

Let's go to Luke 7. Let's get back into never ending series. I've been looking forward and not looking forward to this text. I have referenced this text probably about 25-30 times since I became the pastor here. It was something I saw years ago that just burned into my heart and mind, so it comes up a lot when I'm making this point. But this is a very, very weighty text, and it's a difficult text. It's a difficult text because it goes contrary to what I believe is and what I've read is the popular message among Evangelicals, which in the end is not the gospel at all. It's idolatry decorated in Jesus' clothes. I'll explain that later as we work our way along. But let me catch you up to the text. John the Baptist was the forerunner of the Messiah. His mom Elizabeth is beyond her years, which is going to translate as "as good as dead." So she's a very elderly woman who ends up getting pregnant and gives birth to John the Baptist. John the Baptist's ministry was to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. And so he goes out and begins to preach and teach, "The kingdom of God is at hand...you had better repent...it's not enough for you to know what's right but not walk in it. You've got to walk in it...just because you have heritage, just because your mommy and daddy were good church people and just because you go doesn't mean you have justification, doesn't mean that you've got right standing in front of God...you had better repent." And that was kind of his message. The Bible tells us that some people actually starting going, "Maybe this is the Messiah." And John the Baptist goes, "No, I'm not. In fact, there's one coming, and I'm not even worthy to touch His feet." And the Bible tells us that Jesus shows up one day and tells John to baptize Him. And John's like, "I'm not baptizing You."

Jesus goes, "No, I'm God. You're baptizing Me." And John the Baptist baptizes Jesus, and when he pulls Him out of the water, the Scriptures say that the heavens opened up, a dove ascended and the audible voice of God was heard saying, "This is My beloved Son with whom I'm well pleased." Now, Jesus then gets out of the water and goes into forty days of temptation to prepare ministry. While He's there, John the Baptist starts pointing out Herod, who's the tetrarch, he rules that area for Rome. Herod's got some Jerry Springer like problems. Let me try to explain them to you. He is actively in an affair with his brother's wife and finds his teenage niece sexually attractive. That's pretty Springer like. So John the Baptist, who's fearless...and by the way. In the ministry and in the faith, I think all of us would be fearless for a season if you had heard the audible voice of God, if your mamma was 114 when she gave birth to you. I think you'd be going, "I'm a miracle baby. I have got some clout with God here." And so you've heard the audible voice of God, your elderly mother gave birth to you, you've got a call on you're life, you've been unbelievably obedient. In fact, God has come to John the Baptist and spoken to him and said, "You're going to be homeless for My name, My renown. You're going to live in the woods, you're going to wear animal clothes, you're going to eat bugs and drink honey. You're not going to touch wine, you're not going to touch normal food. You are going to be the antithesis of what everyone else pursues, and you're going to be My voice." And John said okay. So that's a high level of obedience. So Jesus goes off to be tempted in the wilderness, begins His ministry, John starts popping off about Herod and what he's doing is immoral and not only what he's doing is immoral but how he governs is immoral. And he begins to attack him verbally to these large crowds. And so this is Rome, there isn't a *Bill of Rights* in Rome. There isn't any free speech in Rome. So Herod simply has him put in a dungeon. He goes and he grabs him, has John the Baptist arrested and thrown in a dungeon. So we don't know how long he's in there. He's not in there for a terribly long period of time, although I think a day or two in a dungeon is bad news. But we know Jesus' ministry is only three years long, so we know he hadn't been there too long, but we know he starts to wrestle with, "Hey, this isn't going like we planned it." He starts wrestling with "Okay, so was that the Messiah? Because I did everything I was supposed to do in this plan of His and I'm in a dungeon." And so that's where we pick up this story.

