

JESUS: THE LIFE GIVER

Luke 7:1–17

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Our Scripture today is in Luke 7:1–17 as we continue our study in the Gospel of Luke.

“When Jesus had finished saying all this in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum.

There a centurion’s servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. The centurion heard of Jesus and 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. 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. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But 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.’ 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.’ Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well. Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. 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. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, “Don’t cry.” Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” 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

JESUS: THE LIFE GIVER

Luke 7:1-17

appeared among us,' they said. 'God has come to help his people.' This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country" (Luke 7:1–17, NIV).

There are some who may hear a Scripture like the one we read today and say, "Those are great stories but, are they really true? Can I really accept the idea that there were supernatural healings like this and a resurrection from the dead as was described here? Or was it just that in those days people were gullible and when they told a story, people began to believe a fictional story as a true story. Let me set your mind at ease on this. The Lord is still in this century doing such splendid works as are recorded in the Gospel of Luke. It isn't very often that we hear of a resurrection from the dead. There aren't many. There weren't many in Jesus' ministry. In fact, there were only three, and all of them are recorded in the Gospels. But there have been resurrections.

I have a book in my library by missionary H. B. Garlock called *Before We Kill and Eat You*. I have read it before and knew within it was a story of a resurrection from the dead. H. B. Garlock was a missionary, a pioneer missionary, to the country of Liberia in the early 1920s. As I was reading this story and preparing to use it as a modern illustration that miracles happen, just to set at rest any people's mind that think this was a made up story, I thought of Brother Garlock and I wondered if I would be able to talk to his widow, Ruth Garlock, whom I did not know. And, by the way, the book was written by H. B. Garlock's son and daughter-in-law, who used to be members of the church years ago. So I found out where Mrs. Garlock was and gave her a call. She's in a retirement home now in Dallas, Texas. As she answered the phone on the second ring, I said, "Sister Garlock, this is George Wood calling, I'm a pastor in Costa Mesa, California. I don't think you know me, but I imagine you knew my mother, Elizabeth Whiteman, missionary to China and Tibet." "Oh, sure," she said, "I knew your mother. I was at Bethel with her."

JESUS: THE LIFE GIVER

Luke 7:1-17

So that immediately established a linkage. I expressed my condolences upon the loss of her husband and then we began talking about the events in this book. She, of course, confirmed verbally and added some great detail to the story in the book. They were young missionaries, in their twenties at the time, and had gone from a town in Liberia by boat to a town that is on the coast, and then walked from that town on a two- or three-day journey on a jungle path into the brush of Liberia to settle in a little encampment and begin a mission school, a Bible school, outside a village in Liberia. In fact, it's interesting to hear the detail of an eyewitness. When you hear that, you realize the story isn't made up because of the authentic touches that can only be told by an eyewitness. She immediately recounted the burial place, the grove where they would take the bodies out of the village when they were dead; the jackals and hyenas and vultures would come and eat them. Sometimes their mission station, being located downwind, would catch a good draft of the air coming out of the grove. She remembered that distinctly.

They began calling on a very sick lady who was the wife of the town's hammock carrier. His wife was very ill, because she suffered from leprosy and she had complications resulting from childbirth. She grew more and more emaciated, down to skin and bones. One day, the Garlocks were in their missionary hut, a little ways down from the village, and they heard wailing in the village which told them there was a death. Brother Garlock immediately left his home and went to the village and discovered that it was the wife that had died. When they came to their particular hut, he found that they had already taken her naked body out of the hut and laid it on the pile of dung, the pile of refuse, which was located there. She was skin and bones, totally wasted away. Garlock noticed that there was a muscle that still twitched, but upon examining the heartbeat and the respiration, the lady was dead and, of course, eaten away by the devastation of her disease.

JESUS: THE LIFE GIVER

Luke 7:1-17

They were preparing to get ready to carry her out to the grove of trees. Garlock had preached a few weeks before that and talked about Elijah's God who answered by fire. The king said to him, "If your God answers by fire, I'd like to see that God at work. What can He do in our village?"

