

Luke 7:1-10

The Man who Astonished God

We should not be surprised that during His time on earth, Jesus amazed many people. At the end of the talk we have been studying, Matthew records that “the crowds were amazed at His teaching (Matthew 7:28). When Jesus calmed a stormy Galilean Sea, the disciples “were amazed, and said ‘what kind of man is this?’” (Matthew 8:27). When He healed those who were deaf and mute “they were utterly astonished” (Mark 7:37). As we have seen, when Jesus taught in His hometown synagogue people “wondered at His gracious words” (Luke 4:22). The same was true when He taught at Capernaum (Mark 1:22) and in Jerusalem (John 7:14-15).

No matter how long the disciples had been with Jesus, He continued to amaze them. Even during the last week of His life, after the disciples had seen dozens, if not hundreds of miracles of all sorts, when He caused a fig tree to wither, “the disciples were amazed” (Matthew 21:20). Even those who only met Him once recognized the uniqueness of this man. When brought before Pilate, even “the governor was quite amazed” (Matthew 27:14). Throughout His life, by His actions and upon hearing His teaching, people were continually amazed.

This story contains some of the same basic events that have marked the narrative of Jesus in Galilee thus far. Jesus received word that someone was desperately ill. He went and healed them. The routine nature of the miracle can, perhaps, numb us to God’s infinite grace manifested in a specific time and place. But consider the greatness of this particular miracle. Jesus never touched the person he healed. He never spoke to him. He never even saw him. No greater miracle of healing is recorded in Scripture.

Moreover, consider the genuine grace by which Jesus agreed to heal the centurion’s slave. Jesus did not question why the centurion had taken so long to inform Him of the dire need of his slave. Nor did Jesus question why the request was not made in person. Neither did He say that His miracles were reserved for only those of the Jewish faith. Also, Jesus did not criticize the argument of the Jewish leaders that this man somehow *deserved* to have his slave healed. And Jesus was not put off by the fact that the man was a Roman soldier. Jesus continued to amaze.

What may perhaps surprise us is that there were two occasions on which Jesus, Himself, was amazed. The first was when He was teaching in Nazareth, later in His public ministry. Despite His teaching and the many miracles He had performed, those in Nazareth refused to accept Him as the Messiah. Jesus “wondered at their unbelief” (Mark 6:6).

The second instance of Jesus being amazed occurs in this account in Luke. In this case Jesus will be amazed not at the lack of faith, but at the expression of faith itself. It must be quite a thing to have such faith that it would astonish God.

The Setting

“When He had completed all His discourse in the hearing of the people, He went to Capernaum” (v. 1). There are three elements to the transition provided by Luke. The first is chronological. The ‘when’ is not specific, though the context would suggest that it was not long after Jesus finished his teaching. The

second transition is geographical. Luke transitions from Jesus' teaching to this account by following Him to Capernaum. The third element of the transition is topical. After providing us with a narrative of Jesus teaching, concluding with the illustration of the wise man who "laid a foundation on the rock" (Luke 6:48), Luke presents us with an account of Jesus meeting such a man.

Capernaum was the adopted center of activity for Jesus in the region of Galilee and provides the setting for the story. The name of the city means "city of Nahum" though whether it received this title as a result of the recognition of the prophet Nahum is uncertain.

Capernaum was located along the northern coast of the Sea of Galilee and was reputed in historical sources to be the most significant town in the region. However, despite the presence and activity of Jesus there, it was not a place known for its acceptance of the Messiah's message. In fact Jesus will later chasten the city for its arrogance, "And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will be brought down to Hades!" (Luke 10:15). This prophecy was fulfilled in history as the city was destroyed by the Persians.

At the time of Jesus, though, it was worthy of the attention of a royal official in the service of Herod Antipas and a detachment of soldiers from Rome.

The Centurion

A centurion, as one might expect, was in charge of about one hundred men. A full strength Roman legion was comprised of 6,000 soldiers, divided into ten groups of 600 each called cohorts. Therefore each legion had sixty centurions who reported to a person called a chiliarch (Acts 22:26). The rank beneath a centurion was a decurion, a person in command of about ten soldiers.

