

To Seek and To Save the Lost

Jesus Heals a Centurion's Servant

Luke 7:1-10

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Scripture

Dr. Luke wrote one of the earliest biographies of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. His purpose in writing was to show that Jesus came “to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). That is, Jesus came to reconcile lost sinners with a sovereign and merciful God.

Jesus spent most of his life and ministry in the region of Galilee, a mountainous area in northern Israel. His ministry was primarily a ministry of preaching and miracles. God enabled him to perform miracles to validate his claim that he was indeed God's Son who came to seek and to save the lost.

During his first year of ministry Jesus preached his famous Sermon on the Plain that Luke recorded in Luke 6:20-49.

The sermon was about the kingdom of God. He preached about the blessings that belong to those who have entered the kingdom of God, along with a warning to those who have not yet entered the kingdom of God by professing faith in him.

Then Jesus described how his disciples are to live as citizens of the kingdom of God. He said that they must love their enemies, not judge others, and examine the fruit of their lives.

Jesus concluded his sermon with a penetrating application. He said that faith apart from obedience is worthless.

Luke then recorded that immediately following his Sermon on the Plain Jesus returned to Capernaum, the city Jesus adopted as his base for ministry. Luke described an incident that demonstrated the kind of faith that Jesus commended.

We learn about the nature of commendable faith in the account of Jesus healing the centurion's servant.

Let's read about Jesus healing the centurion's servant in Luke 7:1-10:

¹ After he had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. ² Now a centurion had a servant who was sick and at the point of death, who was highly valued by him. ³ When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant. ⁴ And when they came to Jesus, they pleaded with him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy to have you do this for him, ⁵ for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue." ⁶ 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. ⁷ Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed. ⁸ 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." 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." ¹⁰ And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well. (Luke 7:1-10)

Introduction

We are all familiar with award ceremonies. Awards are usually given for some commendable behavior or contribution.

So, for example, this past week the President of the United States handed 16 Presidential Medal of Freedom awards. The Presidential Medal of Freedom is an award bestowed by the President of the United States and is the highest civilian award in the United States. It recognizes those individuals who have made "an especially meritorious contribution to the security or national interests of the United States, world peace, cultural or other significant public or private endeavors."¹

¹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presidential_Medal_of_Freedom.

During his first year of ministry Jesus would have awarded the “Medal of Commendable Faith” to the centurion who is described in today’s lesson. Luke writes in Luke 7:9 that when Jesus heard about the centurion’s faith, “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.’” Most translations record Jesus as saying, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such *great* faith!”²

So, what was it about the centurion’s faith that was so commendable? What does commendable faith look like?

Lesson

In today’s lesson, an analysis of Jesus healing the centurion’s servant as set forth in Luke 7:1-10 will show us the nature of commendable faith.

Let’s use the following outline to show us what commendable faith looks like:

1. Commendable Faith Is Loving (7:1-5a)
2. Commendable Faith Is Generous (7:5b)
3. Commendable Faith Is Humble (7:6-7b)
4. Commendable Faith Is Trusting (7:7c-8)
5. Commendable Faith Is Validating (7:9-10)

I. Commendable Faith Is Loving (7:1-5a)

First, commendable faith is loving.

Luke said that **after Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum (7:1).**

The city of **Capernaum** was Jesus’ adopted hometown (Matthew 4:13) and the headquarters for his ministry in Galilee. It was a major city located on the northwest shore of the

² W. Hall Harris III et al., eds., *The Lexham English Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012), Lk 7:9.

Sea of Galilee and was within walking distance of the location where Jesus had just preached his Sermon on the Plain. **Capernaum** was significant enough to have a **centurion** and his detachment of soldiers stationed there.

A **centurion** was in charge of approximately 100 soldiers. Centurions were the backbone of the Roman army. A Roman legion at full strength consisted of 6,000 men, and was divided into ten cohorts of 600 men each. A centurion commanded 100 of these men, and a legion therefore had 60 centurions, each of whom reported to one of the legion's six tribunes (cf. Acts 22:25–26). The Roman historian Polybius described centurions as “not so much venturesome daredevils as natural leaders of a steady and sedate spirit, not so much men who will initiate attacks and open the battle as men who will hold their ground when worsted and hard pressed and be ready to die at their posts.”³

A **centurion** is mentioned 23 times in the New Testament, 19 of which are in Luke's Gospel and Acts. Interestingly, like all the other centurions mentioned in the New Testament (Mark 15:39; Luke 23:47; Acts 10:1-2; 22:25-26; 24:23; etc.), this one is mentioned favorably. Along with the centurion in charge of Jesus' crucifixion, and Cornelius (Acts 10:44-48), the centurion in this account also became a believer in Jesus Christ.

