

7.45am & 9.30am

‘Luke - The Doctor Is In’

20 November 2016

The Outsiders and the Vulnerable

Luke 7:1-23

Introduction:

Recap:

Today’s reading follows immediately from Jesus’ sermon that we touched on last week.

Remember, we’re tracking Jesus’ interaction with the suffering, the oppressed, the downtrodden and the excluded as he encounters them in the course of his ministry.

We’ve also seen how a ministry to those he has described as “the poor” — those who are consciously and utterly dependant on God for their physical and spiritual survival, as opposed to those who are self-sufficient, self-righteous or self-preserving — is central to his establishment of the Kingdom of God.

Particular things that we’ve learned from watching Jesus have been:

- Jesus made it quite clear that **the gospel is good news for those who *know* they have nothing to offer God** (ch4). As a result, his word was offensive

to those who placed great value in their religious piety or their national heritage to win God's admiration.

- Though Jesus stated clearly that his purpose was to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God (4:43), he never shied away from caring for those who suffered physically. In Jesus' ministry, **proclamation of the Kingdom and demonstration of the Kingdom go hand-in-hand.**

- **Jesus doesn't make distinctions concerning who cares for.** He cares equally for the leper, the paralytic and the tax collector (ch5), engaging with their physical and spiritual condition.

- **Jesus calls his disciples to a new social ethic of radical generosity** to all, even their enemies, because of the glorious and permanent future that awaits them in heaven.

We've also seen two very important **"landmarks"** in Jesus' ministry so far, and we're going to see a third one today.

Those two landmarks we've covered are the two proclamations of his ministry in ch4 and ch6.

The first you'll remember from ch4, when Jesus got up in the synagogue at Nazareth and read from Isaiah 61:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

(Luke 4:18–19 ESV)

You'll remember that Jesus followed this reading with the simple statement, **"Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."** (Luke 4:21 ESV)

The second landmark we encountered last week, when Jesus taught the crowds on the plain in Galilee. Luke tells us:

“And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said:

“**Blessed are you who are poor**, for yours is the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied.

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.

“Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.”

(Luke 6:20–23 ESV)

He then followed this with a parallel series of woes to those who have it all now and attempt to live independently of God, before calling his followers to a new culture of generous giving in all circumstances.

As I've mentioned, today we'll see a **third landmark**, which kind of brings these ideas full circle. You might have already spotted it during the reading.

Today's text is quite neatly divided into **three sections**, so that's the course we'll plot through it too. From v1-10, Jesus has an encounter with a Roman centurion and heals his servant, from v11-17 Jesus has an encounter with a widow, and raises her son from the dead, and from v18-23, Jesus has an encounter with some disciples of John the Baptist.

1. The Roman Centurion (v1-10):

Although it's the servant who gets healed here, the main character in this section, apart from Jesus, really appears to be the Roman centurion.

Centurions were officers in the Roman imperial army. They were professional soldiers, and would typically be in command of a unit of 80 men, or a cohort of 500

men if they were more senior. Historians tell us that their rank was very roughly equivalent to a modern captain.

Centurions were paid twice as much as regular infantry. They also had special status in the society of the Roman Empire.

This all fits with what we are told by Luke about this centurion. He's clearly a prominent member of the local community in Capernaum.

But there's one very significant thing about this centurion - he's not a Jew. And it's this fact which is key to understanding what's going on here.

Let's see what happens. Luke tells us:

“After [Jesus] had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. Now a centurion had a servant who was sick and at the point of death, who was highly valued by him. When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant.”

(Luke 7:1–3 ESV)

That Jewish elders would act as intermediaries between Jesus and this centurion shows something of how highly the centurion must have been regarded in the local community.

Capernaum, as we have read, has been a base for Jesus from the beginning of his ministry. He had a close relationship with the family of Simon and Andrew, who became apostles, and stayed at their house in Capernaum. That's where he had healed Simon's mother-in-law, and also healed a number of others and cast out demons at the end of one Sabbath day.

This centurion must have heard about what Jesus had been up to in his neighbourhood. More than likely, he had heard about Jesus casting a demon out of a man in the synagogue that he had built!

And so when a servant that he greatly values is experiencing great physical suffering, and on the point of death, he calls Jesus.

But he doesn't go himself. Instead, sends a party of Jewish elders.

“And when they came to Jesus, they pleaded with him earnestly, saying, “He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue.””

(Luke 7:4–5 ESV)

They are clearly talking-up this centurion. There's no need to be suspicious of what they say here. Though not himself a Jew, this man seems to be what the Bible sometimes calls a God-fearer: someone who, even from the outside, loves and honours the God of Israel. But, he doesn't go the whole deal and get circumcised.

