

The Faith of the Centurion, Part 1

Luke 7:1-5

We are in Luke Chapter 7. We're going to be opening, looking in that opening narrative there on the remarkable faith of a soldier. The faith of a Roman centurion. I wanna start this morning by reading that text, so read along with me if you have your Bibles open to Luke 7:1 through 10. "After he had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people he entered Capernaum. Now a centurion had a servant who was sick, and at the point of death who is highly valued by him. When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant. And when they came to Jesus, they pleaded with him earnestly, saying 'He is worthy to have you do this for him. For he loves our nation and he is the one who built us our synagogue.'"

"And Jesus went with them. When he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends saying to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed. For I too 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 servant, "Do this, and he does it." When Jesus heard these things, he marveled at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well."

The main focus of this narrative is the faith of the centurion. It's indicated clearly there by Jesus' reaction in verse 9, where he marveled, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." That word marvel, *thaumazo* in the Greek, it's, it's not an uncommon word in the New Testament in the Gospels especially. It describes the natural reaction that people have to Jesus.

Seeing his miracles, seeing his unparalleled power, power over nature, power over demons, he calms storms, he, he heals leprosy, he does all kinds of, his unparalleled authoritative teaching, his insightful responses and answers to those who would be like the inquisition sent to trip him up. People marvel at Jesus. What is not common, however, is to read about Jesus marveling at something else.

I mean how would he? He is the second person of the Trinity, he is God himself, he created all that is. How is it that this one marvels at anything, except God and God alone. This is one of only two places in the entire New Testament where it says that Jesus marveled. Jesus marvels here as we see over the faith of the centurion. And later on, when he returns to his hometown synagogue at Nazareth, it says in Mark 6:6 that Jesus is going to marvel again. But there, "because of their unbelief." So we see two places in Scripture that we read about Jesus marveling, and both times his astonishment has to do with faith.

He marvels at the presence of extraordinary faith in a gentile centurion, where this kind of faith is not expected. And he marveled at the absence of an expected faith, among his own people, the Jews, especially those in Nazareth, where they saw his upbringing, saw his, his life. They saw his family, they saw how he conducted himself, saw him without sin. They ought to believe and they didn't and so Jesus marveled.

So we want to discover today and as it turns out next week, we want to discover what was it about this centurion's faith that made Jesus marvel. I'm gonna give you a little hint. What makes Jesus marvel is God and God alone, and the faith that's

represented by this centurion is a faith that comes from God and God alone.

So we want to be thinking as we hear about this, we want to obviously be reflecting on our own faith. What does our faith look like? We want to reflect on the nature of our faith, the character of our own faith. Even the strength of our own faith as we reflect on them, think about that, going through this narrative going through this story. Would our faith call forth Jesus' rebuke like, "oh, you of little faith. Why do you doubt?"

Or, would Jesus marvel at our faith? Like he did over the faith of this gentile centurion. Would he see in us a faith that comes from God? Would he see a faith that's pure and unmixed by any doubt? Would he see in us a faith that is pure and unmixed by any distraction? Any other love? Any other interest? What would he find?

So with just a brief introduction, let's get into our outline for this morning written in your bulletin. We're only getting into half of it, as I mentioned, but let's start with the first point, the surprising situation. Surprising situation.

Look at verse 1 again, "After he'd finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people he entered Capernaum." We're not

really sure how long he was there in Capernaum before hearing from the centurion. There's no time reference provided, but it couldn't have been too long. After coming back from the mountain side, where he taught the crowds, Mark wrote about this time in Mark 3:20 that Jesus went home. That is back to Peter's home, Peter's house, where he was staying when he visited Capernaum. And it says that there in Mark 3:20 that the crowd gathered again so that they, the disciples and Jesus, could not even eat. And they were crushing in on the town, crushing in on Peter's home. They couldn't even get a meal together.

So there's still this massive crowd of people in attendance; they're not only from Capernaum but, as Luke 17 says, there's a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon. So, looks like all those folks are not ready to go home just yet. They want to see more, they want to hear more, from Jesus. You can hardly fault them for that.

And then in verse 2, Luke introduces us to this situation. And the way he has written about this in the original text, it comes across as quite surprising. The English reads this, "Now a centurion had a servant who was sick, and at the point of

death.” And it makes it sound in that translation like the centurion is the subject of the sentence. He’s not.

At this point, he’s almost incidental. In fact, in the original he’s just a certain centurion. There’s actually a word that says certain, just a certain guy, doesn’t have a name even in the text. He’s not even placed grammatically, though, as the subject of the sentence. It’s actually the servant who’s in focus here.

