

Luke 7:11-17

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[0 : 00] to say in the face of death? When I pose that question, I'm not talking about some abstract philosophical response to the concept or the reality of death and what do we make of it, but rather to death as it is painfully experienced by those who lose a loved one.

What to say? What words to use? What to say to that distraught widow, to that grieving orphan, to that heartbroken husband or wife or partner? What to say in the face of death?

I'm sure many of us have struggled to find the right words and often have failed to find them. Our words can seem so trite. Imagine for a moment, imagine a grieving mother at the funeral of her only son. How do the words, as a possibility of what you might say, how do the words don't cry register on the insensitivity scale? Those words would seem to merit a place on a top ten of what not to say to a grieving mother list. Don't cry. Well, of course she should cry. There is a time to cry, and the death of your only son would certainly be such a time. You might say, well, would anybody be so insensitive as to actually say such a thing to a distraught mother at the funeral of her only son? Well, actually, yes, Jesus said precisely those words to a mother in those circumstances. And let's read the occasion when He said those words in Luke's gospel, chapter 7, and reading from verse 11. Luke chapter 7, reading from verse 11. It's on page 1035 in the Bible. The gospel of Luke chapter 7, reading from verse 11. And take note of the words that Jesus addresses to this grieving mother.

Soon afterwards, Jesus went to a town called Naim, and His disciples and a large crowd went along with Him. As He approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out, the only son of His mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, His heart went out to her, and He said, Don't cry. Then He went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, Young man, I say to you, get up. The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to His mother. They were all filled with awe and praised God. A great prophet has appeared among us, they said. God has come to help His people. This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country. The Word of God. Don't cry. Don't cry. What can we say about these, in the circumstances, seemingly bizarre words? Remember that when these words are pronounced, the mother knows nothing of what is about to happen. What can we make of these words that Jesus addresses to this woman? Don't cry.

[4 : 28] The manner in which we want to consider this, the manner in which we want to tackle our consideration of these words, don't cry, is by imagining how the woman herself might have responded to the words of Jesus. Now, we're not given this information. We are going to be, in a sense, speculating on the kind of questions she could have reasonably asked Jesus in the light of such an exhortation. Don't cry.

All this, of course, before the wonderful miracle takes place. How might this woman, very reasonably, if she had been able to do so through the tears, what kind of questions could she have asked this man, who, as she is walking before the corpse of her only son, tells her, don't cry? There are three questions that she could very reasonably have asked. She didn't ask them, but she could very reasonably have asked through her tears. The first question she could have posed to Jesus was, do you know what I'm going through? You say to me, don't cry. Do you know? Do you appreciate? Do you understand what I'm going through, that you would say such a thing? That's the first question. I want to think a little bit about that and what the response would be. A second question this woman could very reasonably have asked is, do you really care? Do you really care? Who are you anyway?

What do you care about concerning my situation? Do you really care? And then a third question she could have asked, why shouldn't I cry? You say to me, don't cry. Well, why shouldn't I cry, given the situation I'm in? Why shouldn't I cry? You say don't cry. Let's think of these three questions. Do you

know what I'm going through? You tell me not to cry, but look at me.

You see, the situation of this woman was tragic in the extreme. The language that we are given that describes her situation is simple, and yet in its simplicity describes a woman for whom all hope is gone. Verse 12, as he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out. And then we read these very simple words, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. The only son of his mother.

[7 : 20] How she loved her only son. She only had one son. She was surrounded perhaps by other women who had many sons, but she only had one son. In providence, she had been given only one son. Maybe she had had others and they also had died. We don't know, but there was this one son that remained alive, her only son. And she loved her son. All her love was showered on him. There was nobody else for her to love than this one son. All her hopes revolved around this one son. All her love, all her hopes around the one. All her love, all her love, all her love, all her love, all her love, all her love. And the only son of his mother, and now a dead son. But that is not all. The only son of his mother, and, as if that were not enough, and she was a widow. This woman is alone. She's destitute. She would have been considered by many as cursed. Maybe some wondered as to what the reasons for her wretched state must be. What hidden sin would explain such a cruel providence? Alone, destitute. Who would provide for her? Who would defend her? Who would love her? Who would simply be there for her? Who would accompany her? She was alone.

