



# Jesus and the Centurion

Luke 7:1-10

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Since we are finished the series of sermons on the Ten Commandments and since we are still in the summer season, I'm going to preach a few sermons on individual texts during the afternoon worship services until September when we will begin a new series. During times like this, I like to choose texts that focus on Jesus or the gospel. I chose this text because it focuses on Jesus and the basic response to Jesus which is faith. We have spent a lot of time thinking about the Ten Commandments which are all about obedience and the series on Elijah is quite convicting as it deals with idolatry and so I thought it would be good to hear the word of God to us from this story in Luke's gospel that teaches us about Jesus and about what it means to have faith in him.

The main purpose of each of the gospels is to reveal Jesus to us and to call us to respond to him in faith and obedience. And since, loving, worshiping and trusting in Jesus is such a central part of what it means to be a Christian, it is always helpful for us to turn to the gospels and reflect on some aspect of what they have to teach us about Jesus, our Saviour and our Lord. So this evening, we consider this story in Luke's gospel in which Jesus heals the servant of a Roman centurion.

Now one of the key things about the presentation of Jesus in all of the gospels is that he is presented in the light of the Old Testament promises of God concerning the coming salvation by which God would save his people and defeat the great enemies of the human race – sin and death. The Old Testament contains many promises and prophecies concerning God's plan of salvation. Taken altogether these promises and prophecies look forward to a world where the effects of sin are overcome. And this wonderful vision for the renewal of the creation will be implemented by a figure who is described in various ways in the Old

Testament, sometimes a king in the line of David and sometimes a mysterious Servant of the LORD and sometimes he is given the title the Son of Man. And what the gospels do in various ways is show how Jesus is the fulfillment of all of these promises or the fulfiller of these promises.

Two of the themes of the Old Testament hope are connected to Jesus in this story of the healing of the centurion's servant. They are the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God and the promise of a world without sickness and pain.

The promise of the Gentiles' inclusion in the people of God goes all the way back to the promise that God made to Abraham that in him would all the nations be blessed. The purpose of God choosing Abraham and his offspring was that through them salvation would come to the world. We see this theme developed in connection with the coming servant of the Lord in Isaiah 49:6 which says, "I will make you as a light for the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." Our text in which a Gentile Roman centurion expresses faith in Jesus connects Jesus to this whole Old Testament theme as an anticipation of what is to come.

The promise of a world without sickness or pain is made in Isaiah 61:1-2 where the servant of the Lord says, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor." Isaiah 42:7 speaks of the servant "opening of the eyes of the blind." Jesus applies these two verses to himself in Luke 4 when he quoted them in the synagogue in Nazareth and then said, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

This is a general perspective on the healing that Jesus performs in this story and on the fact that it is a Gentile who comes to Jesus in faith. This story is one of many which identify Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promises of salvation and has the one who had come to fulfill those promises. What we must see in Jesus' miracles is a firstfruits of what will

one day be a reality when God will wipe away every tear from the eyes of his people.

There is a world coming in which sickness and all that it represents will be no more. Of course the entire story shows that in order to bring healing Jesus had to deal with the underlying cause of all sickness which is sin. And the miracles of healing point to this as well because the Bible often uses the imagery of sickness to refer to our sinfulness and so Jesus miracles of healing also point to his great work of healing us from the sickness of sin.

But each of the stories of healing had its own lessons and insights and so we will look at the details of this story and see what we can learn from it. One of the interesting things about this story is that the centurion is a significant character in the story. Of course, Luke especially wants us to see the glory of Jesus, but he has a lot to say about the centurion in this story and the reason is that he is also very interested in teaching us about how we are to relate to Jesus.

Now a centurion was a Roman soldier, a leader over 100 soldiers. He is a man with quite a bit of authority. It is surprising how positively Luke describes him. We must remember that the gospels are finely crafted literature. They describe what actually happened, but the biblical authors selected material to include in each story in order to make a certain point. And so it is significant here that so much space is given to describe how nice a man this centurion was.

He has a servant whom he highly valued. The servant was sick and at the point of death. And the centurion was greatly concerned. This is striking because the Roman army was a nasty business and servants in that context were often treated as replaceable tools. So, it is noteworthy that this officer in the Roman army was so concerned about a servant.

He also has a very good relationship with the Jews and the Jews who knew him were fond of him. The Jews generally were not fond of the Romans because the Romans were their oppressors. And so, it is remarkable that this man had such a good relationship with the Jews. He sent some of the elders of the Jews to ask Jesus to come and heal his

servant. The text does not say why he send the elders of the Jews, but the words of the Jews show how highly they thought of him. "Verse 4-5, "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.'"

So, the Roman centurion was on good terms with the Jews. He probably was what is called a God-fearer which was a Gentile who had accepted much of the Jewish religion without actually becoming a proselyte. He clearly saw value in the Jewish religion because he had built a synagogue for them. So, this man is presented in a very positive light.