Centurions appear in Scripture on several occasions.

There is the centurion at the cross who recognized Jesus as the Son of God, "Now the centurion, and those who were with him keeping guard over Jesus, when they saw the earthquake and the things that were happening, became very frightened and said, 'Truly this was the Son of God!'" (Matthew 27:54).

Later in Acts 10 we meet Cornelius, "¹a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort, ²a devout man and one who feared God with all his household" (Acts 10:1-2).

And even Paul received fair treatment from the centurion Julius, "¹they proceeded to deliver Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan cohort named Julius . . .and Julius treated Paul with consideration and allowed him to go to his friends and receive care" (Acts 27:1, 3).

While we do not know with certainty, our knowledge of the period would suggest that this particular centurion was probably not a Roman, but rather a local who had risen up through the ranks. He and his men kept general order, enforced Roman and local laws, and made sure taxes were collected. No doubt this man had proved himself responsible and loyal. He was skilled enough as a soldier to be thought capable of training others. He commanded respect from his men and general fear from the local population.

Characteristics Worth Emulating

Love

The centurion loved his slave. Slave, *doulos*, was a common term in the ancient world for a person who was completely in the possession of another. He had been purchased and could be sold. He had no legal standing or rights. His very life was legally in the hands of his master. He was property in the most basic sense. Aristotle described a slave as a living tool. Varro said the only difference between a slave, a beast and a cart was that the slave could be taught to speak.

Yet look at the terms used by the centurion to describe his slave. His slave “was highly regarded by him” (v. 2). The word not only means “highly valued” in the sense of a financial investment, but also ‘honored’ in the sense of a special guest at a feast (Luke 14:8). Paul used the same term to describe Epaphroditus and others to be honored in the church, “receive him then in the Lord with all joy, and hold men like him in high regard” (Philippians 2:29). Peter used the word to describe Christ “And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God” (1 Peter 2:4).

More than simply a highly esteemed person, the centurion loved his slave like a son. That is indicated from the term used when the centurion confidently tells Jesus “just say the word, and my servant will be healed” (v. 7). Here the term used for servant means ‘boy’ or ‘son’. This simple slave was as dear to the centurion as his own flesh and blood. And this slave “was sick and about to die” (v. 2). Surprisingly the physician Luke is not specific about the disease, but Matthew tells us that the wretched man was “lying paralyzed at home, fearfully tormented” (Matthew 8:6). The centurion did not simply allow his slave to die in peace. He actively sought help.

There is another way in which this centurion was loving. He loved the Jewish people. The Jewish leaders themselves testified to this when they came to Jesus. “He loves our nation” (v. 5) they argued, as they persuaded Jesus to come and heal the man’s slave. This is extraordinary. First, that a Roman centurion, a gentile, would have Jewish friends is unusual. More than that, these Jewish friends were not unworthy social outcasts, but the very leaders of their religious community. Finally, that the relationship would be so strong that these religious leaders would do the centurion a favor by pleading with another on his behalf is almost impossible to believe.

The centurion had “heard about Jesus” (v.3). What had he heard exactly? Clearly he had heard enough about Jesus performing miracles of healing to believe that He could help his slave. Jesus had healed lepers and driven out demons. But as we shall see, this man believed more than that Jesus was simply a magically-gifted healer. He believed Jesus had authority, but more on that later.

Generosity

The Jewish leaders had their reasons for supporting the cause of the centurion, and these reasons were a reflection of the love the centurion had for the Jews. The man deserved the attention of Jesus, the Jewish leaders argued because “it was he who built us our synagogue” (v. 5). The words used indicate that the man may have been solely responsible for the financing of the building. Whether this was literally true or not, it was the way the Jewish leaders of Capernaum represented him to Jesus.

