

It's a Wonderful Life

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[0 : 00] Back to Luke chapter 7. We're going to look for a while at the passage that we read, the latter half of this chapter. Now, I suppose around this time of year, as we look towards New Year, if you pick up the papers or magazines, you'll tend to get the kind of articles I came across yesterday when I picked up the Hedald magazine.

Articles that reflect on the year past or that look forward to the year to come. And a lot of people do that kind of thing at this time of year, don't they? What's life been like?

So I read this. I just want to read a couple of sentences to you. This is, open the page of a Hedald magazine, this is like the first columnist that appeared as I was drinking my coffee.

So this man says, So there you go, another year more or less emptied out. Just the dregs to suck from the bottle now, and they'll probably turn out to be flat.

It's not that I get modlin' at this time of year, that's my default emotional register anyway, but as the calendar turns, I realise another year has passed and none of my grand plans has come to fruition.

[1 : 10] I still haven't written that novel or learned to speak Italian. Instead, in 2014, I crashed my car, broke my wrist, and spent a lot of time doing, well, really not very much.

He doesn't sound too pleased with his life. I would say he, I think his tongue's a little bit in his cheek. It's a light-hard column, but still, what he's trying to say is, life disappointed me this year.

Didn't live up to my expectations. Wasn't particularly wonderful. And so he's maybe a bit cynical about the year to come as well. And I think that's a temptation for a lot of people to feel that.

But the reality is actually that life genuinely can feel like it lets us down often. And we feel a sense that life isn't quite what we wanted it to be.

So the question, I guess, is, if you were to think ahead this year, what would make life better for you? What would make life wonderful if you were to be able to decide the kind of things that would make it better?

[2 : 21] I wonder what you would come up with. Well, that's a question I want to come back to. In this chapter, Jesus makes an amazing claim about the potential of life that we'll come to.

And also in this chapter, we meet a woman, an ordinary woman, but a woman who's realized this potential. She's realized this potential. Now, it's not come about in her life because of herself, or because of anything she's done in a worldly way to make her life better.

She's not suddenly got rich or become popular. But nevertheless, her life has dramatically changed. And she has realized this potential that Jesus is talking about. And that's the story that I really want us to follow this morning.

What's the scenario here in this chapter? We kind of came in halfway through the chapter, didn't we? John the Baptist is somebody who has been so aware of Jesus and has spoken of Jesus as the one who was promised the Messiah.

But as we find him in this chapter, he's, some folk would say, perplexed. He has maybe expected either more or different of Jesus to what Jesus has been doing.

[3 : 38] Jesus has been healing and forgiving. He's been in and around all kinds of people's lives. But John has maybe expected more or different.

So he sends some of his people. Now, John's in jail at this point, but John sends some of his followers to Jesus. And he says, are you the one who I prophesied about?

Are you the one who we were expecting or is there somebody else? And it's a very direct question that John sends to him. But what does Jesus do in response?

What does Jesus do? Well, what he does initially, if you look down to verse 22, Jesus replied to the messengers. Jesus doesn't get angry or mad and throw a big tantrum because they've dared to come and ask him this question.

What does he do? Well, he says, well, go and tell John what's been happening. He re-emphasizes all that's been going on. And he highlights his work.

[4 : 46] And you'll see in verse 22, the blind received sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured. And he lists all the different things that he's been involved in, his healing ministry.

And also you'll see that this, the end of that verse, he says, the good news is preached to the poor, the good news of the kingdom, the good news about who he is. So Jesus re-emphasizes really what John already knows, maybe what has sparked this curiosity from John in the first place. And all that he describes, as I said, is a challenge to his expectations. It wasn't what John and what a lot of people were expecting.

Also, notice that he still affirms John the Baptist. He doesn't say, can't believe that John asked that question. I'm so disappointed that he would ask that question.

Look at what he says in verse 28. A few verses later, verse 28, I tell you, among those born of women, there's no one greater than John. Now, John was a prophet.

[5 : 52] John was a messenger. John was the one who was pointing forward to Jesus. And even at this point, with this query that is kind of hanging there, John says to the people, he affirms John and his position, his role, and who he is.

What a great thing that is to say about somebody. There's no one, effectively, there's no one more significant. Think about the role that John had. There's no one more significant than John.

He affirms John as he responds to these people who've come to ask him this question. And then he says something amazing. In the second half of verse 28, he says something that you probably need to read a few times.

Among those born of women, there's no one greater than John yet. The one who's least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.

