

“The Centurion’s Faith”

Luke 7:1-10

As we begin Luke 7 we have this remarkable account of a centurion who’s expression of faith caused Jesus to marvel. First, we are going to look at the setting and the characters that are found in this passage, and then we are going to look at the miracle that was performed, and we will give special attention to the words of Jesus found in verse 9. In this text we see elements of faith that please God.

I. The Context

First, we see the setting for this account. In chapter 6 Jesus had been in the hills outside of Capernaum. That is where he chose the 12 apostles and then preached the sermon we studied in chapter 6. Chapter 7 begins by telling us about a change in location. Jesus went back to the city of Capernaum. This city on the northwest end of the sea of Galilee was a major center of Christ’s earthly ministry. And Capernaum is where the events of this passage took place. Next let’s look at who was involved in or witnessed the events in this text.

First, Jesus. “He entered into Capernaum.” Jesus entered the city. He was there.

Next, the sick servant. Verse 2 tells us four things about this servant. First, he was a servant or slave. Second, he was dear to his master. Third, he was sick.

And finally, he was at the point of death. He was “ready to die.” In Matthew’s account of this miracle we are told that this servant was, “Sick of the palsy, grievously tormented.” (Matthew 8:6) Apparently he was suffering in a terrible way because of his sickness.

Verse 3 tells us about “the elders of the Jews.” These would have been men who held position in the synagogue. They were religious leaders in Capernaum.

In verse 6 we are told that there were friends from the Centurion sent to Jesus with a message from the Centurion. It is very possible that these friends were gentiles. Remember, Capernaum isn’t a huge city, but it is a relatively important city in that region. It was along the route of an ancient road that connected Egypt and Syria. It is believed to have been a garrison town, an administrative centre, and a customs station where taxes were collected.

Because the Romans used this city as an administrative center, there was a significant population of Gentiles in Capernaum. And we know that the Jews were not to intermingle with the Gentiles in the way that friends would. Remember the words of Peter in Acts 10:28 when he said to the Roman Centurion Cornelius, “Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation.” These friends of the centurion were most likely gentiles.

Verse 9 tells us that Jesus spoke to the people following Him. This is some portion of the multitude that was present for the sermon in chapter 6: people from

Judea, Jerusalem, Tyre and Sidon, the disciples, and the 12 apostles. A portion of that crowd was present here as well.

And then finally: the Centurion After Jesus, the centurion is the main character in this passage and the one we are told the most about. He was an accomplished military officer. Verse 2 tells us this man was a centurion. This was a position of significant authority.

The word “centurion” comes from the number of men they originally commanded: a century of men, or 100 men. By the time of Christ, the structure of the Roman army had changed and a centurion would normally have about 80 men under his direct command. But centurions also held positions of authority within the cohort and within the legion as a whole. That level of authority varied based on seniority, experience, and ability. The highest ranking centurion in a legion was eighth in overall command, that’s over between 5,000 to 6,000 men. This was a very significant role in the Roman military.

Centurions were also highly respected by their fellow-soldiers. There were three ways to become a centurion. A centurion could be appointed by the Senate or Emperor, promoted from the ranks by a senior officer, or elected by his fellow soldiers. And in almost every case this promotion would be based on the centurion’s ability to lead men in battle. Centurions were required to lead their men from the front, and the more he was promoted, the closer he got to the very front

line in battle. This structure of promotion by merit meant that centurions were usually highly respected by their fellow soldiers.

Centurions had to be veterans and they had to be literate. A man would have to be in the Roman military several years, ideally 15 years or longer, before he was eligible for promotion to the rank of centurion. And he had to be literate because he would need to receive and give written orders. It was no small thing to be a Centurion. The man in our text was an accomplished military officer. Later on, when he tells Jesus he understand's authority, he really does, because he has a position of significant authority.

This centurion was a man of compassion. This may seem like a contradiction with what came before. This is a battle-hardened centurion. He is serving in Galilee, a notoriously rebellious and dangerous region. Can such a man afford to be a man of compassion?