Garlock, as he knelt by this dead lady, suddenly felt the Holy Spirit speak to him and say, "Pray for her and I will raise her up." He, of course, did the thing you and I would do and that is to argue with the Lord about it. He recognized that, if he prayed and God didn't raise her up, he would set the case of the Gospel back for who knows how long. But he felt the Lord speaking very strongly. "The King wanted a sign of My existence. You pray and I will raise her up." So Garlock took faith and he turned to the husband, "Do you believe that there is no power at all that can raise this woman up except the true power of God?" He said, "There's nothing in our village that can raise her." Is there anything that can raise this lady? The king agreed, "No. Only if the God you serve can, but our gods cannot do it."

So Garlock knelt and placed his hands upon the body and began to pray. He said that suddenly, the body began to shake violently in all directions and lift clean off the ground, so that there was actually open space between the body and the ground. When the body settled down, the lady opened her eyes, sat up and was alive. Garlock immediately ordered food for her. He went back a couple of days later into the village and asked, "Where is your wife?" He said, "She is out working in the fields." You are a man who has many wives. I'm talking about the wife that lay on the dung pile two days ago. Where is she? "Yes, that's the one. She's out in the fields. In fact, here she comes now."

And here comes this lady. No longer looking like a skeleton, but with flesh, walking in from the jungle path with a heavy load of firewood on her head and on top of the firewood was a great bunch of bananas.

JESUS: THE LIFE GIVER

Luke 7:1-17

It was an astounding miracle. It turned the village to the Lord. In fact, Sister Garlock told me she has had intermittent contact with the people there over the years and there is a strong church in that place today originating out of that miracle. The miracle was so great that the king came down to missionary Garlock and some of the young men and said, “Would you come and burn the juju house that was on the trail leading into the village. If we burn it, the witch doctors may get it in for us; but you have our permission to burn it.”

So they came and set fire to that juju hut and there were a couple of wild beehives in that juju hut. Sister Garlock relished telling me this story. She said that with the burning juju hut—this animistic place where magic was practiced—the smoke drove all the bees away, so the hives were left. And the two young Bible school students each took a hive in their arms and walked right into the village with the hives and they were putting their hand into the hives and dipping out the honey and eating the honey off their fingers and singing a little song, “O taste and see that the Lord is good. There’s honey in the rock for me.” Great story. True story.

So when I read the New Testament, I never have problems with miracles because, coming out of a missionary background with parents who were missionaries, and having seen the Lord do miracles over the years here in this area of the world too, we know that the Lord works in those ways. I read an article in the *LA Times* by some religious scholar at Stanford University who was commenting on the fact that there was a great gulf between the religious scholars and the common people who believe the Bible, because common people really can’t read the Bible. Only the scholars can read it because they need to understand the story in which the Scripture was cast, and separate the myth from the reality and all that stuff. I thought, “This guy has never been out in the trenches where the power of God is at work and seen that the things described in the Bible actually do happen today.” We regret their unbelief. We have profound compassion for

JESUS: THE LIFE GIVER

Luke 7:1-17

them. But a person that is in that position has a reason for disobeying God. With people who have studied the Scripture all their lives and don't believe it or obey it, I would submit that, at the bottom line of their life, there is probably some moral dislocation, some sin, some disobedience to God, and they then use an intellectual cop-out for refusing to believe what God has said in His Word. That's my own private guess.

Now let's look at the Scripture. There are two things I want to say today from this passage. One is that I want to talk a little bit about the centurion and describe some qualities in his life that pleased the Lord. If these same qualities are present in our life, the Lord takes delight in them as well. There are five I want to identify.

Then, using these two stories—the Capernaum slave who was ill and the son who was dead—I want to talk about some qualities in the Lord that delight us and attract us to Him. We'll do this rather rapidly.

