

Recognising the Sickness; Welcoming the Doctor

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[0 : 00] Well friends, why don't you stand with me and we'll pray together. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you so much for your kindness to us in Jesus. Thank you for giving us your word that directs us to him. Thank you for this magnificent passage at the beginning of his ministry. And we pray that as we look at it tonight, you'd help us understand it.

And understanding it, Father, that you'd help us to live rightly in response. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Thank you. Sit down. Let me start by telling you that before we came to Melbourne, five and a half years ago, Heather and I lived in Perth for about 11 years.

And the last five of those years, I worked in IT as a network and systems administrator while we planted a church. And during those years, I had a regular Saturday routine that I thought I'd tell you about this morning.

I slept in. That was the first thing. And whenever I woke up, I would go off and do the necessary shopping. And while I was out shopping, I would buy the Saturday paper.

[1 : 15] Now, there are a number of reasons for buying that paper. You wouldn't, let me say, buy the Western Australian newspaper for its news quality. It is the worst, trashiest metropolitan newspaper in the country.

If you don't believe me, next time you're in Perth, buy a copy and throw it out. Anyway. No. Anyway, so I bought this Western Australian for a number of reasons. Not at all for the news.

The first reason was the list of professional appointments that was at the back of the paper. And I was looking for jobs occasionally and, you know, so I'd look through that section.

Then there were the classifieds. And then there was the weather page. Now, this is a strange thing to be looking at, really, in Perth. But I realised very quickly that this is what you do. You look at the weather page and it tells you how Perth is going in terms of annual rainfall.

Because it is a massive problem in Perth and so you need to keep your eyes on it. So you'd do that and you'd pray about our need for more rain. Then finally, there was the glossy TV guide that came right at the back of it.

[2 : 20] Now, when it comes to the TV guide, I noticed from years of picking up this paper that there was a ritual that is observed by nearly every person I have ever seen read this TV guide.

If you left it out, you know, by the TV or whatever, and people picked it up, they would do this. They would extract, after they'd extracted the guide from the newspaper, they would immediately flip to the inside back cover.

Now, on the inside back cover, there was something that motivated them. You see, inside the back cover was a fascinating page of gossip. It contained small paragraph length cameos of our most loved and hated movie stars and celebrities.

Now, I guess you've observed a very similar ritual. If you haven't, let me encourage you to go to Safeway Coles, whatever, and do some shopping. And watch what people do when they get to the exit aisle, you know, to pay for their food.

What do they do? They pick up the magazines and they browse them. And which ones are the most browsed? They are the ones that have all this sort of gossip stuff in it.

[3 : 29] You see, I think we modern people have an incredible and passionate curiosity about such people, haven't we? I don't think, you know, I don't think that we crave to be powerful or rich or full of resources like them necessarily.

I'm not sure that we're saying we'd love to be them. Some people think that's what's going on. I'm not sure that that's what's going on. I think we are just fascinated with what it might be like to be known.

You see, we're curious about the lives of the famous. Why? Because they are famous. And we want to know what is it that makes a famous person function. And deep underneath, that is because we covet what they have, isn't it?

You see, we don't covet their wealth so much. Some of you might. But I'm not sure that that's what we're coveting. There are lots of rich people that sort of we don't covet. No, we're coveting something else.

I think we long to be recognized. We long to be known. We long to have people think, oh, that's Joe Bloggs. You know, we want to be somebody.

[4 : 36] Friends, we Christians, I think, are no different from anyone else in our culture. You see, we long to be among those who are recognized. And in Christian circles, we have such people.

They might be Christian leaders, preachers, entrepreneurs, or the like. Yes, you know, church planners is the latest really trendy thing you can do. But we have all of them. We Christians have our sort of pin-up boys and girls.

And many of us crave to be among them or to be seen with them. Well, friends, I think that tonight God will put a huge question mark under such coveting for us.

The pin-ups that we have may not be the best pin-ups to have. So let's see what God has to say by examining this passage in Luke chapter 4. Now, have a look at it with me.

