

Voice for the Unheard

Well good morning everybody. If you've got a bible, turn with me to **Luke 7**. If you're new around here, my name is Kent and I'm the **primary teaching pastor** here at City Church. Which I realize might sound odd if you've only been coming around for the last few weeks, considering I haven't been up here during this portion of the Gathering. For those three weeks, we've actually had other members of our pastoral staff and teaching team up here sharing from the Scriptures. And before we dive in, I just wanted to say a quick word of thanks, publicly, to each of them. We are incredibly blessed as a church to have multiple people who can get up here on Sundays and teach from the Scriptures. And that's a *huge* blessing to me personally, so that I can have weeks off, to simply sit *under* the teaching of someone else. Which I think is an extremely important thing for pastors to do—that's a teaching for a different day.

But it's **also a huge blessing to our church** to have other people up here teaching. Especially during *this* series, I think other members of our teaching team really brought some personal *experience* to their teachings that I just didn't have and wouldn't have been able to bring. **Even just last week, Eric talking about his experience as a "foreigner" and how that informs his reading of passages in the bible where God is described as protecting the foreigner—I just felt like that helped those passages come alive to me in a whole new way.** And Marcus and Jeff were able to do that in their own ways as well. So all that to say, **if you see those guys**, maybe just give them a quick word of thanks for that. It's been a great few weeks on that front.

But all that said, this morning, **I'm going to wrap up** our **series** called *Good News for All People*. In this series, we're talking about how the gospel is good news *specifically* for different *vulnerable* groups of people in our world: people like the *widow*, the *poor*, the *orphan*, and the *foreigner*. And **this week**, we're going to close out by talking about a group of people we're just calling the *unheard*. And we're drawing that idea from passages like the one you just heard read in Proverbs 31. I'm gonna read it again, but this time I'm gonna read it from the *Common English* translation of the bible.

*Speak out on behalf of the **voiceless** (the *unheard*), and for the **rights of all who are vulnerable**. Speak out **in order to judge with righteousness and to defend the needy and the poor**.*

That passage, really, **summarizes** what we've been talking about the past five weeks: being motivated by God's character, and by the message of the gospel itself, to advocate and defend and provide for vulnerable groups of people in our world. And that's what has *motivated* the partnerships with various organizations this Christmas: these are

organizations that are already doing that type of work, and who we can lock arms with in those efforts.

But *part of* doing all *that*, these verses say, is “*speaking out*” on *behalf* of a group of people called “the *voiceless*.” It looks like identifying those in our world who often don’t get a *voice*. Who often don’t have the cultural influence required to be *heard*, and advocating for them to *be* heard. One of the most difficult parts of belonging to some of these groups of vulnerable people is the degree to which you often feel *invisible*: like your needs and preferences don’t even *matter*. Like your voice doesn’t even get *heard*. And as followers of Jesus, part of embodying this good news for all people is being a sort of *amplifier* for the voices of those people. ~~Not speaking *instead* of them, but doing everything in our power to help ensure that *their voices* get heard.~~ Does that make sense?

Okay. So *one of the partnerships* we’ve formed to help do this is with an organization called *Raising a Voice*. Some of you may have heard of them—they actually run Likewise Coffee shop in East Knoxville. But as you can tell from the *name* of their organization, their mission is to do precisely what Proverbs 31 talks about: they “raise a voice” for people whose voices often go unheard. And *one* voice that goes *unheard* often is the voice of women in the sex industry. So Raising a Voice is an anti-trafficking nonprofit. They work with women who are being sexually exploited right here in Knoxville, as well as *internationally* in places like Argentina, Indonesia, Rwanda, and Kenya.

Now, what’s interesting to me is that there has been a *recent push* in modern societies to try and *de-stigmatize* the sex industry: to insist that it’s just a normal job like any other job. But what that narrative tends to *ignore* is the amount of exploitation, misogyny, and abuse that *pervades* the sex industry—at levels far *higher* than any other job. So here in the states, *conservative* estimates show that around 80% of prostituted women and girls are survivors of childhood sexual abuse. 92% of trafficked women report being *subjected* to physical violence in their line of work such as being shot, strangled, burned, beaten, stabbed, or punched. Trafficked women nearly *always* live at or below the poverty line, while their pimps and facilitators make an *average* of \$670,000 a year.¹ **The world of sex trafficking is a world where, *by and large*, men call the shots while women’s voices go unheard and ignored.** So obviously, *this is a specific area where* the call for us to “speak out for the unheard” as followers of Jesus is vitally important.

