

Luke 7

by John Nelson Darby

This sermon explores the themes of grace and faith through the stories of the centurion, the widow's son, and the contrasting responses of the Pharisee and the sinner.

Scripture: Luke 7:1

Topics: "Faith", "Grace"

Description

John Nelson Darby expounds on Luke 7, illustrating how Jesus, despite being rejected by Israel, extends grace to the Gentiles, exemplified through the faith of a centurion who humbly recognizes Christ's divine authority. The sermon highlights the transformative power of faith and the compassion of Jesus, as seen in His miracles, including raising a widow's son, which signifies God's grace surpassing the law. Darby emphasizes that true understanding of God's character comes from recognizing His grace, as demonstrated in the forgiveness of sins and the love that follows. The contrast between the Pharisee's judgment and the sinner's gratitude serves to illustrate the heart of the gospel, which is rooted in grace and love. Ultimately, the message is one of hope and assurance for all who believe, as faith in Christ leads to peace and salvation.

Transcript

We have seen the Lord, rejected by Israel, gradually, in virtue of His person and rights, breaking out beyond the ancient limits, and gathering the remnant round Himself, the new and only just object of God, the source of a mission in grace, and the full development and exemplification of holy love in an evil world; for, whatever the principles laid down in chapter 6, they are but the expression of God's character in grace, as displayed in Christ here below.

In accordance with this, we have now (v. 1-10) the case of the centurion, and a very full and striking one it is. It is not merely an act of grace, but grace to a Gentile. Nor is this all. The principle on which the apostle rests this question is brought out. "It is of faith, that it might be by grace, that the promise might be sure to all the seed." Faith, as the great turning-point, is introduced. It was no mere theory; it was living faith, and such faith as had not been seen in Israel. Neither was there presumption, but, on the contrary, remarkable humility. He recognised the honour God had put upon His people; he sees, holds to it, owns and acts upon it, spite of their low and debased, and, in every other respect, unworthy condition. Despised and failing as they might be, he loved the Jews as God's people, and for His sake, and he had built them a synagogue. Unfeigned lowliness was his, though (yea, rather, for) his faith was far beyond those he honoured.

Consequently he had a very high apprehension of the power and glory of the person of Christ as divine, reaching out beyond Jewish thoughts altogether. He does not refer to the Lord as Messiah, but recognised in Him the power of God in love. This was blessed faith, which forgets itself in the exaltation of its object. He had not seen Jesus, it would seem, but assuredly gathered from what he "heard," that diseases were nothing to Him but occasions wherein to display His absolute authority and His sovereign mercy. He was a stranger, and the Jews were God's people; must not they or their elders be the fittest to bring this wonderful person? For he confided in His mercy as well as His power, and his servant, "dear unto him," was sick and ready to die. He needed Jesus.

74 "Then Jesus went with them. And when he was now not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to him, saying unto him, Lord, trouble not thyself; for I am not worthy that thou shouldest enter under my roof; wherefore neither thought I myself worthy to come unto thee; but say in a word, and my servant shall be healed." There was surely the deepest personal respect and affection. Untaught as he might be in other things, he strongly felt the excellency of Christ's person, and here again with humility correspondent to the measure in which His glory was seen. This message of the centurion's friends admirably depicts his character and feeling. He told nothing to Jesus of his service to the Jews, spoke of nothing personal save his unworthiness, and this so consistently, that he begged Jesus not to come to his house, as unworthy to receive Him. There was in this soul the exact opposite of doing Christ an honour, by believing on Him, and far from him was the pretence of receiving Christ to set himself up; both alas! found often elsewhere. The simplicity of his heart is as apparent as his strong faith. There was none such in Israel, and yet it was in one who loved Israel. It was a lesson of grace, in every way, for the crowd that followed Jesus - for us too most surely.

Along with grace to the Gentiles came the evidence of power to raise the dead, but here it was manifested in human sympathies, in witness that God had visited His people (v. 11-17). It was the power of resurrection, a power which was yet to be shewn more gloriously, and to be the source of that which is new for man according to God - the God who raiseth the dead. It was another and wondrous proof that He is here going, in the character of His action, without the sphere of the law and its ordinances. "For the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth": what can it avail for one who is dead? "But what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh," Rom. 8:3. It was grace, indeed, and divine energy, but withal displayed in One who was touched with the feeling of our infirmities. And how astonishingly all the details bring this out! The dead man was "the only son of his mother, and she was a widow." "And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her, and said unto her, Weep not.... And he that was dead sat up and began to speak. And he delivered him to his mother." How exquisitely human, and withal how unmistakably divine!