So Luke chapter 4, verses 14 to 30. Now, let me just give you a brief overview. And then I want to pose a question to you. A problem that I have with this particular passage.

[5 : 34] In verse 14, Jesus returns to Galilee after his victory over the devil, full of the Holy Spirit. And news spreads about him. And he teaches in synagogues.

And everyone praises him. And in verse 16, he arrives at his hometown of Nazareth. And it appears as though he's been away for some period of time now. Anyway, he does what he was used to doing.

That is, on the Sabbath, he goes to the synagogue. And he goes to meet with God and goes to meet with God's people. And in verse 17, we read that when the time came for reading the prophets, this Jesus is asked to read.

And so he stands up. He unrolls the scroll to Isaiah chapter 61. Although it didn't have verses in those days. So I don't know how he knew where it was. But anyway, he unrolls it to Isaiah 61.

And he reads the reading. And then he rolls up the scroll, puts it back in place. And then he sits down to preach, which is the normal way that you preached in this particular time. And everyone's eyes are fixed on this young man.

[6 : 36] Well, actually, he's not so young at this point. Probably he's 30, which is probably beginning to get a bit older in that culture. They're waiting to see what this gifted preacher has to say. And he begins with the words from verse 21.

Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Anyway, verse 22 tells us that his preaching is really received well. But then in verse 23, Jesus challenges his hearers.

And he provokes them to think a lot more seriously. In other words, I think he thinks there's something wrong with your response. You should be responding differently. And so just to make sure that they get the response right, he pushes them some more.

He goes on to tell them some things about some prophets and those who listen to them. And then in verse 28, we're told all the people in the synagogue were furious with what he said. I think he's finally got what he wanted.

They've understood because they're now furious. And that's what he thought they should be from the first reading. But verse 30 tells us. And then they set out to kill him. But verse 30 tells us that he escapes from them.

[7 : 38] Now, friends, I wonder if you can see what it is that makes them furious. Let me tell you, this has always puzzled me.

This has always been quite confusing to me until a few years ago I came to preach on this passage. And I thought, I've got to work this out. Why on earth are they okay about what he says?

And then they get so angry with these two rather harmless little stories about Naaman the Syrian and the widow of Zarephath. I mean, what is going on here? Well, I want to explain it to you tonight because if I can explain this, then I think you'll understand why they should have got angry at the first passage.

And what the first passage is really saying or what he's using it to say. Now, the key verses are verses 22 to 27. By the way, I'm going to try and get into the habit of giving you little outlines so you can see where I'm going.

And if you like, you could even take notes. So let's work through these things and see what we can learn about the prophecy from Isaiah. So let's start with verse 22. Keep your eyes pinned on your Bibles there.

[8 : 38] In verse 22, we're told three things. First, the people in the synagogue speak well of him. Second, they are amazed at his gracious words. And the literal reading of the Greek is that they are amazed at his words of grace.

They're amazed at his words of grace. In other words, they're amazed at words he speaks of God's grace. The third element in this verse hints that there's a slight reluctance, resistance and doubt. They say, is not this Joseph's son? So this verse tells us that the people here like his words. He speaks well.

His message is one of God's grace. But they really are not sure that a local lad can be the one spoken of by Isaiah. Now, verse 23.

Verse 23 indicates that Jesus picks up their doubt and their unbelief. And I think he decides, well, I'm just going to push a little bit on this. So he pushes them a bit further. And look at what he does. First, he quotes a proverb about physicians.

[9 : 42] What he's saying is, look, any physician, any doctor needs to prove himself by their deeds. And he then goes on to say that he feels the skepticism of the people will eventually show itself up in a similar way with him.

That is, they will want to test him by his deeds. Eventually, it will show up in them wanting concrete deeds from him rather than just claims that he's certain people. And so on. They will really want to see some action.

And the deeds they will want are miracles and the like, such as what he has done in Capernaum. Then in verses 24 to 27, Jesus pushes them yet more.