Verse 2 tells us that his servant was “dear unto him.” This centurion was burdened and grieved for his sick servant. Some people who are in positions of authority are unconcerned about those who are under them: their needs, struggles, trials, and suffering. But not this centurion. His servant was “dear unto him.”

This centurion was a respected, generous, and God-fearing man. We are told in verse 3 that he sent the “elders of the Jews” to Jesus on his behalf, *and they went*. It was not common for Jewish elders in Galilee to be friends with centurions. But these elders had a great deal of respect for this centurion. Note particularly

what they tell Jesus is verse 4: they told Jesus that this centurion was “worthy.” Worthy of what? Worthy to receive what he requested: that Jesus would heal his servant. What were the Jewish elders really saying? Whether they fully understood it or not, they were saying, “This centurion is worthy to receive the miraculous power of God.” In their judgment, he was worthy of a miracle. This is an important claim, and we will come back to it. But for now, just note that this centurion was a respected man in the community.

This centurion was also a generous man. Look at verse 5. The Jewish elders tell Jesus, “He loveth our nation, and he hath built us a synagogue.” This is why these Jewish elders liked this centurion. “Look at what he has done for us. He built us a synagogue. Certainly he deserves a miracle.”

A centurion in the first century would have made between \$100k and \$400k in today's money, depending on his position within the legion and then how you convert that pay into modern money. If you survived any length of time as a centurion, you could become very wealthy. Now, it was hard to survive.

Remember, they led from the front and the greater your seniority, the closer you got to the very front line. But it paid well, and this centurion was very generous with his wealth.

It is likely that this synagogue which the Centurion helped finance was in Capernaum and we only know of one synagogue in that city. The ruins of a 4th century synagogue are still there and can be seen today, and it is built on top of a

1st century synagogue. It was a substantial stone structure built to a high standard of craftsmanship and it would have been every expensive to build. This centurion built a synagogue for the Jews. He was a generous man.

He was a God-fearing man. I draw this conclusion from two statements found in this text. First, in verse 5 the Jewish elders said, “he loveth our nation.” Why would a centurion love the Jewish nation? For the God they worshipped. Remember, the elders said, “He loveth our nation, and he hath built us a synagogue.” Because of the love he had for the Jewish nation, he built the Jews a place of worship in Capernaum. Jesus said in John 4:22, “Salvation is of the Jews.” And to some degree, this centurion knew that. That’s a strong statement, but I believe it is supported by what Jesus said in verse 9.

This is the second statement found in this text which I believe shows this centurion was a God-fearing man. Jesus said in verse 9, “I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel.” Jesus marveled at this man’s faith and called it great. This centurion was a god-fearing man.

And finally, this centurion was a humble man (v. 6-7a). In verse 6 his friends delivered this message to Jesus, “I am not worthy that thou shouldest enter under my roof.” Without a doubt, he was familiar with the Jewish custom mentioned by Peter in Acts 10, of not keeping company with Gentiles, to the point of not entering their houses. Though he had the power and authority, at least from a human perspective, to bring Jesus to him by force, he sent this message to Jesus, “I am not

worthy for you to come under my roof.” In verse 7 he said, “Neither thought I myself worthy to come unto thee.” This man had a high regard for Jesus and a very low opinion of himself in comparison. He said, “I know I am not worthy to even come to you.” This is a very remarkable statement, and we will come back to it. But for now, just note the humility shown by this centurion.

So far we have looked at the context of this miracle: where it happened and who was involved and witnessed it. Now let’s look at the miracle itself.

II. The Miracle

The miracle itself is found in verse 10, “And they that were sent, returning to the house, found the servant whole that had been sick.” This servant who had been sick to the point of death. This servant who had been “grievously tormented.” He was healed. He was made whole. Jesus did not touch him. Jesus did not see him. We are not even told that Jesus said anything directly about this servant. He was sick, his master, the centurion, asked Jesus to heal him, and he was made whole.

This was a remarkable demonstration of the miraculous power of Christ. It demonstrated his authority. It demonstrated that His power came from God the Father. And it supported His claim that he was the Christ, the Son of God, the anointed one sent by God, the Messiah. Now look again at what Jesus did and said when He performed this miracle.