Luke 7:18, "The disciples of John reported all these things to him." They went to him and said, "Oh, Jesus raised this kid from the dead and He's casting out diseases and He's casting out demons." Let's keep going. "And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And when the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?'" Now this is a very difficult question. You've got John the Baptist going, "Okay, I know all of what I've seen in the past, and I know my story well, but this has gone a lot different than I thought. It's gone bad for me." And so he sends his doubts to Jesus, "Are You the one? Are You the Son of God? Are you the Messiah, or is there going to be another one? Did I hear it wrong? Was I off, or are You the one, or will there be another? Are You God in the flesh? Are You Emmanuel? Are You the one that's come to save us? Or are You not? Are You an impostor, and is there going to be another one?" So here's where I'm encouraged by this story. John the Baptist, who heard the audible voice of God, whose mother was elderly when she had him, who had a thriving, booming ministry where thousands upon thousands repented and got right with God, now in a dark moment finds his heart doubting. Later on in this text, it's going to call John the Baptist "the greatest man ever born of woman." There will never be a greater man than John the Baptist born of woman. We'll get to that later on next week. So if the greatest man ever born of woman who had heard the audible voice of God, who had seen the power of God in his birth and in his life and at every moment, who had been sustained by God as a homeless prophet can have a season of doubt, then maybe we all will.

So if you remember last week, Jesus is always kind of talking to His group of disciples. He had a little nickname for them, "You of little faith." If you go and read, it's like every other chapter Jesus is going, "Oh you of little faith, how long must I be with you? When are you going to figure this out?...Oh you of little faith...Oh you of little faith..." Are we about to see that again? I mean, here's John with doubts and Jesus has a lot of things to call back on where He could go, "Are you serious? Am I the one? Didn't your mama give birth to you when she was like 137? Didn't you hear the audible voice of God? Am I the one? Are you serious?" But that's not what He does. In fact, Jesus puts quite a thing for John here in verse 21. "In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight." So keep in mind that list. He healed many people of diseases and plagues, cast out some evil spirits and on those who were blind, He bestowed sight. "And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard:..." So now He's going to add to the list of what He actually just showed them personally by things He was doing in other places. So let's look at this. "And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them." Now, in the book of Isaiah there's a series of chapters that are messianic prophecies, what they can expect when the messiah comes. So you've got these two lists, you combine them and then you go back to Isaiah and look up what the Messiah would do and you can literally check these things off. You can go, "Okay, healing the lame, casting out evil spirits, healing diseases, giving the blind sight, making the deaf hear..." And you can go through and check off what Isaiah said the Messiah would do when He came off of this list. So in essence, He just sent back to John, "I am the one. There will be no other." So John, and I love John for this, is intellectually Varsity, and here's why. Because John's got doubts, and instead of giving in to his doubts, he doubts his doubts. He's going, "This doesn't add up, this doesn't make sense, this is not working like I thought it should." And instead of sitting in his doubts and letting those derail his faith, he goes, "No, I'm going to doubt my doubts, and I'm going to send word to Jesus for clarity on what my doubts are." And Jesus, not offended at all, answers him. "I am the one. There will not be another."

Now, I think that's the light side of this passage, that we can have doubts and Jesus is quick to go, "Oh no no no. I'll solve those doubts for you. I'll step in." Here's the weightier side of this text that usually goes unseen. If you take the list of what Jesus is doing and compare it to the messianic prophecies in the book of Isaiah, they match line for line for line. Except there's one in Isaiah 42 that is not mentioned in this text. And that is that the prisoners will be set free and men in dungeons will be let loose. And so John the Baptist's men come back, and they're going, "He's healing the lame, He's

giving sight to the blind, He's preaching good news to the poor..." And John the Baptist is like, "Okay...okay...okay...Is that all? Did He not say anything else? Did He not add anything to that?"

And they're like, "No. We recorded it on our iPhone. Listen. He said nothing else. That's all He said." And so John's going, "Okay, surely it's just a miscommunication somehow. He meant to put that on there, because He is the one. He is God and I have been His faithful servant. I have done everything He has asked me to do. I have been obedient since day one and He's God so we're good." And now if you pull it into modern Evangelical thinking, here's how it pulls out. Here's how it works itself out. Here's how the story ends. Since I have done all that God has asked me to do and Jesus has just sent word back that He is God and there won't be another, then at any minute now the lock on my door is going to be unlocked, the gate is going to fall open and I'm going to walk out. There is going to be an extremely attractive Israelite woman there. And we are going to fall in love, we're going to make trips to Jerusalem and we are going to eat a sundae there with the skyline and we're going to fall deeply in love. And then we're going to get a three camel garage with a pool in the back so I can continue my ministry of baptism. And we are going to grow old together in health and in wealth and in prosperity. And he's got this thing in his head and he just can't wait. He knows it coming any minute now. And then he hears the gate open. He has been obedient, it is going to end beautifully. And then the gate opens, a guard drags him upstairs where a party is going on, and there's this mass of men and women who are drunk out of their minds. And there's a young teenage girl who is scantily dressed, and King Herod who won't look him in the face. And so now John's a little bit concerned, because this doesn't make sense. Maybe this is how God's going to do it. God got King Herod drunk, and now with all of his friends in a drunken stupor, he's just setting him free. And so John's going, "Okay, this is it. This is where prosperity comes. This is where it ends. This is where the good things happen." And then the soldier kicks his legs out from under him and shoves his face down on a piece of wood, draws his sword and cuts his head off and rips it off his body and puts it on a plate and hands it to the scantily dressed teenage girl. Because Matthew 14 says that's how John the Baptist's life ends. "I am God. There will not be another." And then John has his head cut off.