That's an absolutely astounding thing to say. That kind of phrase, that statement would have been a shocking thing to say in that culture. And actually, it should be a shocking and astounding thing still for us to hear this morning.

[7 : 06] So I just want to think about that for a little while. What's Jesus saying? What's Jesus saying here about John and about people and about the kingdom?

Well, he's kind of redefining what people thought of as the kingdom. What did they expect? What did John expect?

Well, they maybe expected much more of a big picture, political change. They expected that when the Messiah came, when Jesus came, the Jews, as they were being dominated by the Romans, well, all that would change.

It would be really bad news for the Romans. They would be put in their place. And Jesus is, he takes the emphasis away from that completely, doesn't he?

He doesn't really say, it's okay, just hold on a bit and I will do that. I'm getting there. I'm going to start marching on Rome soon. The kingdom, the emphasis, say, isn't on politics.

[8 : 08] It isn't on power. It isn't on earthly power. And that's not the focus they're there to have. But the focus is on the people and on the individual and on the good news.

And on the kind of kingdom that Jesus, as Messiah, as Savior, was bringing in. One writer says this. He says, Christ insisted that the preaching of the gospel to the individual must take precedence over the executing of God's judgment on the wicked in general, and on unjust governments in particular.

So Jesus' time wasn't about overthrowing governments. It wasn't about doing dramatic statements of power to re-emphasize who was really in charge.

But the way in which he worked was to heal and to preach the good news. And as people heard the good news and as people were healed and as people came face to face with Jesus, they were changed.

And that's something that we'll go on and see. And so that troubled a lot of people. Some people outright rejected him. Some people asked questions. What's going on here? What are you doing? You're not doing what we thought you were going to do.

[9 : 27] So Jesus kind of redefines how they should think about the kingdom. He also redefines status. What is an impressive person to you?

We all have different ideas maybe of what is an impressive person. And also the different ways in which we can belong in our culture. There are different things that we need to match in order to

belong to different segments of society.

Jesus speaks about status here. And he says the one who's least in the kingdom of God is greater than this great prophet Jesus. What's he saying here? Well, what he's not saying is, he's not saying, he's not implying that he's done wrong with John.

And he's not saying, well if you are in my kingdom, you get this special quality and you become this amazing person, an impressive person. All of a sudden you transform and you're like a super person.

And therefore you're greater than John the Baptist. He's not saying that. He doesn't want them to understand it like that. But the emphasis that he's bringing is that John, John's, what was John's role?

[10:34] John's role was looking forward. He was pointing people to Jesus. A great role and a massively significant role. But it was anticipation.

But what they're to understand here is that with the coming of Jesus, who is the Messiah, those who in his day saw him and heard him and were touched by him and those all through history who have looked back and seen him, including us, those of us who know him and who trust in him, though we may be nothing in this life, we are the greatest in the kingdom.

Because we know the Savior, we know the Messiah. And this is, it kind of turns things on its head when we understand this, doesn't it? It turns, it means that we don't live life according to the categories that everybody else would maybe have.

Being rich, being successful, being popular. These things aren't to be our priority. But Jesus is really drawing us into the key which is to know him.

And there is also that sense, isn't there? He talks about being least in the kingdom. And there is that sense of the need for humility. If you remember, the previous couple of stories had been miracles that Jesus had been doing.

[12:02] He raised a widow's son, but he also had dealings with the Centurion at the start of chapter 7. Now the Centurion had sent to Jesus because a servant in his household, of any valuable man, was sick.

And this Roman Centurion sent to Jesus to ask for healing. But what's interesting is, while Jesus is on the way, he sends another messenger and he says this.

He was not far from the house when the Centurion sent friends to say to him, Lord, Lord, don't trouble yourself. For I don't deserve to have you come under my roof.

You know, there's a powerful man, but there's a man who says, Lord Jesus, I don't even deserve to have you come under my roof. And he evidences humility.

So he doesn't trust in Jesus and himself equally. And think of himself as a great man. He trusts in Jesus and he has humility. And there is that emphasis, isn't there, in Jesus' teaching of humility.

[13:05] But those are two, who are to be his people. You can't follow Jesus and be one of his kingdom people and acknowledge his lordship and be fully yourself and proud.

Or at least it's very difficult and it's very problematic. And that will always challenge us with who we are because of the temptation we have to go back to ourselves and to reckon ourselves as compared to other people is pretty good.

Always a temptation for us. So Jesus is redefining the way that people think about status. And as we read that verse again, he who is least in the kingdom of God, what we see is Jesus talking about the potential of people in their lives.

