

One Soldier's Amazing Faith

Luke 7:1-10

Memorial Day has become a time for each of us to remember our own deceased loved ones, but of course, it was originally, and it continues to be primarily, a day for remembering those who have fallen in the defense of this nation. The day was called "Decoration Day" when it was established in 1868. Families from both sides of the Civil War decorated the graves of their loved ones. The nation's wounds eventually healed. Now, Americans in all states observe the day, thanking those who paid the ultimate price defending this nation. We honor the sacrifice of every member of every branch of the American military that served to defend our liberties.

Every secure culture in history has been indebted to its military. Rome at its peak was no exception. While the virtue of imperialism is dubious, one has to concede that the Romans did it well, largely because of the centurions, commanders of 100 men. Our text tells of one such centurion, who finds himself calling upon a different kind of courage than has ever been required of him in his service to Rome. A centurion was a man proven in battle and in his ability to lead others. He was not an officer or administrator. He was an enlisted man, the equivalent of a non-com, someone who started at the bottom and earned his stripes, so to speak, through competence in combat.

One day, this centurion found himself ravaged with a personal grief. His credentials and the respect he commanded meant little as he watched a beloved servant cling to life. But, apparently, he had been following the healing ministry of an itinerant preacher from Nazareth named Jesus

This accomplished centurion found himself helplessly needing the man from Nazareth in much the same way that many have discovered their need for the One Who alone can put lives back together again. This centurion's goodness and public standing, just like whatever goodness or public standing any of us may enjoy, were filthy rags compared to the power and righteousness of Jesus. He alone can mend sinful and broken people. Counting on Jesus' grace for the healing of a dear servant was the only hope this centurion had. Let us explore now their encounter:

¹When Jesus had finished saying all this in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum.

Jesus had just finished a version of the inaugural message with which He introduced His kingdom. In Matthew, it is called the *Sermon on the Mount*. Luke's version of the message is distinct in enough respects that I believe it was similar material preached on a separate occasion. In any event, after Jesus taught these things, he went to Capernaum, a Roman port on the northern coast of the Sea of Galilee. A Roman garrison was there, and several Roman centurions, each responsible for 100 soldiers, were authorized to keep the peace. These centurions kept a number of Roman slaves to carry out household tasks as well as administrative business.

A Roman centurion was far from an aristocrat, but he was typically held in higher regard by the rank and file of the populace. Commanders of 100 soldiers, centurions were the backbone of the Roman military. Luke, a gentile who wrote his gospel and the book of *Acts* to gentiles, makes several references to centurions. He always speaks of them respectfully, if not as men of unique virtue. A centurion appears at the crucifixion, concluding, "Surely, this was a righteous man" (Luke 23:47). The first gentile convert to Christianity was Cornelius, another centurion. More centurions appear throughout the various ordeals of Paul as men who were concerned about insuring fair treatment for the apostle as well as keeping him safe. It seems as though Luke may have featured these men positively so that Romans might find his message more palatable.

Among the many centurions in a single garrison, this particular centurion appears to have grown weary of the gods of his ancestors. Roman gods, far from behaving like gods, often conducted themselves almost sub-humanly. The power and respect wielded by this centurion now seemed empty. He had turned to *YAHWEH*, the God of the Jews, with a devotion and a solidity of faith that even caught Jesus by surprise. What was it about this Roman's faith that so amazed the Jew's *Messiah* that He would observe: "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel"?

For Jesus to find "such great faith" in Israel implies that there was a certain quality of faith that He expected to see among those who were part of God's covenant nation. He was pleasantly amazed when this excellence of faith was manifested in one who did not grow up under *YAHWEH'S* covenant blessings and promises. Still, this centurion had seen enough; through faithful Israelites, through recorded history and through the meanness and emptiness of his own religious heritage. Whatever the factors, formally or informally, this centurion had chosen to honor God, and he was clearly able to recognize that Jesus had come from God. So, what is this character of faith that Jesus seeks in those who profess to love God. What can we learn?

I. The Loving Kindness of the Faith Jesus Seeks (2-6a)

A. This Centurion Loved His Slave verses 2, 3

... ²There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. ³The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant.

"Valued highly" is an odd phrase. According to Roman law, a slave was a living tool. A master was within his rights to treat his slave as capriciously as he pleased, even to the point of executing him on a whim. One Roman writer on estate management recommended an annual inspection of all tools and implements. Those worn out or broken should be thrown out. Slaves were to be included in such an inventory. Slaves were less than human in the eyes of Roman law.

