

The Faith Of A Gentile
Gregory Lawhorn
Matthew / Matthew 8:5-13

The Faith of a Gentile

> [Matthew 8:5-11](#) (2016 ESV) — 5 When he had entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him, 6 “Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly.” 7 And he said to him, “I will come and heal him.” 8 But the centurion replied, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. 9 For I too am a man 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.” 10 When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. 11 I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven,

INTRODUCTION

In the Sermon on the Mount, [Matthew 5-7](#), Jesus speaks with tremendous authority. In the three chapters that follow, [Matthew 8-10](#), we see Jesus acting with authority. His Lordship is not merely expressed in words and ideas; He is no philosophical Savior. He does speak with authority, yes; He also acts with absolute authority.

Last week we saw a leper come to Jesus, and we were reminded that Jesus’ power over sin is just as great as His power over leprosy. Every human being is born infected with spiritual leprosy: sin. Jesus is our Savior just as He was the leper’s healer; in fact, the Bible even speaks of salvation as healing:

[Isaiah 53:5](#) (2016 ESV) — 5 But He was pierced for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed.

TRANSITION: Today we see another man, a Gentile, come to Jesus, and the issue remains Jesus' authority. We will see that there is hope for Gentiles, the same hope that Yahweh offered His people Israel, and on the same basis: faith.

The Centurion

A Roman centurion was a military officer. The Roman army didn't have as many divisions as do modern day armies. This centurion's rank covered what we would consider a junior office – a second lieutenant – up to a captain or major. He was in charge of ten groups of eight men each – each group of 8 was called a contubernium – 80 men in total.

In order to rise to the rank of centurion, a Roman soldier had to have several years of military experience. He also had to have important connections, since letters of recommendation were required. And he needed the respect of other soldiers and centurions around him. He had to be literate, in order to read orders and write reports. He had to possess physical size, strength, and dexterity. He needed expert skill in hand-to-hand combat, and had to be intimately knowledgeable with the workings of the military. He also needed to be personally vigilant, temperate, active, and ready to carry out orders quickly, without argument. He was responsible for maintaining discipline among his men, keeping them clean, well-dressed, and well-trained, with their weapons kept clean and sharp.

So, any centurion, including this one, was a career officer with a fairly high rank, a lot of responsibility, with good character (at least as the Romans measured character), and intelligence.

TRANSITION: So, why would a man in this position come to a poor, itinerant Jewish teacher?

The Centurion's Need

He came to Jesus in desperation; we'll let him speak for himself:

> [Matthew 8:6](#) (2016 ESV) — 6 “Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly.”

He calls Jesus “Lord.” Context must determine what he meant by that; ‘lord’ could be nothing more than ‘sir,’ or a reference to God Himself. He wants his servant healed, and so ‘lord’ can’t be just a common courtesy. His attitude about Jesus’ authority tells us that he viewed Jesus with deep respect; he speaks to Him as he would to a superior.

His servant is lying paralyzed at home; in [Matthew 5:8](#) we see this is the centurion’s home. The servant is not where military servants usually lived, in a military barracks, but in the man’s own home.

His servant is suffering terribly. This battle-hardened, profession soldier, this professional killer who had sworn to be loyal to the death to the Roman emperor, ached because of the suffering being endured by his servant. He is not making a request for himself, but for another person. That person is not his equal, but his servant. The Greek word implies that the servant might actually be a teenager.

The centurion has become deeply concerned for him, so much so that he is willing to appeal to a Jewish teacher who has reported worked miracles.

Luke’s Gospel tells us more details about the story. The centurion first asked elders in Capernaum to approach Jesus. Luke writes,

Luke 7:4–5 2016 ESV

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.”

This Roman centurion, this Gentile, loved the nation Israel. He even built the synagogue in Capernaum. He might have paid for it out of his own pocket. Since Roman soldiers were not only soldiers, but laborers and engineers – they were often responsible for keeping roads in repair, or building projects at Roman forts – I think it’s possible that the centurion gathered up his men and physically built the synagogue. Because of this, the elders tell Jesus, he is a worthy man, and it would be right to heal his servant.

TRANSITION: How does Jesus respond to this man? Some today would hope that Jesus would “speak truth to power,” as they say, and rebuke this man for oppressing the Jews, causing suffering, and being part of a racist system; I guess we could call it Latin Supremacy.

Jesus’ Response

But Jesus does none of those things. He simply went with the Jews and headed for the centurion’s home.

The centurion hears that Jesus is coming, and does the unexpected; he comes out and speaks to the Lord, not to hurry Him up, but to stop Him. Let’s listen in on their conversation:

> [Matthew 8:8](#) (2016 ESV) — 8 But the centurion replied, “Lord, I AM NOT WORTHY to have You come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed.”

He doesn’t say, “Look, I want a miracle, but I don’t want a Jew in my home.” He says, “Oh, I am not worthy to have You enter my home; I don’t deserve Your presence. If You will just give the order, my servant will be healed.”

The Jewish elders thought he was worthy. He loved Israel. He built their synagogue. He was a friend to Israel and her people, in spite of his occupation.

But the centurion himself knew that he was not worthy of having Jesus anywhere near him.

This is where I am a brother to the centurion: I’m not worthy, either. I wasn’t worthy to be saved. I’m still not worthy of any good thing; I am certainly not worthy to stand and speak the Word of God to you, or to dare to share the Gospel with those who don’t know the Lord. But, praise God, Jesus doesn’t act based on our worth, but on His mercy and grace.

> Only say the word, and my servant will be healed.

You remember that the leper came to Jesus, and Jesus physically touched him, and spoke the words, and the leper was healed. The centurion believed that Jesus' authority was so great that all He had to do was speak – to give the order, in military parlance – and it would be done. He goes on to say,

> [Matthew 8:9](#) (2016 ESV) – 9 For I too am a man 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."