75 It is manifest that these two cases illustrate the change which the Spirit is attesting in this part of Luke. Nor is it otherwise with the scene that follows, which brings out in fact the hinge of the dispensation. The Lord bears witness to John Baptist, not John to the Lord. John sends two of his disciples, on the report of the Lord's miracles, to learn from Himself who He is. Are we surprised? He had preached and baptized in the confession of sins and in faith of the coming Messiah. But now all was changed. John was in prison, not delivered, and it was no longer a people preparing for the Lord. Was it not strange? At any rate John sought a plain answer, and well could he trust the word of One who did such mighty and holy works. But what a comment upon the marvellous change was this very inquiry! It was a sort of turning over the disciples of John to the Lord. "And in the same hour he cured many of their infirmities, and plagues, and evil spirits; and unto many that were blind he gave sight. Then Jesus answering said unto them, Go your

way and tell John," etc. At the same time, if He receives no longer testimony from John, He bears it to him, owning John and his work. But they were owned from a higher ground where the Lord in grace and resurrection power had placed Himself; and this was based on entire rejection in and by the world, so that, though He was doing all good, still it was "blessed is he whosoever shall not be offended in me." Hence in the very verse where the Lord recognises in the fullest way John the Baptist, He marks the change about to take place - "he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." Happy they who justified God in being baptized of John - wretched the self-righteous who rejected His counsel against themselves. Wisdom is justified of all her children. They understand the ways of God, whether in the servant or the Lord. The ways are quite different, but understood in grace. This generation alas! understands none, finds fault with all. John is too righteous for them, Jesus is too gracious. The mourning of the one and the piping of the other are utterly distasteful. Such is man's wisdom before the ways of God. But the children of wisdom justify wisdom notwithstanding.

76 And in spite of the perverseness of men, our Lord did not stop manifesting Himself to the world. Accordingly a tale follows (v. 36-50) which shews how God's wisdom is justified by and in those who own it in Jesus. It is a tale of grace, of pure, plenary, pardoning grace, which rests not till its object is dismissed in perfect peace. Jesus is in the Pharisee's house, who failed entirely in the essential point: Simon perceived not the glory of Christ. In this the Lord meets him, and shews, in contrast with the woman "which was a sinner," the point where this Pharisee was exercising judgment to be precisely that wherein he failed. God's thoughts are not as our thoughts, nor His ways as our ways. What if the despised Jesus were not a prophet only, but a Saviour of poor lost sinners? Ah, God was unknown - that was the secret. The converted soul sees the glory of the Lord as grace towards itself; he who is unconvinced, however interested humanly, judges according to his own thoughts, and therefore necessarily fails to see the glory which is not according to these thoughts. Man's judgment of the gospel must be wrong therefore; his reception of it, as grace, is alone right, and alone the way of coming to the knowledge of it.

This was, then, a direct and distinct example of God's ways. It was a forgiving of sins in grace, sovereignly and freely, to any poor sinner, manifesting and producing love in the forgiven, who loves God, because God is love, and this in respect of his sins, in Jesus the Lord. It was proper grace - the ground on which any one, a Gentile or not, would be received, and God manifested not in requirement from man (and so making man in the flesh of importance) but making God all, and His character in sovereign grace, so bringing in blessing and its blessed effect upon the heart, developing the fruits of grace in a heart restored to confidence in God by the sense of His goodness.

What a blessed picture! Goodness known not only in the act, but in Him who did it. The discernment of guilt in its gross forms by man was one thing, but the grace of God which could blot out and forgive all was quite another. It was not Christ there to judge, and to sanction Pharisees, but love to a sinner, manifesting God in this new character of grace, producing thankful holy love to God, and a blessed relationship, sovereign and beyond the reach of man. But how has God always to prove Himself right in His goodness to man! so hard is man's heart. But the Lord identifies Himself with the believer, and vindicates him against the haughty world, and this gives assurance. Perfectly regardless of comments, He applies Himself, not to unbelief, which were useless, but to those who have faith, and having communicated forgiveness, shews the soul his uprightness, that is, the right thoughts of God and self which faith has. The last word settles the whole question. The soul's love was a ground of evidence and reasoning - not, of course, the cause. "Thy faith hath saved thee, said the Lord to the woman, Go in peace." All is discharged from the conscience, and the heart finds itself infinitely and everlastingly a debtor to the continual fountain of all

grace.

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