

## The Faith of A Centurion

Lesson for April 14, 2024

### Unit II: The Measure of Faith

#### Adult Topic: Healed from A Distance

**Background Scripture:** Luke 7:1-10

**Printed Text:** Luke 7:1-10

**Key verse:** *“That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed.”* (Luke 7:7, NIV)

If you were to ask people what faith is, you might receive all kinds of different answers. It is something they put their trust in. It is where they place their confidence. This is where the definitions differ quite a bit. We know that a Christian faith puts its confidence and trust in God and God alone. From the Book of Hebrews we read: *“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see”* (Hebrews 11:1). Our faith is based in the present but also looks forward to the future, knowing that God has provided for all things. Believers discover that great faith is not self-centered but Christ-centered and humbly trusts in God.

There are times when the enormity of our problems diminishes our capacity to move forward. How should or do we respond to seemingly impossible problems? When a centurion whose servant was close to death responded in great faith, Jesus was amazed and miraculously restored the servant to full health. (Sunday School Commentary, 2023-2024, Townsend Press, p. 296)

### Key Terms

- 1. Centurion** (verse 6) – A Roman officer in command of a hundred men (Mark 15:39 Mark 15:44 Mark 15:45). Cornelius, the first Gentile convert, was a centurion (Acts 10:1, Acts 10:22). Other centurions are mentioned in Matthew 8:5; Matthew 8:8; Matthew 8:13; Acts 21:32; Acts 22:25- 26. A centurion watched the crucifixion of our Lord (Matthew 27:54; Luke 23:47), and when he saw the wonders attending it, exclaimed, “Truly this man was the Son of God.” The centurions mentioned in the New Testament are uniformly spoken of in terms of praise, whether in the Gospels or in the Acts.
- 2. Was amazed** (verse 9) – Feeling or showing great surprise or wonder.

## Lesson Background

Last week it was established that church traditions universally credit both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts to Luke – a physician and a Gentile. Luke 7 continues Luke’s pattern of describing Jesus’ Galilean ministry by alternating stories with calls to faithfulness.

Luke 7 continues Jesus' mission primarily to the people of Galilee expressed as a series of pointed events and teachings punctuated by calls to follow Him. He has finished teaching the rigors of discipleship (Luke 6:17–45) and invited the crowd to place their faith in Him (Luke 6:46–49). Here, Luke describes different reactions to Jesus' miracles and message. The first thirty-six verses of Luke 7 deal with power in various forms. They deal with Christ’s power over illness and death as well as His power over the political and relational dimensions of life. They provide a prism which reveals the totality of our Lord’s authority. This chapter presents six events which describe reactions to Jesus and His ministry. It begins with the faith of the generous centurion.

## Lesson in Depth

### I. Faith’s Request (Luke 7:1-5)

**He entered Capernaum:** After Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth rejected Him and tried to murder Him, Jesus made His home in Capernaum (see Luke 4:28-31). After Jesus preached His “Sermon on the Plain” (similar to His “Sermon on the Mount” – Matthew 5-7), Jesus returned to Capernaum. In His “Sermon on the Plain,” Jesus taught, “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit” (Luke 6:43) and “A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of” (Luke 6:45). Jesus demonstrated these facts by His life and teaching and did so when He healed the centurion’s servant.

**A certain centurion’s servant, who was dear to him, was sick and ready to die:** A centurion, a professional soldier in the Roman army, had heard of Jesus’ healing abilities, and he had a valued servant who was sick and about to die. Luke did not say how much the centurion knew about Jesus, but he knew enough to confirm what Jesus taught: “Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn bushes, or grapes from briars” (Luke 6:44). He recognized Jesus was a good man who used and would use His power to help others. He knew what kind of a person Jesus was by His reputation. He knew Jesus was a good, kind, and powerful person who would be able to help him and his sick servant if he asked Jesus for help

This centurion appears as a devout, kind, humble man – yet, all the same he was a *centurion* – not only a Gentile, but a Roman soldier, and an instrument of Israel’s oppression. The centurion had an unusual attitude towards his slave. Under Roman law, a master had the right to kill his slave, and it was expected that he would do so if the slave became ill or injured to the point where he could not work.