And he uses a phrase that highlights particular important truth. He says to them, I tell you the truth. And then he tells them that their doubt about him is common among God's people.

And he goes on to say, look, God's prophets have often not been accepted in their own hometowns. Now, I think what Jesus means is that God's prophets have often not been accepted by God's people.

[10 : 45] It's not just he's a local boy. I think he's having a go at them. God's people have often not accepted God's word from God's prophets. And he then goes on to give two examples.

He hones in on one or two of the most significant Old Testament prophets. First, he talks about Elijah. And the point he makes here is, look, there are lots and lots of widows in Israel.

However, Elijah was sent to a Gentile woman. And then he goes on to speak about Elisha, Elijah's successor. And he makes the point that there were many people who suffered leprosy or their skin disease in Israel.

However, however, only one was cleansed. And he was a Gentile, Naaman the Syrian that we read about in two kings. So there's an overview of the passage yet again.

Now, let's think exactly about what Jesus is saying. You see, the time of Elijah and Elisha was a time in the history of God's people when the people of Israel and their leaders were notoriously sinful.

[11 : 55] They were into idolatry and sin. But the people of God and their rulers rejected the prophets when they saw a prophet coming. They did not like it because he was going to tell them what was right.

And they did not like what was right. They were proud. They refused to listen. And so they were cut off from the blessing of hearing God's word. They were cut off from the associated blessings that came from hearing the word of God's prophets.

But there were two people who were outside of God's people who modeled to God's people what should be done with a prophet of God. And these outsiders heard some of the most unlikely words from God's prophets.

Like Naaman the Syrian. It's a terribly unlikely word. Go and bathe in the river Jordan. And he says, I've got better rivers at home. Why this one? But his servants get it right, don't they?

Say, go and bathe in it anyway. What harm can it do you? And he does. And he's cleansed. You see, they listen. And as a result, they are blessed by God's grace as a result.

[13:02] So let me tell you these stories again. Widow Zarephath. It's told, the story is told in 1 Kings 17 verses 7 to 24. And there is a drought. There's a drought and it's surrounding the whole of the country where Elijah is staying at the time.

And God says to him, go to Zarephath, which is outside the land of Israel. And there is a widow there. And she'll look after you. And Elijah arrives at the widow's place and asks for food and water. And the widow explains that all the food she has is enough for a final meal for her and her son. And then they will just die. So she says, well, you know, she's really saying to him, you're really pushing it here.

You know, that's all I've got. But hospitality in the ancient world was so important. And anyway, Elijah says, look, I will use that to make bread. And he then tells her that for the duration of the drought, her food reserves of flour and oil will never run out.

Never run out. So the widow does exactly what Elijah says. And it turns out just as he said. And then her son becomes critically ill and finally stops breathing.

[14:13] And again, Elijah cries out to God for this woman and her son. And he asked that God would have mercy on this lad.

And God hears. And the life of the boy is restored. He miraculously comes back to life. Now, let me tell you just again, remind you about that first part of the story of Naaman the Syrian.

He's from the commander of the army of the king of Aram. He's a great and important man. This is a wonderful little story, isn't it? And as far as the king of Aram is concerned, he'd like to have this man restored and healthy again.

The problem is he suffers from this skin disease. And Naaman hears about Elijah's ability. He lished the help of his master. A letter sent to the king of Israel. It's a wonderful little letter, isn't it? You get this letter and it says, oh, please heal the person I've just sent to you.

It's an incurable disease. So what are you going to do? And so the king says, you know, what am I doing? You know, am I just the sort of clearinghouse for lepers? Anyway, Elisha hears.

[15:16] Naaman is sent for. Elisha tells him to go and dip seven times in the River Jordan.

Nathan's affronted. And anyway, you know the rest of the story. He dips in the River Jordan and he's healed. Now, there are two stories.

Now, think about them for a moment. The thing I want to point out to you is firstly the things that these stories do not have in common. Can you see what they do not have in common?

First, let's think about the widow for a moment. What's her status in life? What is she like? She's poor, isn't she? She's utterly resourceless.

