

Jesus, Power, and Free Will

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One of the most central attributes of God is His omnipotence. As Psalm 115 says, our God sits in the heavens and does whatever He pleases. However, there is one conspicuous area of creation where what God pleases does not happen. 1 Timothy 2 reveals that God desires all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. However, Jesus Himself reveals in Matthew 7 that most men will not be saved, not because it is impossible for them to be saved, but because they choose not to be. God gave us all free will, and we can use it to frustrate even His will for us.

This tension between the power of God on the one hand and the defiant free will of man on the other is evident throughout the Bible, but it is never more obvious than during the ministry of Jesus. Jesus worked miracle after miracle, displaying power far beyond what is humanly possible, yet over and over again, He ran up against limits to it. Even Jesus couldn't pierce the heart that was hardened against Him. Let's consider this morning, then, Jesus, power, and free will.

Miracles of Healing

There are many texts in the gospels that illustrate this conflict, but we're going to focus this morning on the linked stories of Luke 7. This chapter begins in upbeat fashion, recounting the stories of two of Jesus' most prominent miracles of healing. They'll help us prepare for the Lord's Supper. Read with me from Luke 7:1-17. Within this section of Scripture, we are first confronted with **A CENTURION'S PROBLEM**. This centurion is one of the most positively regarded characters we encounter during the ministry of Jesus. He's not a Jew; indeed, he is a Gentile, an officer in the occupying army of the Romans. However, the Jews of Capernaum, where this centurion lives, don't hate him. Instead, they love the guy because he loves them and shows it by treating them well. When the town of Capernaum needed a new synagogue, it wasn't some wealthy Jew who stepped up and paid for it. It was this man.

In any event, one of the slaves of this centurion falls ill, and rather than waiting for the slave to die and writing it off as a business expense, the centurion calls in some favors to do his best to save the man's life. He asks the local Jewish elders to ask Jesus for help. Apparently, he's reluctant to approach a Jewish prophet himself.

Despite his reticence, he receives the help he's looking for because of **HIS FAITH**. Jesus hears the plea of the elders, decides the situation is worth checking out, and heads toward the centurion's house. However, the Gentile centurion shows a greater respect for the Jewish Messiah than the Jews themselves did. He doesn't want Jesus in his house because he believes he is unworthy of the honor. He sends his friends to wave the Lord off. Instead, his faith in the authority of Jesus is so great that he says that all Jesus has to do is say the word, and his servant will be healed.

It's hard to imagine anything astonishing God, but the centurion certainly astonishes Jesus. Throughout His ministry, among His own people, people who had been prophetically prepared for centuries to welcome the Messiah, Jesus has encountered a steady pattern of unbelief. And yet, this uncircumcised Roman hears about Jesus, accepts the miracles at face value, and displays greater faith than any among God's people have done. In response to his humble request, Jesus gives him the healing he has asked for before his friends even return to his house.

Here, we see the beginning of a theme that will dominate the chapter. It doesn't matter who we are. It doesn't matter what we have done. It's not about us. It's about Jesus. If we take Him at His word and seek His blessing in faith, we will surely receive it. However, if we try to play by our own rules instead of His, we can defeat His power in our lives.

The measure of Jesus' power is shown next by the story of **THE WIDOW'S SON**. Jesus' travels have taken Him to Nain, a city to the southwest of the Sea of Galilee, and as He and the crowd with Him are headed in, He meets a funeral procession headed out. A widow has just lost her only son. Even today, this would strike us as tragic. 2000 years ago, it was a disaster. A widow couldn't work to support herself. In her old age, she had to rely on her children for help, and a widow whose children had all died was entirely dependent on the charity of others. This widow, then, has lost not only her son, but also her retirement savings. She is both emotionally desolate and materially desolate.

Note also the setting for this miracle-to-be. Jesus doesn't encounter this dead man in a secret room somewhere. Instead, this meeting takes place in the midst of a crowd, half of whom are inhabitants of Nain. That's important for two reasons. First, these people aren't following Jesus. Second, they know beyond a doubt that this widow's son is dead. In a situation like that, it's not like they would have bundled him into the coffin while he was taking a nap. They would have made sure that he was 100 percent, for-certain dead, if only because the consequences of his death were so serious.

