

The Cast | People Engaged In the Story of Jesus Christ

“Full of Pity Joined With Power”

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Luke 7.1-17

When He had completed all His discourse in the hearing of the people, He went to Capernaum. ² And a centurion's slave, who was highly regarded by him, was sick and about to die. ³ When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders asking Him to come and save the life of his slave. ⁴ When they came to Jesus, they earnestly implored Him, saying, "He is worthy for You to grant this to him; ⁵ for he loves our nation and it was he who built us our synagogue." ⁶ Now Jesus started on His way with them; and when He was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends, saying to Him, "Lord, do not trouble Yourself further, for I am not worthy for You to come under my roof; ⁷ for this reason I did not even consider myself worthy to come to You, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁸ "For I also am a man placed under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, 'Go!' and he goes, and to another, 'Come!' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this!' and he does it." ⁹ Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled at him, and turned and said to the crowd that was following Him, "I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such great faith." ¹⁰ When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

¹¹ Soon afterwards He went to a city called Nain; and His disciples were going along with Him, accompanied by a large crowd. ¹² Now as He approached the gate of the city, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow; and a sizeable crowd from the city was with her. ¹³ When the Lord saw her, He felt compassion for her, and said to her, "Do not weep." ¹⁴ And He came up and touched the coffin; and the bearers came to a halt. And He said, "Young man, I say to you, arise!" ¹⁵ The dead man sat up and began to speak. And Jesus gave him back to his mother. ¹⁶ Fear gripped them all, and they began glorifying God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and, "God has visited His people!" ¹⁷ This report concerning Him went out all over Judea and in all the surrounding district.

We're looking at the cast of characters surrounding the main Character in the Gospels According to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Today, we meet a few different characters and (as we've said before) Light in itself is invisible but Light makes other things visible. In these two scenes two characters are especially in the spotlight.

The first is a highly regarded, well-to-do, influential and powerful person but also with some UNSEEN stuff in his life. And the second is a plainly powerless and pitiable person, a widow grieving the loss of her only son. One strong and one weak but BOTH are now in dire need. One seeks OUT this Rabbi looking for help and the other is too helpless even to seek.

Today, both these needy people are made visible by the Light of the World, Jesus Christ, and as they come into His light, we see Him. He is of a certain nature and disposition toward needy people.

He's looking for people, like a shepherd might search for lost sheep and HE IS LOOKING for something IN people...When He sees this characteristic or quality or attribute, HE'S DRAWN TO IT... and it makes Him marvel...it triggers something in Him...thrills Him.

But also, these connections, His encounters with need bring out ...not only His heart of tenderness but also these flashes of awareness and awe; they become another piece in the puzzle as we move toward that question, "Who do YOU say that I am?"

Let's look at: 1) The People in Need 2) The Basis for Connection and 3) The Elements to Emulate

The first cast member we meet here is a Roman soldier and a man of great influence. Centurion simply means 100, i.e. he had about 100 soldiers under his command. He represented the foreign power, the world-dominating power of Rome in that region and in the town of Capernaum.

Rome was a very religious empire and they always had room for another deity so they often supported the local worship whatever that worship WAS...and here that meant that the Centurion paid for the construction of the local Jewish synagogue...and even beyond that...he seemed to believe (at least a little) of the Jewish religion. And he had, for these reasons, a very good reputation with the locals.

Even though he was a powerful man, there are always forces we can't control and he was powerless to stop a sickness that was killing an employee who was also, apparently a respected friend. This ranking soldier had known about Jesus Christ and sent the Jewish leaders of the synagogue to present his case before Jesus. And when they get there, THEY MADE sure Jesus knew, "this isn't just a Gentile or one of those bad soldiers...this guy is ON our side (loves our nation) and this is the kind of man YOU want on your team...we're sure... so, TREAT HIM RIGHT!"

And Jesus Christ goes with it. He evidently changes course and heads to the Gentile home of this Gentile Centurion... and that's a big deal because to enter in to that kind of home...would render a Jewish rabbi ceremonially unclean (couldn't go to the Temple for a while... people might avoid Him)...

