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THE SURPRISING NATURE OF JESUS' MINISTRY

Luke 7:1-50

(1 of 11 in a series through Luke 7-15)

David McCullough opens his book about the Wright brothers by reflecting on a photograph of the two men. From the photograph, he describes their appearance—height, build, and look. But then he writes, “To judge by the expressions on their faces, they had little if any sense of humor, which was hardly the case. . . . But what is most uncharacteristic about the pose is that they sit doing nothing at all, something they almost never succumbed to.”¹

Now, I have never written such a book, so I’m no expert. But I do find it interesting that among all the ways McCullough could have opened his book on these two men, he decided to do it by reflecting on a photograph that really didn’t capture who they were. He holds up the photograph to the reader in order to say, “If you expect the brothers to be like what you see in this photograph, you’ll be more than a little surprised. And it’s these surprising elements about the Wright brothers that I’m going to tell you about.”

But perhaps there’s a skill in this that I need to learn because I think Luke does something similar in this seventh chapter of his gospel. We know that Luke has carefully arranged his gospel account of the life and ministry of Jesus because he tells us in the opening verses that he’s writing “an orderly account” (1:3). However, that doesn’t mean that it’s chronologically arranged. Rather, it seems that Luke often arranges episodes in Jesus’ life and ministry around certain themes or ideas that bind them together. And much how McCullough uses that photograph to say that the Wright brothers are quite different than you might anticipate, so Luke seems to arrange the events of chapters 7 around the idea of things being surprising, unexpected, unanticipated, and astonishing concerning Jesus, his ministry, and how people respond to him. And by putting these surprising or unexpected stories together in this chapter, Luke gives us a clearer picture of who Jesus is. So, I want to walk through each of these five stories that Luke ties together in this chapter, noting a surprising element in each, making some application along the way, and then end our time by looking at who these stories tell us about who Jesus is. First, Luke shows us an unlikely faith.

Unlikely faith

Luke opens our chapter by telling us the story of a Roman centurion, a commander in the Roman army responsible for leading about 100 soldiers. Now, the Romans could be a ruthless people, but apparently this man didn’t fit this mold. First, he has a servant who is sick and at the point of death, and Luke says that the man “highly valued” his servant. And he hears of Jesus and asks some elders of the Jews to go approach him about healing his servant. We might expect a

¹ David McCullough, *The Wright Brothers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 6.

ruthless leader to ignore the humanity and value of his servant, leaving him to die, but that's not the case here. Second, he has an impressive relationship with the Jewish people.

The Jews largely hated the Romans who oversaw them. But notice their role in this story. They're pleading earnestly with Jesus to heal this man's servant, 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" (vv. 4-5). So, both of these elements are unlikely—the centurion's kindness to his servant as well as his good relationship with the Jewish people. And yet there was something more unlikely and more astonishing to come.

Luke tells us that when Jesus was not far from the centurion's home, a group of the man's friends came to Jesus with a message from the centurion, saying, "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 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" (vv. 6-8). In other words, the centurion recognizes that Jesus is ministering under the authority and in the power of God, much as he himself speaks with the authority and power of Rome. And there's only one other time the gospels say something like this, but Luke tells us that Jesus "marveled at him," turning to the crowd and telling them, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith" (v. 9). Then, when they returned to the house, the man had been healed.

I mentioned that there was one other time Jesus marveled, and that was at unbelief. This time he marvels at belief. He marvels at the man's faith. Here's one who isn't an Israelite, so he wasn't looking for the Messiah, and his faith in Jesus causes Jesus to marvel. Here is one who should have represented everything the Jews hate in their Roman oppression, and he has a clearer understanding of the greatness of Jesus than most of them. Here is a man who should think much of himself—being in charge of a hundred Roman soldiers—but he knows that he's not worthy even to have Jesus come into his house. This is an unlikely faith, and it's a faith in one who has authority to speak and make a man well.

Perhaps one way this story should move us is in praying for those whom we feel are unlikely converts. Maybe it's your neighbor, co-worker, or family member who you basically have just given up on coming to faith. To you, it may feel utterly unlikely that this person could come to faith, but it is more likely than a Roman centurion displaying greater than that Jesus had seen among any Israelite at this point in his ministry? Surely not. Moreover, it's a miracle any time someone believes, and yet the Lord regularly gives people life where there was only death and opens the eyes of the blind. So, let us continue to share the gospel and pray for those whose faith would feel to us very unlikely. Next, we see astonishing compassion and power.

Astonishing compassion and power

Luke moves from Jesus' miracle in healing the sick servant to another miracle where Jesus shows his authority over death itself. But that's where most of the similarities end. Whereas in the first

story we have an impressive figure in a Roman centurion, having a group of people ask Jesus to heal, and then Jesus healing this sick man from a distance merely with his word, in this story we have a destitute woman, no one asking Jesus to do anything, and Jesus getting his hands dirty, if you will.

