

Glimpses of the Kingdom
Three Unusual Encounters
Luke 7:1-50
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January 28, 2024

Religious people are often some of the most exclusive people around. They gravitate toward people who think like they do. They're hesitant to befriend people who are different than they are. They have strict lists of dos and don'ts. And they tend toward being judgmental and harsh rather than extending grace and demonstrating love.

In last week's sermon, Pastor Jen focused on Jesus' ongoing conflict with the Pharisees, leaders of the Jewish religion. The Bible doesn't present the Pharisees in a positive light. In fact, they're portrayed as the villains of the New Testament. The Scriptures aren't kind to these religious leaders, but the Pharisees weren't bad people. They were respected and influential leaders in the culture of their day. Jesus' problem with them—or more accurately, their problem with Jesus—was that Jesus prioritized loving people over obedience to the law and following its rules. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were so fixated on trying to please God by seeking holiness for themselves and others and following the letter of the law that they lost sight of God's love for people. For Jesus, obeying the letter of the law took a back seat to loving people. Their different priorities meant that conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees was inevitable.

Early in the Bible, we see God anticipating the exclusive tendencies of his people, the Jews. Immediately after calling Abraham to follow Him, God spoke these words to the Father of the Jews: "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; **and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you**" (Genesis 12:2–3).

Throughout the Old Testament, God reminded his people time and time again that the blessings He was pouring out on them weren't to be hoarded and kept for themselves. His blessings were given to be shared with others, and yet God's people grew increasingly exclusive. By the time Jesus arrived on the scene, the Jewish people were one of the most exclusive communities in the world. It's not surprising that one of Jesus' main emphases throughout his life and ministry was to demonstrate the inclusivity and far-reaching nature of God's love, and

it's also not surprising that He was destined for conflict with the Pharisees and other Jewish religious leaders like the Sadducees and the teachers of the law.

We've titled this sermon series "Glimpses of the Kingdom" because as we explore Luke's Gospel over the first six weeks of the year, we're focusing on how Luke shares accounts from Jesus' life to demonstrate what God's kingdom looks like. As the only New Testament writer who was a non-Jew, a Gentile, Luke was passionate about helping his Jewish and Gentile readers understand that God's kingdom wasn't limited to Jews; it was for everyone who accepted Jesus as their Messiah and Lord.

In chapter 7 of Luke, we're given three accounts of Jesus' interaction with people "good Jews" normally wouldn't have interacted with, and yet Jesus extended love and grace to each of these people. Before we look at Jesus' interaction with a Roman Centurion, the dead son of a widow, and a person Luke refers to as a "sinful woman," I want us to look at an exchange that is recorded in the middle of chapter 7 between Jesus and John the Baptist's disciples.

John had been imprisoned by King Herod, because John insisted on denouncing Herod's marriage to Herodias, the divorced wife of his half-brother Phillip. In prison, John experienced doubts about Jesus, and he sent his disciples to ask Jesus whether or not He was truly the Messiah. I'll begin reading at verse 18 of Luke chapter 7:

¹⁸ John's disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, ¹⁹ he sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

²⁰ When the men came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'"

²¹ At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. ²² So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor." (Luke 7:18-22)

John the Baptist, who boldly foretold Jesus' coming, was in prison. He was tired, hungry, and alone. He'd been imprisoned by King Herod and was no doubt wondering if he was going to be executed... and eventually he was. As he languished in prison with too much time on his hands, John was troubled by his doubts, and he began to question whether Jesus was truly the promised Messiah. He sent his disciples to Jesus to assuage his doubts.

Jesus' answer was direct and concise: "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor." Jesus pointed to all that He was doing as evidence that He was the Messiah and that God's kingdom had arrived, and his summary of his activity was very similar to his words at the synagogue in Luke 4. Quoting the Prophet Isaiah, Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

I wanted to focus on Jesus' interaction with John's disciples before we look at the three encounters Jesus had in this chapter, because it serves as a reminder for us of why Jesus came to earth. When asked, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus replied, "Take note of how I'm demonstrating God's love by ministering to people and proclaiming God's good news." Jesus' mission was to point people to God's love by loving them, caring for them, and healing them.

Now, let's explore these three encounters Jesus had with people that emphasized the message that the Good News of the Kingdom was for everyone. The first of these is found in Luke 7: 1–10.

When Jesus had finished saying all this to the people who were listening, he entered Capernaum. ² There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. ³ The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. ⁴ When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, ⁵ because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." ⁶ 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. ⁷ That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁸ 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.”

⁹ 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.” ¹⁰ Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well. (Luke 7:1–10)

Every devout Jew despised the Romans, especially Roman soldiers like this centurion. The Romans had occupied Jerusalem and the surrounding area for nearly a century. Living under foreign rule is painful for anyone, but especially for God’s people, who cherished their freedom after spending a large portion of their history under captivity. The Roman Empire spanned much of the civilized world at that time, but the empire’s grip was particularly strong on Judea because of the constant threat of coup attempts—would-be messiahs with their ragged bands of followers who believed they were God’s promised deliverer that would lead Israel to freedom. Roman military presence in and around Jerusalem was particularly strong so these frequent uprisings could be squashed.