**He sent elders of the Jews to Him, pleading with Him to come and heal his servant:**

Apparently, the centurion did not think himself worthy of a personal meeting with Jesus, and perhaps thought Jesus would not *want* to meet with a Gentile like himself, so he sent Jewish leaders as his representatives to Jesus.

His high position in the Roman army had not made him arrogant or give him a feeling of superiority over others. He did not demand help. His giving to help others had not motivated him to think that he was deserving of Jesus' help. Unlike the religious leaders who wanted to kill Jesus because of the good and miraculous things Jesus did that threatened their authority, these leaders respected Jesus as a healer and teacher. They also respected the Roman centurion as a God-fearing Gentile, so they went to Jesus for help. They serve as a good example – they interceded for an army officer of a hated, occupying enemy – it appears they had learned to love their enemies (at least some of them) as Jesus taught.

**When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with Him:** When these leaders went to Jesus, they showed their faith in Jesus – that Jesus could do exactly what was needed. Otherwise, they would not have interceded “earnestly” for the centurion; rather, they would have taken an unbelieving halfhearted skeptical approach to Jesus. They also gave Jesus some good reasons why He should heal the servant of this Roman officer. They appreciated this Roman officer, and they believed the man deserved to be helped because he had borne good fruit – he was a good man and they told Jesus why he was good.

**because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue:** Though these elders would not have thought of their pleading as prayers to the Son of God, they provide an example of how someone can intercede with God on behalf of a good person who bears good fruit. Even though the oppressive Roman army was unwanted in Judea, these religious leaders recognized that some individuals in the occupying army loved their nation and their people and wanted to help them in practical ways. The centurion probably also loved and believed in the God of the Old Testament Scriptures up to the level of his understanding, because he built their synagogue where he and others could worship God and be taught the Scriptures.

## II. Faith's Reward (Luke 7:6-10)

**So, Jesus went with them:** Jesus did not hesitate to go to the centurion's house, and we half wish the centurion would have allowed Him. Would Jesus have entered a Gentile's house? It was completely against Jewish custom, but not against God's law.

Jesus went with these elders to answer their pleadings (or prayers) to heal the servant. Jesus went on the servant's behalf and not just because the servant was valuable financially or otherwise to the centurion. Jesus traveled far enough to show He would heal the servant; perhaps by touching him as He often did when He healed someone. To Jesus, a person some would have considered “just a lowly unimportant servant” was of value as a person created in the image of God regardless of his social standing. Then, Jesus heard from the centurion's friends that he felt too unworthy for Jesus to come into his house, and he did not want Jesus to trouble himself any more than He already had. The centurion knew that it might be a problem for this prominent rabbi to come into his home, so he had his friends meet Jesus on the way to say that it was not necessary for Him to come all the way to the home.

The centurion was a remarkable man. The elders said he was worthy; he said he was not worthy. They praised him for building a house of worship; he felt unworthy that Jesus would come to his house. They said he was deserving; he felt himself undeserving. Strong faith and great humility are entirely compatible.

“Two features of character blend in him which do not often meet in such graceful harmony. He won the high opinion of others and yet he held a low estimation of himself.” (Spurgeon)

Rather than give Jesus an order to serve him and help his servant, the centurion called Jesus “Lord.” He said he was not worthy to come to Jesus for help because Jesus was his “Lord.” In this situation, calling Jesus “Lord” would have meant more than simply calling Jesus “Sir” as a title of respect. He spoke and acted as though Jesus was His Lord and Lord over creation too. He believed that Jesus could heal his servant right from where He was on the road, and he told Jesus why: it had to do with Jesus’ authority.

**But say the word, and my servant will be healed:** Because of his feelings of unworthiness, there is no indication that the centurion eagerly sent the elders to Jesus for help. The elders may have argued and convinced him that if they went to Jesus for help that Jesus would help his servant even though he himself felt unworthy. The elders may have brought the idea to the centurion of their going to Jesus after they had heard of his servant’s illness, because they felt he was worthy of Jesus’ help. The effort that these elders and these friends put forth to help the centurion and his servant reveals how good the centurion was to others. The centurion had such faith in Jesus that he knew Jesus could “say the word” from anywhere and his servant would be healed. He interceded for his servant by asking Jesus to take a moment and help him and then go on to His more important work. With his feelings of unworthiness, he may have had “second thoughts” about sending for Jesus; therefore, he sent his friends believing Jesus could do whatever His servant needed without any more trouble.