And the word is *doulos*, which means slave. Not someone who is hired like a servant. But a slave, someone who is owned. So this slave, he is the subject of the sentence. In the most literal, the maybe, maybe accurate way to render that opening sentence is this way. Now the slave of a certain centurion was sick and about to die. Or, if we just whittle away all of that down to its bare essence: A slave was about to die.

A slave was about to die. You know the response of a first century reader, to that opening line, a slave was about to die. So what? So what? Slaves die all the time. They come, they go, they work, they die. What is the big deal? Just a slave. There were tens of millions of slaves throughout the Roman Empire. Some estimates run as high as 50 to 60 million people in slavery.

Italy had a population of five to six million people and 1.5 to 2 million of those people were slaves. In larger cities like Rome and Corinth, Ephesus, slaves made up one third of the total population. The city of Rome itself, population of 1.5 million citizens, there were 400,000 slaves in that city; even middle-class citizens owned an average of eight slaves per household.

So slavery was the unquestioned, normal way of the world, of the entire world. There was no hue and cry against the institution of slavery like there is today. There's nothing strange about slavery in the first century mind. There's nothing necessarily inhumane about slavery in that time. There were humane and inhumane ways of treating one's slaves but slave owners by and large considered their slaves to be their personal property, or the, the property of the estate.

They had the potential of being very useful tools to the slave owner. In fact, that's what Aristotle believed. Famous quote, "A slave is a living tool, just as a tool is an inanimate slave." That's how Aristotle thought about it. That's how the first century world thought about it.

So in the first century world, a subject line like a slave was about to die, hardly raise an eyebrow. Say it to most people

response would be, so? Why write about it? That's one of the many things I love about the New Testament. It's written not in the twenty first century. Where it's cool to write about anti-slavery kind of stuff.

No, this was written in the first century and this is completely countercultural, because Luke begins this narrative by counting this slave to be important. Putting him as the subject of the sentence. He's grammatically the subject. He puts him in the center of the situation and Luke demands just by the way he has written this, that we, the readers, see the slave's life-threatening illness as worthy of our attention and our concern. Because that's how the centurion saw him.

That's how God sees him. That's what's surprising about this situation. We're introduced to the character of the centurion, here, in kind of an oblique way, but we're introduced to the servant, the slave, right in the center. And now we see the centurion, introduced to him as a man, marked by a remarkable kindness.

He's a kind man. He's one who is genuinely, truly concerned about this slave. It says in verse 2, the slave was "sick and at the point of death." Over in Matthew 8:6, parallel passage, we



learned that slave was paralyzed. He, he was immobile and, and yet he didn't have the advantage of dead nerve endings.

His nerve endings and pain receptors were all still firing because it also says in Matthew 8, he was suffering terribly. Other translations say he was grievously tormented, feeling great pain, suffering terrible anguish. Centurion doesn't respond to this situation like, like most centurions or most even citizens probably would, by counting this living tool as a throwaway tool and looking for a replacement. Centurion here sees the slave as a man. Created in God's image.

Even more than a man, someone he really cared for. It says, verse 2, that this slave was, was highly valued by him. The translation could lead us to believe the centurion found the slave really, really useful. Hard to replace. Like a really good drill you like, you know you don't wanna throw it away 'cause, I can't get a good deal and have this drill fitted to my hand. That's not the idea here.

He didn't just hate to lose him because of utilitarian reasons only. The word here is *entimos*, which can mean respected, esteemed, even highly honored. So it's not just a matter of utilitarian usefulness, it's not a matter of that. It's, it's not even just a matter of esteem and honor, as if the

slave had noble character. The word here *entimos* can also mean a deep affection, and that's how the King James translators render it. The, the centurion's slave was, I love this, "dear unto him." Dear unto him.

Down in verse 7, look at it there, the centurion, when he entreats the Lord through his friends. He says, "Let my servant be healed." Same word, but the word for servant there it's not *doulas*, it's not the word for servant either. It's the word *pais*, which means child; like a son or like a daughter. And that is an odd, rather surprising way for a centurion to speak of a slave, but that is how this centurion was.

He was a kind, tender man. And he considered this dying slave like his own child. He spoke of this, this man as an, it, with an intimate affection. Slave isn't just a living tool to him. He's a highly valued, highly esteemed human being, but even more than that, he's one who's dear to him.

It's a surprising way to introduce the story. But introduced to the surprising situation, this is where we're going to see the character of the centurion become even clearer in the next verse, verse 3. Where he poses a second point, second point, the bold question. In your outline, the bold

question. It's not just the question itself, but it's, it's how he asked it.

