

God Has Visited His People
Luke 7:1-17
April 18, 2021
Rev. Dave Dorst
CenterPoint Church

Read Luke 7:1-17

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matthew 4:4b)

Introduction – Vouching for Others

I have been asked to write many pastoral references and recommendations. Usually it's students who were in a church that I worked at who are applying for a job or to be a camp counselor or to get into college. And they require a pastor's recommendation or just some adult in their life besides their parents. The last one I filled out was for Josh Pennington to get into UD; I take all the credit for him getting accepted. When I'm asked to write these letters, I have to rack my brains for everything I know about this kid and figure out how to say that their activities at church and their personalities will make them great candidates for whatever it is they're applying for.

So, when I filled out one for someone going into the Honors Program at their college, I wrote: “I believe that the applicant will do great in any college setting that values hard work and maturity. She can balance very demanding work and a tough schedule, and I've never seen her overwhelmed. She'll find success in academics and in life and career afterwards. I can't wait to see how many works she gets published!”

When I filled out one for someone going into the army, I wrote: “The applicant not only has good personal, social, and conversational skills, but he has strong traditional values and respect for authority and tradition. I have seen him in many settings outside of Sunday worship - mission trips, youth retreats, athletic competitions, and informal social gatherings - and he has always been a team player, a valued part of the group, and someone I could count on when I needed him.”

So, I basically just make up stuff. Just kidding, those are all true things, but you do have to know how to tailor what you know about the person to what you're recommending them for and how they're worthy of whatever it is they're applying for. What I'm doing in these letters is vouching for someone. I'm sure many of you have vouched for others, whether it's in a recommendation letter like this or a job reference (or even trying to set up two people on a blind date). You do the best with what you know about someone to recommend them as worthy of whatever honor or position they're applying for, and you hope that you're right. I haven't always been right, kids have been rejected to schools that I've recommended them for and I once strongly recommended a guy for a job where he only lasted a year and it was a disaster for both sides.

This morning's text sees a group of men who were vouching for someone they knew. It was not for a job or a school, it was vouching for a man who needed Jesus to help him. He had a problem that Jesus could solve, but first he had to convince Jesus to take time out of His schedule and come help him. So, he sent a group of men in person to do some persuading, in the hopes that Jesus would take up his case. A big question in this story is “Is he worthy enough to have Jesus help him?” It's a question that we should be asking as well: “Who is worthy enough for Jesus to work on their behalf?”

In the first story in the first ten verses we see that

I. Jesus Marveled at Faith (vv. 1-10)

¹After he had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. ²Now a centurion had a servant who was sick and at the point of death, who was highly valued by him. ³When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant. ⁴And when they came to Jesus, they pleaded with him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy to have you do this for him, ⁵for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue." ⁶And Jesus went with them. When he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends, saying to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. ⁷Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed. ⁸For 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." ⁹When Jesus heard these things, he marveled at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." ¹⁰And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well.

What do we know about this centurion? A Roman centurion was a commander of a hundred men. We generally think of Roman soldiers of that time as being rough, even brutal, as they had to establish Roman authority among all its conquered lands in a way that the locals did not challenge their authority. Put yourself in the shoes of an army commander who was tasked to keep the peace in a foreign land. Israel is about 2,500 miles away from Rome by land, so this man was a long way away from the capital of his homeland. It would be easy for someone like that to resent the people that he had to police, and to be harsh with them. But this man seems to be both compassionate and respectful. He had a great relationship with the local Jewish people and their religious leaders. The cynical person would say that this was just a good PR move and a good way to not have as many headaches in his job, and that's certainly possible. But this man seems to have invested in Israel and truly helped the local people: the elders of the Jews testify that he loved their nation and built their synagogue for them. That doesn't seem to be the actions of a man who is just helping people to make his job easier. Most likely, he was what the book of Acts called a "God-fearer," someone who believed in the Jewish God but didn't convert to Judaism.¹

Not only did this centurion treat the Jewish community well, but he also treated his servant very well; the text says that he valued him and was willing to plead for his life. He even used a Greek word in verse 7 for servant, *pais*, that is used elsewhere in the NT for son, so they had a very close relationship.² But the most impressive characteristic of this man is that he had great respect for Jesus. Not only did he believe that Jesus had the power to heal, but that he could heal from a distance. His second message was, "Jesus, you don't even need to come to my house, just heal my servant where You are. I'm sure it will work." He says that he understands the ideas of chain-of-command and responding to those in authority, because as an army officer he has people over him and under him. What he's saying is that Jesus has authority over disease, but also that Jesus is clearly his superior. He does not want anyone to misunderstand that he is demanding that Jesus heal his servant because Jesus is under his authority. It's the other way around, Jesus was the authority there, he addressed Him as "Lord" in verse 6. And it will be completely an act of grace to have Him heal the servant.