So to help, this Sunday, we asked you to bring toiletry items that Raising a Voice can deliver directly to exploited women through their drop-in center. This is a way to help

¹ Source for stats [here](#).

bestow dignity on these women, in hopes that Raising a Voice can gain trust and help these women in even longer-lasting ways. Providing basic health items is one step in a complex, multi-step process of raising a voice for these unheard women. So we're doing what we can to *help* with those efforts.

But what I wanted to do **with our teaching this morning** is this. As we've discussed throughout the series, **Jesus is our inspiration and model** for all of this. *He* is our inspiration for what it looks like to "raise a voice" for unheard people. It was *his* advocacy for *us* as sinners that made a relationship with God possible. And it was *his* raising a voice for vulnerable groups of people that laid the groundwork for *us* doing the same thing. **So I thought what might be helpful this morning is for us to look at one specific example of Jesus doing just that: a place where Jesus himself raises a voice for the unheard in his society.**

And in many ways, **that's what Luke 7 is all about.** In this passage, Jesus actually interacts with a woman from the sex industry of *his* day. And he interacts with her *in the company* of a group of men who are inclined to ignore her dignity and worth as an image bearer of God. And I think there is *so much* we can learn from how Jesus goes about this interaction. So take a look with me. Luke 7, beginning in v. 36:

[36] When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table.

So a Pharisee invites Jesus over for dinner (which to me, sounds like the beginning of a bible joke, but it's not. This is an actual account of Jesus' life). If you're *newer* to the bible, **the Pharisees were** the ruling religious elite of the day. Men of prestige. Respected. And generally, men with a good bit of cultural clout and influence. One of *them* invites Jesus over to his house. Now, we find out later that there were *more* people at that dinner, most likely several more *Pharisees*. But the one that invites Jesus is named *Simon*. So they're all at Simon's house, having dinner together, and an unexpected guest shows up—v. 37:

[37] A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume.

Now back then, people's homes sometimes didn't have *doors* on them at all, and often would just have large holes cut in them as windows. So *theoretically*, anybody could just wander in. And in this story, a woman wanders in who had "lived a sinful life." In all likelihood, this was a delicate way of saying that **she was a prostitute**. And her carrying around a jar of perfume would seem to confirm that. Prostitutes were known for carrying

around perfume with them. Often, it was their only possession, and a very practical one at that. In a society that existed before daily showers and soap and deodorant, *perfume* was *crucial*. She could apply it to her clients to make her job more bearable, to conceal some of their smell—and to *herself*, so that she didn't bear the stench of all the men she had been with on a typical day. So this perfume was her most *valuable* possession, both by *price* and by *usefulness*.

But in the story, **this woman—a prostitute—wanders into** the dinner party between Jesus and the Pharisees. **Now, for a second, I just need you to stop and think about the social dynamics at play here.** The *Pharisees* in the room were respected, accepted, looked up to. People wanted to *be* them and be *like* them. // *Meanwhile*, the experience of this *woman* was most assuredly one of *shame* and *rejection*. Likely rejection by her ex-husband or men in general that *forced her* into prostitution, and then *more* rejection by society at large *because of* her profession. No decent person in society would speak to this woman, or even *listen* to her if she were to begin speaking to *them*. Much less would they *welcome* her into their *home*. The only doors that ever open for *her* are at night, in secret and in shame.²

But she has likely heard of the man named **Jesus** from Nazareth by now. She's heard of his acceptance of people from *all* walks of life, *even* those marked by rejection and shame, like her. And so the thought occurs to her: "If I can just get to *Jesus*, maybe—just *maybe*—he will accept *me* too." So she *knows* that this dinner with Pharisees present isn't her scene—she knows that she will likely be scoffed at and maybe kicked out—but this is her one *shot* at meeting Jesus. And so despite all societal norms, she wanders into the house. Verse 38:

[38] As she stood *behind him* [that's Jesus] at his *feet* weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