The back story is that Herod's party got a little bit out of control. And his present from his niece, the little girl, was a seductive dance. If the present from your 12 year old niece is a strip tease...family issues. But Herod, visually stimulated, goes stupid and promises this little girl, "Anything you want in my kingdom I'll give to you." She doesn't know what she wants, so she goes to her mama. "What should I ask for?...I want the head of John the Baptist." And so Herod, wanting to kill John the Baptist this whole time but not doing it because he was scared of the people, is caught now because he gave his word. And so not long after Jesus says, "I am God. There will not be another," John is drug upstairs in front of a bunch of drunken Roman men and women and had his head removed from his body. Does anybody else struggle with this story? I'll tell you what. It flies in the face of what most of us have been taught and believe about what the nature of God is, that if we'll just do what we're told, if we'll just be obedient, we'll just do thing God's way, then our bank accounts will get a little bit fuller and our health will be a little bit better and our kids will be better. Isn't that what we hear? I mean, I turn on my TV. Despite better judgment I watch that stuff. I hear it. I hear, "If you'll just believe in yourself, then this will happen." I hear, "If you'll just submit to this, then this will happen." I've heard, "Hey, if you walk this way, this is how God responds." I've heard all these things, but it doesn't seem like our boy John got that at all, does it? He's more obedient than you. I can promise you that. He's more obedient to me. If God came to me and just in my spirit went, "I want you to be homeless," I would probably go, "Look, I'm going to need an audible voice coming out of something burning yet not being consumed. And even then I'm going to need the freedom to be disobedient for awhile. And I'm going to need You to talk to my wife, because she's not going to just take this one from me. She has been great the last eleven years of just following, but this one just going to go bad for me. You're going to have to help her with this one."

Okay, why would I point this out? Because honestly I could have just gone doubt and that God handles doubt. And we could have just been dismissed and we could have just gone on to our day off without having to see this, without having to feel this weight. Why would I point this out to you? It seems that we would be better served by me not doing so,

wouldn't it? Can I tell you my great fear for you? My great fear is that so much of what you're ingesting in Evangelical thinking and teaching and reading will not be enough to sustain your joy, will not be enough to sustain your faith when the tragedies of this earth finally catch up to you. I find so much of what's being taught this day to be subtle idolatry. And what I mean by that is if you follow Jesus so that you can get a better marriage, a healthier life, fill in the blank, if you're following Jesus to get this end goal, then what you are is an idolater. Because you seek not God, but rather what you think He can get you. That's not biblical Christianity. It's just not. I'm not trying to start a fight. I can point to more guys than just John the Baptist for whom it ends badly. It's all over the Bible. This idea that you get to control God with your behavior, that you do this and that forces God to do that, that's just nowhere to be seen. Here's what we can be confident of. We can be confident that He is good and that He will in all things, both joy and sorrow, accomplish His good pleasure and our joy.

