

“How Great Is Your Faith?”

Luke 7:1-10 (see parallel gospel reading on the last page of this transcript)

2/11/2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

If you look at the parallel gospel printing of today’s text in your bulletin,¹ you can notice a few differences in how Matthew and Luke tell this story. Matthew tends to tell it in sweeping and general terms. He says the Centurion asked Jesus to heal his servant and he briefly associates the messengers (carrying the request for healing) with the Centurion as if they were one and the same. Over in the Matthew column (to the left), his verse 5 says: “A Centurion came forward to Him” (that is to Jesus).

Luke, however, gives us more detail. In his verse 3, he says the Centurion first approached Jesus through Elders of the town and then a second time through some of his friends (in verse 6). All this is to point out that in the telling of the story, Matthew and Luke were using literary styles and rules that were a little different than those of today.

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A few words about some of the people in this story.

A Centurion, as you remember, was a Roman-employed military commander of 100 soldiers. He likely had authority over the National Guard troops who were local Jewish men and not Roman citizens. Galilee was not a Roman province until about fifteen years after this date. What he probably supervised was an area network of policemen and tax officers who were working for Governor Herod Antipas.

The Jewish people generally resented the Roman presence but this officer was well liked. They considered him worthy enough to ask Jesus for help. They said he loved the nation and he was responsible, in some way, for the construction of their neighborhood synagogue. The Roman commander apparently loved the ethnic traditions of the Jews and respected them as a people.

The Centurion’s servant was obviously loved by the family but was near death. This servant had probably worked in the household for years. Perhaps

he or she was the child of another servant in that home and had been raised in the household.

When Luke says he sent “Elders” to get Jesus, it means the town leaders in Capernaum. In our own terms, it might be the Town Clerk, the Mayor and the Director of Capernaum’s Parks and Services – all of whom would be prominent leaders in the synagogue.

Notice the contrast in what the Elders said about the Centurion with what he said about himself. The city planners said the commander is worthy of Jesus’ attention (in verse 4) but the Centurion claimed he was not worthy to have Jesus come under his roof (in verse 6). The soldier was humble and he was also knowledgeable about Jesus. Curiously, he was one who revered God and who exhibited a mutual respect for others. This caused the people of the town to respect him.

The gospel writers included this incident in their accounts because of his example of faith. The Centurion was in a managerial position in his career and naturally he compared his request (for Jesus to just `say the word’) with his own career experiences. In his life, decisions were regularly passed up and down through the ranks. So he was stating that Jesus is One Who was in touch with power and as a soldier, he knew exactly how power is used. He did not need Jesus to come into his home and say magic words over or pour a medical potion on the stricken servant. He believed Jesus’ word was enough from a distance. But how would this soldier ever come to know something like that? Where did he get his “great” faith?

The Centurion apparently had prior knowledge of what Jesus had been doing elsewhere because he certainly did not come up with that in speculation. His faith was based on previous knowledge which produced a trust in what Jesus could do. Our faith in God today is based on our knowledge of Jesus Christ and we approach our future with a faith which looks back on our previous experiences.

This Roman leader, in some way, had experienced Jesus in another context but what that was remains unknown. Only twice, in the recorded life

¹ or at the end of this sermon transcript

of Jesus, do we hear that Jesus *marveled* at the greatness of a person's faith – here and on the occasion when He met the Syrophenician² woman (up the coast) who also had asked Jesus to heal her daughter without a house visit. In both cases the individuals were Gentiles.³

Time after time, Luke shows Jesus using Gentile-related illustrations and demonstrating an ever increasing ministry to societies beyond the Jews (as we have been talking about in these studies in Luke). In Luke's gospel, we've noticed his clear interest in Jesus' movement *outward* to the Gentiles and we see the culmination of the organized Church spreading throughout the Gentile world in Luke's second book entitled Acts. It is no coincidence, then, that the very first Gentile convert in Acts is a Roman soldier.⁴ This passage, then, fits into one of Luke's major themes or interests in the universal direction of the Gospel – a good news that is intended for all people.