The centurion fully understood that Jesus’ healing power was not a magic trick that required the magician’s presence. Instead, he knew Jesus had true *authority* and could command things to be done and see them completed outside His immediate presence.

The centurion showed great faith in Jesus’ *word*. He understood that Jesus could heal with His *word* just as easily as with a *touch*.

**For I myself am a man under authority:** The centurion also knew about the military chain of command, and how the orders of one in authority were unquestioningly obeyed. He saw that Jesus had at least that much authority.

The centurion knew enough about Jesus to know Jesus had tremendous authority and power in the spiritual or supernatural realm. The centurion did what his commanding officers told him, and the soldiers under him obeyed him. He told his friends to tell Jesus that he believed in Jesus as the one who could do anything in the world with a word – that is the way God created the world, with a word, and the centurion probably knew and believed the teachings that God’s creation of the world was with words. He knew Jesus had the power of creation, even if he did not say that to Jesus in so many words. He certainly attributed the power of God to Jesus, or at least Jesus’ spiritual power with God to work miracles.

“He believes that, just as he, a man with authority, is obeyed by his subordinates, just so surely will the authoritative utterance of Christ be fulfilled even though He is not present where the sick person is.” (Geldenhuis)

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him: Jesus expressed amazement at the centurion’s public expression and statement of faith in Jesus, and Jesus’ amazement impressed His disciples and those nearby. Jesus acknowledged the fact that He did not need to see or touch the sick servant to heal him. All He needed to do was speak the word. He spoke the word in silence so people would know that the power of healing was His to give rather than in the use of special words.

Jesus’ word healed; not special or magical words or chants that others could memorize and use to heal people or work miracles. Whereas many religious leaders hated Jesus for His good works and miraculous healings, this centurion saw the true source of Jesus’ good works as Lord over all – as a person powerful enough to heal from a distance with a word and good enough to do so.

**I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!** Jesus considered the faith of this Gentile centurion – a living symbol of Jewish oppression – and thought it greater than any faith He had seen among the people of Israel.

**Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well:** The men returned to the centurion and when they found the servant healed, they knew Jesus had the authority and power that the centurion had attributed to Jesus by his expression of faith in Jesus. This miracle could motivate them all to consider the teachings of Jesus, lead them to learn the true source and the nature of His power as Son of God, and lead them to faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior more carefully.

### Lesson Summary

In this centurion we see a picture of Gentiles today brought into blessing by the pure grace of God. First, he recognized that God had sovereignly chosen Israel as His special people, and He loves them rather than envying them. Secondly, he takes a place of complete unworthiness in reference to having any claim upon the Lord Jesus. Then thirdly, he gave the Lord His true place and honor of being both Son of Man, obedient to the authority of God, and Son of God in authority over all creation. This beautifully illustrates the proper attitude of Gentiles in their reception of the blessings of Christianity. The heart of the Lord Jesus was so refreshed by the man's words that He told those who followed Him, “I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel” (v. 9). The Greek word for “great” used by the Lord in this instance is great in its largeness: faith was not restricted by mere natural thought or feeling.

There are several lessons from this week’s passage:

- **Faith transcends boundaries:** The centurion, a Roman officer, demonstrates great faith in Jesus, even though he is not part of the Jewish community. This shows that faith in Jesus is not limited by nationality, social status, or background.

- **The power of intercession:** The centurion's friends intercede on his behalf, showing the importance of seeking help from others in times of need. This also reflects the role of community and relationships in supporting one another's faith.
- **Humility:** The centurion demonstrates humility by acknowledging his unworthiness and recognizing Jesus' authority. Humility is a key characteristic of those who seek God's help and grace.
- **The authority of Jesus:** Jesus' ability to heal from a distance demonstrates his divine authority and power over sickness and death. This reinforces the belief that Jesus is the Son of God and the source of healing and salvation.
- **God's concern for all:** The fact that Jesus responds to the centurion's request shows that God's love and mercy are available to all people, regardless of their background or circumstances.