Now to make sense of this detail in the story, you have to **know some specifics on how people ate meals** in the ancient world. Try not to think of your dinner table at home with chairs around it—that's usually not how it looked. Back *then*, you ate reclining on the *floor* (or maybe on a pillow or cushion *on* the floor). And the table was low, near the ground. So you leaned towards the table on one arm, while your feet faced *outwards*, *away* from the table. So it would've looked something like *this*. This is a depiction of a dinner party like the one in this story. All of these men are very *white*—so *that* part isn't accurate at all to first-century Jewish culture, but the rest *is*. So my point is that when the passage says

² I owe much of this description to John Ortberg's chapter on the passage, in his book *Everybody's Normal Until You Get to Know Them*.

that this woman was *behind* Jesus while he was at the table, it means exactly that. All the men are facing the table, with their feet behind them, and this woman approaches Jesus' feet from behind.

Now as she does that, **she immediately begins to weep.** This is likely a combination of the brokenness and exploitation she's been through, but also the *shock* at actually being within *inches* of this man who might offer the acceptance she's always longed for. Her tears begin to fall on Jesus' feet, so she begins to wipe them with her hair. Now remember: most places consisted of dirt roads and people either went barefoot or wore open-toed sandals. So Jesus' feet are likely *disgusting*. And yet, this is what she does. She cleans his feet, kisses them, and then uses her perfume—her most valuable possession—on them.

Now **notice that in all of this,** the passage doesn't record this woman saying so much as a word. Isn't that interesting? I mean try to imagine somebody wanders into your house uninvited, and starts interacting with people there without saying a word. That'd be a little awkward, right? That's what happens here. But some of it is due, again, to the dynamics at play. This is a patriarchal society: some men didn't even speak publicly to *women* who weren't in their *family*. There was also a *religious* dimension to it: these men were Torah-observant Jews, and she very obviously was not. And then there's a *moral* dimension: as we're about to see, these men were disgusted by a woman of her moral reputation being present at their dinner party. They were likely nervous that if people walked by and saw this woman at the table with them, *their* moral reputation would be ruined as a result.

We see **all of this tension embodied in Simon's comment**—look with me at v. 39:

[39] *When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he **said to himself**, "If this man were a **prophet, he would know** who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner."*

Notice how Simon **can't even bring himself to address the woman directly.** Won't even give her the dignity of acknowledging her. He simply *scoffs* at her presence there. He talks and thinks *past* her, in the third person, like she is some sort of inanimate object in the whole situation. To Simon, this woman is little more than a prop for his *fuming* about Jesus' behavior. So he either utters this comment *about* her under his breath or thinks it in his mind. Either way, Jesus is aware of it. Verse 40:

[40] *Jesus answered him, "**Simon, I have something to tell you.**" "Tell me, teacher," he said.*

So to me, this is **brilliantly worded by Luke**, the author of this book. Simon's dig has just implied that Jesus *isn't* truly a *prophet*, or else he would *know* who this woman is who's interacting with him. But then, Jesus *responds* to this comment about him not being a prophet by *reading Simon's thoughts*. That's pretty prophet-like, isn't it? Jesus knows exactly what Simon is thinking, and in order to confront it, he is going to **launch into the sort of parable** he was *notorious* for telling, v. 41:

[41] "Two people owed **money** to a certain **moneylender**. One owed him **five hundred denarii**, and the other **fifty**. [For **context, that's approximately** two years' wages, versus two *months'* wages. So think about the difference between what you make in *two years*, versus what you make in a *couple months*. That's the difference we're talking about here.] [42] **Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?**" [43] Simon replied, "I **suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.**"

Very simple illustration, yes? Very simple question to answer, yes? But I think Simon is already starting to see where this is going—and he doesn't particularly *like* the side of the parable he finds himself on. This is not a complicated question for Simon to answer. *Very, very obviously*, the one who has *ten times more* of a debt forgiven is going to love the lender *more*. But Simon is having a hard time answering the question because he doesn't like the *implication* of the answer. But *reluctantly* he answers, "the one who had the bigger debt forgiven." So then Jesus says to Simon, last part of v. 43...