In confirmation classes and any group which discusses spiritual matters in life, we talk about the nature of our faith. We discuss what it means to have faith in a person. We usually talk about how that faith in a person involves a trust, a belief and a confidence in that individual.

We next discuss what it means to have faith in Christ and the parallel is obvious. As Christians, we trust in Christ because we believe in the reliability of God's character as witnessed in Scriptures and in our experiences in somehow sensing the reality of the love of God for us. At various points in our lives, we come to know the reality of the presence of God in our life. We come to know God is (and has been) involved in our own life but how this comes to us is different for everyone.

That Roman Centurion had faith in Christ and when his servant became critically ill, the first thing he thought of was to ask Jesus for help. It was an

² In the area of Syria and Phoenicia

³ And Luke views both circumstances as evidence that Christ came to earth first to the Jews, was rejected by them and then went to the Gentiles – a reoccurring theme for Luke in his writings.

⁴ Cornelius

emotionally compelling decision because he deeply loved this servant who had become like a daughter or son to him.

While the messengers were on their way to Jesus, he had second thoughts. He probably said to himself: 'If Jesus has the power to heal, He certainly is not dependent on saying a few magic words of hocus-pocus or doing some ritual with magic potions.' He understood that one either has or doesn't have the power to perform miracles, so the Centurion sent his close friends to meet Jesus to suggest that He not go through the trouble of coming all the way to his house.

The man's faith was considered great because it was an intelligent faith. It was a faith that recognized that either God is real and all-powerful or God is not – plain and simple. If it is the case that God is going to carry out an unusual action on our behalf, God will do it and certainly does not need a human ceremony to make it happen.



Another way of getting at this is to ask ourselves: do we have to go to a so-called "faith healer" and get slapped on our forehead and fall over in a faint and be caught by a so called "catcher" in order to experience healing? How far do we have to go in *our* ceremonies to invoke something special from God? How many people do we have to have praying for us until God will come through?

At times, I have felt leery about congregations having "special prayer services" for the sole purpose of praying for someone with a life-threatening illness. Sure there is a power in prayer but how many people does it take praying? Is one enough, ... are three hundred too many? Is God sitting up there with a calculator, waiting for a magic number of people to be praying before God ends up doing what is best?

Obviously I'm being facetious but only to suggest that the nature of our faith should be such that it focuses on the greatness and power of God and not on the greatness or impressiveness of human activity. The Roman soldier trusted God so shouldn't we trust that God is going to bring something about in the face of our human suffering? Shouldn't we trust in God rather than depend on a big human production?



Sometimes you find yourself with a nicely completed shiny resume but your soul feels kind of lost and aimless. You're sad or you're broke or you're lonely or you've gotten back the results of that medical test and it doesn't look too good.⁵ But as Paul said, in Romans 8, God's Spirit within us is aware of our plight – even when we are so sick that we can not even utter a prayer.

I believe that in circumstances like this, whether it is the prayer of one child or of several churches full of people, one voice will be heard.⁶ If God is going to perform special healing beyond the miraculous healing powers our bodies already possess, God will do it. **Is our faith focusing on the greatness of God or just on the greatness of what humans are trying to do?**

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Notice, secondly, that the Roman commander did not feel the need to get the religious heavies to approach Jesus. He did not go to the rabbis and say: “Would you say a prayer for me, ... would you ask Jesus, ... because if YOU ask, He will probably do it!” Instead, he made the request himself.

In whom are you placing your faith?

The last time I visited relatives in Chattanooga, I saw their church was involved in a fund raising campaign in order to expand their building and add appropriate staff to put programs into place. They hired an outside fund raiser for \$60,000 to come in and motivate their people. These fund raisers produced a slick booklet showing the goals of the church.