Many people have tools that they "value highly". We've all been around tradesmen and their tools. We know how protective they can be. I remember several years ago when some men of the church took some youth down to the camp to stain our cabin. Our resident painter, Dick, was leading the project. One of the boys loaded up one of Dick's good cutting-in brushes and just started slathering stain on an exterior wall. I thought we might lose Dick that day.

Other professional tradesmen and amateur craftsmen have their own gadgets about which they can get pretty squirrely, but the word used here describes a stronger emotion than most people would feel toward even their favorite tool. *Entimos*, from which we derive our word "intimate," is a much warmer term than we would apply toward any inanimate object (except maybe a set of golf clubs). If your translation says "valued highly" or "highly regarded" it is technically correct. However, in this instance, the old *King James Version* probably provides a more descriptive rendering when it refers to the slave as "*dear*" to the centurion. This master's affection for and sense of his slave's personhood was not unprecedented, but neither was it commonplace.

This Centurion had an unusual rapport with his Jewish neighbors. Typically, the Roman presence was resented by the Jews. Jews hated Romans, and, not surprisingly, the Romans hated the Jews right back. Certain movers and shakers among the Jewish elites had little qualm about crawling into political bed with Rome, but the rank and file of Jews despised everything Roman. Levi, a tax collector for the Romans was despised within this same city of Capernaum, but this centurion had a close enough affinity with the elders of the town (the synagogue elders) that made them want to speak to Jesus in his behalf. Why would *THEY* be willing to speak for *HIM*?

B. This Roman Had Committed Himself to the God of the Jews verses 4-6a

... ⁴When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, ⁵because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." ⁶So Jesus went with them.

The elders told Jesus that this unique centurion: "... loves our nation." "Love" is *agape*. Here, *agape* does not convey every unique nuance about God's love that the early Christians infused into the word in their writings, but even to the most generic gentile audience, *agape* was distinct from other words for love in that it was known by its action and its generosity. This is why it is often rendered "charity" in older versions though that English word has taken on nuances over time that make it a less than adequate rendering. To the elders of Capernaum, the fact that this centurion "built their synagogue" proved that he loved their nation.

Synagogues were the Jews only real mechanism for spreading God's truth around the world. The temple service in Jerusalem and the Jewish worship rituals excluded Gentiles, but a synagogue could be planted anywhere in the world where an adequate community of Jews resided. There, even Gentiles could hear the Scriptures read. To fund a synagogue would be a costly enterprise in terms of resources and reputation. It probably amused the other centurions of Capernaum.

How very Jewish for these elders to say, "This man deserves to have you do this." This centurion's Jewish pals believed that this man had earned a little divine consideration. The Jews believed that God's favor was contingent upon one's good deeds and righteousness. Of course, the Jews are not the only people who have ever fallen into the trap of believing that such things provide the best shot for getting God to notice them. Man is so prideful by nature that it is hard for him to concede that any divine consideration he receives is only by God's grace and mercy.

Most Christians understand this, but many understand it to such an extreme degree that they actually misunderstand. There is no consideration for the place of works at all in their practice of Christianity even though James 3:26 clearly reminds them that "faith without works is dead." One preacher suggested some years ago that ministers should stop reminding Christians that they cannot earn salvation by good works, since nobody is really trying very hard to do that anymore.

Works are vital to a living faith. Without them, any professed faith is proven to be a lie. Of course, the mere presence of works does not prove the presence of faith, not when Jesus comes calling. The centurion understood this whether his Jewish friends understood it or not. It seems apparent that this centurion served God and God's people because he loved and trusted God and not simply because he wanted to wrestle good things for himself from God's hand

II. The Lowly Meekness of the Faith Jesus Seeks (6b-9)

A. Love and Good Works Can Emerge from a Variety of Motives

A little boy told a salesclerk he was shopping for a birthday gift for his mother and asked to see some cookie jars. At a counter displaying a large selection the youngster carefully lifted and replaced each lid. His face fell as he came to the last one. He asked, "Do you have any with covers that don't make any noise?" Right motives do not always accompany right actions.

The Romans encouraged some support of local religions from the cynical motive that it served to keep the provincials in order. In most places in the empire, people could worship as they pleased, and later, when emperor worship was introduced in an effort to unify the empire, most pagans didn't mind. They already worshipped multiple gods anyway. But, the Jews were granted an exemption because imposed emperor worship would create neither unity nor order, but rebellion. Is it possible that a ruler might build a Jewish synagogue from motives that were less than pristine? Augustus recommended this of his tetrarchs and governors as a matter of smart politics.