First, verse 9 tells us that Jesus “marveled at him,” that is, at the centurion. This word “marveled” means “to wonder at, to be surprised or astonished.” It is used often in the gospels to describe the reaction of the people to the miracles Jesus performed. Jesus would perform a miracle and the people would marvel, they would be in awe, they would be astonished, and they would wonder at the power demonstrated by Jesus. And rightly so.

But we are only told of two occasions when Jesus marveled and on both of those occasions, Jesus marveled at people’s faith (or lack thereof). In our text this morning Jesus marveled at the faith shown by the centurion. The only other occasion when Scripture tells us Jesus “marveled” is in Mark 6:6. When Jesus was in his home country around Nazareth, the area where he grew up, we are told that he “marveled” at the people’s unbelief.

What a striking contrast. The people who knew Jesus best did not believe, to such a degree and against such powerful demonstrations of God’s power, that is was astonishing to Jesus. But this centurion who, as far as we know had never even met Jesus. He may have never even laid eyes of Jesus. This man who was a Gentile. This man expressed a faith that Jesus marveled at.

Look again at the message this centurion sent to Jesus in verses 6-8. “Lord, trouble not thyself.” He called Jesus “Lord.” Now, we understand that not every one who calls Jesus “Lord,” will enter the kingdom. (Matthew 7:21) But the centurion’s use of this title does reveal what the centurion thought about Jesus. This

word “Lord” is “kurios,” (koo-ree-os) and it means “supreme in authority.” And this man didn’t just say “Lord.” He meant it. He believed that Jesus had supreme authority, and that is evidenced by the rest of what he said.

He went on to say: “I am not worthy.” He did not think himself worthy to have Jesus under his roof. He did not think himself worthy to go to Jesus himself.

Now remember, the elders of the Jews had a far different opinion. In verse 4 they told Jesus this centurion was worthy to receive Jesus’ attention. He was worthy to receive the miracle he had asked for: the healing of his servant. And why did they think he was worthy? They said, “He loveth our nation and hath built us a synagogue.”

“Look at what he has done. Look at his love. Look at his generosity. Look at his promotion of religion. He is worthy to receive a miracle from you Jesus.”

This statement from the Jewish elders reveals their theology. They thought of God along these lines: “How can we get what we want from God? We must do good. We must show ourselves worthy. If we work hard enough, if we show enough love, if we are generous, if we promote religion. Then we will be worthy to receive from God what we want.”

That’s what they said to Jesus. “This man is worthy to receive a miracle, a supernatural work of God on his behalf, because of his works. What he has done has made him worthy.”

How often do we think about God this exact same way? If I do enough good things, God will be pleased with me. Then He will give me what I want.

That's works righteousness, and it is a hopeless cause. It doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't matter how much good you have done. It will never be enough to merit God's favor.

We like to think that we start at a level position, neither good or bad. And then as we go through life, we try to do more good things than bad things. And in the end, if our good outweighs our bad, then God will be pleased with us.

But the Bible teaches that we do not start in a neutral position. We are born under the sin of our father Adam. I Corinthians 15:22 says, "In Adam all die." Romans 5:12 says, "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." We start in sin.

To level the scale, what would we need to do? We must understand that God's standard is perfection. To level the scale, we would need to be perfect. Not perfect in the judgment of men, but perfect in the judgment of God. And not perfect from this point forward, but perfect for our entire lives. It's already too late. We have already blown it. But even if we could be perfect, that's not enough because that only brings us back to even. We would still be "unprofitable servants." (Luke 17:10) We would still have to do more to earn God's favor, but we cannot.

Works righteousness is a lost cause, and it always has been. Keeping the Law is not the way of salvation. The Law reveals our sin to us and points us to the perfect Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. He is the way of salvation. He gives his righteousness to us, free and undeserved. The perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ, which pleased God the Father, is given to us in salvation. We don't stand before God in our works, but in the perfect, finished work of Jesus Christ. We are not worthy. Jesus is worthy. We can only stand before God in Jesus Christ.

