

14. The Faith of the Centurion

Luke 7:1-10

Luke: A Walk Through the Life of Jesus

Only two times in all four Gospels did Jesus ever compliment people on their faith, and both times it was Gentiles (Non-Jews) who received His praise. The first is found in Matthew 15:28 when a Canaanite woman came to Jesus on behalf of her daughter, who was afflicted by a demon. Her words to Jesus expressed persevering faith. The second person recorded in the Gospels is found in the passage we are studying today, i.e., a Gentile centurion.

¹When He had completed all His discourse in the hearing of the people, He went to Capernaum. ²And a centurion's slave, who was highly regarded by him, was sick and about to die. ³When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders asking Him to come and save the life of his slave. ⁴When they came to Jesus, they earnestly implored Him, saying, "He is worthy for You to grant this to him; ⁵for he loves our nation and it was he who built us our synagogue." ⁶Now Jesus *started* on His way with them; and when He was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends, saying to Him, "Lord, do not trouble Yourself further, for I am not worthy for You to come under my roof; ⁷for this reason I did not even consider myself worthy to come to You, but *just* say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁸" For I also am a man placed under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, 'Go!' and he goes, and to another, 'Come!' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this!' and he does it." ⁹Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled at him, and turned and said to the crowd that was following Him, "I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such great faith." ¹⁰When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health (Luke 7:1-10).

Luke writes that Jesus returned to Capernaum after His sermon, recorded in chapter six. In his narrative, Luke gives us an example of the kind of faith for which Jesus is looking, but not finding it in an Israelite, but in a Gentile Roman centurion. It was in Capernaum that several Jewish elders came to Him from a Roman centurion. This centurion was different from the average Roman in many respects.

Five Things About the Centurion:

- 1) The fact that he was a centurion set him apart as a man among men. Centurions were the backbone of the Roman army. In early Roman times, they commanded one hundred men, but their responsibilities varied greatly. In the time of Jesus, a centurion could have had many more under his authority. The ancient historian Polybius offers a list of qualifications looked for in centurions. They must be not so much "seekers after danger as men who can command, steady in action, and reliable; they ought not to be over-anxious to rush into the fight; but when hard pressed they must be ready to hold their ground and die at their posts."□
- 2) This man cared for his slave. The English word "slave" is translated from the Greek word *doulos*, which means a bond slave. In Roman law, a bond slave was a living tool to do with as his master wanted. A Roman writer on estate management recommends the farmer to examine his implements every year, to throw out those that were old and broken, and to do the same with

his slaves. Usually, when a slave could no longer perform his work through old age or illness, he was thrown out to die (William Barclay).¹ This servant had endeared himself to his master so much that, when the centurion saw his servant slipping away into death, he became desperate enough to spend his relational capital with the Jewish elders by asking them if they would mediate with Jesus to heal his servant. Perhaps the centurion feared he would not be seen as worthy by the Jewish elders or Jesus knowing that he was a Roman and a Gentile. Thus, he may have felt that this would affect whether or not Jesus would choose to heal his servant. Perhaps, he thought that, if the Jewish elders would plead his servant's case, there was a much higher chance that his servant would be healed. The elders' word and reputation, he thought, would carry much weight with Jesus, the holy Rabbi. Remember, too, the intense hatred the Jews had for the occupying power, the Romans. The centurion was, after all, one of Rome's officers.

Luke writes that the centurion had built their synagogue (v. 5), so can you think of possible reasons why the centurion would do that? What does this tell us about his character?□

3) The centurion was a believer in the God of Israel and had come to trust in the Lord. The fact that he had used his finances as a centurion to build their synagogue is a good indication of his faith in God. This man would not have put his wages into a Jewish building unless he had come to be a believer in the God of Israel and wanted himself to hear the Word of God taught. The fact that he calls Jesus *Lord* in verse six is another indication. The whole area, we are told in Luke 6:17, was excited concerning Jesus, with people coming eighty miles to be healed and hear His words. With that kind of excitement, it is likely that someone had witnessed to him about the miraculous power of the Lord.