But off He goes and then...another delegation comes from the Centurion's house (not Jewish leaders this time but v.6, "[he] sent friends") and they convey a message, "Lord, do not trouble Yourself further, for I am not worthy for You to come under my roof; for this reason I did not even consider myself worthy to come to You, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man with authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, 'Go!' and he goes, and to another, 'Come!' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this!' and he does it."

And THAT'S the thing...apparently...those words are just what Jesus Christ was hoping to FIND. Something in that response was right on the MONEY so much that Jesus "marveled" at the man... and heals the servant/friend at a distance... What was so great about that reply? That's the question.

The second cast member here is in a town some 6 miles from where Jesus Christ was raised, about a day's walk from the first episode. And in this little town a funeral is taking place. The only son of a widow, apparently a young man...has died.

Not only will the death of her only son CRUSH her emotionally but, in that time/culture/legal-system could leave her without property rights...without protection (in a society that was often violent and dangerous)... It's incredibly sad to see (like we continue to see in modern images from the Middle East) a body on a wooden plank (it could have been a box like we use, but probably a plank with a wrapped up body laying on it) hoisted up on the shoulders of men carrying the dead young man through the streets. The mother – now what will become of her? – the mother weeping and a crowd as sad as they can possibly BE!

And then it's that pattern so often seen in the life of Jesus Christ – He sees, He feels, He speaks and He helps.

He sees her and He feels compassion (the emotion most often attributed to Jesus Christ of all emotions) and He speaks to the broken woman...and the spotlight really is on her (in both scenes the healed person is sort of secondary) but he sees HER...and feels compassion for HER...and said to HER, "Do not weep, Mother" and then HE helps... He speaks...to the dead man (not a prayer... that's significant!) not a prayer but a command to the dead man, "I say to you, 'Arise!'" and he does and speaks...and He, Jesus Christ gives him back to HER...

And then fear SNATCHES the whole crowd... a dead man came back to life...and it reminds the crowd of the Prince of the Prophets, Elijah and his apprentice ELISHA who also healed a Gentile General and also raised a dead only-son and returned him to his grieving mother (some 800 years prior to this) and because every Jewish person in that day, KNEW about the prototype prophets, and their stories, the funeral crowd concludes (like we saw last week, a conclusion, a revelation!) "This is a great prophet like Elijah and ELISHA...and God is watching over us again!" And everybody was talking about it everywhere!

Now, as I said, this is another piece in the puzzle; it's a beautiful display of tenderness, that most often exhibited attitude seen in Jesus Christ... BUT ALSO these scenes show us something about Who we're dealing with here. And when the puzzle piece DROPS right into place...and when the ONE WHO PLACES IT IN ITS RIGHT POSITION is a Gentile, a soldier, the enemy – well, Jesus Christ marvels, He's thrilled!

So what IS IT that the Centurion GOT and why is it SUCH a big deal?

Well, the man has a need...and he has some sense from what he's heard that this is a healer, this is someone who has power...has authority. He knows he doesn't HAVE a leg to stand on; he has no real status to commend him to this Jewish Super-Rabbi so he appeals to the leaders of the synagogue.

"You guys can speak to Him for me. YOU of all people KNOW how your religion functions – so please ask Him to help me!"

And they say... "You are RIGHT! We know JUST how true religion works, so leave it to us... we'll tell this Super-Rabbi that YOU are good enough, smart enough and dog-gone-it, Jewish people LIKE you... and we'll tell Him that you love our nation... that you built our synagogue... and that YOU are worthy!... And we think that ought'a do IT!"

In other words, the people, OF ALL PEOPLE that on on earth do dwell...of all people who ought'a know how true religion works, the leaders among the people of Abraham are C L U E L E S S !

They have completely reversed the order of things. They believe that FIRST you have to prove yourself to God and do enough good stuff...and have the right ethnic background...and prove that YOU ARE WORTHY and THEN God will help you..."

But the Gentile...the enemy ...the big-boss-man of the Roman army says, "I am NOT worthy...but I do know how authority works and I recognize that YOU have authority...so please...not because I'M WORTHY but because YOU have authority...please just say the word!"