The Jewish elders said this centurion was worthy. But he said, "I am not worthy." He was right. He was not worthy. This centurion had a better understanding of who Jesus was than even the Jewish elders. He understood something of Jesus' authority and he knew he was unworthy to have Jesus come to him or even for him to go to Jesus himself.

But notice, *and this is extremely important*, he still asked Jesus for help. Though he knew he was not worthy, he still asked Jesus for help. Oh! that we would all see our unworthiness to come to Jesus. And oh! that we would all still come.

Salvation is not based on merit, it's not based on our worthiness, but on grace. Your unworthiness is what qualifies you to come to Christ. Jesus said in Luke 5:32, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

I love the words of the hymn “Come Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy.” One of the verses in that hymn says: “Let not conscience make you linger, / nor of fitness fondly dream; / all the fitness he requireth / is to feel your need of him.”

See your unworthiness. See your need of Christ. But do not let this keep you from Christ. Rather, you should be driven to the foot of the cross in faith and repentance. Not expecting to receive anything from God because of your good works. But knowing yourself to be unworthy, trust your soul to the grace of God. Like the leper in Luke 5 say to Jesus, “Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean.” And He will answer you as He did that poor leper, “I will: be thou clean.” (Luke 5:32)

The centurion said, “Lord, don’t trouble yourself.” He said, “I am not worthy.” And then he said, “Say in a word, and my servant shall be healed.” He believed that Jesus could just say the word, and his servant would be healed. He didn’t think Jesus needed to come to his house. He didn’t think Jesus needed to lay his hands on his servant, or even see him. “Just speak, Jesus, and I know you can heal him.”

Even some of Jesus closest friends and most devoted followers didn’t have faith like this. Both Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, said to Jesus in John 11, “Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.” (v. 21 and 32)

“Why didn’t you come when we sent word to you? If you had come, if you had been here, then you could have healed him. Because you were not here, he died.”

Even Mary and Martha, at this point, did not understand the true nature of Jesus’ authority. But somehow, in the grace of God, this centurion did understand. He explained in verse 8. This was a man who, as a centurion, understood authority. If the emperor in Rome gave an order, when that order reached him, he would carry it out. The emperor didn’t need to be there, his authority was sufficient to ensure that the centurion would carry out the order. If the centurion gave an order, his soldiers and servants would carry it out. He didn’t need to be there. His authority was sufficient to ensure that his subordinates would do as he ordered. This centurion understood authority and he recognized Jesus as possessing supreme authority, as the title “Lord” indicates. And so he sent this message to Jesus, “Just speak the word, and my servant will be healed.”

Upon receiving this message, Jesus marveled. Jesus marveled. That’s what Jesus did, now look at what Jesus said.

Jesus commented on the centurion's faith in v. 9. Jesus turned around and said this to the people who were following him. In verse 9: “I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel.” Who did Jesus tell this to? Most likely a group similar to the group described in chapter 6. People who had come from Judea, Jerusalem, Tyre and Sidon because they had heard about Jesus and were

curious to see Him in person. His disciples, that is, his committed followers. The 12 who were called as apostles. And maybe also the Jewish elders who had first come to Jesus on behalf of this Centurion. And to this group, this group that included apostles, Jesus said, “This man has a faith unlike any I have found in Israel.”

Notice two things about this centurion’s faith which mark it and separate it from the faith of the Israelites. First, this centurion had comparatively little access to divine revelation. What did this centurion know of God? What did this centurion know of the promised Messiah? What did this centurion know of the Old Testament and the promises of God found there? Certainly any Jewish person was better positioned, had greater light, and had more opportunity and exposure to divine revelation. Yet on this occasion it wasn’t a Jew, but this centurion who had a faith that Jesus called “great.”

Never assume that anyone is beyond the reach of God’s grace. Never assume that a little gospel light can’t or won’t bear any meaningful fruit. And conversely, don’t assume that tremendous exposure to things of God will necessarily lead to faith. The Jews, in spite of all the light they had been given, ultimately rejected the Messiah and the gospel went to the Gentiles. And here we see an early example or foreshadowing of that.