We started by asking the question, what will make life wonderful for you? Well, Jesus is opening up this incredible potential for ordinary people to be his people, part of his kingdom, and to be great in the kingdom.

Such a great calling, such a great calling for us to hear and for us to recognize. And what I want to do now is just see how that plays out in the rest of the chapter because we have responses to this.

[14:27] When Jesus taught, people responded. Often they hated what he said and they rejected him. And then there were those who accepted him. So we see that, don't we, in the way this chapter plays out.

First of all, from verse 31, there were those who really weren't impressed. And Jesus addresses these people. He's still speaking in the context of people who really say, well, I won't accept you, Jesus, because you're not doing what I think you should be doing.

And then in verse 31, he talks about the generation. To what then can I compare the people of this generation? They're like children sitting in the marketplace and calling out to each other. We played the flute for you and you didn't dance. And he goes on to describe how when John the Baptist came as an ascetic, who kind of shunned fine food and all the rest of it, they had a problem with that.

But then when Jesus came and he mixed with ordinary people and he went to their feasts and he ate and drank with them, well, they had a problem with that as well. And they just weren't satisfied. [15:30] They wouldn't accept Jesus for who he was. And so Jesus condemns these people who have this attitude. They're always looking at Jesus and saying, I don't accept that. I won't follow him.

But then we get this wonderful story of this woman from verse 36 onwards. And nobody, woman, really.

She's nobody particularly special. We don't know her name. But her response to Jesus is a standout moment because it's in some ways it's like a model response for us.

There were all those who weren't impressed, all those who thought they could stand over Jesus and judge him and decide whether or not they thought he was impressive. But this woman, you see in verse 37, how is she referenced in the Bible?

Well, the Bible remembers her. It kind of references her as a sinful woman. Verse 37, when a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisees' house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume.

[16:38] Maybe she was a prostitute. She was certainly known disreputably. And so it would also have been difficult for her to even come to this feast.

These feasts, these meals put on by these kind of public people were often open. So you could just go. She didn't necessarily have an invitation. But it wasn't easy for her to come.

She had a reputation. She had a name. You imagine walking around Edinburgh and everybody thinking bad of you. Everybody knowing you for who you are. And actually, if the truth were told and our hearts were exposed, that would be the case, wouldn't it?

If people knew what we were really like. But her sin was public and it was open. And she was a bad woman. You get that when the host in verse 39, the host thinks to himself, when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, if this man were a prophet, he would know who's touching him and what kind of woman she is.

She's a sinner. He didn't accept her. She'd come into his house, but he didn't want her there. She's a nobody. She's a sinner.

[17:55] What does she do? Well, she's somebody who has met with Jesus. Another writer says, he's scared of no one in a sense to win sinners for God he freely associated with them.

Imagine if Jesus had decided not to associate with sinners. She would have nowhere to go and neither would any of us.

But she is somebody who has met with Christ and her life has been changed. She maybe carries a stigma in the eyes of people, but her life has been changed.

So she comes, we get the sense as we read this, that she's not meeting Jesus for the first time. But as she comes into this house and as she sees Jesus reclining at the table, remember as they ate, they would have reclined, they would have lain kind of on their side, facing in towards the table.

So she would have come and as she stood behind him, she's just weeping as she sees him. She's weeping as she sees Jesus.

[19:02] As she sees the one who's teaching she's heard and whose grace and love she's experienced. She's weeping with gratitude and with joy.

And so in verse 8 we read, she began to wet his feet with her tears, she wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and poured perfume on them. So she contrasts hugely with the crowds who stood at a distance.

Judging Jesus. She contrasted hugely with those who rejected Jesus and said, no, I won't believe. She simply came, didn't announce herself, didn't claim to be anybody special now because she was a Christian, as if she'd become a standout member of society.

All of a sudden she stood behind him and she wept. And in doing so she reveals the changed heart that she had. And she reveals that she's one of Jesus's kingdom people, somebody who's least.

And she's still small in many ways in terms of status. But she's great because she knows our Saviour.

[20 : 20] She's seen the Messiah. She's known his love and his forgiveness. And so she weeps. And as she weeps, she shows that she's full of gratitude.

She's thankful. As she does this, she demonstrates humility as she cleans her tears from his feet. She's humble. And as she announces feet with this perfume, she shows that she's, she incurs cost by doing this. This would have been valuable stuff.

And this is done because she loved, because she loved him. This isn't done to perform. This isn't done to show off in front of everybody.