And it's this final piece of the picture which makes him an even more surprising character. A practicing Jew would not associate with an uncircumcised Gentile, and certainly wouldn't enter his house or eat with him.

Incredible that this man then built a synagogue that he wasn't allowed in to, and had such love for a people that would struggle to associate with him in a meaningful way.

This explains what Luke tells us next.

“And 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. Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed. For 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.'”

(Luke 7:5–8 ESV)

The centurion seems to have second thoughts. Is he messing with Jesus? Not at all.

Let's look carefully at what he says to Jesus. First he says to him, “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. Therefore I did not presume to come to you.” (v6-7a)

Perhaps distress at his servant's condition made him act impulsively, but now he's had time to think things over. He humbly recognises that a Jewish teacher, like Jesus, would be defiled, made unclean, by entering the home of an uncircumcised Gentile. He doesn't wish Jesus to be placed in an awkward position, or compromise himself.

But he goes on to say something even more remarkable, as he couples this great humility with great faith: “But say the word, and let my servant be healed.” (v7b)

The centurion is convinced that Jesus is capable of healing his servant without ceremony, without ritual, without any medical intervention, without any physical touch, and even from a distance. He is convinced that it is simply Jesus' word which has the power to heal his servant.

His understanding of how this works is revealed in the next part of his message:

“For 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.”

(Luke 7:8 ESV)

He recognises the parallels between himself and Jesus, as men under authority, who carry a word of authority. Is it going too far to conclude that this uncircumcised Gentile, a Roman soldier, this ‘outsider’, recognises that Jesus of Nazareth is one sent by God, under the authority only of God, and himself speaks with the authority of God?

In any case, his faith in Jesus is in such stark contrast to what we have seen in places like Nazareth, where God’s own people wanted to throw Jesus off a cliff because of things he said.

Does Jesus “say the word”? All Luke tell us is:

“When Jesus heard these things, he marvelled at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, said, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.” And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well.”

(Luke 7:9–10 ESV)

The thing to really notice here is the power of Jesus’ word, and how it is coupled with deep compassion for those who place their faith humbly, and submissively, in Jesus himself.

The Widow (Luke 7:11-17)

The next time we meet Jesus is shortly after this event, as he is moving around Galilee. He arrives at a small town called Nain.

Nain survives as a modern town in Israel, about 14km south of Nazareth.

At this point it's probably worth us looking at a **map** of the area so we can orientate ourselves.

What you'll see up there is are two maps. One map has the whole of Israel in the first century, with the regions of **Judea**, **Samaria** and **Galilee** marked. You'll also see the **Sea of Galilee** up there on the north.

You might also be able to see **Tyre** up on the northern coast, which gives you an idea how far people were travelling to see Jesus, as we discovered last week, where people came from Tyre and Sidon in the north, and Jerusalem and Judea in the south.

On the other map (which I hope you can see), everything kind of happens to the west of the Sea of Galilee. On the north-western side of the Sea, you can see **Capernaum**. Further inland, further west, you've got **Nazareth**, south of that, the town of Nain, where we meet Jesus today. You can see that it's quite a distance between Capernaum and Nain, especially on foot, maybe 30km's-plus. Jesus may have followed the coastline of the Sea of Galilee, or he may have passed through Nazareth.

(return to widow slide)

Now as Jesus approaches the town of Nain with his "great crowd" that Luke tells us about in v11, they are met by another "considerable crowd" going in the other direction.

It turns out that this is a funeral party for a widow whose only son has died. They were carrying her son's body on a kind of stretcher called a bier. Jewish burials take place as soon as possible after death, and the body is not embalmed to allow it to decompose naturally. The whole event would have been very raw and emotional, the son having died very recently.

Remember also that in the first century, even in the Roman Empire, there was no such thing as life insurance, unemployment insurance, family tax benefit part-whatever, Centrelink, etc.

To be a widow back then made a woman exceptionally vulnerable. We learnt something about this when we studied the book of Ruth earlier in the year. When a Jewish man died, his family was expected to care for his widow, even by his brother or nearest male relative marrying her and making her a part of his family. It seems this widow was without such support.

For her, she would have been entirely dependant on her only son. Career options for single women in those days were severely limited. And with her only son dead, this woman would have been left destitute, except for the charity of her community. One wonders how long the crowd who mourns with her would hang around.

What happened when the two parties met? Luke tells us in v13:

“And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, “Do not weep.””