This death, though, sets the stage for **JESUS' COMPASSION**. He is as moved by the widow's plight as we would be, He can do something about it, and so He does. He commands the man to arise, and he sits up in the coffin and starts talking! There is no prolonged period of convalescence. The recipient of the miracle instantaneously goes from dead to talking. This has two effects, the first of which we would perhaps not expect. When we think of Jesus relieving such a conspicuous tragedy, we would expect everybody to be thrilled about it. Eventually, they are thrilled, but first, they're terrified. That's entirely reasonable. Just imagine how we would feel if we were attending the funeral of a friend, and some dude strolled in, told our friend to get up out of the coffin, and he did! Personally, I would start out thinking I

was the victim of a practical joke that had gone way too far, and then I would be frightened out of my wits! Dead people do not get up and start roaming around. They don't, that is, unless Jesus happens to be in the vicinity.

Once the terror subsides, the witnesses to this miracle start glorifying God and telling everybody they could find about it. The story quickly makes its way through all the districts of the Jews. This too is what we would expect. Once again, if I were an eyewitness to an event like this, I would seriously re-evaluate some of my long- and firmly-held beliefs about modern-day spiritual gifts! I imagine the news would be all over Facebook before the dead guy had the chance to set his feet on the floor. There are few displays of the power of Jesus as impressive as this one.

These two stories have all kinds of implications for the Lord's Supper. First, they remind us of the evidence that Jesus is the Christ. Like the widow's son in Nain, Jesus was widely recognized to be dead. His corpse was publicly displayed on the cross. A spear was publicly and brutally thrust into His side, and He didn't even twitch. Just as important, the resurrection of Jesus was equally public. Over a period of forty days, hundreds saw the risen Lord. If indeed Jesus was raised from the dead by the power of the Father, that gives us the confidence to trust in His promise, that His blood is powerful enough to raise us from the spiritual death that is worse than any physical death could be.

Second, these stories remind us that the healing power of Jesus is available to anyone. He is able to deliver us, if only, like the centurion, we are willing to seek Him in humility and faith. Time doesn't matter to Jesus, any more than distance mattered on that day in Capernaum. Whether we want His power at work in our lives is entirely up to us. Let's consider whether we are making room for Him as we partake of the Lord's Supper.

Messengers from John

The story of Jesus doing nothing less than raising the dead is one to stir up strong reactions, and some of those reactions come from the followers of John the Baptist. Jesus' interactions with messengers from John make up the next section of our study this morning. Let's consider Luke 7:18-35 together. First, the narrative here details **THEIR QUESTION**. This is late in John's ministry. Matthew tells us that John is already imprisoned at this time, awaiting his date with the executioner. He has already baptized Jesus, has already seen the Holy Spirit descending upon Him. John personally has no doubts about whether Jesus is the Expected One, yet he sends messengers to Jesus asking that very question anyway. From this, we must infer that John isn't sending the messengers for his benefit. He's sending them for theirs, so that they can see and hear for themselves that Jesus truly is the Messiah. John is probably aware that his time on earth is short, and he wants to make sure that his followers will head in the right direction once he's gone.

Next, Luke describes **THEIR ANSWER**. It's interesting to me that one of the hallmarks of Jesus' teaching is that He almost never answers a question directly, whether the questioner is honest or not. Instead, His practice is to tell a parable or present something else that will lead the questioner to the answer himself. In fact, in this instance, Jesus never actually answers the question at all. It's almost like he invites the messengers to wait and watch what happens next for themselves. The events that follow are both mundane and extraordinary. They represent nothing more than everyday activities for Jesus—the healing of the sick and the blind and the demon-possessed—but what was everyday for Jesus was astonishing in any other context. After doing so, Jesus instructs the messengers to do no more than reveal what they have seen. If it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, it's a duck, and if it heals the sick, gives sight to the blind, casts out demons, and preaches the gospel, then it must be the Messiah. Jesus' logic here is inarguable.

However, He concludes His words to John's ambassadors with a comment that we would not expect. He says that blessed is the one who does not take offense at Him. At first, this strikes us as bizarre. What has Jesus done that would offend anyone? He's used His miraculous power to help those in need and proclaimed God's word to sinners who needed to hear it. Being anti-Jesus strikes us as being on about the same level as being opposed to America and Mom and apple pie. Who could possibly have a problem with things like that?