The centurion had invested his money to build the synagogue because God had opened his heart to the Scriptures. We read of the same thing with the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8:30. He had come to Jerusalem for some reason, but he loved the truth so much that he had bought at least one scroll of the Scriptures to take home with him. The Scriptures have the ring of truth that is breathed by the Holy Spirit. Surely, there is no better investment of our time, energy, and money than to get this message of salvation to every living person on earth. The centurion did what he could to facilitate the Scriptures being taught. What a man invests his time, energy, and money into reveals what is essential to him.□

4) At a time when anti-Semitism was virulent, this centurion had a different attitude toward the Jewish people among whom he was living. The testimony of the Jewish elders was that the centurion loved their nation (v. 5), a rare thing, and in their opinion, he deserved his servant or slave to be healed. Usually, an occupying force is not much loved by those who have to pay taxes and live under new rules, regulations, and laws that are different. The Romans spoke of Judaism as a barbarous superstition. They felt that, because of the Jewish mindset to live differently than the rest of the world, it was a hatred of humanity and of everyone who was not a Jew.

Anti-Semitism is, I believe, from the pit of Hell. Two times in Scripture, Satan has tried to wipe out the Jewish people. In Egypt, under Pharaoh in the book of Exodus, and the book of Esther under Haman. Not only in Scripture but also history, we have read of the pogroms of Russia

¹ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible, The Gospel of Luke*, Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh. Page 84.

against the Jewish people (The film and play, *The Fiddler on the Roof*, was set in this period of the nineteenth century.) Then, there was Adolf Hitler, who killed six million in his “Final Solution.” Down through nineteen hundred years, we have seen this spirit of genocide against several different people groups, but especially toward the Jewish people. The centurion, although not a Jew himself, counted himself as one who revered their faith and their God. □

5) The centurion was a man of humility and faith. A man of faith will always have a humble heart. When he heard that the Jewish elders had succeeded in their petition with Jesus and that Christ was on His way to the house of the centurion, he sent another person to Jesus to stop Him before He got to the house.

Again, and again, in the Gospels, we are told of how people were amazed at what Jesus was doing, i.e., His miraculous acts and teaching, but only twice are we told of Jesus’ being amazed at something. The Greek word, *thaumazō*, means to be astonished, wonder, marvel, or be amazed at some event or object. The first time was when Jesus preached His first sermon in Nazareth. He was amazed at their unbelief (Mark 6:6). The second time is in the passage at which we are looking today.

Was that being a bit risky? After all, Jesus was actually on the way to heal his servant. What was it about this man’s character that amazed Jesus?

Faith Expressed by Action

We hear of Christ marveling or amazed at the centurion's faith in taking a risk by asking Jesus to speak the Word of Healing. This man recognizes that Jesus has authority on earth to heal sicknesses without coming under a Gentile's roof. The centurion had come to hear of the miraculous ministry of Jesus and felt unworthy to be in His presence, let alone have Jesus under his roof. He knew that it was forbidden for a strict Jew to enter the house of a Gentile and that to do so would make a Jew ceremonially unclean. Yes, it was risky for the centurion to stop Jesus on the way, but this tells us something of the faith that pleased Jesus. To the Jewish elders of the town, this man seems worthy to have Jesus heal his servant, but the centurion proclaims his unworthiness. In his mind, his servant is worthy of being healed, but the centurion feels his own unworthiness as a sinner in the presence of the Son of God.

John Wimber, the man who started the Vineyard group of churches, used to say, "Faith, to a large part, is spelled R.I.S.K." It is risky business to step out in faith, but God is honored by faith in Him. Faith in God is trust in action. Faith is like a connecting wire between God and us. When we reach out in faith to our heavenly Father and trust Him to work on our behalf, what flows from Him to us is the grace of God, giving us whatever we need. There is grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:16). Faith is trusting that God has told us the truth in His Word.