Now this centurion had a servant (7:2a). A **servant** (*doulos*), or slave, is “a term describing a person purchased, owned, and completely subject to the will and control of his master.”⁴ However, in verse 7 the **centurion** referred to his **servant** using the Greek term *pais*. Although *pais* often referred to servants (cf. 1:54, 69; 15:26; Matthew 14:2), which is how it is used in verse 7, nevertheless, it literally means “child” or “son.” In the context of the narrative the term suggests that

³ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Luke 6–10*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2011), 124.

⁴ John F. MacArthur Jr., 125.

the centurion loved his servant. In fact, Luke said that the servant **was highly valued by** the centurion (7:2c).

The centurion's love for his servant was starkly different than the cultural standard of his day. The Greek philosopher Aristotle described a slave as a living tool (*Ethics*, 1161b). The legal scholar Gaius noted that it was universally accepted that masters possessed the power of life and death over their slaves (*Institutes*, 1.52). The Roman writer Varro insisted that the only difference between a slave, an animal, and a cart was that the slave talked (*Agriculture*, 1.17).⁵

The centurion's faith enabled him to love his servant, and this was especially seen when the centurion's servant **was sick and at the point of death** (7:2b). Interestingly, Dr. Luke, who normally described medical matters in some detail, did not describe this servant's disease. He simply noted that the servant was about to die.

The centurion's love for his servant drove him to seek Jesus' help. **When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant** (7:3). Perhaps the **elders** told the centurion about **Jesus** and the multitude of miracles that he had performed, many of them in Capernaum. You recall that in Luke 4:31-41 Jesus healed a man of a demon, Simon Peter's mother-in-law of a high fever, and all who were sick with various diseases. As the centurion heard story after story about Jesus' miraculous power to heal, he believed that Jesus could do the same for his servant. And so **he sent to Jesus elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant.**

Remarkably, the elders went to Jesus. It demonstrates the high regard that they had for the centurion.

Perhaps they went to Jesus while he was preaching his Sermon on the Plain. As soon as he finished his sermon, **they came to Jesus, and they pleaded with him earnestly, saying,**

⁵ John F. MacArthur Jr., 125.

“He is worthy to have you do this for him” (7:4). The centurion’s personal merit, they argued, was the reason Jesus should help him. This was consistent with their own understanding of getting right standing with God. They believed that personal merit was the basis for acceptance by God.

We do this today, don’t we? We often say, “I wish God would save so and so, because he is such a good person.” Or, “I pray that God would heal so and so, because she deserves to be healed.” But that is simply works-righteousness, and that is never the basis for our acceptance by God.

The reason the centurion was worthy, the elders told Jesus, was that **he loves our nation** (7:5a). Commentator William Barclay notes that “anti-Semitism is not a new thing. The Romans called the Jews a filthy race; they spoke of Judaism as a barbarous superstition; they spoke of the Jewish hatred of humankind; they accused the Jews of worshipping an ass’s head and annually sacrificing a Gentile stranger to their God.”⁶

But, God was working in the centurion, causing him to overcome his prejudices towards the Jews, and love them in a demonstrable way, as we shall see in a moment. Furthermore, his love was clearly demonstrated toward his dying servant.

II. **Commendable Faith Is Generous (7:5b)**

Second, commendable faith is generous.

The centurion demonstrated his love in practical terms. The elders said that **“he is the one who built us our synagogue”** (7:5b). It may well have been in this synagogue that Jesus healed a man of a demon that Luke has already recorded in Luke 4:31-37.

The syntax of the sentence in Luke 7:5b in Greek clearly emphasizes the centurion’s personal role in building the syna-

⁶ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 101.

gogue. He could afford to do so, because as Darrell Bock says, “Centurions earned significant amounts of money: in a period where the lowest-paid soldier earned 75 denarii, a centurion earned between 3,750 denarii and 7,500 denarii.”⁷

God was giving this centurion a love for people that was counter-cultural, as well as a generosity for the propagation of the word of God.

III. Commendable Faith Is Humble (7:6-7b)

Third, commendable faith is humble.

After hearing the plea of the elders to heal the centurion’s servant, **Jesus went with them** (7:6a). He had determined to heal the centurion’s servant.

Perhaps someone ran ahead to tell the centurion the good news that Jesus was indeed coming to his house. And perhaps they also told him what the elders had said to Jesus. This astonished the centurion, because his view of himself was radically different from that of the Jewish elders. You see, the more he learned about Jesus, the more he realized how sinful he was and how utterly unworthy he was to have Jesus come into his house. Unlike the elders who based their acceptance with God on their own good works and merit, the centurion was utterly unacceptable to God because of his sin. So, **when 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”** (7:6b-7a).

