a useful insight into the same thing: faith. Faith is an essential but sometimes very difficult and challenging aspect of the Christian life. Each of these four encounters with Jesus in Luke seven will give us an important insight into what faith is and how it operates.

-- These lessons about faith build on one another a bit better if we look at the encounters in re-arranged order. So let's begin with what is actually the second story in the chapter, the story of Jesus and the widow's son in verses 11-17.

I. THE WIDOW'S SON (VV. 11-17)

A. THE STORY

-- A large group of followers are walking with Jesus and His Disciples towards a little village called Nain, about six miles southeast of Nazareth. As they approach the city gate, they encounter a funeral procession coming out of the town. Funerals in first-century Israeli villages would have involved many, perhaps most, of the people from that village and would have been filled with loud and highly emotional cries of anguish and grief. This particular funeral is especially grief-stricken because it's the funeral of a young man whose mother is a widow, and this was her only son.

When Jesus sees the deep anguish of this mother and hears her sorrowful and desperate moans, Luke says that "his heart went out to her," or literally that he was moved deeply in his guts. Jesus walks to the devastated mother and speaking compassionately makes a very strange statement to her - He tells her to stop crying. And then Jesus walks over to those carrying the dead son and reaches out and takes hold of the bier, the open box in which the dead body lay. Those who are carrying the body stop, and everyone looks at Jesus. Then Jesus speaks to the dead body, what in Greek are just four words:

vv. 14b-15

The people who just moments earlier were filled with grief and despair are now filled with wonder and faith.

vv. 16-17

B. THE LESSON ABOUT FAITH

-- This story illustrates a significant truth about faith: that faith is the gift of God's mercy and grace. No one in this story demonstrates any faith; no one is trusting Jesus for a miracle.

-- Let me ask you: who in this story best pictures the unbeliever? The answer is the dead son. No one in the story expresses any faith, but the son is totally unable to do so because he is dead. That's exactly the way the Bible describes us before we came to trust in Christ.

Ephesians 2:1 As for you, you were dead in trespasses and sins.

All those apart from Christ are spiritually dead, and those who are spiritually dead are as unable to trust

Christ as was the widow's dead son. Our only hope is that Jesus would do for us what He did for the dead son - be moved by His mercy and grace to give us life. And thank God that's exactly what He does. Moved only by His love, Christ takes the initiative and regenerates us, calling our dead souls to arise to new life and graciously granting to us the gift of faith to turn to and trust in Him.

Ephesians 2:8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God

II. THE SINFUL WOMAN (VV. 36-50)

A. THE STORY

-- The second story in this chapter that I want us to look at is the story of Jesus and the sinful woman in verses 36-50. Jesus has accepted an invitation to have a meal at the home of a Pharisee named Simon. Meals in that culture weren't eaten on a chair at a table; rather, they were eaten seated on a cushion in a semi-reclining position at a low table. As Jesus is reclining at the table with Simon and Simon's friends, an uninvited intruder suddenly enters the room. Luke describes her as "a woman who had lived a sinful life," which most likely indicates that she had been a prostitute. The people with Jesus at the table are certainly stunned at her intrusion, but they are about to be shocked at what she does. Without saying a word the woman falls and begins weeping and embracing Jesus' feet. Then, loosening her hair (a highly improper act), she proceeds to wipe Jesus' tear-streaked feet with her hair and to kiss His feet. Finally, she does something even more outrageous in the eyes of Simon and his friends - she breaks open an alabaster jar and pours its contents, a very aromatic and expensive perfume, on to Jesus' feet. Simon is appalled and reacts with an unspoken assessment about this rabbi named Jesus: this Jesus certainly isn't a man of God - if he were he wouldn't let trash like that act like that.

Jesus knows what Simon is thinking and is going to confront it.

"Simon, I have something to tell you," Jesus says.

"Go ahead," Simon replies.

Jesus tells a story about two men who owed money to the same lender. One man owed 500 denari (about a year-and-a-half's wages) and the other man owed 50 denari (about two months' wages). Neither man could pay what he owed; so the lender graciously forgave both their debts. Then, looking at Simon, Jesus asks, "Which of the two debtors will be more grateful?"

"The one who owed the most," Simon answers.

"Exactly," Jesus says. "And that's why this woman is here doing what she's doing - because she was a big sinner and owed a big debt to God and that debt has been forgiven."

And then Jesus does something that shocks Simon and his friends even more than what the woman had done.

vv. 48-49

These words from Jesus shocked those around the table even more than the actions of the woman. What she had done was improper and outrageous, but what Jesus had said was blasphemous because they assumed, correctly, that only God could pronounce the forgiveness of sins. What Jesus had said would have been arrogant, irreverent blasphemy - unless Jesus is God - and that, of course, is exactly who He is - the eternal Son of God come in human form.

And then Jesus speaks once more to the woman.

v. 50

B. THE LESSON ABOUT FAITH

-- It was the woman's faith that brought her to seek Christ and to find forgiveness of her sins from Him. Faith is the God-given capacity to turn to and trust in Christ for the forgiveness of sins and for salvation from God's judgment.