Alone. We might read the passage and say, well, is she actually alone? We have this funeral described, and we're told there in verse 12 that a large crowd from the town was with her. Yes, she has no husband, and now she has no son, but there seem to be others who care for her. Indeed, there's a large crowd, we are told.

Well, we don't know who made up this large crowd. No doubt among them were the required, expected, hired mourners who would give every evidence of being equally grieving and distraught, but simply going through the motions of grieving. But no doubt there were others who were there as an expression of genuine sympathy for her. The town in question was not a large town. She would have been known, her circumstances would have been known when the son died, and people found out. They would have said, oh, that is so terrible. The widow's son has died. Well, that's just an awful situation. And their hearts would have been touched by the tragedy of the situation. And so when it's time for the funeral, they're there, and they're genuinely moved, and they're genuinely concerned for her. They're sympathetic.

Now, sympathy is good, but sympathy is passing. It's passing. It doesn't generally endure.

These folks at the funeral, they would mourn for a moment. And then what would they do? Well, they would do what most people do who go to funerals and who aren't directly, immediately, intimately connected with the one who has died. They go to the funeral, and then what do they do?

[11 : 08] They get on with their lives. They get on with their lives. They have lives to live. They don't continue to mourn. She would mourn alone, and not just on this day, but on the days that would follow, were it not for this wonderful intervention that we know of, that she knew nothing of at this point.

Death claimed two victims that day, a dead one, her son, and a living one, this poor woman.

She's surrounded by people, but very much alone. Now, that is a scene that is described for us in first century Palestine 2,000 years ago, but it is a very contemporary scene.

Isolation, being alone, feeling alone, being alone is perhaps the number one problem in modern Britain.

With all our comfort and with all our advances and all our technology, yet solitude and isolation is a problem that so many have to deal with day by day, surrounded in a city such as ours, and yet alone. But never mind what the social statistics tell us that this is so.

[12 : 45] What about you? What about you? Do you, in a measure, relate to this woman? Maybe your circumstances outwardly aren't so dramatically tragic, and yet when you meet a woman who is alone, who is isolated, who is carrying a burden that others maybe know something of, but cannot carry for you, do you feel something of what this woman might have felt, alone and isolated, looking to the future with no hope? And indeed, that is another feature of her tragic situation, not only alone, but without hope. It's not just her present that is tragic. Her future is wretched, or so it would seem.

No hope, nothing to live for. What's the point? I wonder if as she walked in front of her dead son, I wonder if the thought passed through her mind, I wish I too was in a similar coffin by his side, because why would I continue to be alive? I'd rather be dead than in this funeral procession, with

my only son about to be engraved.

No hope. What's the point? Nothing to live for. Better dead than alive. I wonder how many in our city, how many who surround us on our street, in our workplace, in our families perhaps even, living normal lives, going through the motions of existing, but hope has gone. Hope has gone.

Certainly this was so for this woman. And what does Jesus say to her? He says, don't cry. Don't cry. And she rightly could have screamed, do you know what I'm going through?

And yes, Jesus knows. Jesus knew her circumstances. He knew what she was going through. He knew better than she knew herself. And he knows you. He knows you. He knows your circumstances. He knows the burden that you're carrying. He knows the tragedy that has confronted you in your life. He knows.

[15 : 23] But there's a second question that we suggested this woman might have asked Jesus in response to these words that he addresses to her. Don't cry. The second question we suggested was, do you really care? You see, the woman may have been persuaded that Jesus knew what she was going through. But so what? Everybody knew, at least in a measure, in the town of Nain, everybody knew that she had lost her son. Everybody knew that she was a widow. Everybody knew that her future was dark and bleak.