Jesus' authority is not just personal autonomy, but sovereign authority over all creation. I don't think there's any way the centurion could have known just how far Jesus' authority actually went, but he understood what the leper understood: if Jesus chose to heal, nothing could prevent it. In fact, if Jesus gave the order to heal, there would be immediate obedience by every element and particle and entity involved in the servant's illness. Bacteria would be banished. Nerves would regenerate. Blood would flow as it should. If the illness had a demonic element, that demonic power would be instantly broken. We think it's pretty cool to say "Hey Siri, what's the weather." Jesus can speak and re-order the entire universe if He chooses.

TRANSITION: Jesus tells us that the centurion's faith was genuine, and even praises it.

The Gentile's Faith Praised

Let's listen in on what Jesus says to the elders and the others standing around:

> [Matthew 8:10-12](#) (2016 ESV) – 10 When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. 11 I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, 12 while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

This is the one time in the Gospels that Jesus praises anyone's faith. He says to a few, your faith has made you well. But this is the only time He openly pointed to someone and says, "I haven't found a single Jew with that kind of faith." That includes His own disciples, by the way.

The centurion knew that Jesus had the authority to do whatever He wished to do.

The centurion knew that Jesus' authority was such that He could speak in any location at all, and do whatever He desires in any other location.

The centurion's faith actually amounts to saving faith. Entrance into the Kingdom of God is not a matter of physical birth, or being part of the right church. It depends on personal faith in Jesus Christ, the kind of faith that the centurion possessed.

Jesus Himself tells us that many Jews – sons of the Kingdom – will be thrown into outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Why? Because they reject Him, their Savior. In [Psalm 2](#) God promised to send His Son, and warned the nations of the earth to worship Him, or face eternal judgment. In [Isaiah 53](#) God promised to send a substitute who would take our punishment and give us His life. In [Genesis 3](#) God promised that the seed of the woman would destroy Satan, and that's what Jesus came to do.

But the nation Israel rejected Jesus, formally through their priests and leadership, and informally through the crowds who followed Jesus for a time, and then turned away when He offended them.

But the Kingdom of God will not be empty. Many will come from east and west – that's another way of saying around the world – and sit at the table of the Lord with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all those Jews who truly believed in Yahweh. [Revelation 5:9-10](#) contains a song of worship that we will sing one day:

Revelation 5:9-10 2016 ESV

And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.”

Gentiles aren't second-class citizens of the Kingdom of God. Some Jewish Christians believe that Gentiles will serve the Jews in eternity; that's simply untrue. Gentiles are saved by the same Savior, ransomed by the same blood, and will be a Kingdom of priests to Yahweh.

The Jews had every human opportunity and advantage. The Bible tells us that, in order to bring the nations into His Kingdom, the Lord has temporarily cut off Israel. He will restore His people, however, when He decides that the time of the Gentiles is complete. As [Ephesians 2](#) says, He has made one new person – the Christian – out of the two people, Jew and Gentile.

TRANSITION: Jesus then turned His attention back to the centurion, who might have been a little confused at what Jesus just said.

Jesus Speaks Healing

Let's watch what happens:

> [Matthew 8:13](#) (2016 ESV) – 13 And to the centurion Jesus said, “Go; let it be done for you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed at that very moment.

Now, Jesus points to the centurion's faith as an essential quality: let it be done for you as you have believed. But we must remember that while faith is essential, no one's faith is perfect or flawless.

We must remember the father in [Matthew 7](#), who said to Jesus, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!” His faith was not perfect; it was mixed with fear and doubt, but such faith as he had was genuine, and he kept his faith dominant in his mind. Jesus healed that man's son, not IN SPITE OF his unbelief, but BECAUSE OF his faith.

Likewise, He heals the centurion's servant. He speaks – let it be done for you as you have believed – and it was done. Luke writes that when the centurion returned home, he found his servant healed.

Beloved, the Lord knows that we are frail and weak. He knows that our faith is imperfect, and that this world and the devil are constantly working against our faith. He has pity on us, and helps us.

But we must also remember that those who do not believe at all – who reject Jesus' person, and power, and promises, who rebel against His Word and authority – have nothing at all from Him. They are driven not by faith, but by unbelief. They are not healed, they will not be helped, and they have no hope of salvation.

> Bringing it Home

I want to remind you that, just like the leper, the centurion takes a submissive posture before the Lord. He may not have physically knelt, but he submitted his heart and mind and will to Jesus' Lordship.

I want to remind you that the comparison of Jews and Gentiles remains true today, not only in terms of the Jews, but of all religious people. The argument of pluralism or ecumenism is that all religions are essentially the same, teaching the same things, having the same hopes, pursuing the same goals. I truly don't understand how anyone can say that with a straight face. It is simply untrue. Not only do most religions make exclusive claims, the Bible itself is incompatible with every human religion and ideology.

Even Christians often feel unworthy of the Lord's attention. You know something? We are. If the only way to be saved was to deserve it, no one would be saved. If the only way to receive answers to prayer was to be worthy, no prayers would be answered. If the only reason God showed us kindness and mercy was because we deserved them, we would never receive them.

But we are saved by grace alone, not personal worth. We are saved by faith alone, not meritorious works. We are saved by Jesus alone, not by any church or saint or personal contribution. Scripture alone tells us what we need for salvation; church tradition and personal opinions – “God as you understand Him” – are powerless to save, although they can and do damn people to judgment. And we are saved for the glory of God alone, that His mercy and holiness, His lovingkindness and His righteous judgment, would be put on display throughout creation.

My fellow unworthies, look to Jesus this day!

Let's pray.