How did Jesus react to this man's message? Knowing Jesus' main calling to the children of Israel and His affinity for the poor and neglected, would He minister to someone who is both a Gentile (an outsider) and a wealthy, important person? Did He say, "I'm sorry, you don't fit the ministry profile

¹ E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 117.

² <https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/luke/luke.htm>

of our target audience, so I'm going to have to respectfully decline to work a miracle for you"? No, He marveled at the man's faith, He was amazed. Only one other time does Luke record that Jesus was amazed, and that was at the unbelief of His hometown. His comment in v. 9 that He had not found that kind of faith in Israel is very telling. Jesus expected His own people, the Jews, who had witnessed the things that Jesus had done among them to think through their Scriptures and believe He was the promised Messiah. But for a pagan Roman soldier to have come to this keen understanding was remarkable, it was unexpected. He was impressed with both the man's humility and understanding of Jesus' abilities.³ So Jesus rewarded the faith that the man showed by healing his servant.

This is a foretaste of what the church would look like. While much of the early church was Jews who embraced Jesus as the Messiah, much of Israel rejected Him. At the same time, the gospel began to be preached to all nations, and people from all nations responded and came to faith. The Gentiles joined the early church and they forged a new community of Jews and non-Jews living in community, worshipping, and ministering together. It wasn't always pretty, there were a lot of issues to be dealt with, but faith in Jesus went far beyond the bounds of the Jewish people.

In our second story this morning, we see Jesus responding not to faith, but to great need.

II. Jesus Was Moved by Compassion (vv. 11-15)

¹¹ Soon afterward he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him. ¹² As he drew near to the gate of the town, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her. ¹³ And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep." ¹⁴ Then he came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, arise." ¹⁵ And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.

Any situation where a mother is grieving over the death of her child is distressing and deserving of pity and compassion. But this woman is both a widow and now childless. Which meant that her son's death put her in a very difficult position in life, with no men to take care of her. Now, before you accuse me of being demeaning and insulting to women, that is just a statement of the reality of that culture. Widows with no husbands and no male children had no protection and no great sources of income, so they were extremely vulnerable. That's the reason that the early church cared for widows. 1 Timothy chapter 5 has Paul's instructions for the church to care for widows who truly have no one to help them. He mentions enrolling them on a list, presumably a list that the church leaders would check on to see if there was a need, if they are at least sixty years of age and conducting themselves as servants of the Lord. His final statement is, "*If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are truly widows*" (1 Timothy 5:16).

So Jesus had compassion on this random woman that he encountered as He watched the funeral procession of her son pass Him by. Unlike the centurion, this woman did not ask Jesus to do anything, she didn't send anyone to get Him to do a miracle on her behalf. Jesus just intervened because verse 13 says that "*he had compassion on her.*". The Greek word for compassion, (*splanchnon*), is the same one used in the parable in Luke 10 where the Good Samaritan had such compassion on a man who had been beaten and robbed that he got down and bound up his wounds and brought him to an inn. That's the key with compassion; it's not just pity in your heart, it moves you to respond with action. The New Testament records 9 times when Jesus felt this deep compassion, whether it was because of sickness or some other effect of sin in the world. And it was

³ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 203.

not just the human side of Jesus that felt compassion, as though that were an unworthy emotion of his godhood. God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have compassion on human beings. Psalm 103:13: *“As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear Him.”*

Jesus told the woman, *“Do not weep.”* Ecclesiastes (3:4) tells us that *“there is a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance,”* and certainly if there ever was an appropriate time to mourn and weep, this was it. But Jesus was going to turn this woman’s mourning into dancing, her weeping into laughter. Do you remember when Elijah healed the son of the widow in 2 Kings chapter 17 (we studied that last fall)? He stretched out over the boy three times which brought him back to life, and then he gave him back to his mother. Jesus is the greater Elijah, who can bring someone back from the dead simply by speaking to a dead body, *“Young man, I say to you, arise.”* And then He gave him back to His mother. No wonder people mistakenly thought that Jesus was Elijah. What an amazing, life-changing turn of events that woman experienced that day.

Our final two verses show the reaction of the crowds:

III. The People Were Motivated by Both Fear and Excitement (vv. 16-17)

¹⁶ Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has arisen among us!” and “God has visited his people!” ¹⁷ And this report about him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country.