That wasn't any great novelty. No great investigation required. No great divine insight to know her circumstances. Her wretched fate was in the public domain. You don't get more public than a funeral procession at the town gate. The town gate where everybody gathered. If you wanted something to be known, you announced it at the town gate. It's the Palestinian first century equivalent of posting on YouTube.

Everybody knew her circumstances. Everybody could see what was going on in her life. Jesus knows. But this woman could say, okay, you know, but do you care? Do you really care? You tell me, don't cry. What do you care if I cry? Well, did he care? Well, what does the passage tell us? We read in verse 13, when the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her, and he said, don't cry. He saw her. He saw her. He didn't just see her circumstances. He saw her. He saw her heart. He saw her emptiness. He saw her helplessness. He saw her hopelessness. He saw her soul. He saw her. When Jesus saw her, his heart went out to her. This is powerful language that has been used to describe Jesus' reaction, emotional response, if you wish, to the circumstances of this woman. His heart went out to her. He was moved to the very depth of his heart. In a mysterious way. His heart is touched by her heart. His heart shares her grief. He not only sees and understands the grief, he feels it. He lives it. He makes it his own.

This is the incarnation experience, delving new depths. The Word became flesh. He became one of us. He experienced our sorrow. He saw her, and his heart went out to her.

[18 : 21] And friend, he cares for you with that same intensity. He cares for you with that same passion. His heart goes out to you in the same manner as it goes out to this woman.

Do you really care? Well, it's clear that Jesus does really care. But let's get back to this woman. Let's imagine that she can accept that Jesus knows what she is going through. Imagine that somehow she can get her head around the truth that he really does care.

But still, the words he speaks remain incongruous. Don't cry. You know my circumstances. I agree with that. I can accept that. You say you care, and I'm willing to somehow agree that yes, you do care. But why do you say to me, don't cry? In any case, if you care, then cry with me.

And I wonder, and we don't know, but might he have been doing just that? We don't know. But there is the third question, the final question, that this woman could very reasonably have posed to Jesus in response to his words, don't cry. She could have said, why shouldn't I cry? Why shouldn't I cry? How could Jesus say such a thing? And there are three related answers that together answer that question. Why could Jesus say such a thing? The three answers that together provide the answer are the identity of the one who speaks, who is it that is speaking, but also the purpose of the one who speaks, of Jesus, and the power of the one who speaks. Let's think of these things briefly as an answer to this woman's hypothetical question. Why shouldn't I cry? Who is it that is addressing these words? Well, Luke tells us, and it's very significant the language Luke uses to present to us the one who speaks. In verse 13, the very verse where these words are introduced, we read, when the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her, and he said, don't cry. Now, of course, we know it's Jesus. That's no great revelation. We've been looking at the story. It's obviously Jesus who's speaking.

[21 : 02] But Luke here, for the very first time in his gospel, describes Jesus as the Lord. You know, we read the Lord, and we say, well, of course, that's one of the ways Jesus was described, the way he was named, identified the Lord. But here Luke, for the first time in this gospel, uses this language to identify, to present Jesus to us, just as he is about to say to this woman, don't cry, and just as he is about to raise this corpse from the dead. And that tells us a great deal about the identity of the one who speaks.

This language that Luke uses is laden with meaning. Now, those of you who have been able to be present when we've been going through the commandments in the evening, and when we were considering the third commandment about not misusing the name of the Lord, and we were exploring, well, what is this name?

And we were able to consider this name that was revealed to Moses, or in any case, this name that was revealed again to Moses, Yahweh, I am that I am, the name that is not to be misused, the name of God.