What about Naaman? What's he like? Well, he's actually quite rich. He's in a key position in the Syrian government. In other words, these two people are at opposite ends of the social scale. However, these two stories about these two people do have a number of things in common. Can you think of what they are? First, both Zarephath and Naaman are not Jews.

[16:18] They are not people who have access to God. They are, in other words, not spiritually rich. They are spiritually impoverished. In the New Testament, Paul talks about it as being without hope and without God in the world.

Second, both the widow Zarephath and Naaman were asked to trust God's prophets without having seen them do any miraculous signs before.

They just were told, do this. And they do. They were asked to trust God's prophets in something that seemed incredibly stupid. In the widow's case, she was asked during a famine to use the very last skerricks of food that she had to make a cake for a prophet.

And with his promise that everything would be okay. That's a big stretch, isn't it? You've got only this bit of food left. The prophet says, make a cake, it'll all be okay. And make it for me. In Naaman's case, he was asked to go and dip this seven times in the river to heal a leprosy, where there are many other rivers around the world.

Both of them, though, did the incredible. You see, both of them put aside their unbelief and their scepticism. And against all odds, they believed and obeyed.

[17:33] Both of them trusted God's word to them from God's prophet. And both of them were looked after by God. Now, I think the point Jesus is making here is crystal clear.

He is saying, God blesses these spiritually poor people because they've put aside their arrogance and humbled themselves before God. And called out to him in helplessness and said, yes, I will do this.

I will trust you. It's more than I can think would ever happen. But I will trust you. I will trust the word of your prophets. And listen to what they say at the end of the encounter.

The widow says this in 1 Kings 17 verse 24. Now I know that you're a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth.

And Naaman says in 2 Kings 5.15, now I know that there is no God in all the world except Israel.

[18 : 34] Now, can you see what Jesus has done? The local lad has turned up to his peers. He's turned up among his family and friends and the people who know him well.

He's announced, I'm God's means for blessing the world and the people of God. And they have become arrogant and disbelieving. They have lined up behind their ancestors from the Old Testament.

Moreover, and while they're in that state, they will never be able to be healed, you see. While they line up in arrogance, they will never be able to be healed. They will never be able to be blessed.

For Isaiah made clear in Isaiah 61 that the Messiah is anointed to preach good news to whom? To the poor. He has sent him to proclaim freedom for the prisoners.

He has sent him to proclaim recovery of sight for whom? For the blind. He has come to release whom? The oppressed. And the people of Nazareth refused to put themselves in those categories.

[19 : 41] The Jews finally understand when he tells them the story about Naaman and the story about the widow of Zarephath. They finally get it. The penny drops. He's a local. He's not a local lad.

He's the Messiah. And he's saying that they are spiritually poor. And they need to hear his words. No wonder they're furious because a local lad has just told them, you're not rich. You're not God's rich people.

You are God's poor people. And I've come to help you. I've come to be a doctor for you. No wonder they seek to kill him. But they fail.

And just as God miraculously protected his people, his prophets Elijah and Elisha, so he protects this prophet, this Messiah, Jesus. And Jesus walks through the crowd and he goes on his way.

So can you hear? It's very important to understand this. This is not just a drop in a pan, this passage. It is incredibly strong. Can you hear what Jesus is saying to these Jews?

[20 : 41] He's saying to them, you are in great, great danger. You are in great danger because you think you are not spiritually poor. You think you're not sick.

And people who don't think that they are sick will not seek the help of a doctor even though this is what they desperately need. Well friends, I hope you've understood what's going on here.

If you do, then you will understand what Jesus is saying when he uses Isaiah's prophecy. You see, I think that we moderns are in so much danger of totally missing the point of this prophecy.

You see, we read it and I've heard so many sermons on this passage. We read it and we turn it into a prophecy about other people, don't we? We read it and turn it into a prophecy about the materially poor.

It's about those in literal prisons. It's about those who are physically blind. It's about those who are politically and socially oppressed. Friends, I think that there are verses in the Bible that address all of those issues.