Let me give you an example. The Bible tells us that Joseph was born into a large family that had all sons. And Joseph was just kind of better looking than all of them. And he was smarter than all of them, and he was a little bit arrogant. Like God gave him this dream that one day all of his brothers would bow down and worship him and he would save all of them, and then he actually shared that dream at breakfast. That's just bad leadership, isn't it? That's just like, "Hey, how did everybody sleep? Great. I had this dream last night where you fools worshiped me." I mean, that's coming from the kid brother. And the Bible makes it very clear that daddy favored him. And so the Scriptures tell us (this is the modern version) that his dad bought him this great Armani jacket, and he wore that thing proudly. Like, he wore it even when it was summer. He was that guy. He's like, "Hey guys, did you see the jacket that dad bought me?" And so the brothers finally had all they could have of little Joseph and so they decided to murder him. So out in the field one day they threw him into a well and started talking about how they were going to kill him. And they decided they probably shouldn't kill him because they didn't want blood on their hands. So instead they just sold him into slavery, and then they took the Armani jacket and poured blood all over it. And they took it to the dad and said an animal got him. So Joseph is in slavery. We don't know how long he's in slavery, but we know it's a while. I wonder how many of those nights he cried out to God, "Where are You?" I wonder if he was mistreated, if he was beaten. He's got this great organizational mind, so he ends up working for a man named Potifer. He serves him well, so well that he's making Potifer an unbelievable amount of money. So Potifer just keeps raising him up so much that he not only ends up running Potifer's business but also his household. He's just governing the place. And Potifer's wife notices how attractive Joseph is. She starts flirting with him, and then finally one day she can't control herself and just pounces on him, which freaks him out. If you go and read the text, he was like, "How can I sin against your husband? How can I sin against my God?" And he tries to run away, but she's an aggressive woman. So he bails out without his jacket and runs out without his shirt on. And now she's embarrassed, she's lost face, so she starts screaming at the top of her lungs that Joseph tried to rape her. I don't know how much you read history. I always want to encourage you to. If you try to look at any instance where a slave and a slave owner's wife got in a disagreement about what the facts were, the slave never wins. And so here's Joseph going, "Things couldn't be any worse than this. I'm a slave." And now he's a slave that's in prison. And this is covering the span of a couple of decades. Now he's in prison and he's got this knack for interpreting dreams. He interprets the dreams of two other prisoners. And he goes, "Okay, I'm going to interpret them. You're not going to like this. Cupbearer, you're going to get out, and I'm sorry Baker, but you're a dead man." So they're like, "Well, we'll see about that." This one gets let loose and this one gets killed. So Joseph's interpretation was right, and the cupbearer remembers this when Pharaoh has this really disturbing dream. He dreams that there are these seven really fat cows, and then all of a sudden these anemic, skinny cows show up and eat the fat cows. And he's just terrified by this dream. He kind of sounds weak to me. That's not very scary. I mean, I've had scarier dreams than that. But it freaks him out and he's demanding that people tell him what his dream means. None of his people can do it. And then finally, the cupbearer goes, "Wait a minute. I know a man who was in prison who can interpret dreams." So now Joseph, the slave prisoner, is brought up and interprets the dream. Here's the interpretation, "The next seven years will be abundance followed by seven years of famine, and the seven years of famine will destroy all of the abundance." And then Joseph, the organizational mind, the logistical guru

goes, "Here's what I would do. I would build storehouses and use the seven years of abundance, ration it out and use the abundance for the seven years." Pharaoh loved it, he said, "You do that." And so Joseph begins to set it up, and sure enough here come the seven fat years. They store it all away. Here comes the famine. By this time, Joseph is raised to the ranks in Egypt so that he pretty much has his own throne. He's not Pharaoh, but he's a pretty powerful man. And he sits on that throne until one day some older men that he recognizes come in. It's his brothers, the brothers that had sold him into slavery. They didn't just wrong him, they started a process of 20-30 years of slavery and imprisonment. Joseph, filled with the Spirit of God, says, "Hey guys. I'm Joseph." The brothers are terrified and throw themselves on the ground. He loads them up with food and grain and says, "Go get my father and bring him back." And then the famous line, "What you have meant for evil, God has meant for good." So God was involved in, allowed, did not stop the sorrow that had landed on Joseph's life so that he might bring about good, so that he might save a nation thirty years later. The Bible is filled with these stories...the tower of Babel, the cross of Christ. How dark does that moment look?

