

The Faith of the Centurion, Part 2

Luke 7:1-5

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.”

Again, comfort to a Gentile. “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the tree every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. And the crowds asked him ‘what then shall we do?’” So he answered them very similar to what Jesus teaches, “whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none. Whoever has food is to do

likewise." Be generous, share, be kind, love your neighbor. "Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, 'teacher, what shall we do' He said, collect no more than you're authorized to do."

Soldiers who often were the strong arms for the tax collectors, "They asked him as well, 'What shall we do?'" We, we ourselves? Soldiers like us? Soldiers who really don't belong in any of this company. Who killed a lot of people. What should we do? "He said to them, 'Don't extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation. Be content with your wages.' As the people were in expectation, all were questioning in their hearts concerning John whether he might be the Christ. John answered them all, saying, 'I baptize you with water. But he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn,' those are the those who are baptized by the Holy Spirit, 'and the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'" There's the baptism of fire.

So grace and judgment. That's this one who's coming. With any of, "Many other exhortations, he preached good news to the

people.” Now that had, all of that had to be encouraging for pagan soldiers. Those who were serving the interests of Rome in this remote outpost of the Roman Empire. And what intrigued them was the promise of this coming one. Someone who’s even mightier than John. Someone who will receive soldiers like them, that made an impression on soldiers.

One more passage. How did the centurion hear about Jesus? When had he heard? Go over to John chapter 4. John chapter 4, end of chapter 4 after the, the whole conversation with the woman at the well. And the whole, really, revival among the Samaritans. John chapter 4 over in John 4:46. In John 4 it says there that Jesus healed the son of a, of a royal official, and the word there is a *basilikos*, someone who is also very likely in the service of Herod Antipas.

You know where this healing happened? At Capernaum. You know how it happened. Listen to this in John 4:46, “He came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine and at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill. And when this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down to heal his son, for he was at the point of death. So Jesus said to him, ‘Unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe.’ And the official said to

him, 'Sir, come down before my child dies.' Jesus said to him, 'Go your son will live.' The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him, and he went on his way, and as he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering. So he asked them the hour when he began to get better, and they said to him yesterday at the seventh hour, the fever left him. The father knew that it was the hour when Jesus had said to him. 'Your son will live.' He himself believed and all his household."

Now you think word got around. You think maybe with he and his entire household believing, that they kept that to themselves. No. Believers talk about what God has done for them. And when they talk, they get excited, and they rejoice, and that joy cannot be contained. The word about Jesus, been going around a long time. Very likely come to the centurion, whether from the soldiers who were at John's baptism, or whether from the members of the nobleman's household, or those who knew them or all the above.

Not only that, you can go back to Luke 7, not only that, but, that synagogue that was in Capernaum. That one that he himself had built, Jesus had cast a demon out of the, a man there in that synagogue. Reports about what Jesus had done

during his itinerant ministry throughout the region, that had made it back to him. All about the miracles, the healings, all of his acts of compassion and kindness. Very likely the centurion had heard about all that too.

And now, Capernaum, he's stationed around there, and this massive throng of people has swelled the population. There's people from Judea and Jerusalem, from the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon. And the population of sleepy little Capernaum has mushroomed in size. So it's his business to know what's going on, because when there are massive crowds, for anybody who's in a police force, there are massive problems, aren't there?

The centurion, he's pretty well informed about Jesus. No doubt he's very curious. And now there's a situation that arises within his own household. It gives him the opportunity to make contact. He's in dire need here. His beloved dear servant is sick and paralyzed and, and in pain, and he's facing an imminent death. So the centurion is compelled by the problem that he's faced with. He's emboldened by what he's heard about Jesus, that this man and this man alone can heal my beloved servant.

So he makes contact. Verse 3 says, "He sent to Jesus elders of the Jews asking him to come and heal his servant." Because of his role. Because of his status and his wealth. We might add to

because of his wisdom as a commander of an occupying force. The centurion had become friends with some of the leading Jewish elders of Capernaum.

Although these Jewish elders are not at all under his command, though they're not in his employ, they're eager to act as his emissaries. They're eager to take his question and his request to Jesus to ask Jesus to come and heal his servant. We find out why in the next two verses, which is our third point. The persuasive petition. The persuasive petition. Look there in verse 4. It says when they came to Jesus, they pleaded with him earnestly. The verb tense there makes it clear that they were urging him repeatedly. They were imploring Jesus over and over again. They didn't just ask once and walk away, they just kept at it. They're earnest in this petition. They're persistent, they're urgent.