I. Qualities in the centurion that pleased the Lord:

A. First is his caring attitude toward another human being. He cares about a slave. We know that in slavery in the Roman world, like slavery in America, the people who had slaves frequently treated them like pieces of property rather than human beings. In fact, a first-century Roman writer who writes on estate or farm management says to farm owners that they ought to examine their implements every year and throw out those who that are old and broken, and they should do the same things with their slaves.

Here is a slave of a Roman officer in the Roman army, a slave who was ill, but his owner, a centurion, is not throwing him out. In fact, he loves him—an unusual relationship. I think the Lord would have us have that same kind of attitude toward every human being; an attitude of caring about another person. We're witnessing, in our day, an epidemic of burnout in human

JESUS: THE LIFE GIVER

Luke 7:1-17

relationships. Maybe you've said it or you've heard it said or it's been said of you, "I don't care whether you live or die." That's a terribly hurtful thing to say to another human being or to be said to you. It's not the attitude of the centurion, who cared whether a member of his household lived. He cared.

People are such throwaways in our society. The Playboy philosophy has impressed this upon us. Disposable people. We use them for a moment of time then discard them like an old dishrag. In fact, we just use a paper towel. Madonna—did you see? I watched some of the interviews this week. They were saying to one of her fans, "Do you think Madonna's going to last?" and the fan said, "I don't care whether she lasts or not. What's important is she's here now." Madonna was asked who her famous heroine was and she said, "My real hero is Marilyn Monroe." I immediately thought, "I feel nothing but sorrow and compassion for Marilyn Monroe because, if there was ever a woman who died unloved, it was probably Marilyn Monroe." She had all the beauty in the world going for her. She was Hugh Hefner's first centerfold in the first issue of Playboy magazine. But she was disposable in society. And when it came down to it, no one cared for her soul. No one really truly cared for her as a person in giving her the sense of wanting to live.

We need to be caring about one another. So often it is the case that the people we get the most bent out of shape with are the people we live with and we may take an attitude that "I'd be better off without you."

But the attitude of the centurion is to care.

B. Another wonderful attitude about him is his love for a despised people within the human race. He loved the Jewish nation, the Scripture says. The Roman world was known for its anti-Semitism just like the world today has many pockets of anti-Semitism. We're now observing

JESUS: THE LIFE GIVER

Luke 7:1-17

forty years since the Holocaust and there's so much in the news these days, there's so much anti-Semitism. But here is a Roman military man who loves the Jewish people. God's people need to be free from the kind of racial stereotypes that direct hatred towards people of another ethnic or cultural group, whatever the color of skins or whatever the mannerisms of the tribes, ethnicity, or the people's culture. The centurion saw past the Jewishness and he identified himself with the Jewish people. They were fellow members of the community of man.

This story had to have a profound impact on the late first-century Christians because, by the end of the first century, the Christians were being horribly persecuted by the Romans and probably when they saw a Roman officer in uniform, they wanted to say, "That's the lowest form of human being on earth. He represents the might and power of Rome and God could never work in his life."

But here's this story in the New Testament. And, by the way, every time a centurion is mentioned in the New Testament, whether in the Gospels or in Acts, they're always mentioned in a positive light. Every centurion has a heart that is hungry for God. There's a deliberate motivation that the Holy Spirit had for giving that to the first-century church; that they would never look upon a person from a stereotypical point of view and say, "He's past salvation." Or, "He's past being loved by God." The Lord wants us to look past uniforms, past language, past habit patterns, past caricatures and see the real person.

C. Another wonderful quality of the centurion was his deep commitment to God and to His work. It was this centurion's money that had built the synagogue in the town of Capernaum, the very synagogue where Jesus had begun His ministry. He was deeply committed to believing in the one God; and committed to the work of the synagogue. One of the Roman philosophers said that there were many gods in the Roman world, and of those many gods, the general mass of

JESUS: THE LIFE GIVER

Luke 7:1-17

people believed that all gods were real, the philosophers believed that all gods were false and the soldiers, the magistrates, the centurions, believed that all gods were useful. The idea was to let the magistrate prey upon the naiveté of the people that were hooked by religion.

