

Sermon: A Humble Request

Text: Luke 7:1-10

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Introduction: One of the lessons that needs to be learned in life is that we control very little. The latest economic recession showed us what greed can do. It also showed many people that as much as we think we have a great financial plan for retirement, real estate values and 401ks and other financial instruments can dramatically disappoint.

Health is another one of the areas in life we cannot control. Changes in our physical conditions as we age or encounter disease will reveal if we are humble or proud, whether we will ask for help or not, and ultimately whether we trust God or not.

Humility does not mean we are unimportant, but that others should be just as important and valued. There is wonderful counsel in [Philippians 2](#) for us to hold in one hand as we read our story.

[Philippians 2:3-4 \(NIV\)](#) ³Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. ⁴Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

In our story in Luke we have a centurion who did exactly that. He is in a way a paradigm for us because he acted in so many ways like Jesus. In our story, Jesus has moved back to his base of operations in Galilee.

[Luke 7:1-10 \(NIV\)](#) ¹When Jesus had finished saying all this in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. 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. 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. 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." 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." ¹⁰Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

It was a “humble” request from:

I An Extraordinary Centurion (vv. 1-5).

First of all, what is a centurion? Generally speaking, he is a soldier who is in charge of 100 men (a man’s man); although there does not appear to be a garrison of troops in Capernaum until about 44 A.D. He was likely a comparatively wealthy man. This is because the centurion may have even helped collect taxes (Bock, *Luke*, p. 202). Few of his duties would have naturally endeared him to the people.

“Polybius, the historian, describes the qualifications of centurions. They must be not so much ‘seekers after danger as men who can command, steady in action, and reliable; they ought not to be over anxious to rush into the fight; but when hard pressed they must be ready to hold their ground and die at their posts.’” - Barclay, *Luke*, p. 82

Keeping all this in mind, Luke still says:

A. He was a caring person.

One way, we know that, is this centurion loved his servant. The text says the centurion highly valued this servant. Many, in Jesus’ time, who had a servant become deathly sick would just get rid of them. Slaves were thought of as tools (inanimate objects), to be discarded when worn out or past their usefulness.

In the text there is a variation in the Greek word for this slave. Δουλος is used in vv. 2, 8 and is commonly translated slave or bond-servant. Paul uses this term to apply to himself in his relationship to the Lord Jesus (*Romans 1:1*, etc.). The other word that is used (παις, v. 7) is also translated servant in Luke’s account. This word is used in other passages to talk of young children, but here it is relational. This important word is used for Israel, David, and Jesus in their relationship to God. I believe for the purpose of the teaching it also keeps in parallel the issue of authority. God is over His Servant, Jesus, and the centurion has authority over his servant.

One of the reasons the centurion may have sent others to ask Jesus for help was he wanted to stay with his dying friend.

The centurion loved the people of God (Jews). He had contributed toward the building of their synagogue. Jesus had probably spoken there. The synagogue was not only a place for worship; it was a major community gathering place for civic activities.

Archaeologists have previously found an early white limestone synagogue at Capernaum. Within its walls there was unearthed another 4-foot thick wall of black basalt that ran for about 78 feet long. This has been identified as the synagogue built by our centurion. This was no small building! - *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, p. 783

B. He was a resourceful leader.

In most cases a Roman centurion and a Jew working together would be like President Obama and Bill Clinton working together (which happened with the two reporters released from North Korea this last week). Or, forgive me here, Rush Limbaugh promoting the National Health Plan the President is proposing.

In our story the centurion asked help from people with whom he had built a solid relationship. He sent the same civic leaders who had benefitted from his generosity. Whether from political savvy or religious piety, the centurion relied on others to get his message to Jesus. The Greek word translated “sent” in [verse 3](#) is a verb form of where we get our word “apostle.”

A resourceful leader will use whatever or whomever is necessary to resolve a situation positively. The centurion actually dispatched two different delegations to try and facilitate the healing of his servant. Centurions may not be especially noted for being humble people, yet to ask help from anyone *requires* humility.

Our centurion ultimately was asking help from Jesus. One might imagine that he had heard Jesus speak before. I am sure there were stories circulating of his healing of paralytics like Matthew describes the man ([Matthew 8:6](#)). There was also the nobleman’s son who was healed in Capernaum ([John 4:46-54](#)).

Even though Matthew says that the centurion approached Jesus directly, Luke indicates, in his more detailed account, that the centurion never meets with Jesus in person. It is almost like Jesus’ logic in John’s gospel where he says:

[John 6:46 \(NIV\)](#) ⁴⁶No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father.

[John 14:8-9 \(NIV\)](#) ⁸Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.” ⁹Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?”

It is clear that the centurion had:

II. An Extraordinary Faith (vv. 6-8).

A natural question here is: from where did this faith come? Certainly its origin is with God, but it has been nurtured through possibly hearing Scripture at the synagogue, maybe even Jesus himself, and assuredly from the witness of others.

A. He understood the power of Jesus' words.

Luke 7:7b (NIV) But say the word, and my servant will be healed.