I think there's this idea that we've got to get past. We've got to get past this idea that God is most glorified when we're rich, healthy and wealthy and we go, "Isn't God grand? Look at all He gave me." Because if anybody joins us in that and says, "Oh, if you love Jesus, you get a house and health and cars? Then I love Jesus too." Because then all of a sudden you've got a different religion. You have the religion of cars and houses, not God. No, God is most glorified, God is most seen as powerful, glorious, worthy when everything's gone wrong and He's enough, He sustains us. Don't hear what I'm not saying. I'm not saying that tragedy lands, you get a phone call, the car wreck is your child's car wreck, the cancer is your spouse's cancer and all of a sudden we're like, "Isn't God great?" No, I'm saying through the deepest possible pain, through tears streaming down our face, we cry out that He's enough, that God is enough, that He is sustaining. And until that phone call is our phone call, until that knock comes at our door, I don't think that we can answer that; we can just hope that it's there. And we can just hope that the Holy Spirit will work in us in that moment, because I think right now we have to live vicariously through those who have received the call. So right now I don't know myself. I know in part, but I don't know in full. But I have watched a young couple this year put their three month old daughter's body in the ground, who just went down for a nap and didn't wake up. And through all of it, they have said He is good, He is faithful and He is here. And so I can look at that and go, "No, He is enough. He's enough." I have seen several men and women put their spouses' bodies in the ground this year, and through it all, they have said, "He is good and this hurts and we miss them, but He's enough and He's sustaining and He's beautiful and He has not betrayed us."

I don't know how else to say it but this. I'm pointing this out to you because I love you and because the problem with the prosperity gospel...and by the way, here's just a simple truth. If anybody puts a word in front of "gospel," you can go ahead and exit out. Prosperity gospel, liberation gospel, anything that puts a word in front of "gospel" that tries to further define the gospel, it's no longer the gospel. That's just a general rule. The problem with this belief is that it's not reality. Honestly, is it reality? For those of you who have faithfully followed the Lord, have you lived unscathed? Any blood as you've followed the Lord? For all the energy and vitality that God given to me that I've poured into knowing Him and making Him known, it didn't stop me from putting my two year old son in the back of an ambulance. My wife and I have miscarried twice this year. The second one was late enough term to hear the heartbeat and know it was a boy. It doesn't change the fact that now my two year old son going to have a cyst like tumor removed from eye by a plastic surgeon, then they'll reshape it in the fall. It didn't stop those things from happening. I mean, is it even reality? That's what makes it so goofy to me. You can hear that stuff and just look at life and see the disconnect. And I think the answer is, "Well, you lack faith or you don't believe enough." I think John the Baptist believed pretty well, believed enough to be homeless. I think Peter, Paul, the men in the Bible, they believed a little bit better than our petty faith, and yet they all die pretty badly. Joy in God will always be mixed with sorrow here. Here's why, because that's how love works. Let me try to explain it like this. We who believe in Him will always have in our hearts a mixture of the tragedies of this earth, which tie us compassionately to this earth, and the treasure of heaven, which always keeps us looking to the future. And those are both there, always. It's how love works.

Okay so I don't know how you're hearing this morning, I really don't. I don't know if you were like, "Actually I was doing great, pastor, until I came here." I don't know how you're hearing this, but I want you to hear it as good news. I want you to hear that there is nothing, nothing, nothing that is currently on or in your life that God has, in His infinite all-knowing wisdom, not allowed. And so therefore it's a part of the purposes of God for His glory and your eventual joy. So here's how I want to encourage you. If the last month, the last year, the last six months, the last three weeks, you've been going, "Where are You? Have You abandoned me? Have You betrayed me? Where are you?," if that's been your heart, if that resonates with you, I want to tell you that that's okay. But I also want to tell you that just maybe Luke 7 fell on this morning, at this period of time, in this moment, while you would be here so that God might encourage you and say, "Oh, I'm here." He might just be answering your questions this morning. I think I've heard often that there are these things that befall us that we'll never know why until later. Maybe we'll never know until much later. Maybe this morning God's going, "I'm here. I haven't abandoned you. Your doubts are okay. I am Him. There will be no other." This is the God of the Bible that sends both joy and sorrow to detach our hands of the things of the world and to attach our hands to Him, the treasure that we really need. God help us.

Let's pray. "Father, I thank You for the truth that You have not abandoned us in our sorrows. I thank You that at times You love us enough to allow things to occur for our eventual joy and Your glory. Help us in this because I think we want to control You. I think we love safety more than we love You and we love health more than we love You and we love our spouses more than we love you and we love our way more than we love You. We've got so much idolatry in us that we need to be chiseled away at. Help us. I thank You that there is no catastrophic moment that You have not, in Your infinite wisdom, decided to not stop. So You're there. We love You. Help us, Jesus. It's for Your beautiful name. Amen."