But this Roman centurion was a nobleman. He was committed, evidently, to believing in the one true God and expressed his commitment by being involved in God's work. He had no sense of, "I can worship God on my own." The people of God, have always needed places to gather for fellowship, for training, for worship, for instruction, whether in synagogues or in churches. Here was a person who committed his own resources to helping that happen.

D. There's also in this centurion a wonderful quality that reflects his keen sense of humility and graciousness. He sends the message to the Lord, "I am not worthy that You should come to my house." Meanwhile, his Jewish friends, who are the rulers of the synagogue are saying, "This man is worthy. This man deserves You to visit him." His friends are saying, "He deserves it" and he's saying, "I don't deserve it." What a beautiful combination.

I think probably this man recognizes there were certain rules about social meetings between Jews and non-Jews. That, because of certain dietary habits, kosher laws and matters pertaining to daily routine, it was inappropriate for a Jewish person in good standing with his faith to spend time visiting the home of a non-Jewish person. In fact, it's such a sensitive matter, it's seen in Acts 10, where Peter is shocked at the idea that the Holy Spirit is telling him to go to Cornelius, the Centurion's home up in Caesarea. Because that would reflect breaking his habits as a Jew. The centurion knows that about Jesus, so he, very graciously, is saying to Jesus, "You don't need to come into my house." Humility, graciousness.

What a wonderful quality that God wants developed in our life. Feeling where another person is, going the extra mile to be pleasant and tactful and courteous. It's interesting that, while I was on

JESUS: THE LIFE GIVER

Luke 7:1-17

the phone with Mrs. Garlock this week, after I got off, my secretary told me, “There was a collect call for you from a reverend...” and then gave me the name. Then she said, “I told him you were on the phone, on a long distance call. He was very rude to me and said, ‘Oh, I knew you would give me that story.’” I said, “If he calls back, tell him I don’t talk on the phone collect call to anyone who wears the title ‘Rev’ in front who is rude to my secretary.” Of all people who shouldn’t be rude, ministers shouldn’t be rude. And Christians ought not to be rude to one another, but filled with civility and graciousness.

E. Then another great quality about this man is his faith in Jesus. He, as a centurion, knows that he doesn’t have to be physically present in order for an order to be carried out. He doesn’t have to be there on the spot. He can give orders to one of his subordinates and the subordinate goes away from his presence and does what he says, because he is a man under authority and he has people under his authority. So he thinks in military terms of Jesus in the same way. He’s under authority, but He sends out His orders. He said that just as was, he didn’t need to be present for an order to be carried out; You don’t need to be present for an order to be carried out either.

“Speak the word and my servant will be well.” Jesus, the Scripture says, is amazed at his faith. The King James uses the word “marveled.” He marveled at his faith.

There are only two times in all of Jesus’ ministry where He is said to marvel at someone or to be amazed at someone. One of them is here. He marvels at this man’s faith. The second time He marvels is at Nazareth’s unbelief. His own hometown didn’t believe in Him (Mark).

I got to reading that this week and thought, “Lord, has there ever been any time in my life where You looked at my faith and You’ve stood back and been amazed?” How about you? Has there ever been a time in your life when you’ve had such faith in the Lord, the Lord said, “Look at that faith. I’m amazed.” I hope there has been. There are all kinds of faith.

JESUS: THE LIFE GIVER

Luke 7:1-17

There's saving faith. Romans 10 tells us that, in order to be saved, we need to "confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead."

There's miracle faith—Mark 11:22—which says to this mountain, or circumstances, "Be removed."

There's people faith, faith that a person could become something. In Acts 18:10, the Lord says to Paul at Corinth, "I have many people in this city [and the people He's talking about that are His are cheats and swindlers and all kinds of grossly immoral people. But the Lord's already calling them His people because He believes in them. He has that kind of faith]."