I had a friend who used to say, “What’s the scuttlebutt?” It was such a funny saying because nobody uses that word anymore. Well, the scuttlebutt all throughout Judea and the areas surrounding it was that a great prophet was among them, and that God had visited His people. Now, you could interpret that to mean that God was working through this prophet, and probably the majority of people then and now have called Jesus a prophet that God worked through, and just left it at that. But the other way you could understand those two sayings is that the man who seems like just a prophet is God Himself. God Himself is here among us! Which is the proper way to see Jesus, who is the eternal Son of God, equal in power and glory to the Father and the Spirit. He is the image of the invisible God, Colossians says. The book of Hebrews starts with these words: *“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature”* (Hebrews 1:1-3a). Jesus was greater than a prophet, He was God in the flesh.

This was the first time that Jesus had raised someone to life, at least the first one recorded in the Gospels, and it was certainly the first time that this crowd had seen a dead person sit upright and begin talking. You can understand why they were seized with fear, as verse 16 says. Our experience of death is that it is a permanent thing. Anything or anyone coming back from the dead is unnatural, scary. Anyone who has power over death would be a threatening person. But it seems that fear gave way to awe and excitement, and people told everyone they knew about Jesus. Oh, that we would discover the passion of the people who were so overwhelmed by the works of Jesus that they told their friends and neighbors all about it.

Conclusion – Who is Worthy?

I want to go back to focus on a couple verses early in this passage that I passed over quickly, verses 4-5: *⁴ And when they came to Jesus, they pleaded with him earnestly, saying, “He is worthy to have you do this for him, ⁵ for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue.”* Remember what was happening here: the centurion wanted Jesus’ help, so he sent the Jewish leaders to lobby for him. They made their pitch to Jesus that this centurion was such a great man that he deserved to have

Jesus help him. My question is: is that how Jesus works? Do we have to prove to Him how worthy we are so that He'll help us? Should we find other people who can vouch for us, and remind God how much we've accomplished and how He won't be disappointed when He invests in us? Does it work like my college and job references? Do we have to be worthy to have God do things for us?

No to all of those questions, none of us is worthy. Notice that the Jewish elders had called him worthy, but when the man sent a second group to Jesus, they communicated his words: *"I am not worthy to have you come under my roof."* He realized something that is important for all of us to realize: we are all unworthy of Jesus' attention. I don't care if you financed the building of a church or of an entire ministry. I don't care if you have achieved the highest standing in your profession and have the respect of your peers and your community. I don't care if you are the nicest person who treats people great and makes sacrifices for others. You are not worthy of spiritual blessing by what you've done. Your sin is the issue, not your virtues. Your sin has separated you from a holy God and earned you the judgment that will keep you from fellowship with God. How much have we done to earn God's salvation and favor? We've done as much as the man in the second story! He was dead as a doornail, lying on his funeral bed, heading to be buried. That is a picture of our spiritual state before Jesus speaks life into us:

Colossians 2:13 - *"When you were dead in your transgressions..."*

Ephesians 2:1 - *"And you were dead in your trespasses and sins..."*

I know that seems like a really pessimistic teaching, but that is straight Bible truth. And if you embrace the truth, it will help you see clearly. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble! It's good news that you're not good enough, that you're not worthy, because God loves to save the unworthy. Don't come to Him bragging of your accomplishments, come on your knees admitting your unworthiness. His grace is greater than our sin. God bestows us with grace, not because we deserve it, but because He cares for us. It doesn't matter if we're as important, wealthy, and honored by men as the centurion, or as destitute, lonely, and economically struggling as the grieving widow, God bestows His blessings, His favor, His salvation on whom He chooses.

Jesus is the only One who is worthy. Revelation 5:12 - *"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!"* Jesus is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega. He is the Creator of the universe and holds all things together. And most of all, He is the One who went to the cross to die for you. He is the One who intercedes for you, takes away your sins so that you can have fellowship with the Father and inherit the kingdom for all eternity.

Just as Jesus raised this woman's only son to life, so God the Father raised His only Son to life after He had died. And because Jesus was raised to life, all of us who are united to Him by faith will be raised to eternal life after our deaths. Every one of us will be reunited with our loved ones who are the beloved of God. We all yearn for God to protect our loved ones from death, or if they have already passed, we wish that we could have them back again. But the greatest hope is that God will give us life after death in heaven; that we will be reunited on that golden shore, in a place where God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death shall be no more.

And all who long for that resurrection in glory said, "Amen."

Benediction

Numbers 6:24-26 - *"The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace."*