It was bad enough that Jesus would respond to this centurion’s request to heal his servant, but Jesus didn’t stop there. He had the gall to lift the centurion up as a model of faith when He said, “I tell you I have not found such great faith even in Israel.” Highlighting the faith of a gentile, and a Roman military leader at that, was completely unacceptable. Let’s look now at Jesus’ second encounter. I’ll continue reading at verse 11 of Luke chapter 7.

¹¹ Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. ¹² 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. ¹³ When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, “Don’t cry.”

¹⁴ Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” ¹⁵ The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.

¹⁶ They were all filled with awe and praised God. “A great prophet has appeared among us,” they said. “God has come to help his people.” ¹⁷ This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country. (Luke 7:11–17)

Jewish law strictly forbade religious leaders having physical contact with a dead body. Being holy, one set apart for God, meant separation from human blood and death, but that didn’t stop Jesus from touching the funeral bier—the frame or stretcher carrying the coffin in which a dead man was being transported to his burial.

We’re told that this man was the only son of a widow. In other words, he was her only means of support. When Jesus saw the widow, who was weeping, we’re told, “His heart went out to her and he said, ‘Don’t cry.’” Jesus was moved with compassion for her and her plight, and so He touched the funeral bier and raised the man to life. For Jesus, loving and caring for people took priority over following rules and religious practices.

The last encounter Jesus had in Luke chapter 7 is found in verses 36–50, and this was the most controversial of the three, once again involving Jesus’ nemeses, the Pharisees. I’ll read the account of the encounter and then come back to Jesus’ reply to the Pharisee Simon’s objections.

³⁶ When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table. ³⁷ A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. ³⁸ As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

³⁹ When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is— that she is a sinner.” (Luke 7:36–39)

The social and religious faux pas here are many:

1. The woman who approached Jesus “had lived a sinful life.” She was likely a prostitute or at least was known as a promiscuous woman.
2. As a woman, and a sinful woman at that, she had no business entering a Pharisee’s house uninvited.
3. It was completely inappropriate for her to touch a man that wasn’t her husband in public, especially in such an intimate way.
4. The cost of an alabaster jar of perfume was exorbitant. This display of love and adoration was highly wasteful. In another Gospel account, one of Jesus’ disciples objected, saying this money should have been given to the poor, not wasted like this.
5. To top it all off, Jesus, a known religious leader, allowed and encouraged the woman’s public display of affection.

Jesus’ response to the woman clearly demonstrated his approval of her actions, but his explanation to Simon, his Pharisee host, was even more pointed.

⁴⁰ Jesus answered him, “Simon, I have something to tell you.”

“Tell me, teacher,” he said.

⁴¹ “Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”

⁴³ Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.”

“You have judged correctly,” Jesus said.

⁴⁴ Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. ⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”

⁴⁸ Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”

⁴⁹ The other guests began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?”

⁵⁰ Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” (Luke 7:40–50)

If you’re keeping score after Jen’s message last week, that’s Jesus–5, Pharisees–zero; or since it’s football playoff season: Jesus–35, Pharisees–nothing. Once again, Jesus openly confronted the Pharisees’ preoccupation with religious protocol, which kept them from caring and loving for people, and Jesus didn’t stop there. He went on to tell the “sinful woman” that her sins were forgiven and that she could go in peace because her faith had saved her.

I like the distinction Pastor Jen made last week, based on Dallas Willard’s quote, that the question we should be asking as followers of Jesus isn’t “What would Jesus do?” but “How did Jesus do it?” Behind the question “How did Jesus do what He did?” lies the question: “What was Jesus’ motivation?” What was it that propelled Jesus to do what He did? I could give a long explanation about Jesus’ motivation, but the gospel writer John sums it up so well in John 3:16–17. I’d like you to read these words aloud with me.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:16–17)

It was the love of God that compelled Jesus to do and say all that He did and said during his time on earth, and it's love for God that Jesus wants to be the driving motivation for each of us who call ourselves his disciples. At McBIC, we talk regularly about the importance of loving people in such a way that they are attracted to Jesus' love through us. We regularly encourage loving others with Jesus' love through our sermons and in our children's and youth ministries. We highlight missional communities that are doing a fantastic job caring for people with Jesus' love, and we encourage people to serve in these ministries. Our mission statement seeks to capture this priority with the simple words, "Experiencing Jesus, and sharing His love."

It's easy for us to focus on "sharing Jesus' love" as the main objective of that statement while glossing over "experiencing Jesus," but the reality is if we're not experiencing Jesus' love, we can't share his love with others. This was the Pharisees' problem. They spent so much of their energy focused on the law and on making sure they were holy—and that others were holy—that they failed to experience God's love for themselves. In fact, it appears that their preoccupation with the law and holiness actually insulated them from personally experiencing God's love. As a result, rather than sharing God's love with others, all they had to share with others was laws, rules, and judgment. That last statement I made is so important for each of us. If we're not personally experiencing Jesus' love, instead of sharing his love with others, all we'll have to share with people are rules and judgment. People will experience us like they did the Pharisees instead of how people experienced Jesus.

We're near the end of January now, so perhaps you've moved past the time of making New Year's resolutions, but if you're open to it, I'd like to propose a resolution for each of us individually and for us as a church family: "Let's make 2024 a year in which we deeply and routinely experience Jesus' love." As we genuinely experience Jesus, sharing his love with others will be a natural outgrowth, and our lives will more closely resemble Jesus' life than the lives of the Pharisees.

I encourage you to consider the question, "How do I need to experience Jesus' love today?"