And yet, we know that throughout His ministry, Jesus faced bitter opposition. At one time or another, He got grief from Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians alike. Just about everybody who was part of the spiritual elite in the Jewish nation came out opposed to Jesus. Why? It was a question of expectations. They had so painstakingly constructed their own conception of what God's law should be and who the Messiah should be that when Jesus showed up as the actual Messiah and challenged their preconceptions, they couldn't stand to hear Him.

Jesus continues the theme of preconceptions in His comments **ON JOHN**. Remember—it had been centuries since the Jewish nation had been blessed with actual prophets from God, and in that 400 years of silence, some pretty strange expectations had grown up. Some might have wanted a man who would be a reed shaken by the wind, a man who would bow to pressure from the people and tell them what they wanted to hear. Others might have wanted a man with fine clothing, someone who would endorse their covetousness and materialism. What they got instead was a genuine prophet, a man who told them what they needed to hear, not what they wanted to hear. John came not merely to proclaim the word of God, but to proclaim the Messiah and His kingdom, in comparison to which even he would dwindle into insignificance. The ordinary people heard John gladly. Even the tax collectors repented when they encountered him. However, once again, it was the spiritual elite, the people who thought they knew what was going on, who rejected him.

We don't have prophets today, but we do have the prophetic word of God. It might not be the word we want. If we actually look into it, it's not going to pat us on the head and tell us that we're just fine the way we are. It's not going to boost our egos. It's not going to tell us how to get rich quick. However, even though it might not be the word we want, it is the word we need. If we listen to it, we can learn how to imitate Jesus and inherit eternal life.

Our problem, though, is the same as the problem of the Pharisees and lawyers. It's our preconceptions. Are our ears open to the word of God, or would we rather tune out the voice of Scripture and go on doing what we've always done and believing what we've always believed? This is the core problem of the denominational world. People take passages like Acts 2:38, which plainly teaches baptism for forgiveness of sins, and ignore them, because those passages don't line up with their preconceptions. However, it can be every bit as big a problem for us. We can tune out the unpleasant truths of the Bible. We can ignore the Scripture when it warns us against laying up treasure on earth. We can reject it when it commands us to care for the needy, so that we too serve our preconceptions, not the truth.

Jesus' final comments on preconceptions come when he describes the **REACTIONS** of the Pharisees to John first and Him second. He compares them to children who don't want to hear a happy little flute tune or a dirge. No matter what, these children are determined to be displeased. It was likewise with the scribes and lawyers. John lives like an ascetic out in the desert, and they claim he is demon-possessed. Jesus dines with sinners and tax collectors, and they accuse Him of being a drunkard and a glutton. There was no prophet that these supposedly godly men would accept.

In the same way, we must recognize that sometimes, we encounter people, in a spiritual context or otherwise, who are determined to be displeased with us. There is nothing we can say that will make them happy, or there is nothing we can say that will persuade them to obey the gospel. My dad is a very intelligent man, but sometimes, he has a touching naiveté about the power of logic. He believes that when you present a sound, rational argument to somebody who disagrees with you, he should accept the power of that argument and change his mind on the spot. In real life, 90 percent of the time, that's not the way it happens. Instead, most people will go on believing what they want to believe, regardless of the logic of the situation. That's true of the Bible too. The word of God is powerful and active, but even the Scripture cannot pierce the heart that is hardened against it. Most people can and will resist the power of God to salvation.

The Sinful Woman

We see one final instance of the power of preconceptions in the story of the sinful woman. Let's read together from Luke 7:36-50. Luke begins by describing the unusual events of **A DINNER**. One of the Pharisees who didn't think Jesus was utterly detestable, a man named Simon, invites Him to his home for dinner. However, in the middle of this dinner, a woman whom the community knew was immoral barges into the room and begins making a scene. She starts crying over the feet of Jesus, which were doubtless filthy from walking through the dusty streets, wiping them with her hair, kissing them, and anointing them with perfume that she had brought with her.

At this point, Simon's preconceptions begin to engage. He regards sinners as unclean. He believes that a true prophet would both be able to recognize this sinful woman when he saw one and would want to have nothing to do with her. Jesus is continuing to allow her to cry on, kiss, and anoint His feet, so He must not actually be a true prophet.