There's kingdom building faith where Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 16:9, "I will stay on at Ephesus...because a great door for effective work has opened to me." He believes that God is going to work through him. One of our junior high kids has had a Bible study operating on the junior high campus and it's gone on for some weeks. Just five kids present, and she was getting rather discouraged. But she kept at it. She had kingdom building faith. Now, all of sudden, she has twenty-five kids in that Bible study on a regular basis. She's put faith into operation as a junior high kid.

And there's steadfast faith. Hebrews talks about the kind of faith that perseveres in the midst of trial. When God isn't changing our circumstances or giving us miracles, we believe and have faith nevertheless.

All of those kinds of faith are ones which the Lord can stand back and be amazed and marvel at.

Those are some of the qualities of the centurion.

II. There are qualities in Jesus that please us:

A. He comes to anyone that calls. That's one great thing. When the centurion called for Him, He didn't hold a committee meeting to figure out whether or not He could go and keep in good

JESUS: THE LIFE GIVER

Luke 7:1-17

standing, He just goes. Jesus, to the best of my knowledge, never refused an honest invitation.

He always acts on an honest invitation. So He comes to us whenever we invite Him to come.

B. Another wonderful quality in Him is He has an uncanny way of being present when we need him. So He comes to the village of Nain at just the right time. There's a funeral procession coming out of the city. Jesus arrives, coming up to the city gate with His crowd at just the nick of time. He comes at the right time. If you look on a map of the biblical world, you can see that Nain was about thirty-five miles southwest of Capernaum and that meant a couple of days' walk. Jesus got there at just the right time. Having been a Christian for a number of years, I cannot tell you the amount of times Jesus has arrived just at the right time. When I was at a critical intersection, juncture in my life, He was there. That's His habit. He shows up when we need Him. Of course, He's there all the time but He's there in special ways, when we're going through crises.

C. I think thirdly what's so attractive in Jesus here, what appeals to us, is that He is so profoundly caring and sensitive. When this funeral procession is coming out of the city, He doesn't do what we might be tempted to do and just not interfere with the procession, and let it go. But He comes up and He sees the widow. He's concerned for her. He knew that, in His culture, widows were without social security—she was without a husband, now her only son had died—Jesus knows what that meant concerning her status in society, not to speak of the grief she had suffered in already burying her husband and now burying her only son. He was moved by that. Jesus is the most genuine human being that ever lived. Profoundly sensitive to peoples' needs.

Some months ago, in our church membership class, the pastor's class, we were going through the articles of faith of our church. We were on the article that talked about the deity of Jesus, the fact

JESUS: THE LIFE GIVER

Luke 7:1-17

that Jesus is divine, the Son of God. One of the persons in the class said, “Do you have any article in your bylaws, in your church doctrine, any section on the humanity of Jesus?” I said, “You’ve brought up an excellent point. We just take that for granted. We don’t say anything about that, but we need a section on the humanity of Jesus.” This passage shows, so eloquently, what a marvelous human being Jesus is. So He went straight to the mother and consoled her.

D. The last thing that appeals to us so much about Jesus is what He does. He is the life-maker. He stands by this coffin, the King James says “bier,” where the young man is stretched out, a corpse, and He speaks to the dead boy. Has that ever struck you? He speaks to a person who’s dead. He speaks to the boy as though he were alive. The reason why He speaks that way is that the boy was alive from Jesus’ point of view. The body was dead, but the boy was not dead. In fact, the three times Jesus raises people from the dead, every time He talks to them because He knows just because the body is dead doesn’t mean the person is dead. So He speaks to the person. And He raises him. We call that a miracle. So much of life is a miracle.