(Luke 7:13 ESV)

Notice that no-one is coming to Jesus for a miracle. No one is sending friends to ask for help. This compassion, and the action that follows it, is entirely of Jesus' initiative.

You may have heard this before, but the word for compassion that's used here is a very physical word. The Greek word even sounds physical - *splachnidzomai*. I somehow doubt that Melissa would let me add that the shortlist of names for our new baby.

It means to have a compassion or a pity for someone that you can feel in your gut. Maybe the closest English expression is to be “utterly heartbroken”.

What’s remarkable, though, is not so much the meaning of the word, but that the Son of God, God’s appointed King, should feel this way about an insignificant widow, in an insignificant town in Galilee. Do we even have a concept of what it means for God to be utterly heartbroken at someone’s desperate situation?

But maybe it’s not so remarkable if we really understand that Jesus truly is God in human flesh.

God cares deeply and passionately about widows. That was the point behind the laws he gave Israel to ensure that widows were taken care of. Listen to what God says to his people:

“You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.”

(Exodus 22:22–24 ESV)

Just as we reflect on this, I wonder if we in our modern world of institutionalised charity have lost some of the personal concern that God has for widows. The New Testament church certainly cared about widows, and in Acts 6 one of the first major organisational challenges for the church was the care of widows.

I counted this week that there are at least 20 widows and widowers in our church, with 75/25 split between women and men. That’s about 10% of our total congregation. Are we even conscious of that?

When a person in our fellowship has lost a husband, or a wife for that matter, are we really the kind of family that will go out of our way to include them, care for them,

be sensitive to their situation, have compassion for them and love them? When we go home to our families for lunch on a Sunday after church, are we aware that there are a number who go home to an empty house to have their lunch in silence? Are we compelled to imitate our saviour's compassion, and ensure that they feel part of God's family in the absence of their immediate family?

That's certainly one thing we should consider from today's text.

Jesus compassion for the widow results in action of the most unimaginable kind. Luke tells us:

“Then he came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, “Young man, I say to you, arise.” And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has arisen among us!” and “God has visited his people!” And this report about him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country.”

(Luke 7:14–17 ESV)

Contact with the funeral equipment would have defiled a person, making them ritually unclean. But as we discovered in Jesus' encounter with the leper in Luke 5, Jesus cannot be defiled. His divine purity overpowers any kind of uncleanness.

And again, it's his word that does the work. He commands the dead man, and he obeys by returning to life and sitting up. And Luke records one final compassionate detail, as Jesus “gave him to his mother”, returning that which she had lost.

Healing the sick and casting out demons is one thing, but raising the dead - that's the work of God. And whether or not the crowd really understand who Jesus is, they know one thing for sure: God is at work, and Jesus is somehow very intimately involved in that work.

So up to this point, we've seen Jesus' care and concern for the socially elite as well as the socially destitute. He's cared for those who have means, and those who have none. He has had compassion on those on the outside of God's people, and those on the inside.

But he has also demonstrated his power over sickness and even death, a power that is bound up in his authoritative word, and not in any magic, ritual, ceremony even physical contact.

Just to comment on that last point: this is good news for us living this side of the cross, the resurrection and the ascension, because if Jesus' word carries authority and power to heal a servant across town, surely it carries no less authority and power now that he is in heaven and we're on earth. Jesus physical absence doesn't diminish the authority and power of his word.

John The Baptist (v18-23)

In our final section we meet someone who's more familiar to us - John the Baptist. John was Jesus' cousin, and was effectively the last of the Old Testament prophets, preparing the way for the coming of God's King and his Kingdom. And the way he did this was to exhort people to repent of their sins, and be baptised in the Jordan river, in preparation for what God was about to do.

It's not noted here in ch7, but John is probably languishing in King Herod's jail. Back in ch3, Luke wrote:

“But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by [John] for [marrying] Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.”

(Luke 3:19–20 ESV)

This prison was in a fortress on the eastern side of the Dead Sea, where John was eventually executed. One commentator describes it as a “...desert fortress-palace perched on a desolate high ridge by the Dead Sea, where today the remains of the castle’s dungeons can still be seen, complete with iron hooks. A more desolate, formidable place is difficult to imagine.”¹

As John sits in this miserable prison, Luke picks up the story:

“The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?””

(Luke 7:18–19 ESV)

What’s going on here? Is John’s faith faltering because he’s in jail? To understand John’s question, we need to remember what he had said about Jesus when he had preached beside the Jordan:

“He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptised by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.””

(Luke 3:7–9 ESV)

“As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, “I baptise you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His

¹ R. Kent Hughes, Luke Volume 1: That You May Know the Truth (Preaching the Word; Accordance electronic ed. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1998), 267.

winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.””