This is done because she loved, because she had been loved. We love because he first loved us. And it's a remarkable story.

[21 : 19] It's a story about somebody who's, in some senses as we've seen, she's a nobody. She's not particularly special. But just as we finish, we learn a few lessons from this. We learn a few lessons from this woman.

I began by asking what would make life better for you this year. What would make your life wonderful? I was thinking about the movie. I had to participate at a Christmas quiz this week. And one of the questions was about the most watched Christmas movie. And it's, it's a wonderful life. That's apparently the most watched Christmas movie. But that film's interesting.

I haven't seen it for a long time. But as I remember, the key is that the main, Jimmy Stewart, the main protagonist is in desperate times because he feels his life isn't worth living.

Because he feels like he's no good. There's a particular situation that's led to this kind of crisis point. But what brings redemption for him is being told by different people, being reminded of his value.

[22 : 25] And as he's shown all the good that he's done, then he's given a kind of, like a re-emphasis, a reinvigoration for his life.

He, he, he can go on living because he knows his value and because he knows what he means to people. And that finds redemption really because of a good insight that's been brought back to him. Now that's good. I, I don't want to put down at all the importance of encouraging people or valuing people.

But really what happened to the guy in that movie isn't what happens to this woman. And it's not the message of the Gospel. Because this woman wasn't told, you know, you just need to discover your inner good.

You just need to put all your past behind you and move on. That's not the Gospel. That's not what we are told. That's not the potential that Jesus speaks about for our lives, that the potential is really within and we just have to discover it.

[23 : 33] Because the Gospel, what the Gospel did for this woman was it exposed who she really is. We don't shy away from that. It's maybe unpopular and it's not a very seasonal message to think about, is it? What we really like, she was exposed as a sinner.

The Bible doesn't shy away from that. And that's the truth for every single one of us. And that's partly what the emphasis on humility does for us. That we have to come face to face with who we really are when we stand before God.

And a holy God shows us our sin and our poverty. And we are not afraid to die. But then he says, I have dealt with your sin at the cross.

She recognized in Jesus one who could save her and who would bring her redemption. She recognized the desperate past that she had.

And the past that meant that she was a reject and an outcast. But she recognized in Jesus somebody who said, come to me and I will set you free and I will forgive you.

[24 : 41] And that's the gospel that we have this morning. That's the good news. That's the potential for life that Jesus is speaking about. That we can know the reality of who we are when we stand before a holy God.

Which drives us to our knees. But then we know the forgiveness of the merciful Savior. Jesus says this about her, doesn't he? He, at the end of the chapter, he says to the crowd, therefore I tell you how many sins have been forgiven for she loved much.

Now he's not saying, because she loves me, she's saved. Rather, the way she is in her weeping and in her anointing him and in her loving Jesus is a response to the fact that she has been loved so much by him.

Because Jesus goes on to say, she has been forgiven much. She knows her sin. We can't shy away from that.

She knows the reality of her life and she knows the reality of her need. And all of us need to know that too. All of us need that honesty before God.

[25 : 54] And as we then know the reality of ourselves, the reality of our state and the reality of our sin, knowing that forgiven, only then will we be grateful people and humble people and loving people who will want to do all for Jesus Christ because he has done all for us.

So what will bring a sense of one this year, life this year? Well, maybe lots of things. There's maybe lots of things that we'd like to do and a lot of them are very good. But the challenge for us if we're not believers this morning is that nothing will transform our lives at all, anything like knowing Jesus as the one who sets us free from our sinful lives and who forgives us.

And if we're believers, we have to ask the question, have we lost the wonder of the Gospel? The raw understanding that we were dead in our sins but we're alive in Jesus Christ.

That is a life affirming, transforming truth. That's the truth that sets us free. And although we might not like to demonstrate in public, that's the truth that will bring us to our knees and make us weep at the foot of the cross.

Weep with gratitude and joy for all that He's done for us. Amen. Let's just pray.

[27 : 37] Lord, our God in heaven, what you've done for us is so vast and it's such a monumental truth that Jesus came to be the light of the world and to be the ransom for our sins.

And we pray that we wouldn't think more highly of ourselves than we should. Help us not to think that we're above needing saved. Help us not to get complacent about salvation.

Help us not to get tired of Jesus. Lord Jesus, we pray that you would be such a great light to our hearts that we would love you from the depths of who we are.

We would see that you have done so much and that you gave your all and that our lives would be a response to all that you have done. Help us then. Amen.