We considered how that name, when it is translated from the Old Testament into the Greek, in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Greek word used there to translate Yahweh as kurios, the Lord. And so for Luke, a Greek-speaking Jew, when he speaks of Jesus as the Lord, this is laden with significance. He is saying this is no great rabbi, this is not simply a great prophet, as others would describe him, the very crowd who witnessed this miracle. No, Luke says, it is the Lord who speaks, don't cry. It is the Lord. It is ho kurios. It is Yahweh who addresses this woman in this way, don't cry. And so, in answer to the question, how could Jesus say such a thing? The answer is grounded in who he is. It is the Lord who says to this woman, don't cry. He is the Lord of life and death. He is the eternal Son of God who came to deal death a mortal blow, as he conquered death by his own death and resurrection. This very miracle pointing to the greater and definitive victory over death that was to come. Why could Jesus say such a thing? Because of who he is. But also because of his purpose for this woman. You see, his purpose for this woman was to give life to the woman, to give back two lives. Her son's life and her own life. Jesus knows that this is what he is going to do.

[23 : 54] He knows the end of the story. He knows the happy ending, if you wish. And so, he is able to say, don't cry. I have a purpose in this. And my purpose is to give you back your son. My purpose is to give you back your life and a better life than the one you had before. My purpose is to give you life and life in all its fullness. And so I say, don't cry. Don't cry, woman.

How could Jesus say such a thing? He could say such a thing because of who he is. He could say such a thing because of the purpose that he had for this woman. But he could say such a thing because of the power that he had to make reality his purpose. Of course, that power is because of who he is.

And so he commands new life. He went up and touched the coffin and those carrying it stood still. He said, young man, I say to you, get up. And the dead man sat up and began to talk.

His power, power to command new life. Body and spirit reunited. And the boy sits up and speaks. I wonder what he said. If we're not told, I wonder what he said. No matter. The power of Jesus to command command new life. And what does Jesus do? Perhaps the most tender moment in this passage, and we might even go further, is the words that we read there at the end of verse 15. And Jesus gave him back to his mother. Jesus didn't say to the man, follow me, become a disciple of me. No, he gave him back to his mother. His mother needed him. And he gives the boy back to his mother. What tender love for this woman to whom he had said, don't cry. Don't cry anymore. Here he is. He's alive and well. Take him home.

[26 : 09] Power to command new life. Power to wipe away every tear. And so we come back to where we began.

Don't cry. Were these trite words? Were these empty words? Were these inappropriate words? Were these insensitive words? You know the answer to those questions? And today, yes, even this morning, he comes to you. And he says to you, don't cry. Don't cry. I know your circumstances. I know the tragedy that has befallen you. I know the burden that you carry. I know. And I care. My heart goes out to you. I see and I care.

I know and feel and live your pain. I care. I care. And he says also, I have the power to give you life. To give you life in all its fullness.

To dispel your isolation and your loneliness and your hopelessness. To be with you in the midst of your pain and your tragedy. And so today, he says, don't cry.

Finally, what is the response of those who witness this command to live? Well, it's a worthy response. But it's an inadequate response. We read in verse 16, they were all filled with awe and praised God. That is good.

[28 : 00] A great prophet has appeared among us. A worthy response. You see, they see Jesus with power over death. And they think of Elijah. They think of the great prophets. And they say, another Elijah is amongst us.

A great prophet. That he can raise the dead. God has come to help his people. This is true. This is a worthy response. But it's inadequate or in any case, it's incomplete.

Because they're not able yet to understand just who this Jesus is. He is not just a great prophet.

Yes, he is a great prophet. But he is more than a prophet. A worthy response. But inadequate. And that is a dangerous mistake. And I ask you this morning, might you be guilty of that mistake?

A worthy response to Jesus. You respect Jesus. But you fail to bow down before Jesus. You're marveled by Jesus, but you keep a safe distance from Jesus. You're an admirer of Jesus, but not a worshiper of Jesus.

[29 : 13] A response that's worthy in as far as it goes, but inadequate. Before this man, you can do no other than bow the knee.

And confess with your tongue that Jesus is Lord. And follow him. And put your trust in him. The one who has conquered death and who would share resurrection life with you. That is the only response.

And so, I say to you, come to him. Come to this man, Jesus. As he would graciously whisper these same words in your ear. Don't cry. Let us pray.

Amen. Amen.