But remember, this was a centurion, a commander of one hundred soldiers, not a ruler. He was important, but not that important. He may have been comfortable by the standards of the day, but not rich. He needed more motivation than administrative cynicism or theological curiosity to privately finance a synagogue. His love for the Jews and his spiritual sensitivities must have been genuine.

B. This Man Approached Jesus in Humility and Meekness verses 6b-8

He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. ⁷That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁸For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

In occupied lands, Roman soldiers could grab any bystander and constrain him to carry a burden, or, they could commandeer his property. This galled the occupied people, but they usually played along rather than to face the soldier's sword. This reality lay behind Jesus' words in the *Sermon on the Mount*: "If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles" (Matthew 5:41).

As the centurion caught wind of the fact that Jesus was in route to his home, he may have been concerned about a misunderstanding. He was not compelling Jesus to come to him. As a man in authority, he knew how authority worked. The guy in charge gives a command. The subordinate responds. He sent forth another delegation, this group identified simply as "friends" to intercept Jesus. Far from "pulling rank", the centurion was sensitive about troubling Jesus. He did not expect Jesus to enter a gentile home, which would have been awkward for a rabbi like Jesus.

The centurion demonstrated great meekness. The world has a hard time understanding meekness, which has nothing to do with being a doormat. Many, even in the church, think that to be meek is to be weak and they recoil at the notion. Biblical meekness is a powerful virtue. Someone once called it "strong enough to be gentle." Jesus was the Son of God. However, His absolute trust in the Father enabled Him to meekly show self-restraint even when resistance seemed warranted. When we are meek, we don't need to lash out when attacked. Meekness would be weakness if it meant yielding to sin. True meekness empowers us to trust God enough to honor and obey Him. Meekness lets any number of slights and trials slide, because we trust that God is in charge of our lives.

Our arrogant self-reliance and self-assuredness must look so silly from the vantage point of heaven. Dr. James Dobson keeps a picture of an elegantly dressed woman drinking a cup of coffee. Her little finger is cocked ever so daintily, and her face reveals complete self-assurance. However, she does not yet know that her slip has collapsed around her feet. The caption reads: “Confidence is what you have before you understand the situation.” That’s the trouble with much of our “thumbs-up” confidence. We are ignorantly confident and so unaware of our weaknesses. We must humbly acknowledge the boundaries of our power and find our confidence in Jesus.

A.W. Tozer wrote, “The meek man is not a human mouse afflicted with a sense of his own inferiority. Rather he may be in his moral life as bold as a lion and as strong as Samson; but he has stopped being fooled about himself. He has accepted God’s estimate of his own life. He knows he is as weak and helpless as God declared him to be ...” This man conceded that his authority as a centurion was useless. It could not save his slave, so he turned helplessly to Jesus.

C. This Roman Had Mastered Faith Better than Most Jews verse 9

⁹When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, “I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.”

There are certain human emotions that are difficult for me to consider affecting Jesus. One such emotion is surprise. How could anyone or anything sneak up on Jesus? He knew what was in a man. He knew that Judas would betray Him. He knew that Peter would deny knowing Him. He knew that one sick old woman had touched Him even though He was being bumped and jostled in the midst of a crowd. Jesus knew everything, so it seemed. But at times, it was if He reigned in the full measure of His omniscience so that He could enjoy the very human element of surprise.

There is little wonder that this Roman surprised Jesus. He had just finished a sermon similar in content to the *Sermon on the Mount*. He turned our notions of strength and weakness upside down. He spoke of love for enemies. He spoke of the need to bear fruit that reflects our professions rather than contradicts them. Now, the first person Jesus met who seemed to uphold such kingdom ideals was a gentile whose background prized strength, ferocity and self-reliance. This man was among the first to recognize in Jesus the One in Whom all authority is centered as well as the One Who deliverer us. We should not be surprised that Jesus was surprised.

Conclusion (10)

... ¹⁰Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

Oh yes, by the way, the servant lived. That detail reads almost like an afterthought, not the central point of the story. In fact, the climax of the story was not the miracle. Jesus had a million of those. The climax of the story was the discovery of kingdom faith in a Gentile. Kingdom faith is evidenced by love for others and meekness before God, and it took a Roman to “get” it.

To love others and to trust God in matters where we would never presume to trust ourselves - that’s what amazing faith is all about. That’s the faith that delights Jesus wherever He finds it.