As Jesus is approaching a town called Nain, he noticed that a man who had died was being carried out of the city, and there was a great crowd from the town accompanying a woman who was following him. That woman was his mother. But it's not simply that she'd lost her son; Luke also tells us that she was a widow. And in this culture, that put her in a very difficult place, losing the two men who could provide for her. Jesus sees this and Luke tells us, "He had compassion on her and said to her, 'Do not weep'" (v. 13). Then, Jesus touched the bier on which the coffin would be carried, the crowd stopped, and he spoke to the dead man, saying, "Young man, I say to you, arise" (v. 14). And we're told that the young man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother, of course causing the crowd to react by calling Jesus a prophet and noting that God had visited his people, showing them great favor.

But what stands out in this story are two astonishing elements—compassion and power. First, let's note Jesus' astonishing power. To touch the bier on which the coffin sat should have made Jesus unclean, but in the gospels Jesus is never contaminated by uncleanness but instead spreads his healing power, making the unclean, clean. Then, he raises the dead. I mean, it's one thing to heal someone of a sickness but quite another to raise a dead man to life.²

But also note the astonishing compassion. Jesus sees this woman, notes her destitute state, and has compassion on her. That's what starts this. No one comes to Jesus, asking him to do something. He just sees her and has compassion. The one who has eternally existed as God the Son, through whom everything was made, and who upholds the universe by the word of his power looks on this woman's painful situation and has compassion. Isn't that astonishing? That's our Lord!

The one who reigns over the universe is able to look at us in compassion. The author of Hebrews tells us that as the reigning incarnate Lord, Jesus is able to sympathize with us in our weaknesses. It may be that we've seen this so much in the gospels that it doesn't move us, but it should. The Almighty God who calls out the stars by name and directs every element of this life after his own will (Eph 1:11) looks at us with compassion in our pain and sympathizes with us in our struggles. Once more, don't create our Lord in our image, but allow the Bible to dictate to us who he is, and as we do so, we should be overwhelmed at our mighty and gracious Lord. Next, we see an unexpected ministry.

² Now, of course, someone could point to Elijah and Elisha bringing dead men to life in the Old Testament, and that's no doubt why the people recognized Jesus as a prophet. But he'd obviously more than a prophet. Even in their stories of raising the dead, Elijah and Elisha cry out to the Lord, asking God to raise the dead one (1 Kings 17:20-21; 2 Kings 4:33). But here, Jesus just tells the dead man to rise, and he does. This is astonishing power.

An unexpected ministry

The next story may not be one that we expect. The last time we saw John the Baptist, he was preaching boldly and baptizing Jesus. But then—because of his bold preaching—he'd been put into prison. And Luke tells us that from prison John called two of his disciples to go to Jesus and ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (v. 19). That is to say, he was asking for confirmation that Jesus was indeed the Messiah.

Now, our question might be, "Why was John asking this?" After all, he'd seemed so sure a few chapters earlier. And Luke doesn't give us an answer as to why John might be questioning. But I think we can take a pretty good guess by looking back at John's preaching. You may remember in Luke 3 that John came preaching, saying, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? . . . 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" (3:7-9).

I mean, it doesn't take an interpretive expert to see that John expected God's judgment to come with the coming of the Christ. And there's good reason for that. If you read the OT, the promises of God's salvation are always seen as God saving his people and judging his enemies. For example, Isaiah 61:1-2—a prophecy of the Messiah's work, reads—"The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God."

That's what the Christ would do. He'd save and he'd bring vengeance. And John had just announced that Jesus is the one; he's the promised Messiah. Therefore, we'd expect God's enemies to be in for it. And yet John's sitting in prison, locked up by a clear enemy of the Lord. That doesn't look like Jesus is bringing the Lord's vengeance does it? It looks like God's enemies are trucking along just fine. And so John questions.

But we need also to remember that Jesus had actually taken up this text from Isaiah as he entered the synagogue and began reading from Isaiah 61. We saw that back in Luke 4. But you may also remember that Jesus had stopped reading right before that line about the vengeance of the Lord.

What Jesus was showing us as he did that is that he is the promised Christ, but he didn't come—in his first coming—to bring divine judgment. He came to save his people. Final judgment would have to wait until his second coming. And that's, in essence, what he tells John's disciples to go back and tell him. Jesus says, "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 the good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me" (vv. 22-23).

With that, Jesus is referencing a text like Isaiah 35 that notes all the blessings that the Messiah would bring. He's telling John's disciples, "I'm doing what the Scripture foretold the Christ would do." Now, he knows that he's not doing all John had hoped for, as John no doubt thought the Roman government would be overthrown and he'd definitely not be locked up in prison. And Jesus was telling John not to stumble over this unexpected nature of Jesus' ministry but to believe.

And according to Scripture, this delay in judgment is the Lord's kindness and patience, giving sinners a chance to repent and trust in the crucified and risen Lord for the forgiveness of their sins and eternal life. So, if you don't know him, come to him today. And don't delay. He'll not delay judgment forever, but one day will return, judge his enemies, and bring his people to himself. So trust in him today. Next Luke shows us our overwhelming privilege.