Says in verse 3, "When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant." The centurion he sends a delegation to Jesus. He's used to sending delegations. He's used to sending representatives to speak on his behalf, emissaries. He's confident that whomever he sends is going to convey whatever message he sends with them.

That's abundantly clear over in Matthew's account. Because over in Matthew's account, Matthew does not even mention the delegation. He puts the question in the centurion's mouth as if he is physically present, even though we know from Luke's gospel he's not. He asked Jesus to come and heal his servant.

He knows that the message is going to be conveyed without obstruction, without change. Luke, though, wants us to see the delegation. He wants us to see the use of intermediaries. Because it's important to his purpose for us to understand the kind of man this is. It's going to become clear as we see the second delegation later on in the text. But the word centurion comes from a Latin word for one hundred. It's *centurio* or *century*, we get the word century from that.

Centurion, he's the highest ranking noncommissioned officer. So, master chief in the Navy or master sergeant in the Army, Air Force. He's the highest ranking noncommissioned officer in a Roman legion and as a centurion, he commanded a company size formation anywhere between fifty and a hundred men.

Roman centurions, they were highly respected because they came up through the ranks as soldiers. Centurions, they would have had many military campaigns under their belts visited many as they say, join the Marines, travel to far and exotic places, see interesting and exciting people, and kill them. You know that's, that's kind of this guy.

He's traveling all over the world doing Rome's bidding. He's seen many things. He's been involved in many battles, many wars. He would have fought side by side with the men that he commanded. So a centurion's reputation, for courage and valor it would have been known by those to whom it matters most. The people you serve with. The respect granted to centurions, it's not just on the basis of rank alone.

These guys are known by their men. They're known by those who know. They've distinguished themselves in battle as soldiers first, in submission to authority, able to take commands, able to be directed. But then they've risen up through the ranks, not

only knowing how to take orders, but how to give them too. They've become leaders.

It's notable that on every occasion in Scripture, centurions are esteemed. They're portrayed in a, in a respectable way. They're men have dignity and wealth and influence. They're highly regarded and highly esteemed by others, Jew and Gentile alike. In fact, it's interesting to me that a centurion features here really early on in Luke's Gospel.

There's another notable centurion in Luke's second volume, named Cornelius, right? In Acts 10 we read about Cornelius. He called for Peter to come and preach this gospel to him about this, this Jesus. He brought together his entire family, his entire household, which along with all the slaves that were owned, it was quite a number of people and they were all saved. Radically saved by the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit fell upon them all. They all praised God in other languages, just as the Jews had done on the day of Pentecost. That's a centurion as well.

They're remarkable people. They were used to living in, in occupied territory like this centurion is living here. He's likely attached to a regiment in the service of Herod Antipas. Herod Antipas lived down the coast of the Sea of Galilee on the

western side, in Tiberias, named for his benefactor, the emperor Tiberius. Was located on the western coast of the Sea of Galilee, just southwest of Capernaum. And Antipas, he wanted a Roman garrison up in Capernaum to protect his interests.

He had tax revenue coming in from the fishing industry. He had tax revenue coming in and customs dues from traders who traveled in and out of his territory on the Via Maris, which was an ancient trade route that connected Mesopotamia with Egypt. So this centurion is stationed there. He's, along with the Roman garrison that he commanded, he's there to ensure the orderly collection of taxes. He's there to police the population. He's even there to protect the population from any unsavory characters who moved in and out of town.

It was really a rather dangerous assignment. Especially on the outskirts of Galilee, this border town, Capernaum. This centurion, he had seen enough battle, he'd been stationed in enough occupied territories to know that he had to treat these indigenous people, who were a conquered people, he had to treat them with respect.

By conducting himself, and commanding his men with wisdom, he knew, and he taught them to know how to live within a hostile environment in peace. How to live and police that population in

peace. So this centurion, verse 3 it says, he'd "heard about Jesus." When? When did hear about Jesus, how did he hear about Jesus? The news gets around, doesn't it?

News reports have been continuously flowing in. They've been growing in intensity and in frequency ever since the days of John the Baptist. In fact, remember back in, turn back in your Bibles to Luke Chapter 3. Luke 3:14, some of the characters who showed up at John's baptism, what are they, soldiers right? Soldiers showed up there. They're very likely also in the service of Herod Antipas, back in Luke 3:3, it says that "John went in to all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." It says there in verse 7, he told the crowds who came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers," Oh, soldiers like a guy like that, "you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance and don't begin to say to yourselves we have Abraham as our father." Now pagan, gentile soldiers are perking up their ears. Yeah, don't say Abraham's your father. Don't rely on that. "For I tell you," verse 8, "God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham."