

Jesus, Just Say the Word

Luke 7:1-10

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ April 29, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

¹After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. ²A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. ³When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. ⁴When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy of having you do this for him, ⁵for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us." ⁶And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; ⁷therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. ⁸For I also 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 slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it." ⁹When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." ¹⁰When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health. (Luke 7:1-10, NRSV)

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If you've been here the past two Sundays you've been exposed to some hard teaching. Jesus pulls no punches in chapter 6 of Luke, making clear that the path of following him as a disciple is a narrow and difficult path. The teaching ends with two stark declarations which were the focus of my sermons the last two weeks. First, good trees bear good fruit. If the roots of your life are in Christ, then the fruit of your life will begin to resemble Christ. Second, houses built on solid foundations withstand the storm. If you don't merely give lip service to Jesus as "Lord", but act like he really is Lord and do what he tells you to do, then your life will be rooted on a foundation that no hardship can ever threaten.

I remind you of all this because I want you to see that our passage from today, this story of the centurion, is intentionally placed here by Luke to serve as a vivid illustration of what Jesus has just been teaching us. True faith will always show itself in the life of the one in whom that faith exists. In this story we are given a beautiful example of true faith like this in action.

Luke tells us that there was a certain centurion living in the Galilean town of Capernaum in those days. This was a military man, something like a company commander, in the service of the Roman Empire. He probably took his orders from a higher-ranking commander stationed in Caesarea about 50 miles away, orders which certainly included keeping the local peace. His rank suggests that he was a man of fortitude and character, which fits the description of the Roman centurions we meet in the New Testament. In that small town, he would have been a person of substantial status, a big fish in a small pond.

As a military man he also would have understood authority. Though I've never been in the military myself, I understand enough to know that's how it works. When your commanding officer gives you a command it's not a time to weigh the pros and cons, or to consider whether you have time to fit his request into your busy schedule. No, as a soldier you simply obey and do what you are asked to do by your superiors without hesitation. In battle, clear authority and automatic obedience is vital, and so the military works like a machine where orders go out from the top and then each rank beneath does what they are told, in turn passing on those orders to the rank below.¹ You might say that when a command is given in the military it's as good as done. The great Italian general Giuseppe Garibaldi once said, "I offer neither pay, nor quarters, nor food; I offer only hunger, thirst, forced marches, battles, and death. Let him who loves his country with his heart, and not merely with his lips, follow me." If anybody understands authority it's a soldier, and this centurion was an honorable soldier in one of the greatest military powers in history.

So as the story goes, this centurion has a slave who has become gravely ill. In Matthew's account of this same story we learn that the slave is paralyzed. Fortunately for the slave, he is highly valued by his master. So when the centurion receives word that Jesus has come to town, this miracle-working rabbi he has heard so much about, he dispatches a group of his friends, some Jewish elders, to fetch Jesus to come and heal his slave. In response, these Jews gladly go on his behalf because, as we learn later, this centurion, though a part of the Gentile occupying power, has shown kindness to the

¹ I'm indebted to N.T. Wright for this illustration in *Luke for Everyone* (Westminster John Knox, 2001), 79.

Jews of that city. He even helped to fund the construction of their local synagogue!

When these messengers find Jesus they not only pass on the centurion's request but serve as references for him, urging Jesus to honor his request because he is a deserving man. And it's here that an important question emerges. Does he deserve it? Is this a man who has merited God's help, God's favor, God's grace? Clearly, these Jews think he does. **"He is worthy of having you do this for him,"** they say, **"for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us."** In spite of who he is, and who he works for, he has done enough good to warrant this sort of reward from God.

Other Jews hearing about this account later, however, might not have agreed. The man after all is a Gentile! And on top of that, he's a member of the Roman military which had conquered, and now occupies, all of Israel. Gentiles were not God's chosen people, not included in God's covenant and blessings, not favored by God because they did not honor God. That's what most Jews believed. So on the other side of the argument, you likely had people saying that he was getting exactly what he deserved, both he and his Gentile slave.

There are two errors we need to make sure we correct at this point, two errors about God's relationship with us which have persisted for a long, long time.

First, we must not assume that hardship in life is an automatic sign of divine punishment. When something bad happens to us, we must not immediately wonder, "What have I done to deserve this?" Now, of course, if you make foolish choices in life, especially if you willfully disobey commands God has given us to provide for us and protect us, there will likely be natural and painful consequences which come your way, and so it's ludicrous then to blame those consequences on God. If you eat fast food your whole life and then develop serious health problems, don't then be angry at heaven for letting that happen. It's your fault. But even when hardship doesn't seem to come from natural consequences, it's wrong to assume that somehow God is punishing you for something in your life. We live in a cursed and broken world, cursed and broken by our own doing. That means that hardship is bound to touch our lives, every one of us, and sometimes for no other reason than that.

With that in mind, the second error we need to dispel is the idea that blessings from God are a reward. Because of our sin, do we really deserve any reward from God? No. God punishes sin, punishes our sin. But the claim

of the Gospel is that such punishment was not inflicted upon us but upon Christ. Long before Christ came to earth, Isaiah prophesied about the future purpose of his coming. In Isaiah 53:5 he wrote:

**He was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us
whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.²**

Why do we experience healing in life, or blessing, or the favor of God? It's never because we deserve it or have earned it in some way. It's simply a gift of grace, given to us through the life, death and resurrection of Christ himself! It's by his bruises that we are healed!

So here's what I need you to see in this story about the centurion, and it's probably the central truth of this whole passage. *What Jesus ultimately does for this man has nothing to do with his worthiness or unworthiness, and has everything to do with his faith.* Which of us in this world have lived such good lives that we have put God in our debt? None of us! Does God owe us blessings, healing, favor, status, reward? No! And it's an offense to God and a complete repudiation of the Gospel to ever think in those terms. Why would Christ ever have come to give his life if it were possible for us, on our own, to earn favor before God?

Look at the story. Here is a man who somewhere along the way was told by somebody that there was this miracle-working teacher named Jesus traveling around who had the power to heal. And he believes it! Think about that. He believes it! Whether he has seen it with his own eyes or has had to believe the testimony of reliable witnesses, he has come to believe that Jesus does, in fact, have authority over disease. Disease, in other words, is a slave to Jesus and so disease will do whatever it is Jesus asks disease to do. Have you ever thought about it that way? Persuasion isn't required, nor is trickery, or bribery, or manipulation. None of those things are necessary. This centurion has faith that this paralysis in his beloved slave is, in fact, a slave to Jesus.

Remember that this is a man who understands true authority. Think about true authority this way. When I tell my hand to move it moves. Make a fist. It makes fist. Thumbs up. Thumbs go up. Live long and prosper. The message is immediately sent! The will of my mind is immediately carried out in my hand, no questions asked. For this soldier it was the same with the men in his command. He says as much in the

² NRSV

passage: **“I say to a soldier ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”** The word merely needs to be spoken and it is obeyed.

Notice that the centurion sends a second delegation to meet Jesus to tell him that it’s not necessary for him to make the trip to his house to heal this slave. **“Only speak the word,”** he says to Jesus, **“and let my servant be healed.”** Now, we’re not told exactly why he makes this suggestion. Maybe he felt unworthy to have somebody like Jesus come to his home. Maybe he thought a religious Jew might have a problem entering the ‘unclean’ home of a Gentile. It’s not clear. What is clear, however, is that this man has incredible faith in Jesus’ authority.

For all his lack of appropriate religious background this Gentile centurion has grasped the very center of the Jewish faith, that the one true God, the God of Israel, is the sovereign God, the Lord of heaven and earth. Not only that, he believes that this God is somehow personally present and active in Jesus of Nazareth who is visiting his town this very day!³ He believes that it is absolutely in Jesus’ authority to command this sickness to leave his slave, so much so that only a word spoken will be sufficient. The sickness is a slave to Jesus, a slave which will not and cannot question the expressed will of its master.

I think back to the creation story in Genesis 1. Do you remember how God creates? With his hands? No. God simply speaks the word and creation comes into being. **“God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.”**⁴ No persuasion, no threats, no bribery, no manipulation. God’s will immediately becomes reality because reality is a slave to God. And if God can speak the very world itself into existence, then God can certainly speak disease out of existence. That’s the sort of faith we see in this centurion, faith that God has this sort of authority.

So do you have that sort of faith? That’s the natural question to ask at this point. The gift of this story for us is that when Jesus heals the man he heals him remotely. That’s a gift because sometimes we mistakenly believe that Jesus was able to heal people in miraculous ways during that time only because he was physically present with them, and that it doesn’t happen in our day because Jesus isn’t walking around our neighborhood anymore. But he wasn’t physically present with this man. Right? It’s possible the centurion, along with his slave, never actually saw Jesus

face to face. It makes me think of Jesus’ words to Thomas after the resurrection when Thomas insists on seeing the holes in Jesus’ hands before he believes. In response, Jesus declares, **“Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”**⁵

We have not seen Jesus face to face, not a single one of us. Do we believe nonetheless? Are we the blessed ones who believe without seeing, believe that Christ has authority over all things and that his word can be trusted? Jesus tells us that our sin is completely forgiven, our sin and the sin of everybody we know. Do we believe it? Do we believe sin is a slave to Jesus? Jesus tells us that he is the resurrection and the life and that whoever believes in him will never perish. Do we believe it? Do we believe death is a slave to Jesus? Jesus tells us that if we seek his kingdom above all other things then all other things will be ours as well. Do we believe it? Do we believe that life itself is a slave to Jesus?

Can you see that the obstacle to seeing these things realized in our lives is not Jesus’ ability to deliver the goods but our lack of faith in his authority to do so! The problem isn’t worthiness or unworthiness on our part. We already settled that question. Now we see that problem also is not the lack of power or authority on Jesus’ part. The only obstacle is our lack of faith. And it’s not that enormous faith is required. Even a little faith can be enough, if we can muster it. As Jesus said elsewhere, **“Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”**⁶

In exploring this declaration that even a little faith can result in seeing the impossible realized, let’s look at the example of healing since it’s the example before us in this story. Who here is in need of physical healing or knows somebody who is in need of physical healing, especially physical healing that is beyond what modern medical science is able or likely to cure? With that person in mind, whether it’s yourself or somebody else, do you believe that the disease, injury or disability in question is a slave to Jesus? Then, do you believe that it is not only God’s will to remove that disease, injury or disability but that God has the power, with merely a word spoken, to do so? Do we have that sort of faith that we could say to Jesus from a distance, as the centurion said to Jesus from a distance, **“Only speak the word, and let this person be healed”?**

³ N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 81.

⁴ Genesis 1:3, NRSV

⁵ John 20:29, NIV

⁶ Matthew 17:20, NIV

As soon as I ask that question, I know that all sorts of excuses and hesitations come to mind.

God doesn't heal like that anymore. He did during those days but it's different now. Really? Wasn't it Jesus himself who told his disciples, **"Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father."** Aren't there testimonies from around the world even today of miraculous healings that can be explained in no other way?

Well, maybe it's God's will that you are sick. Where in the teachings and life of Jesus do we ever get the idea that it is God's will that anybody is sick? That sort of fatalism has no place in the church.

Okay, but healing is not my gift. Does the power of healing reside in the one who asks for it or in the One who is asked? I believe the prayer of healing prayed in faith can be answered no matter who offers the prayer, as long as the one offering does, in fact, pray in faith.

That's all well and good but there are just too many impostors out there, healing spectacles that look like a traveling circus. It's true, there are. Turn on cable television and you'll find charlatans preying on the desperation of others for personal financial gain, promising you healing in exchange for your signed personal check. But just because there are fake diamonds out there doesn't negate the possibility that real diamonds exist.

If all this were easy to believe, no faith would be required. *But faith is required!* And faith will not disappoint because God has declared that healing is not only his intention but is within his authority. One of the most beautiful visions of the end of time is this vision from Revelation 21 where we are told that in that day after Christ returns in glory, **"Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."**⁷ Do we believe it?

I heard somebody put it this way recently. Everything changes when our anticipation moves from 'God *can* heal' to 'God *will* heal.' This is not faith to try, but faith to succeed. And when you pray for healing with this sort of faith you begin to pray with the belief that the one for whom you pray will be healed.

That person you have in mind who needs healing, you or somebody you know, do you believe healing will

come? When we believe this we pray in faith for healing until one of three things happens. Either the sick person is healed. Or the person dies and enters into God's eternal presence where healing will be complete and lasting. Or Christ returns to earth and heals our world and all who belong to him. Either way, we pray believing that healing *will* happen. If you are somebody who has placed your faith in Christ, then your faith includes the belief that whatever sickness is in you is a slave to Jesus and that in his time Jesus will command that slave to depart. That means you need to anticipate a future where you will be healed, and healed forever.

I hope that we as a church can begin to pray with this sort of bold faith, about all things but specifically today for healing. God will heal those who are willing, in faith, to receive the healing he has to offer, and that healing can happen in *this life* in miraculous ways. As people of faith we do not only have a past but a present. We're not here this morning reading this ancient account of a centurion and his slave to "find comfort in a book of fond memories of what Jesus once said and what he once did."⁸ Our faith is not disadvantaged because of the time in which we live. Christ is risen! Indeed! Today! His authority is as present to us as it ever was. Physical disease and disability, along with every other broken part of our world, are still his slaves that he intends to banish in the lives of those who will allow him in faith to do so.

Let me offer you an invitation. In the book James we are told this, **"Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up."**⁹ If you are in need of healing I want to ask you to come and let our elders pray for your healing. Let us anoint you in the name of Christ and pray with bold faith for God to heal you. We meet as elders regularly and we will commit to making the first item on our agenda a time to pray with anybody and everybody who comes in need of healing. Just let me know and I will arrange for it to happen, if not you coming to us, then us coming to you. We believe it is God's will for you to be healed. *We will do our best* to believe it is God's will for you to be healed. In this life? Why not? That's up to God, of course, but why not? But if you come to him in faith you will eventually, in this life or the next, find healing, along with forgiveness, and joy, and peace, and life that never

⁸ Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke* (John Knox Press, 1990), 95.

⁹ James 5:14-15, NRSV

⁷ Revelation 21:4, NRSV

ends. And we will not stop praying until all this is realized.

This isn't, of course, just the job of the elders but the job of the whole church. So let's all begin to go to Jesus with bold prayers for healing, the same sort of boldness we see in the centurion here who had no doubt that Jesus, with simply a word spoken from a distance, had the absolute authority to do that which he was asking him to do. In response, Jesus was amazed at his faith. **"I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."** Worthy or unworthy? That wasn't the point. The man placed in faith in Christ and Jesus never turns away anybody who comes to him in faith.

By the way, how did this whole thing begin? Somewhere along the way this centurion heard about Jesus. It's a small detail in the story but without it the story never even happens. If this soldier never hears about Jesus, hears about what Jesus has done and that Jesus is nearby and available to do it again, he then never even has the chance to exercise his faith and send the request on behalf of his slave.

Therefore, may we be people not only who seek our own healing, but also eagerly tell others in the world about the healing that is available to them as well, testifying to them about the ways we have seen healing realized in our lives, so that they can also come and receive in faith that which Christ wants give the whole world.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Jesus' words in Luke 7:1-10. Picture the story in your mind. What stands out to you?
2. Jesus says that the faith he sees in this centurion is unlike any faith he has seen in Israel. What is so unusual about this man's faith?
3. The slave is healed because his master had faith. We actually don't know whether or not the slave has faith. Does this mean that the prayer offered by one person with faith can bring healing in another person who has no faith?

4. Do you believe Jesus has the power and the will to physically (and otherwise) heal people in supernatural ways *in our time*? Have you seen this happen?
5. What obstacles prevent you from such faith?
6. Jesus once told his original disciples, **"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."**¹⁰ That's us! How are we blessed if we believe Jesus without seeing Jesus?
7. When you pray for the healing of other people, what is it you expect to happen? Do you pray thinking that healing *can* happen or that healing *will* happen?
8. Do you have a story of miraculous healing to share with others? Will you share it today?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Who needs to be healed?

How should we pray for their healing?

¹⁰ John 20:29, NIV