"**You have judged correctly,**" Jesus said. **Now, I want you to pay very careful attention to the specifics of what happens next in the passage.** You ready? Verse 44... [44] Then he **turned toward the woman and said to Simon,**

Okay, so **this is where** I need to remind us all that, when you read the bible, the bible doesn't have a habit of including *unnecessary* detail. The gospel writers didn't throw stuff in there just for kicks. They didn't have a word count quota they had to meet. There's something *important* being communicated in the details we just heard, and I want to try and show you what it is.

So, **remember: Jesus and everybody at the dinner party are leaning in towards the table.** The woman is at Jesus' *feet*, away from the table. She's on the outside (both literally and figuratively). Jesus and the Pharisees are the people of *status* at the dinner, she's the unwanted *intruder*. They're *important*; she's *unimportant*. They have a *voice*; she *does not* have a voice. Are you following?

But then, here, something *changes*. It says that at this specific moment in the story, Jesus “turned *toward* the woman.” In order to do that, he would have to essentially turn his *back* towards every Pharisee at the dinner party, *including* Simon. So all of a sudden, *she* is accepted, *they* are rejected. *She’s* the person of interest; *they’re* the intruders. *She’s important*; they are simply in the *audience*. And Jesus is about to *give* her a voice. Continue with me in the second part of v. 44. Jesus says:

[Simon:] Do you see this woman?

Okay, there is **so much being said in that one short question**, “do you see this woman?” Because obviously, Jesus doesn’t just mean “can you literally see with your eyes that she’s here?” *Of course* Simon can see that. She’s in his house, and he’s already making *comments* about her under his breath. Of course he *sees* that she’s *there*. But Jesus doesn’t mean can you *physically* see her; he means “do you see her?” “Do you *perceive* her as a human being? As a person with a story. With a soul. With dignity and honor and worth as an image bearer of God? Simon, do you see her like *that*?” “Would you have a conversation with her? Would you listen to her and see her as an equal? Would you let her sit at this dinner table and share a meal with you?” And the implication in asking the question, obviously, is that he doesn’t. Simon does not see this woman as an equal at all.

Some of you know from personal experience what it feels like to be physically present somewhere, and yet still not *seen* by the people there. Some of you know what it feels like to be *present* in someone’s life, while at the same time being barely acknowledged by them. Being seen as less than, unimportant, insignificant; and not worthy of people’s *time or effort or attention or affection*. That’s what Jesus is drawing out here. Simon *sees* the woman *present*, sure. But at the same time, he doesn’t see her at all. He’s not acknowledging her, he doesn’t want her there, he doesn’t want her to be there. He actually wants Jesus to identify who she is and dismiss her, kick her out. In his mind, *he* belongs there and *she* doesn’t. *He’s* having an important dinner with Jesus of Nazareth, and *she* is just an interruption.

But Jesus is about to turn all of that on its head, continuing in v. 44, Jesus says to Simon:

I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. [45] You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. [46] You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet.

What Jesus cycles through here are all very **basic, minimal signs of hospitality** that Simon has omitted. Again because of the dirty roads, when someone came to your house, you would usually have one of your kids or a household servant wash their feet. Simon didn't even give Jesus a basin of water to wash his *own* feet. You would kiss your guest as a greeting, but Simon gave no kiss at all. You would often give your guest oil for their head, but Simon didn't do that either. Simon neglects to show Jesus even the minimum threshold of hospitality as a guest in his home.

So **this would be like me** inviting you over to my house to get to know you for the first time, and when you show up, you knock, and I yell "door's open, food's in the kitchen" from my recliner ~~where I'm watching football~~. I make you go grab it yourself, and then say nothing to you during dinner as we sit in front of the TV. Everything Simon does communicates a complete lack of interest and even basic decency towards Jesus. **Jesus contrasts that posture** with that of the woman. She has done all the things Simon *neglected* to do, even though she has far fewer resources than Simon does. Simon has no excuse, the woman has every excuse. And yet she has shown tremendous love and welcome towards Jesus, *despite* how little resources she has.