The centurion’s understanding reminds us of Peter, who, when he understood who Jesus was, fell down at his knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8). It also reminds us of the tax collector, who “would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God,

⁷ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 1:1–9:50*, vol. 1, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 635.

be merciful to me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:13).

The centurion knew that he was a sinner, and that Jesus was pure holiness. He could not conceive how he could even be in the presence of Jesus, which is why he sent word to Jesus, **“Therefore I did not presume to come to you”** (7:7b). He did not fully understand God’s provision of grace and mercy.

God was giving this centurion a humility that is essential for salvation. Humility is essential because it affirms that there is nothing whatsoever in us that is acceptable to God.

IV. Commendable Faith Is Trusting (7:7c-8)

Fourth, commendable faith is trusting.

Instead of having Jesus enter his house, the centurion proposed that Jesus simply **“say the word, and let my servant be healed”** (7:7c).

Based on the stories that he had been told about Jesus’ amazing ability to heal people, he had come to understand that Jesus spoke and healed with divine power and authority, as his illustration reveals. He said, **“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”** (7:8).

As a centurion, he received orders and he gave orders. He had come to believe that Jesus had infinitely greater authority than he himself. In fact, he had come to believe that Jesus had power over life and death, and could heal every disease as he had already demonstrated in Capernaum. But what set this centurion apart from everyone else is that he believed that Jesus had infinite authority so that he could heal *from a distance*.

God had given this centurion an ability to trust that Jesus was able to heal a dying man without even being in his presence. Just as God the Father spoke creation into existence, so the centurion believed that Jesus could speak a healing word.

V. Commendable Faith Is Validating (7:9-10)

And finally, commendable faith is validating.

When Jesus heard these things, he marveled at the centurion's faith (7:9a). This is a fascinating comment by Luke.

People often marveled at Jesus (Matthew 8:27; 9:33; 21:20; Mark 5:20; 12:17; Luke 2:33; 4:22; John 4:27; John 7:15). But, there are only two occasions in Jesus' entire ministry when he **marveled**. The first instance is when Jesus **marveled** at the centurion's faith. And the second instance is after Jesus was rejected at Nazareth, "he marveled because of their unbelief" (Mark 6:6). And again, I find that fascinating: in the first case Jesus marveled at the presence of faith, and in the second case he marveled at the absence of faith.

Turning to the crowd that followed him, Jesus said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith" (7:9b). Jesus commends the faith that is found in the centurion. Clearly, the centurion got it. He understood that true, saving faith is grounded in its object and not in the subject.

Let me illustrate. Suppose two men were climbing a mountain when fog unexpectedly descended and they could hardly see anything. They had to get down the mountain before nightfall, and so they pressed on. Suddenly the ground gave way, and they dropped quite a distance. Thankfully, they both survived without injury. While catching their breath the fog lifted. They noticed that they were on a ledge. It was impossible to climb up, but about six feet below on either side of their ledge was a rocky outcrop. From each side of the rocky outcrop was a path that led down the mountain. One man said that they should jump to the right rocky outcrop, while the other said that they should jump to the left rocky outcrop. Each sincerely believed that the side he was proposing was the safest way to go. So, they each jumped at the same time, one to the right and

the other to the left. One rocky outcrop gave way and the man plunged to his death. The other rocky outcrop held firm, and the man was safe. The point of this illustration is that it is not the sincerity of belief that saves but rather the solid rock that saves. It is not the sincerity of our faith that saves, but it is Jesus the solid rock that saves. And that was the faith of the centurion.

Luke records that **when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well** (7:10).

God healed the servant. God validated the centurion's faith. Jesus' power to meet the centurion's request proved yet again that he is indeed the Messiah, and that he is truly the Son of God who came to seek and to save the lost.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the miracle of Jesus healing the centurion's servant as set forth in Luke 7:1-10, we should exercise commendable faith.

Commendable faith is loving, generous, humble, trusting, and validating. Commendable faith believes that Jesus really is the Messiah, and that he is truly the Son of God who came to seek and to save the lost.

As Jesus looks at you, does he marvel at your faith? Or does he marvel at your unbelief?

Do you trust Jesus? Do you believe that he really does have power to save?

Or do you reject Jesus as the One sent from God to seek and to save the lost?

I pray that you, like the centurion, will exercise commendable faith. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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PRAYER:

Our Father, I thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank you that Luke recorded this account of Jesus healing the centurion's servant.

We see such commendable faith in the centurion. We see a faith that is loving, generous, humble, trusting, and validating.

O God, will you grant such commendable faith?

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!