The only thing that separates us from having, in our own life, the same kind of miracle happen, the miracle of resurrection from the dead or—if Christ comes before we die—the miracle of transformation, the only thing that separates you and I from a miracle that’s even greater than this is that this boy was raised to a natural body, we’re someday going to be raised to an immortal body. The only thing that separates us now from that miracle is time—that’s the only thing. Time. It’s like if you had a seed from an orange tree. I’m going to plant it in the ground, irrigate it, fertilize it, and make sure it gets plenty of sunshine and no frost. In a few years, it’s going to be a lovely large orange tree and it’s going to give you delicious oranges. All from a seed. If you didn’t know what could happen from a seed, you’d say that’s incredible. I can’t believe a seed could do all that. But yes, a seed can do all that. Years later, it produces a giant

JESUS: THE LIFE GIVER

Luke 7:1-17

tree. The only thing that separates the seed from the tree is time. If I could take a seed and make it instantly grow into a tree, you'd call it a miracle because I removed the dimension of time.

You take the baby in the womb and the adult human being, the only thing that separates the baby in the womb from being an adult human being is time.

The only thing that separates us, who bear the likeness of Adam, from bearing the likeness of Jesus, the resurrected body, is time. But it's all going to happen. Because Jesus is the life-maker. There was an article in the *New York Times* that reported on some remarkable research where a Swedish scientist extracted fragments of DNA—the life code—from the mummified body of an ancient Egyptian infant. He was able to grow duplicates of the genetic material. The mummy had been dead for two thousand years. What he was doing was cloning it and growing some duplicate cells, duplicate material. I don't know how far they're going to be able to progress with cloning. But the New Testament tells us that Jesus is able to go farther than any scientist. He is the life-maker. For, just as the Father raises the dead and makes life so also the Son to whom He will makes life. The word for “making life” is one word in the Greek language *zoopoieo*. We use it in the word zoo. The life-maker. “I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live” (John 5:25, NIV). Jesus has so many splendid life qualities that attract me to Him, but above all others, that which holds us is the fact that He is Lord over the dead, Lord over the grave. He is the author of life and the giver of life.

III. What qualities does Jesus seek in us?

Like the centurion, He seeks for us to have a caring attitude toward others. He seeks for us to love people without stereotypes in front of the color of their skin or racial background. He seeks

JESUS: THE LIFE GIVER

Luke 7:1-17

for us to have a deep commitment for His work and His people. He seeks for us to be humble and gracious. He seeks for us to have faith in Him.

In turn, what do we find in Him? Someone who comes to us when we call. Someone who is there at just the right moment when we need Him. And someone who is profoundly caring and sensitive. And most of all, He is the maker of life. That we find in Him.

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, we come this service...there are friends who, at this moment in their life, need You in very special way. They need you present in their hour of need. How glad we are that You are Lord, to answer that call of invitation when, from our hearts, we say, "Jesus, I need You. I need Your help." How wonderful of You to come. Lord, as this service is in its final moments, we believe that, in this time of prayer, You will become present. You'll become present all over this sanctuary and seek to us about the needs we have in our life. You'll help us take these few moments of inventory. You'll search our hearts. You'll ask us about the person we've had the secret attitude toward of, "I don't care if you live or you die." You'll ask us to evaluate that in light of Your love for the person we're indefinite about. You'll ask us to let You melt our hearts and give us the love of the cross. You'll search our heart about rudeness in our life and patterns of speech and You'll ask us to come to You and seek to be filled with Your gracious character and person. You'll ask us about our commitment to You and to Your work and to Your people. And You'll search our hearts and seek from us faith in You. As You do that, Lord, we will find You so sensitive and caring toward us. And we'll find You as the life-maker, the one who saves us from death, both spiritual and psychological and eternal. You come, the giver of life, the maker of life. And we receive the gift You are bringing.

JESUS: THE LIFE GIVER

Luke 7:1-17

To those who feel like the life is dead we pray, that You will come with Your presence and give them a purpose and a hope and fill their life with Your presence. For those who may feel trapped and who are trapped by an addiction of some kind, by a bondage in their life, by radical hurts and enslavements, for whom and life is dead and suicide seems to be the only route that is ahead, to that person, Lord, come today, and let them know, in their deepest inner-being, that they are profoundly loved by You and wanted by You, and that You have an answer for the need in their life. We ask this, Lord Jesus, in Your name. Amen.