By way of personal application, to you, do this: Be faithful with all the revelation God has given to you. To whom much has been given, much will be

required. All of us have tremendous access to the Word of God, to the ordinances, to all the benefits of fellowship and discipline and instruction found in a local church body. Woe unto us if we are not faithful with what has been given to us. We have far more light than this centurion ever had. By the grace of God, may we follow his example of faith in Jesus.

The second thing which marked and separated this centurion's faith from the faith of the Israelites, was his willingness to rest on the words of Jesus alone as sufficient to meet his need. What do I mean? Jesus was on his way to this centurion's house. Why? Jesus could have just said the word and healed the servant immediately. He didn't need to go to the centurion's house. We know this because the servant was healed and Jesus never went to his house.

But this centurion did not ask for Jesus to come to his house. He did not demand or even request the bodily presence of Jesus. He did not ask Jesus to touch his servant.

What did he ask for? Again, in verse 7, the centurion sent this message to Jesus, "Say in a word, and my servant shall be healed." He believed that the words of Jesus, the authority behind His words, was sufficient to meet his need.

What all did this centurion believe and understand about Jesus? We don't know. Scripture doesn't tell us. But this we know: Jesus marveled at his faith, Jesus called it a "great faith," and Jesus healed his servant. This centurion knew that Jesus was no mere man. He knew Jesus had authority. And he was willing to

rest on the words of Jesus as sufficient. The Jews asked for a sign. The centurion asked for a word.

What application should we make from this?

In the infinite wisdom of God, our salvation was actually accomplished in the flesh of Jesus Christ. He was truly God, and He was truly man. And as a man he died on the cross to finish the work of salvation. Have you ever considered that in heaven the only visible imperfection will be the scars on Christ's resurrected body? An imperfection to the eye, perhaps, but an evidence and a reminder of the perfect salvation accomplished in his body. But our certainty of salvation doesn't rest on the presence of Christ's body, and that's a good thing.

If it did, then none of us would have any degree of assurance. How many of you have seen Jesus in the flesh? How many of you have heard Jesus say, as he said to Thomas, "Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing." John 20:27 On that same occasion Jesus went on to say, "Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed." (John 20:29) Our certainty of salvation does not rest on the bodily presence of Christ.

During his earthly ministry, Jesus performed signs and wonders. And at times, these miracles attracted a very large following. But the certainty of our

salvation does not rest in signs and wonders, miracles performed by Jesus, or by you, or by anyone else.

Sometimes we might be tempted to think, “If only we still had miracles being performed like the Jesus or the apostles did, then people would believe.” Sometimes skeptics say, “Show me a miracle. Show me a sign. Then I will believe.” Signs and wonders, miracles, evidence— these things aren’t the issue. “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork.” (Psalm 19:1)

Even when Jesus walked the earth, the miracles He performed didn’t convince the skeptics. As Jesus hung upon the cross the priests, scribes, and elders mocked him and said, “He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him.” (Matt. 27:42) They knew the miracles Jesus performed could only be accomplished by the power of God (John 3:2), yet still they said, “Do more, and then we will believe.” There will never be signs and wonders enough to create faith. Our certainty of salvation does not rest in signs and wonders.

Our certainty in salvation, our hope, our confidence, our assurance rests on the Word of God. Not in some experience, not in our emotions: how we feel at any given time, not in the bodily presence of Christ, not in signs and wonders, but in the the Word of God.

Hear the Word of God and believe. All God has said, He means. All God has promised, He will accomplish. All judgment that He has warned will come, He will carry out. Like the centurion in our text, may our faith rest in the authority of Jesus' words.

'Martin Luther wrote this poem 500 years ago, but it could have been written yesterday. It is just as true and applicable today as it was when he wrote it.

“Feelings come and feelings go,
And feelings are deceiving;
My warrant is the Word of God –
Naught else is worth believing.

Though all my heart should feel condemned
For want of some sweet token,
There is One greater than my heart
Whose Word cannot be broken.

I'll trust in God's unchanging Word
'Til soul and body sever,
For, though all things shall pass away,
His Word shall stand forever!”