Our overwhelming privilege

After John's messengers left, Jesus used the opportunity to speak to the crowds about John. He knows that many went out to see and be baptized by him, so he begins to ask them what they went out in the wilderness to see in John. After throwing out some options of what they might have anticipated, Jesus notes that John is the messenger Isaiah prophesied about who would prepare the people for the day when God himself would come to them. This leads Jesus then to say, "I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he" (v. 28).

Now, if you follow the logic Jesus lays out for saying that John is the greatest born of woman at the time he was born, you can see that John's greatness is wrapped up in Jesus' identity. If Jesus identifies John as greatest because he had the privilege of being the messenger to announce that God has come to his people, then what does that say about Jesus? Of course it affirms that he is God the Son, who has come to his people. So John's greatness is wrapped up in his privilege of being able to point to Jesus and say, "He's the Christ who was promised." He was greater than Isaiah, David, etc. not because they didn't point to Jesus' coming but because none of them got to point to Jesus as clearly as John, saying, "There he is. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

But Jesus also notes that any of us on this side of his life, death, resurrection, and Pentecost who believe in him are greater than John. Why? It's because we can say of Jesus even more than John could. We can speak of his life, death, and resurrection. We can note that he reigns at God's right hand. We have the Spirit indwelling us, just as Moses longed for God's people to know. We're privileged more than Moses, Isaiah, David, or John ever were. So don't envy these biblical figures. Rather, realize the overwhelming privilege we have to speak clearly of who Jesus is and what he did to overs. We have an overwhelming privilege to do so. Finally, we see surprising forgiveness and transformation.

Surprising forgiveness and transformation

Luke ends this chapter by setting up a contrast. First, you have the Pharisees. After telling us what Jesus had said about John, Luke notes, “The Pharisees and lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by [John]” (v. 30). What’s key to see in that statement is that the Pharisees didn’t submit to John’s baptism because John’s baptism was a “baptism of repentance” (3:3). Therefore, Luke is telling us that the Pharisees weren’t repentant. They hadn’t come to recognize their sinful rebellion and turned to the Lord in faith for forgiveness.

Then, Jesus makes this even clearer when he says that they were like children saying to their friends, “We played a flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep” (v. 32). What Jesus means is that nothing satisfied them. Take Jesus and John, for example. John came along practicing a strict diet, “eating no bread and drinking no wine” and they rejected John, saying he had a demon (v. 33). Okay, so we might say they prefer someone who likes food and drink a bit more. Well, Jesus came along eating and drinking. So, did they accept him? No. They called him “a glutton and a drunkard” (v. 34). John and Jesus were both pictures of the wise life, but they were greatly different. Wisdom has many children, as Jesus tells us. But neither satisfied the Pharisees because nothing would. They were unrepentant sinners in rebellion against God. And therefore they stood under God’s judgment.

But then Luke provides a contrast to this. He takes us to a scene where Jesus has been invited to the home of a Pharisee named Simon to share a meal with him. And as Jesus is there, Luke tells us that “a woman of the city, who was a sinner” (v. 36) came to the home—as it was common for others to come and gather in these type of settings—with an alabaster flask of ointment. And she immediately began to honor Jesus, weeping, wetting his feet with her tears, wiping them with her hair, kissing them, and anointing them with oil—obviously a different response than the Pharisees who were rejecting him (and even Simon himself!).

As you would imagine, Simon was bothered by this because he knew this woman was a sinner (most likely a prostitute). So, he thinks to himself, if Jesus were a prophet, he’d know what this woman had done in her life, and he’d have her go away.

But Jesus does know, and he knows what Simon is thinking, so he tells him a story about two men who were in debt—one a much larger debt than the other. And both were forgiven by their lender of their debts. Then he asks Simon who would love the lender more, the man forgiven much or the man forgiven little. He answers the man who was forgiven much, and Jesus noted that he was right. But then Jesus makes the application, noting that this woman has been worshipping him from the second he arrived in a way that Simon hasn’t approached, and the reason is because she has been forgiven much and loves much. Then, Jesus says clearly to the woman, “Your sins are forgiven. . . . Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (vv. 48, 50).

What Jesus was showing us is that he doesn’t want to hold at arm’s length any sinner who is willing to repent and come to him. It doesn’t matter what we’ve done. And in those cases, we’ll not only find forgiveness, but we’ll be transformed because great forgiveness produces in one’s heart great love for the one who forgives. Jesus isn’t distant from the great sinner who repents.

Now, I say this is surprising forgiveness not because it's rarely seen in the Bible but because we can be so slow of heart to believe it's true. But it is indeed true. He forgives and transforms those who come to him in faith.

So, I want to plead with us this morning to run to him. In all these unlikely or astonishing events Luke shows us once more who Jesus is. He's the one who calls us to believe, who shows us compassion and pours out his power on us, who is gracious with us in our doubts but calls us to believe, who allows us the privilege of knowing him and sharing him with others, and who forgives much so that we might love him much. May our response be to come to him, know his grace, and celebrate his forgiveness. And let us all, in coming to the table now, realize that we've all been given reason to love him deeply as we've been forgiven much. Amen.