(Luke 3:15–17 ESV)

John had heard about Jesus teaching in synagogues and in the country. He had heard about Jesus healing lepers and paralytics, of Jesus casting out demons and raising the dead. But something didn't seem to fit with what he had been proclaiming on the bank of the Jordan.

We might rephrase John's question like this: “Jesus, are you the mighty one who was coming? If you are, where's the wrath? Where's the axe? Where's the winnowing fork and the fire? Your opening act is great, but when's the main event?”

John's disciples go to Jesus and ask the question. It seems Luke attention to detail records the sight that met the questioners:

“In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight.”

(Luke 7:21 ESV)

And then Jesus gives them a cryptic answer:

““Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.””

(Luke 7:22–23 ESV)

I'm sure you can see how Jesus is stating the fulfilment of what he read from Isaiah 61 back in Nazareth synagogue. But like John, we can be tempted to take offence at Jesus when he works in ways that aren't to our schedule, or in ways that

to us seem inefficient, or when his priorities don't seem to match up with ours, or when he expects us to work in such ways.

This is a bit of what John's experiencing. To see Jesus slowly, patiently teaching people, healing people, casting out demons, healing this centurion's servant, raising that widow's son... it might be good, but you could do it till the cows come home! As Jesus himself once said, "For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them." (Mark 14:7 ESV)

Jesus reply to John is basically that proclaiming the good news, teaching, healing, resurrecting... it's all kingdom-work. Why didn't Jesus just come to earth and go straight to the cross? Let's go a little further and ask, "Why didn't Jesus just spend some time teaching so people had their theology right, and then go to the cross and get on with the main event?"

The first thing we must remember, though is that God works in ways that rarely make sense, at the time, to human minds.

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD."

(Isaiah 55:8 ESV)

The second thing to remember is that the mercy and compassion Jesus showed to the vulnerable, the oppressed, the outsider and the suffering comes from the same divine heart that both devised and faced the cross as the way God would reconcile his people to himself.

Therefore as Jesus heals and cares for the poor, he is revealing the God behind this great work of salvation, he is giving validity to the good news he proclaims, and he is pointing ahead to an even greater restoration.

We touched on this earlier in the series, and perhaps this is the other end of the spectrum from the place where the practical and the work takes precedence over the spiritual and the word.

We can easily make the assumption that the tedious, never-ending, time-consuming work of caring for physical suffering is a like a ball-and-chain on the gospel's ankles.

“Don't get too caught up in it”, we say, “or the work of the Kingdom will suffer.”

Well, that's true if a concern for physical suffering is entirely divorced from a concern for eternal suffering.

But as we learned a few weeks ago, concern for physical suffering and especially eternal suffering is the calling of all who follow Jesus. It's the message of the gospel.

Acts of mercy, caring for physical suffering, even in the smallest of ways, even in ways in which people might think are pointless or insignificant, is Kingdom Work if approached with the right perspective.

So, our big idea for today, is this: **God's Kingdom advances by the Good News of the Kingdom, and is accompanied by the Good Works of the Kingdom.**

As I close, I want to tell read you something I read from an excellent book by English writer Tim Chester called *Good News to the Poor - Sharing the Gospel Through Social Involvement*.

“[A Christian writer] describes a seminary student who took an old Bible and cut out every reference to the poor with a pair of scissors. ‘When the seminarian was finished,’ says [the writer], ‘that old Bible hung in threads. It wouldn’t hold together, it fell apart in our hands.’ Yet this, [the writer] says, is *our* Bible — ‘full of holes from all we have cut out’. **The challenge to evangelicals is not simply to maintain the inerrancy of God’s Word — important as that is — but to live by that inerrant word.**”²

Then Chester gives the final word of the chapter to the Puritan theologian John Owen, paraphrasing the old English.

“Churches and their members ought to think of caring for the poor as an eminent grace and excellent duty. For Christ is glorified and the gospel is honoured when we care for the poor. Many people considerate it unspiritual or something that should be spontaneous rather than organised. Many think it should not be central to the work of the church. **In fact it is one of the priorities of Christian communities because it is the main way we show the gospel grace of love.**”³

With that in mind, why don’t we pray?

² p. 163, *The Soul of Politics*, by Jim Wallis, (n.p. *Good News To The Poor*, by Tim Chester, © 2004, IVP)

³ p.144, *The True Nature of a Gospel Church*, by John Owen, in *The Works of John Owen* © 1968, Banner of Truth (n.p. *Good News To The Poor*, by Tim Chester, © 2004, IVP)