It is interesting that the Jews even say that the man was worthy of Jesus' doing a miracle to heal his servant. That is interesting language and it may reflect the kind of legalism that was a problem in Judaism. Certainly, it is not the teaching of the text that the man was worthy of Jesus' attention. The whole thrust of the biblical message is that none of us are worthy of any love and care from God. But clearly it is the intention of the text to describe the centurion as a good man in a relative sense. This was a nice guy with many admirable qualities.

The point of describing the man in such a positive way is to provide a contrast with his own sense of unworthiness. His Jewish friends considered him to be worthy of Jesus' doing a miracle on his behalf, but the text contrasts their opinion of him with his opinion of himself in relationship to Jesus. Verse 6 tells us that "When he [Jesus] 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." The Lord will later commend his faith and his humility is an important part of his faith.

So, this is one of the key points that Luke is making in this text by contrasting the positive attitude of the Jews towards the centurion and his own self-conception especially over against Jesus. The point here is not a sense of unworthiness because of sin, though that might have been there. The text says nothing about that, and we must avoid reading things into the text that are not there. His sense of unworthiness was a reflection of his high regard for Jesus. What he said was, "I am not worthy to have you come under my roof." The key here

was his sense of unworthiness compared to Jesus. These words reflect both humility and a very great respect for Jesus. This man felt himself to be unworthy that Jesus come under his roof because he had such a high view of Jesus.

This is part of what Luke is teaching us in the way he tells the story. Luke does not deny that the centurion was a very admirable person. But what was most admirable about him was the fact that, though he was genuinely a very nice guy and while he was rightly a person with some status when compared with other people, he understood something of his insignificance in the light of the great worth and significance of Jesus.

We do not know how that realization came to him, but from what he had heard about Jesus he sensed something about Jesus that his Jewish friends did not sense. He saw something of the surpassing worth of Jesus. He saw something of the greatness of Jesus compared to himself and other men. It is very unlikely that he would have been able to say anything about Jesus' divine nature, but it was something of Jesus' divine glory that he noticed even if he could not have put that into words and that sense of Jesus' divine glory affected his self-conception so that he knew that before Jesus' greatness, he was insignificant.

This is an important point of the text. For Luke knew that Jesus was divine and his purpose in the book as a whole was to present the glory of Jesus. Luke understood more clearly than the centurion did who Jesus really was, but he saw in this story a man who in some way saw something of Jesus' greatness and who in the light of Jesus' greatness understood that he was "unworthy that Jesus [should] come under [his] roof."

And Luke's purpose in the story is that we might think of Jesus in a similar way and think of ourselves in a similar way. One of the key attitudes enjoined by the Bible is that we have a realistic view of our own status in the light of the status of God which includes the status of Jesus.

It is not that we are totally worthless and insignificant as human beings. The storyline of the Bible emphasizes the significance of human beings

as creatures made in the image of God and as creatures whom God loved enough to send his Son to die for them.

But what the Bible does emphasize everywhere is the God-ness of God and the non-God-ness of human beings. We are certainly not worthless in the eyes of God, but compared to God we are very, very small and insignificant. God is God – majestic in power and glory – and we are creatures – created beings made by God and for God. At the heart of all sin is us thinking too highly of ourselves. At the heart of all sin is exaggerating our own significance and worth and not giving the honor and glory to God of which he is worthy.

Whenever we sin, we are putting our own will before God's will. That in its very nature is dishonoring to God and an exalting of ourselves. And so, one of our greatest needs as sinful human beings is to give God his due and to accept our place as his creatures, who exist by him and for him. This is one of the ways that the bible describes humility. There are lots of ways of understanding humility, but the most fundamental one of all is the humility of recognizing and acknowledging our unworthiness in the way that the centurion recognized his own unworthiness that Jesus should come under his roof.

There is another thought that is suggested by the attitude of this centurion and that is his lack of a sense of entitlement. His humble attitude precludes a sense of entitlement. He was asking Jesus to heal his servant, but it was a humble request and not a demand. When you know yourself to be unworthy that the Lord should even honor you with his presence you understand that any gift that he gives you comes from his gracious generosity. The centurion certainly wanted Jesus to heal his servant, but his sense of unworthiness meant that he understood that he was not entitled to any healing from the Lord.

And it is important that we exhibit this attitude toward the Lord as well. When we think too highly of ourselves, it is natural to think that the Lord has an obligation to do what we ask him to do. But the only obligation that God has to us is to keep his promises. We are always suppliants before the Lord and our attitude must reflect this fact. Everything that we receive from him is a gift of which we are unworthy.

God's gifts to us are gifts of grace and our attitude towards God when we ask for things must reflect that.

And the wonderful thing is that to be humble like this before the Lord is not a degrading burden, but it is the way of joy and fullness. When God is big and we are small, we are blessed because this is how we are designed to flourish. And God in his grace always wants what is best for us. To live in such a way as to give glory to God is always best for us. And strangely enough it is even the way to glory for us. James says in James 4:10, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you." And Jesus says, "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

And we see this in this text because while the centurion was humble before Jesus, the story itself holds him up as an example for us and Jesus commends his faith. This man humbled himself and he was exalted. What a wonderful truth is the gospel!