Which **brings us to Jesus' conclusion**—his grand finale:

*[47] Therefore, I tell you, her **many sins** have been **forgiven**—as her **great love** has **shown**. But whoever has been forgiven **little loves little**."*

So Jesus **takes the unacknowledged**, the voiceless, the unheard and unseen in the room, and **holds her up as an example**. He lifts her up as a beautiful picture of what it means to love God and experience his grace and forgiveness. He not only *defends* and *legitimizes* her actions, but inverts every power dynamic present in the room. The *men* become those who need to learn from the actions of a *woman*. The religious become the ones who apparently have no religious devotion. The morally *upright* become morally *bankrupt*, while the sinful woman displays a true, authentic, *extravagant* love for God. Jesus doesn't just stop at "hey calm down Simon—it's *okay* for her to be here." He goes a step further. *He* says, "*this* is what a righteous life *looks* like. This woman, who all of you won't even acknowledge, understands far more about God's mercy and forgiveness than you do. *You* should *learn* from *her*."

And then he **does** what no one has done in the story yet: he speaks to *her*, directly. Verse 48:

[48] Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

“Your sins are forgiven. **Everything you’ve done,** everything you’re ashamed of, everything you’ve been told boxes you out of the kingdom and family of God, everything that feels like it has followed you and defined you for the past who-knows-how-many years of your life. *All* of that has been *forgiven*. Taken *care* of. It’s all gone. It’s not who you are anymore. It’s not what you’re about. It’s not what defines you. You have been granted *complete* and total *pardon* from the king of the universe, and complete and total welcome into his family. *You are forgiven.*”

[49] *The other guests began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?”* That’s the *Pharisee* way of saying “you can’t do that, Jesus!” The dinner party is now in an uproar. These Pharisees demand to know why Jesus just did what he did, and by what authority he claims to do it. Jesus ignores all of this and simply says [50] ~~Jesus said to the woman,~~ “*Your faith has saved you; go in peace.*”

So *this* is **how Jesus treats the unheard.** *This* is how Jesus interacts with the voiceless. *This* is how he speaks up for those who aren’t being seen and aren’t being heard. *This* is how he acknowledges the forgotten and overlooked. *This is the God we serve.* And when passages like Proverbs 31 say that we too should speak out on behalf of the unheard—*this* is what they mean. When the Scriptures say that we should *join* God in advocating for the marginalized, *this* is what they mean. They mean giving *dignity* where society does not. They mean giving *honor* where others do not. Giving *acceptance* where others do not.

And as we’ve been saying throughout this series, and will say again, **this all comes from** realizing that Jesus has done that for *us*. He has come to us in our brokenness, in our sin, in our rebellion, in our brokenness, in our trauma—and has extended his healing hand of forgiveness to *us*. Precisely because he has done that for us, we can and should do that for others.

So **although this is an odd passage** to cover at Christmas time, I would say it is actually a *perfect* Christmas passage. Because for followers of Jesus, what we celebrate around Christmas is what theologians call the *incarnation* of Jesus. In other words, the idea that God put on flesh and came into the world as the man Jesus. And what more perfect way to reflect on the incarnation than observing how Jesus interacts with the voiceless? The unheard.

When we look at Jesus in this story, we are seeing the *incarnation* of God. We’re seeing God’s heart and God’s posture towards the broken, in flesh and blood. We’re seeing a living, breathing, example of everything we’ve talked about in this series when it comes

to God's heart for the vulnerable. If you want to see how God feels about those who are unheard in our society, you simply need to see a passage like this one. This is who our God is, and this is what he does.

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And remember: for followers of Jesus, the incarnation **isn't just something we remember and celebrate at Christmas**; it's something we celebrate every single day of our lives. We *celebrate* it by remembering what Jesus did for us, and we *embody* it when we put on that posture towards others. Every time we care for the sick, we sacrifice for the poor, we lift up the broken, we give voice to the unheard—we are remembering and celebrating the incarnation: the day that God himself put on flesh to save, to help, and to heal.

So as we mentioned at the beginning of this series, **even though our partnership with these organizations began** with bringing these items each week, that's not where it ends. Our LifeGroups individually and our church as a whole will *continue* these partnerships into the coming years. We'll give, we'll serve, we'll meet whatever needs we can meet. But we'll do it all because of the incarnation: because this is who our God is, and this is who he's made us, by his grace. We don't just celebrate the incarnation at Christmas: we celebrate it every day that we follow Jesus into the brokenness of our world.

Can we pray together that God would make us into those kinds of people?