[21 : 45] Amos, which I'm sure we'll preach through sometime here, does address those things.

And God is concerned about those people. But that's not the thrust of this passage. That's not what Jesus is saying here.

He is speaking primarily about the spiritually poor, the spiritually imprisoned, the spiritually blind, the spiritually oppressed. And he is saying that that is who we are and his hearers are.

This passage, friends, is about us. And people who are spiritually poor need to hear the gospel.

That is the point of verse 18.

Jesus has been anointed and appointed to preach the gospel to whom? To the poor. To the spiritually poor. It's the gospel that the spiritually poor need.

The physically poor need material aid. The spiritually poor need spiritual aid. And that aid is the great news about Jesus Christ and his death for them.

[22 : 48] Now, let me push this home. I'm sure in a group this size, there are some of you here who are probably not yet Christians. And if that's you, I want you to hear what Jesus is saying, because it's a very salutary point.

He's saying that you are spiritually poor. And you need a doctor. You need some help. You need medicine. He's begging you in this passage to realise your state and to come to the physician for help. Please, please, friends, don't get angry like these people did. Don't get angry with this, because Jesus is saying these things for your good. He's saying it for your good. He longs to help you be right with God. But the only way to become Christian is to recognise you are spiritually impoverished.

There is no other way. Every person who is a Christian has at some point in their existence said, I am helpless. I cannot help myself.

[23 : 54] Please, God, help me. To become a Christian, you need to come to God and say, I know where I am. I know my real position. And my real position is, I need your help.

So I come to you. And I come to your son. And I trust that your son has done everything that I need in order to be related to you. And I'm going to hang on to that.

I'm going to give up all my pretensions for greatness and goodness and rely on you and your son. That's what a Christian is. That's what a Christian does.

And that's what a Christian does from the beginning of their existence to their end. But let me say that there's also a message here for those of us who are Christians.

You see, if you're a Christian, I want to remind you of how you became one. You became a Christian because you realised you were poor and needy. You realised that you needed a position and that you were ill.

[24 : 53] You realised you were in the situation of Zarephath, of the widow of Zarephath and of Naaman the Syrian. And you heard, someone told you those incredible words about Jesus.

And in hope against hope, you said, I'm going to believe that. I'm going to trust that. I'm going to depend upon that. And you put aside your pride and you came to Jesus.

Jesus. And he gave you the right to become a child of God. Friends, this is how you became Christian. And let me tell you, this is how you go on being Christian.

Friends, don't get sucked in by the gossip columns. Christian or non-Christian. Don't be conned by the Christian pin-up women and men. Don't long for recognition.

Long to grow in meekness and humility. Long to be a slave of the Lord Jesus Christ. For the topsy-turvy world of the kingdom of Christ is such a world where the poor are the rich, where the slaves are the masters, where the last are the first, where the children are the parents, and where the followers are the leaders.

[26 : 06] It is an upside-down world. It is not that world you see in the gossip columns. It is not that world that you see amongst the great ones of our world. To place yourself anywhere else but in the place of a child, a helpless babe, is to place yourself in extreme danger.

Can you see and hear what I'm saying? We need to recognise that we can bring nothing to God. There is nothing that I can bring Him that makes me worthy of His acceptance.

Our riches are but filthy rags before Him. Our status, our giftedness, our heritage, our education, our degrees, our achievements, our abilities, our spirituality, all of these have the words My or Our before them.

They are all about me. And God requires poverty of spirit if I'm to enter and live in relationship with Him. So let me urge you to have that for that will make you truly rich.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Father, forgive us for the filthy rags we worship and the filthy rags we parade before You.

[27 : 31] Father, please help us to bring a poverty of spirit before You. Please help us to recognise that we come before You as those who are ill and in need of a physician.

And Father, please heal us as You did with Naaman the Syrian and as You did when we first asked You to forgive us. Thank You for all that You have done for us in the Lord Jesus Christ, that great physician.

please help us to cling to Him all of life and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.