But there is more here. The man's faith is commended. I consider his humility to be part of his faith, but there is more to faith than just humility. In this case what is highlighted is the man's confidence that Jesus did not have to actually come to his house to heal the servant – that Jesus could heal the man from a distance, simply by speaking. Verses 7-8: the centurion says, "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, 'Do this,' and he does it." This is clearly a remarkable faith because Jesus marveled at it. Verse 9 "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.'"

So, we have a faith here that caused Jesus to marvel. What was this faith? The man was confident that Jesus could heal his servant by the power of his word, and he understood Jesus' to be so powerful that he could do that healing at a distance.

There was a recognition of Jesus' authority as well. The centurion's speech references his own authority and his point is to refer to Jesus' authority. He understood that Jesus' power to heal had something to do

with his authority. The text does not go into exactly what this means, but it invites us to think about that. Jesus' power over sickness is an authority over sickness. Authority is the right to rule. The man was saying that Jesus had the right to rule over sickness. That is something more than just the raw power over sickness. There instances of mere human beings in the Bible who perform miracles, but there is never any hint that they themselves had authority over sickness. They always performed their miracles by the power and authority of another – namely God.

This man saw an authority in Jesus that was beyond any human authority. Again, it would be going beyond the text to say that this man had a fully developed understanding of Jesus' divinity, but he saw something in Jesus that tended in that direction. He saw an authority in Jesus that was something greater than any human authority. He saw that Jesus had the authority to heal sickness. Not just the raw power, but the right to overcome sickness. Again, what we are seeing is that the man saw something of Jesus' glory which he had because he was divine. This was long before anyone, but Jesus had a clear understanding of Jesus' divinity, but Luke the writer, by the time he wrote did know of Jesus' divinity and Luke the writer is showing us that this man saw something glorious about Jesus that eventually would be recognized as Jesus' divinity.

This point is a wonderful point to ponder. Jesus has authority over sickness. He has the right to tell sickness what to do – you could say. He is the rightful ruler over sickness. The next story makes the point that Jesus has authority over death itself. These are all illustrations of the fact that Jesus is Lord in the fullest meaning of that term. Jesus has the power and the authority over things that no mere human being as power or authority over. In the centuries and millennia that followed mankind would make great advances in medicine so that he can often greatly aid the healing process, but it would be terribly wrong to ever say that any mere human being has the power over sickness or death. But this is what the centurion saw in Jesus.

And what this all points toward is Jesus' mission to defeat sickness and death by defeating sin and death and Satan. This healing miracle was a

foreshadowing of what Jesus will one day bring to pass when he returns again to bring to its culmination the work that he accomplished while he was on earth. And he will do that work not by power alone, but by right – by his authority as Lord of all.

The rest of the story will show us what it would take. Jesus would have to die to pay the penalty of sin. That suffering and death was necessary so that Jesus could rightly and with authority use his power to heal instead of to punish us in his wrath. The only reason that Jesus could rightly use his power and authority for the centurion instead of against him was because he was going to the cross. The only way that God can rightly be for us rather than against us is because Jesus paid the penalty of sin. Had Jesus not done that we would have to pay the penalty for our own sin and then there would never be any healing.

Jesus said that the centurion had great faith. Jesus had not seen that kind of faith in Israel. It was the faith of a Gentile in fulfillment of God's plan that the Gentiles would recognize the promised deliverer. And it is a faith that is held up for us to seek to emulate.

Such faith is rooted in the recognition of the glory of Jesus Christ as Lord of all. It is a faith that results in humility because to see the glory of Jesus is also to see our own unworthiness compared to him. But it is also a faith that recognizes Jesus' authority over all things; it includes his power, but also his right as Lord of all to bring healing and salvation to those who trust in him.

This story is not a promise that Jesus will heal all our sickness in this life. He does not promise to do that. But he does promise to heal us from sin and death if we trust in him and submit to his Lordship. And that promise is much more precious than the healing of any earthly sickness just as the healing of the centurion's servant is much more significant as a sign of what Jesus came to do than was the healing itself. The servant was healed. But he would get sick again and eventually he would die. But those who trust in Jesus receive eternal life – they will one day be healed of all sickness because they are healed of the ultimate cause of sickness which is sin.

This story calls us to trust in Jesus like the centurion trusted in Jesus and at the heart of that trust was a perception of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Jesus has the power and authority over sickness and everything else. Jesus exercises that authority by means of his word. He rules by the power and authority of his word. And what that means is that he will fulfill his purposes in the lives of his people and his purposes for the coming of his kingdom. We are called to a faith like that of the centurion, a faith that sees the glory of Christ and is confident that Jesus rules over all things by the power of his word.

We can live with confidence in the turmoil of this world and in the vulnerability of our own lives by faith in this Jesus. He is Lord of all. Nothing happens that is outside of his authority. And he is committed to exercising that authority for the good of his people and for the coming of his kingdom.