Obviously, there are all kinds of holes with Simon's logic. It doesn't cross his mind that a sinful woman who repents might be as pleasing in the eyes of God as the most righteous of the daughters of the Pharisees, nor does it occur to him that the goal of a true prophet might be to encourage such repentance rather than to reject it. However, Simon is convinced he's right. Before we go on, let's pause to consider the damage our prejudices can cause in our dealings with other people. They can kick in when a visitor enters our assembly for the first time. They can engage when a brother in Christ says or does something, and we start getting mad because of why we think he said or did that. Friends, the ways visitors dress often say nothing about their hearts, and the way that people act often says nothing about their motivations. I can't tell you how many times I've invented some story about why So-and-So did that, but found out months later I was totally, completely wrong. Let's have the wisdom to reserve judgment instead.

Simon doesn't voice his reservations, but Jesus detects them anyway and replies with a parable about **TWO DEBTORS**. It's as simple as it can be. A moneylender forgives two debtors, one of whom owes a great deal, and the other of whom owes a little. In conclusion, Jesus asks Simon a simple question: Who will love the moneylender more?

Simon does not know what we know, which is that simple questions with obvious answers from Jesus often lead the one answering the question to places he does not want to go. However, Simon is about to discover this via the simple expedient of answering the question. He tells Jesus that the one forgiven more will love more.

He is, of course, correct, and Jesus tells him so. However, Jesus then proceeds to explain why He asked the question, and Simon probably doesn't enjoy the explanation as much. Simon has already compared himself to the woman at Jesus' feet: "Me, righteous Pharisee; you, sinful trash." Jesus revisits the comparison, but he does so on terms that are favorable not to the proud dinner host, but to the scene-making foot-washer. Simon provided no water for Jesus' feet, no kiss for His face, no oil for His head. The woman, by contrast, has provided all three in her foot-washing. It is the woman, not Simon, who excels in the love she is showing Simon's own guest. Why? Because she has sinned greatly and

hopes for great forgiveness. Simon, on the other hand, thinks he has only sinned a little bit and so doesn't feel the need for some great display of affection for Jesus. His need is as great, but his acknowledgement of the need isn't.

Sadly, all too many Christians are more likely to behave like Simon than they are like the woman. They don't understand how far they were from God, so they aren't too impressed with Jesus' gift of forgiveness of sins. Like Simon, they display their pride in their lack of love for Jesus, in their spotty attendance, in their unenthusiastic song worship, in their anemic contributions to the Lord's work, in their unwillingness to serve outside the assembly, and in their lives generally. By contrast, it is the Christians who appear to have more reason to boast who continue to be effusive in their displays of gratitude. Those brethren understand how much they have been forgiven. How about us? Where do we stand? Do we love as little as we think we have been forgiven, or is our love for the Lord as great as His forgiveness?

Indeed, the chapter concludes with a discussion of **FORGIVENESS OF SINS**. Jesus makes explicit what His earlier words implied. He tells the woman directly that because of her repentance and expression of love, she is forgiven. This shocks the other Pharisees at the dinner. They knew what forgiveness under the Old Law demanded, lots of sacrifices, lots of washings, lots of ritual. However, Jesus short-circuits the process with a few simple words.

This marks our final return to our theme. Our salvation doesn't depend on whether God has enough power to save us. It depends on whether we have enough faith to seek Him. We've met many in this chapter who did: the centurion who needed healing for his friend, countless blind and sick and demon-possessed people, the woman who anointed Jesus' feet, and even the sinners and tax collectors who queued up to receive the baptism of John.

However, we've also encountered many who didn't: the scribes and Pharisees who refused to hear either John or Jesus, Simon himself, who apparently viewed Jesus more as entertainment than as salvation, and Simon's guests, who were appalled rather than thrilled by Jesus' words of forgiveness. Every one of us is in this chapter someplace, and where we are is not determined by our own personal righteousness, by our adeptness at checking off spiritual check-boxes, or by our reputation in the community. It is determined by whether we have the humility to come to Jesus on His own terms and acknowledge Him as our Lord. If we do, we will find Him. If we don't, we won't.