Precise numbers are impossible to calculate, since there were many different grades of centurion and it is not possible to know where this particular centurion fit into the Roman army, but a typical foot soldier at this time received about 225 denarii as an annual salary. Depending on position, a centurion might earn

5000-7500 denarii a year. Some of this might be paid in food and clothing, but still this was a significant amount, and it seems reasonable to consider that the centurion was capable of financing the building of a synagogue.

It is also interesting to consider that Capernaum may have had only the one synagogue. If so, that means that Jesus performed his miracles driving out demons in the synagogue built as a result of the generosity of this very centurion.

Humility

The Jewish leaders had presented the case of the centurion because “He is worthy for You to grant this to him” (v. 4). The works-righteousness requirements of their faith had been met by the building of the synagogue. As a result, this man deserved the attention of a rabbi with the power to heal his slave. Such fallacious thinking was common among the Jewish leaders. And though the centurion thought well enough of Judaism, he had no such opinion of himself.

The centurion had not thought himself even worthy of making the request to Jesus personally. Instead, “he sent some Jewish elders asking Him to come and save the life of his slave” (v. 3). That this was not a matter of simple arrogance in delegating a task to another is revealed in that as Jesus was on His way to the centurion’s 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’” (v. 6).

“Humility is the chief Christian virtue, for without it we persist in all our faults” La Rochefoucauld. It is a particular sign of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and a characteristic to be assiduously cultivated by believers.

Hearing that Jesus had agreed to his request, the man recognized his own unworthiness even further. Like Peter after the great catch of fish (Luke 5:8), the centurion could not abide the presence of one so holy. The conflict within him was significant. He loved his slave and wanted Jesus to heal him, but he knew he was unworthy of such grace and mercy. He would not consider having this rabbi, generous as He might be, violate His own customs by entering the house of a Gentile. What an excellent picture of humility!

He did not want Jesus to be bothered with making the trip all the way to his home. The word means to be annoyed, and again speaks to the centurion’s concern for another. He was perhaps a God-fearer, that is a Gentile who studied and reflected on the truths of Judaism without converting. He had an imperfect understanding of the truth, but he was willing and eager to learn. That he would not even approach Jesus was a sign that he understood his own personal unworthiness.

Faith

He did not have Jesus enter his home. He did not ask for Jesus to perform some sign or wonder to validate His ministry. Instead, recognizing that Jesus had authority, he had his friends tell Jesus “just say the word, and my servant will be healed” (v. 7). To demonstrate his understanding of the power of Jesus, the centurion illustrated what he meant. “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" (v. 8). As a soldier in the Roman army, the man well understood the chain of command. As a slave owner, he knew the power of life and death he held over those he owned.

Clearly he recognized that Jesus had the same authority over disease. The centurion believed that Jesus could simply speak and it would be so. Whether he understood all the implications of his belief, clearly his faith was unhindered by any doubt. He simply believed that if Jesus said something, it would be so.

This was a faith that astonished God. "When Jesus heard this, He marveled at him" (v. 9). And not content to let the moment pass without turning it into a teaching moment, Jesus "turned and said to the crowd that was following Him, 'I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such great faith'" (v. 9). That Jesus was as good as His word is indicated by the fact that "when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health" (v. 10). There are three three points to be made here.

First, this is a fine illustration of the humanity of Jesus. Jesus had a real human body. He became hungry, thirsty, and tired. Jesus had real human emotions. He grew angry, and He wept. Jesus had a real human intellect. He increased in knowledge, and there things He did not know. He could be astonished.

Second, this is a wonderful commendation for the faith of the centurion. The centurion had genuine love, remarkable generosity, true humility, and extraordinary faith.

Finally, this is a scathing indictment of the lack of faith among the Jews. They focused on their self-righteousness and entitlement as children of Abraham. The Jewish people had every opportunity (summed up in centuries of prophecy of the coming Messiah), but their hard-heartedness would not allow them to humble themselves as the centurion did.

Take Aways

Think of one area in which you might seek God's help this week as you grow in your faith.

Love for others, even those who might to the world appear unworthy

Generosity with the resources God has given us, especially in the cause of another

True humility that understands who we are and Who God is

Faith that takes God at His word, never doubting and never requiring proof