And Jesus Christ marvels because the people of Abraham DON'T get the core idea of grace received by faith...and the Centurion does.

The first verse in this chapter said, "When Jesus had completed all His discourse."

What is that DISCOURSE? Well it's the famous Sermon on the Mount (Luke's version in the previous chapter) IN WHICH Jesus Christ outlines the way the Kingdom of God really does function and how it turns the values of religion and the ways of the world upside-down. He said words like these (Luke 6)

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God... Woe to you when all men

speak well of you, for their fathers used to treat the false prophets that way. But I say... love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. (Luke 6.20, 26,27-28;32)

Is it possible this Centurion heard those words and concluded, "Ah! I don't want these guys to speak well of me – I don't think that's how THIS RABBI'S Kingdom works! I think I'm the enemy and He believes in doing GOOD to the enemy. I'm not gonna tell Him how much good I've done because He believes, 'If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that?'" It's the upside-down order of grace!

This man draws the two big conclusions that form the basis of Abraham's non-religion (and he has to send his Gentile friends (7.6) to convey it to Jesus because the synagogue elders don't get it): #1- I AM NOT worthy of YOU and it doesn't matter how many synagogues I build! I can NEVER earn grace!

#2 – YOU have all the authority and if YOU want to heal my friend, all you have to DO is say the word because THAT'S how authority works.

And when Jesus sees that...hears that response, that understanding of the basic order of GRACE coming from the mouth of the enemy...He marvels. And says to the crowd: "See? So simple even a Gentile can do it?"

And then Luke records that what was just seen and heard there in Capernaum was played out again at that funeral up the road. See – it was a nobody that GOT Jesus Christ's attention. Someone who had NOTHING...couldn't repay Him...was simply poor as poor could be (Flannery O'Connor wrote a story called "You Can't Be Any Poorer Than Dead") This woman had nothing but NEED. But Jesus Christ is attracted to human need.

And He takes this woman...this widow... this nobody with no rights and no status and Jesus Christ shines the Light on her. Has compassion on her...speaks to her...gave the son back to HER. It's grace.

And here is the very AUTHOR of grace Himself...not only a great prophet like Elijah but the Source of compassion HIMSELF...God visiting His people.

Now is there anything we should DO about these two scenes on a common theme? Let me point out TWO elements to emulate. First, imitate the Centurion and second imitate the Compassion.

We have to follow the Centurion's order. I have NOTHING to commend myself to God but need and #2 Jesus Christ has all the authority and all the LOVE. He is full of pity joined with power!

He is the God-Man. He lives like no man ever lived. He dies the death of a criminal on behalf of the spiritually bankrupt. He is able and He is willing.

“Lord, are you willing to walk into a Gentile’s home even if it means YOU being defiled? And are you willing to touch the dead even if YOU will be made unclean?”

And Jesus says, “ I am willing...because when I touch the dead...they are NO LONGER dead and I am not defiled...and when I walk into the home of the unclean enemy, I thereby declare IT clean and HIM a friend! I am mighty to save.”

But, “Yes!” says Jesus Christ, “I am willing to be defiled in the ultimate sense – not to SIN – but to be charged with YOUR sin that YOU might be credited with MY beauty and righteousness... and when YOU receive this GRACE (before you ever deserve it or DO anything for IT) once you are declared perfect, THEN... you will actually begin, little by little to BE what I declare you to be...first grace, then obedience.”

Last, emulate the COMPASSION. When we receive the compassion of Jesus Christ and come again and again to Him, the Source, we begin to become what He is. “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma”. (Eph 4.32-5.2)

Jesus Christ shows us how: He sees...He feels...He speaks...He helps. It’s the oft-repeated pattern in His life and ministry and it will become the animating principle in our own lives to the degree that we are connecting to Him by repenting and believing. It’s happening too. We, as a church, are more and more, looking where God has planted us – seeing her (the bereft widow... the immigrant who can’t get a job...the addicted...the afflicted) seeing ...feeling compassion...speaking (“Do NOT weep...we have a Savior...He can move the Mountains...mighty to save!”) seeing... feeling... speaking ... helping.