Now, under any normal conditions, it is rather odd for Jews to petition on behalf of Gentiles. They just don't do that. In fact, for this to happen is, is incredible. And to do so aggressively, persistently, earnestly, repeatedly, that's actually undignified for men of their caliber, as elders in the community, to basically beg like this.

As we keep reading, though, we discover the reason for their persistence. They say, '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.'" What's their argument in a word? He's worthy. He's worthy. As Jewish elders they're appealing to Jesus. Yes, Jesus is some kind of a prophet. He's obviously got the hand of God on him, because he's a miracle worker. He's probably even Messiah; kind of, jury's out on that. But he really should take their judgment as elders. Their experience, their wisdom, Jesus should take all of that under careful advisement, because after all, in their estimation, this man is worthy.

The word worthy, *axios* in Greek, *axios* in its strict literal usage it means to kind of like, axis. It, it, it's bringing up the, the other beam of the scales as in, this guy balances the scales. He measures up. He is solid. They're basically saying he is, Jesus, he's, he's upright, he's worthy, he's therefore entitled to, and they're even deserving of your attention. For this use of your resources, this is a good investment for you, Jesus. After all, he's favorable to us. He has done for us. It's only fitting that we return the favor and do something favorable for him. With you as our representative, Jesus with your power, the power of God at your hand, it's only fitting.

Sheds a little light, doesn't it, on the Jewish ethical perspective? In fact, isn't this how most people think? Isn't this how you and I think, tend to think most of the time about doing good to others. Do unto others, and if and only if they have done for us well, we'll consider doing for them. It's not what Jesus just taught, is it?

Two reasons here for this centurion's worthiness. Two reasons which entitle him to at least one miracle. He loves our nation and he is the one who built us our synagogue. Now keep in mind, this is the testimony of an occupied people. This is the testimony of people in Galilee of all places. Galilee is home to a strong nationalistic fervor.

Judas the Galilean, he's mentioned in Acts 5:37. He had led a recent revolt against the Romans. His followers were aligned with the zealot party. Some of those guys in the zealot party were terrorists, known as Sicarii, a group of Jewish assassins. They got their name from the *sicae*, the, the small dagger that they concealed in the folds of their garment. They would take that dagger, they would, they would go into a crowd, and they were known to assassinate public figures in public, in a crowd. Slicing them in lethal areas with that dagger. They were experts at it.



Part of the Jewish Zealot party. That all was centered in Galilee. Even the milder pro-Israel dissent of the Pharisees party was very strong in Galilee. In fact, that's where a lot of them came from. The Jewish elders were very likely not only aligned with the Pharisees, they were probably Pharisees themselves. Many of the lay leaders attached to the synagogue were zealous Pharisees. They longed to see God's Word proclaimed. They longed to see God's favor on Israel.

So the fact that this centurion had won, not just the respect, but even more than that, the advocacy of these Jewish elders in Capernaum, that is remarkable. How did this centurion win their support? He loves our nation. He loves our nation. And he's the one who built us our synagogue.

It's interesting to me that their emphasis is on the love that he has. Present tense, ongoing continuous love. His love, continuous for the Jewish nation. It's the word *agapao* that supreme kind of love that Jesus just commanded in the Sermon on the Mount. From the mouth of these Jews, they testify to what they see in this centurion. They cannot deny this testimony of love.

How highly he esteems the Jewish people. How he sacrifices of himself of his money for their highest good, doing what's

best for them with their interests at heart. Powerful testimony. The evidence of his love, he built them a synagogue. I can point to it. It's a physical edifice, it's a building. It's actually reportedly the highest tallest building in Capernaum.

The emphasis comes out in the translation. First of the physical evidence of this centurion's love, and second of his personal investment in it. The, the grammar puts it this way, the synagogue he himself built for us, using his own personal funds, involving no one else. The centurion and the centurion alone, he is responsible for the synagogue we attend. Responsible for the synagogue Jesus attended the one in which Jesus taught. The one in which he had cast out the demon. No one else but the centurion is responsible for that. In fact, without that centurion, they would not have a synagogue.

Now, Gentile patronage was not unheard of in the first century world. We find archaeological evidence of Gentile patronage in ancient inscriptions. There are building projects, infrastructure improvements, there's even one inscription that recognize a Gentile for building the Jews a house of prayer.

Even Herod the Great himself, he built and beautified the temple in Jerusalem. But this kind of patronage, by this centurion, not at all common. Capernaum started as a small

fishing village. It grew into a large village or town, but there was nothing there worth investing in. But it became large enough to attract the attention of those who wanted to tax it. Those who wanted to benefit from it. But the town and its people were nonetheless quite poor.