Ephesians 2:8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith

-- Morally, the woman was by far the worst person in that dining room that day, but she was the only one whose sins were forgiven and who was saved, because she was the only one with faith to turn to and trust in Jesus.

III. THE CENTURION (VV. 1-10)

A. THE STORY

-- The third story is actually the first one told at the beginning of the chapter. Jesus is arriving at Capernaum on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. A delegation of Jewish elders comes to Jesus representing the centurion in charge of the Roman soldiers in the city. The centurion has a servant who is

dying. The centurion cares deeply about this man and sends some Jewish leaders to ask Jesus to come to heal the servant.

Look at what the Jewish elders say to Jesus.

vv. 4-5

Jesus agrees to go with them to the centurion's house, but before they arrived at the house the centurion sends some friends to intercept them with a remarkable message.

vv. 6-8

Now, there are two significant aspects of this message. First, is the centurion's humility. The Jewish elders had made a case for how much the centurion deserved Jesus' attention, but the centurion doesn't think that he deserves for Jesus to have to come to his house. The second remarkable part of this message is the centurion's faith in Jesus. The centurion not only believes that Jesus can heal the servant; the centurion believes that Jesus doesn't even have to be there to do it - all Jesus has to do is give the command. The centurion understands the power of one who possesses authority. When the centurion wants his soldiers to do something, all he has to do is give the command and it will be done - he doesn't have to go with them. The centurion believes that Jesus has an even greater authority - that He can speak the command and a dying man will be healed.

-- Look at what Jesus has to say about the centurion's faith.

vv. 9-10

Jesus says that the greatest faith He has found in Israel isn't in a Jew, one of God's chosen people, but in the centurion, a Gentile, a Roman soldier.

B. THE LESSON ABOUT FAITH

-- Here's what we learn about faith from this centurion: faith that pleases the Lord is humble confidence in His authority.

Before giving the disciples the Great Commission to go make disciples of all nations, Jesus makes this proclamation:

Matthew 28:18 "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."

He displayed authority throughout His earthly ministry - authority over storms, authority over demons, authority over sickness, and, as we saw with the woman in the previous story, authority over sins.

Faith like the centurion's can expect great things because it believes and trusts in the greatness of God. This is the faith that pleases and delights the heart of our God.

IV. JOHN THE BAPTIST (VV. 18-35)

-- The final story about faith in this chapter is the story of John the Baptist in verses 18-35.

A. THE STORY

-- John is in Herod's prison. The man of the open spaces of the wilderness is shut up in a dark, filthy, vermin-ridden dungeon. The man of God is the captive of the wicked king. John's disciples come to visit with John and tell him about the ministry that Jesus is conducting, performing miracles and proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom. John sends two of them to Jesus with a question.

v. 19

-- When Jesus began His ministry, John was preaching and baptizing in the wilderness and pointed to Jesus and declared, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." John confidently testified that Jesus was the Son of God, the promised Messiah. But now John isn't so sure. Things haven't turned out the way John had expected. Jesus hadn't got rid of the Romans. Evil King Herod was still on the throne, and the man of God was in the prison. John's faith is shaken.

So John's disciples come to Jesus and say: "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?'"

-- This question is asked in the midst of Jesus' ministry that includes an amazing array of miraculous signs. Jesus replies to John's question this way:

vv. 22-23

This reply is a summary of Jesus' ministry and also a combination of statements from Isaiah that prophesied what the Messiah would do. The miracles performed by Jesus were signs pointing to and confirming His identity as the Messiah. What Jesus is saying to John is that you were right when you declared me to be the Son of God, the One who would take away the sin of the world. That's who I am.

Then Jesus adds, "Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." Don't loose faith; keep trusting in me.

B. THE LESSON ABOUT FAITH

-- Here's the lesson about faith that we learn from this story about John the Baptist: genuine faith will be tested but will persevere.

John's faith was severely tested and even wavered, but it didn't fail. John may have stumbled, but he didn't turn away or fall away.

That's the characteristic of true saving faith: it perseveres. Genuine faith, faith that comes from God, may be tested, but it never fails - it clings to and trusts in Jesus whatever its circumstances or adversity.

CONCLUSION

I read a story told by a pastor in New York City who in his early days as a young preacher was preaching at a rural, black church that had just one little light bulb hanging down from the ceiling to light up the whole sanctuary. He was preaching away, and in the middle of his sermon, all of a sudden, the electricity went out. The building went pitch black, and the young preacher didn't know what to say or do. Then an elderly deacon sitting in the back of the church cried out, "Preach on, preacher! We can still see Jesus in the dark!"

Real faith is a gift from God that enables us to trust in Christ. Real faith turns to Christ to receive forgiveness of sins and salvation from the judgment of God. Real faith has humble confidence in the supreme authority of the Lord Jesus. And real faith perseveres even in the darkest of circumstances. Real faith knows that even if we can't see Christ in our darkness that He can see us and that He will hold on to us.