As I read through the materials that were being presented, I noticed that they were using standard motivational tacks commonly used in sales and marketing.⁷ As I saw what this particular church was doing, I sensed that perhaps the leaders of that church did not have faith in their peers or in God. They apparently did not think that they could place

⁵ See Anna Quindelen's wonderful little book, *A Short Guide To A Happy Life* ISBN 0-375-50461-3

⁶ As is sung in a song by that title

⁷ To be sure, a church involved in fundraising and communication about their needs would be foolish not to use the best and most effective form of communication humanly possible.

the needs of their church before their peers and expect them to respond in faith to those needs.

Instead, it appeared that they had placed their faith in total strangers who were good in sales methodology in order to motivate their members to respond, (as if the method was going to produce a response rather than the Spirit of God). Very much like the people who feel they *must* go to so-called “faith healers” to get some results from God, these church leaders seemed compelled to go to professional faith money raisers to get some response from people to be motivated by them, rather than God.

In whom are you placing your faith?

The leaders of your church and I have set before you the importance of your thoughtful and prayerful involvement and support of your ministry in this community. You are intelligent and motivated people who love your church and will respond to its vital needs. And from getting to know you and seeing your commitment to this worshipping community, I have faith in your response to God's work here. While some leaders of the church have privately come up to me and nervously urged me to push you harder on the importance of your financial support for the church, I have sat back and smiled, ... telling them that you'll come through because God will cause you to come through.

I've always believed that you don't need or want gimmicks, second and third requests for higher pledges, ... door to door confrontations or the use of religion or guilt to try to manipulate you into giving to the church. I have believed, all along, that you can do it and that you want to give of yourselves. This is why you give from your abundance, ... giving back in gratitude to God so that what you do makes a difference in the lives affected by your church.

Think back through the many months of your life to the times when you've experienced a sense of healing along your way. Remember how this church has been like a larger family to you.

How great is your faith?

To what extent do you personally believe that this church is your community for personal, spiritual and physical renewal? The answer to this question is shown in your involvement here (and elsewhere) for

God. Because “where your heart is, there your treasure will be also.”



| Matthew 8:5-18 | Luke 7:1-10 |
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| <p>[5] As he entered Capernaum, a <u>Centurion came forward to him</u>, beseeching him, [6] and saying, “Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, in terrible distress.” [7] And he said to him, “I will come and heal him.”</p> <p>[8] But <u>the Centurion</u> answered him, “Lord, <u>I am not worthy</u> to have you come under my roof; but only say the word, and my servant will be healed.</p> <p>[9] For I am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, “Go,” and he goes, and to another, “Come,” and he comes, and to my slave, “Do this,” and he does it.”</p> <p>[10] When Jesus heard him, he marveled, and said to those who followed him, “<u>Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.</u></p> <p>[11] I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, [12] while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.” [13] And to the Centurion Jesus said, “Go; be it done for you as you have believed.”</p> <p>And the servant was healed at that very moment.</p> | <p>[1] After he had ended all his sayings in the hearing of the people he entered Capernaum. [2] Now a Centurion had a slave who was dear to him, who was sick and at the point of death.</p> <p>[3] When he heard of Jesus, <u>he sent to him elders of the Jews</u>, asking him to come and heal his slave. [4] And when they came to Jesus, they besought him earnestly, saying, “He is worthy to have you do this for him, [5] for he loves our nation, and he built us our synagogue.” [6] And Jesus went with them. When he was not far from the house, <u>the Centurion sent friends</u> to him, saying to him, “Lord, <u>do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy</u> to have you come under my roof; [7] therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed.</p> <p>[8] For I am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me: and I say to one, “Go,” and he goes; and to another, “Come,” and he comes; and to my slave, “Do this,” and he does it.”</p> <p>[9] When Jesus heard this he marveled at him, and turned and said to the multitude that followed him, “<u>I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.</u>”</p> <p>[10] And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave well.</p> |