So the kindness of this unnamed centurion, he built the first and only synagogue of Capernaum. That's something. His kindness here is not notable, just as an act of generous patronage, though it was. It was notable because of the motivation. It was love. Love for the nation.

It was notable because of the purpose of a synagogue, which was for the teaching of Scripture. This Gentile had an interest in the Word of God, taught weekly, taught throughout the week as a tool to shape the mind and the character of people as a tool to disciple and raise families, to perpetuate the holy name of God, to reveal this God's mind to the whole community, that's important to him.

He's a God fearer; he's not a proselyte. By the way, a proselyte to the Jewish faith went through painful circumcision, went through ritual baptism and everything, and he was counted as a fellow Jew. This guy is not. He doesn't want Jesus to come under his roof. Not because he doesn't want Jesus there, but

because he's respecting the boundary. He's a God fearer. He remained apart from the Jews. So as a God fearer he respects that distance. He respects that distinction. He recognizes like the Syria-Phoenician woman in Matthew 15. I'm just a Gentile dog. I wanna eat the scraps, though, that fall from the master's table. So would you come after you hear in the synagogue the teaching of the Word of God, would you come and read it to me? Would you come and share it with me?

And you see this guy's humility. He wanted to invest in God's Word. Beautiful picture of a very worthy investment in a remote place. The Jews find the centurion here worthy of Jesus. We can understand their reasoning. I want to stop here for a moment though, to reflect on this man's character just a little more. Because the picture is starting to emerge for us, they really should have us scratching our heads. How did this guy get to be this guy? I mean is he just born noble? The commentator J.C. Ryle, he ponders that question, and he surmises that the centurion could have only learned his kindness, whether toward his slave, as a man or toward the Jewish nation, this level of kindness of love could only come through exposure to the God of Israel. Which could only come through the Scripture, and by the grace of God himself.

Here's what J.C. Ryle said and some of his reflections. He asked, "Where did the centurion learn this kindness? How can we account for one who was a heathen by birth and a soldier by profession, showing such a spirit as this? Habits of mind like these were not likely to be gleaned from heathen teaching or promoted by the society of a Roman camp. Greek and Latin philosophy would not recommend them. Tribunes, consuls, prefects, and emperors would not encourage them. There's only one way to account with the centurion's character. The centurion was what he was by the grace of God. The Spirit had opened the eyes of his understanding and put a new heart within him. His knowledge of divine things, no doubt, was very dim, but his religious views were probably built on a very imperfect acquaintance with the Old Testament Scriptures. But whatever the light he had from above, it influenced his life. And resulted in the kindness described in this passage." End quote.

In my few years on Earth, I've run into a lot of people with a lot of knowledge, I'm sure you have too. And sometimes I'm taken aback by how inconsistently people use that knowledge. How unfaithfully they treat it? How little that knowledge has affected their character. And on the other hand, I've come across people who have very little knowledge. Maybe they had, didn't grow up in a good church or weren't exposed to great

teaching. And yet, with the little that they do know, it's remarkable how consistently, how faithfully they practice that truth. It's incredible to see the mark of God's grace on their life.

Knowledge alone puffs up, but what, love, what, edifies right? Love edifies. This man had been changed. This man is different. The evidence of the centurion's love is clear, unmistakable and it means the evidence of the Holy Spirit's work in his life is also clear and unmistakable too, right? This man was what he was by the grace of God. Chosen by sovereign election. Regenerated by the Holy Spirit, then saved as Christ would later on atone for all of his sins on that cross at Calvary. Also attended, by the way, by a centurion. Who remarked when he saw him, "Truly this man was the son of God."

So the evidence of the grace of God in this man's life couldn't be clearer. As a Gentile, representing the conquering nation of Rome, representing the intruding, extorting, polluting influence of Rome. Just like many of the troops represent the polluting, distorting, degrading influence of America in other parts of the world.

That's how they see it. He's living among a people who are nationally, religiously, ethnically, politically disinclined

toward him. They're more likely to hate him than anything else, and to hate him with a passion. But even they can see in his attitudes, in his actions which are personally sacrificial, in no way personally enriching, they see his love for them. That is instructive to us, isn't it? This centurion has become a living, breathing illustration to the Jews, to this crowd, verse 9, which is following along behind Jesus. He's a living illustration of the kind of love that Jesus just taught about in the Sermon on the Mount.