Often, though, God calls us to action to express our faith. In Luke 17:14, for example, the ten lepers were told by Jesus to go to the priest and get the all-clear from their leprosy, even while they were still lepers. It was as they went in obedience that they were healed. Then, there was the case of the blind man sent to the Pool of Siloam. “Jesus told him, “Go,’ he told him, ‘wash in the Pool of Siloam’ (this word means "Sent"). So the man went and washed, and came home

seeing” (John 9:7). To be healed, each of them had to take a step of faith. If they hadn't been obedient to the Word of Jesus, we might have never heard of their stories! In each case, they believed the Word of God and acted like Jesus was telling the truth. I read about a story that illustrates this type of faith. It happened in a farming community, which had no rain and was in drought conditions:

It hadn't rained in a long time, and things were getting desperate. The ministers decided that they were going to call a prayer meeting. They said, "Look, we want the whole town to come to the prayer meeting and bring their religious symbols." So the whole town showed up for the prayer meeting, and people brought crosses, they brought their Bibles, the Catholics brought their rosaries, and they all cried out to God. They finished the prayer meeting. No rain was in sight. They all went home. The next day, though, in the town square where they had the meeting, there was a little boy. "Oh, God, we need rain." God, show your power, and give us rain." The day before, with all the preachers and all the religious symbols, calling on God, no rain. The little boy shows up the next day by himself in the town square, and as he was praying, rumbling occurred. As he was praying, the shower hit, and it was pouring with rain. What was it about this little boy? He said the same things that all the people said the day before, but the day the young boy came, when the clouds got dark, he lifted his symbol that he brought: an umbrella. He expected it to rain. When the weatherman tells you on the news that it will rain the next day, we believe his word, and most of us take our umbrellas. Why is it, when it comes to God, who is never wrong, we hesitate to believe His Word and act on it.²

For most of Jesus' disciples, their faith grew gradually as they saw Jesus exerting His power over an ever-widening circle, e.g., the blind, the lepers, the dead, the powerful storm on the Sea of Galilee, etc. After Jesus had calmed the waters of the storm, they were stunned. They had walked with him for a year or so and were slow to figure out the extent of Christ's power. However, the centurion has a profound understanding of faith and trust in the person of Jesus, His character, and His authority, without even meeting the Lord in person. Let's consider the centurion's great insight. What amazed the Lord was that this Roman centurion has no understanding of being in covenant relationship in the same way that the Jewish people do, but he expresses faith regardless. He saw Jesus as a commander like himself and recognized that Jesus has authority in the spirit world to exercise dominion and authority as the centurion had in the physical realm. He believed that all Jesus had to do was to "Say the word, and my servant will be healed" (v. 7).

We often think that, if only some famous name would come and pray for us, he would have enough faith and power to heal. Often, our faith is in men and not in Christ. We look to the personal instrument of the healing rather than to the Lord Who can accomplish the task with just a word—His own Word. He is the Delegator of the power, not some great saint past or present. They are mere instruments.

The message of the passage is that Jesus has delegated spiritual authority to heal the sick. Jesus is the Delegator, and in your corner of the world, if you belong to Christ, you are the delegate. Nothing has changed. He is the Captain; you are the private, corporal, or sergeant, and you carry

² Tony Evans, *Tony Evans Book of Illustrations*, Printed by Moody Publishers, 2009, Page 98.

out His orders with His full authority and power to accomplish the task by any authorized means. This authority from God is given to the Church (Matthew 28:18-20).

Jesus Raises a Widow's Son (Luke 7:11-17).

¹¹Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. ¹²As 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. ¹³When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry." ¹⁴Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" ¹⁵The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. ¹⁶They were all filled with awe and praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. "God has come to help his people." ¹⁷This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country (Luke 7:11-17).

Widows and orphans have always been people to whom God has given special care and compassion. His heart went out to them in their need. James, the half-brother of the Lord, wrote, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (James 1:27). It is a cruel world for those who are unmarried and have children. They are among the neediest in our society and even more so in the Middle East at this time where there was no Social Security or insurance plan for the unemployed. God has a heart toward the defenseless of society, and His eye is always on them:

A father to the fatherless, a defender of **widows**, is God in his holy dwelling (Psalm 68:5).

Let's try and get a picture of the scene in front of us. In verse 11, Luke writes that a large crowd of people was following the disciples. Just as they were approaching the town gate, they were confronted with the funeral procession. Usually, there would be a band of professional mourners at the head, with their flutes and cymbals and uttering their shrill cries of grief, followed by those that were carrying the boy in the coffin. When we think of a coffin, we think of a wooden box, but this was more than likely a long, wicker, work basket used for carrying the body to the grave. It would have been an open coffin, most likely.