The centurion had some practical experience of his own when it came to the power of *his* commands and words.

Luke 7:8 (NIV) 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."

Just like him, Jesus merely needed to speak and everything would be accomplished. Again in Luke's account the centurion never has direct contact with Jesus. This is partially because of his feeling of unworthiness (Jew/Gentile relations), but this is an encouragement to us who also have never been in Jesus' physical presence. We need to remember the power of Jesus' creative and restorative word. "The church could not otherwise survive, having a past but no present, finding small comfort in a Book of fond memories of what Jesus once said and what he once did." - Craddock, *Luke*, p. 95

As the church we need to respond to the commanding words of our Savior and obey Him. His words are God's words! To trust in Jesus' words is to trust in God!

B. He understood how power and authority work.

The centurion knew he could not directly affect a positive outcome for his servant. So, like any good leader, he asked someone who could- Jesus. Jesus' foot soldiers are his words that do his bidding.

The centurion had had power and authority to build a synagogue, but he quickly realized that did not help him with his dying servant. This was Jesus' area. He had the power, but the question was: would Jesus heal the centurion's servant? "The major topic of the healing is faith in light of Jesus' authority." - Bock, *Luke*, p. 202

Authority is a major theme in Luke's writings. And Jesus would soon delegate his authority to others: to heal, to preach and represent him to the rest of the world, but this day he would freely use his power and authority to restore health and build faith.

The centurion knew he had to trust in the power of God in Jesus. And because he did, this Roman soldier received:

III. An Extraordinary Commendation (vv. 9-10).

Only twice in the entire New Testament is Jesus impressed by someone's faith (here and the Syrophenician woman, [Matt. 15:28](#)). In both instances the people involved were non-Jews. In both cases people are healed at a distance. Jesus speaks only in verse 9 of our text:

[Luke 7:9 \(NIV\)](#) 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."

Jesus marvels (KJV) or is amazed one other time. It is still here in Capernaum, but in that case Jesus is amazed at the people's lack of faith ([Luke 10:15](#)).

In the compliment there was an implied criticism directed to his own people, but:

A. Jesus praised the centurion.

Here you have a man who was open to God's working in his life, who in spite of a lack of extensive religious training, believed in Jesus.

To be described in an elite category of faith like this was quite a commendation. I am sure people told the centurion what Jesus had said about him.

At the end of the day I wonder what Jesus thinks about our faith. Does he marvel at our trust in Him or is He saddened by our lack of belief? I want his praise, don't you?

[Romans 2:28-29 \(NIV\)](#) ²⁸A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. ²⁹No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God.

Praise is normally reserved for God. We call it doxology. Someday, though, we will have God singing our praises as well.

[I Corinthians 4:5 \(NIV\)](#) ⁵Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.

A little theology here: Faith is most certainly a gift from God, but we must nurture and exercise that gift. Man is a partner in its growth. Otherwise, why would Jesus (God) marvel at something He alone did?

B. Jesus rewarded the centurion.

Jesus rewarded the centurion in at least two ways. Firstly he restored the health of the man's servant. What a gift to have a valued friend's health restored! Secondly, Jesus validated the centurion's faith to let him know that not only was his request accepted, but so was he.

“What would it mean, I ask myself, if I too came to the place where I saw my primary identity in life as ‘the one Jesus loves’? How differently would I view myself at the end of the day?

Sociologists have a theory of the looking-glass self: you become what the most important person in your life (wife, father, boss, etc.) thinks you are. How would my life change if I truly believed the Bible's outstanding words about God's love for me, if I looked in the mirror and saw what God sees?” - Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, p. 69

There is no greater feeling than to not be worthy, but be accepted anyway. It's what we call grace.

Conclusion: Jesus marveled at the faith of the centurion. A question worth asking is: How does Jesus feel about your faith? Is he amazed or disappointed? Have you come to the point where you have humbled yourself and trusted in Jesus for everything?

Harry Ironside, a great preacher from the past, asked a friend if he could help him. Ironside did not feel he was humble enough. His friend told him, “Make a sandwich board with the plan of salvation in Scripture on it and wear it as you walk through downtown Chicago for a day.”

The pastor did as his friend suggested. It was a very humiliating experience. As he returned home and removed the sandwich board, he found himself thinking, “There's not another person in Chicago who would be willing to do a thing like that!” -illustration taken from a sermon entitled *An Effective Servant* by Pastor Steven J. Cole)

The “essence of faith is humility” (Bock, *Luke*, p. 203), and we know from scripture “without faith it is impossible to please God” ([Hebrews 11:6](#)). We know God is in the saving business.

If you have a loved one who is not well physically or spiritually, why not entrust that person to the Lord today. He is the Savior; we are His servants. In the tasks we would like to do for our Lord I think the great missionary to China, Hudson Taylor, was right when he said: “All God’s giants have been weak men who did great things for God because they reckoned on God being with them.”

Today, let’s humble ourselves, put our faith in Him and be remembered not for our greatness, but His!