How much faith do you see here exhibited by the mother who was also a widow? What was it about the crowd or this situation that prompted Jesus to act?

I find it amazing that we don't see the widow's asking for a miracle. Jesus undertakes to perform a miracle without a request from her. Author Ken Gire says: "It is a miracle done without human prompting. Without thought of lessons to be taught to the disciples. Without thought of deity to be demonstrated to the skeptics. It is a miracle drawn solely from the well of divine compassion. So free the water. So pure the heart from which it is drawn. So tender the hand that cups it and brings it to this bereaved mother's lips."

In some situations, God does not require faith before He moves; He acts out of His compassion, grace, and mercy. I find it encouraging to know that, even when I am at a low ebb spiritually, He will move on my behalf outside of His requirement for expressions of faith. This poor widow was a perfect picture of someone helpless and alone in the world, without anyone to provide for her or protect her. She did nothing to earn or merit Jesus' attention, except to be in need. We, like this widow, have done nothing to deserve His favor. It was when we were still lost in our sin that Christ died for us.

Jesus said, "Don't cry." His heart went out to her. When any of His people are hurting, He feels their pain. Luke uses the strongest word possible here to describe Jesus' pity. The root word from which it comes refers to what is inside, the viscera (the heart, liver, lungs). It describes an emotion that has a physical effect.

The Lord was not worried about being made ritually unclean as He stepped forward and touched the coffin (v. 14). People are what matters to Him. There is a higher law at work, the law of love and compassion.

Again, He spoke with authority, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" What confidence, what boldness! When a person hears from God as to what He wants to do, the gift of faith arises, and a man can speak to mountains, and they shall remove. The key is knowing the Father's will. In every account in the Gospels where Jesus went to a funeral, He raised the dead person! There was Lazarus in John 11, the centurion's servant in Luke 7:1-10, and also Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue, who had his daughter raised from the dead (Luke 8:40-56). These are four people we are told about, and possibly, there were more the Gospel writers did not have room to tell us about.

Notice, too, that when He spoke to the boy's cold corpse, the boy heard Him. The young man was dead in body, but he was fully alive somewhere! For us humans, death is only death of the body. The human spirit lives on.

The Jews believed that, when the Messiah came, there would be several things that would serve as evidence to reveal His identity to them. He would heal the blind, mute, deaf, lame, and raise the dead (Isaiah 35:5-6; Isaiah 26:9). These are the very things in this next passage that confirms to John the Baptist that this was, indeed, the Messiah (Luke 7:22). Imagine what it would be like to see a dead man, that you know has gone, suddenly come back to life, with all the stories that he would tell of what it was like on the other side in eternity.

Can you imagine the scene as people realized that the widow's son was alive? What type of effect do you think this had upon the town?

An awe filled the town (v. 16-17), i.e., an astonishment at such a thing. I believe that there was a unique presence of God that descended on them, awe that God, indeed, was visiting His people. How could this be! This man was dead! Imagine the praise that went up as relatives and the mother herself received her son back from the dead. Imagine what pain there would be in losing your only son and then the joy of holding the one you had released to death. Never a more accurate word has been spoken about Him, **"God has come to help His people!"** (verse 16).

We are most like our Lord when we step into the shoes of those who are poor and hurting and do this with hearts of compassion, longing to do what we can to alleviate their pain and need. When people come to Christ for salvation, the Scripture tells us that they become organically one with Him, as the Body, the Bride of Christ. When Paul wrote about the Body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12, he writes in verse 26, “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.” There is a **spiritual connection** that we have with the Lord that makes it impossible for His presence ever to be withdrawn. His promise is:

¹⁹Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And **surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.** (Matthew 28:19-20 (Emphasis mine)).

We can expect the Father to give us a heart of compassion for those who feel lost, for those who have no hope in this world, for those who have been traumatized or betrayed. Having experienced the love of God, we can be the conduit of God’s love to others.

Prayer: Father, thank You that we no longer have to live for ourselves. How wonderful that You have come to help Your people. Please come again to us and touch our lives. We need your help. Let us never rest upon our own accomplishments to please you. Thank You that we are justified through what Jesus the Messiah has done for us. Make us instruments of Your love. Amen!

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