

That's A Belief!

Luke 7:1-10 July 7, 2024

For five seasons in the 70's and 80's, *Charlie's Angels* followed the adventures of groups of female detectives who had been recruited into the Charles Townsend Agency. In 115 episodes, viewers never saw Charlie's face. Quite unusual to have the person whose name is in the title of the show not appear on the screen. Even so, Charlie's angels carried out their missions every week.

There's a remarkable person in Luke 7. The heading in your Bible probably says something like, "A centurion's faith," yet, the centurion never appears on the page. All the action, all the messages come through people he sent on a mission. And even though we never see his face, at the end of the story we're told that Jesus was *astounded* at this man's faith.

Sometimes our culture uses the word "faith" to talk about spirituality in a non-specific, benign way. When an interviewer doesn't want a confrontation, they'll talk about *faith* instead of saying the word Christian or Hindu or Muslim. It can be a group-everyone-together kind of word.

Our secular culture is generally fine with you having "faith" in some far-off sense - something you do when you're on your own time - but keep it to yourself. Don't bring it to work with you.

But for a Christian, faith is the most crucial aspect of who we are, what we think, and what we do.

Here are a few of the things the Bible tells us about our Christian faith:

We've been justified by faith.¹ We're saved by grace through faith.² We *cannot* please God without faith.³ We walk by faith.⁴ We *live* by faith.⁵

Faith should absolutely define a Christian's whole life. In this text, we'll see how this centurion's faith changed his understanding, shaped his attitudes, and motivated his actions. It made him who he was and made life-changing differences for the people around him.

Luke 7:1 - When [Jesus] had concluded saying all this to the people who were listening, he entered Capernaum.

Jesus had just completed what we sometimes call the Sermon on the Plain. It's the Sermon on the Mount, but in Luke we're told that the Lord gave it after coming down from a hilltop and standing in a level place. Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount multiple times in different places. After this delivery, He and His disciples *and* a large crowd walked with Him into Capernaum.

¹ Romans 5:1-2

² Ephesians 2:8

³ Hebrews 11:6

⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:7

⁵ Romans 1:17

This sermon is maybe the most important teaching in all of Jesus' ministry and all of church history. In it we are confronted with what faith *really* means and what it *really* does in the life of a Christian. We learn about how Christians have joy in suffering, how we totally redefine what is important in this life, how we must love our enemies and show them mercy because God our Father is merciful.

After preaching this message, Jesus had a chance to practice what He preached - to show those who had been "listening" the reality of these commands and how to live the sermon out.

Luke 7:2 - ²A centurion's servant, who was highly valued by him, was sick and about to die.

Centurions were serious warriors - "prestigious members of a relatively small class of military leaders," some ranking like a knight in the empire.⁶

This particular centurion had a servant who was very sick. Matthew's Gospel uses a term that indicates the servant was just a boy⁷ and he tells us the servant was paralyzed and in "terrible agony." The word used there is one that means being tortured.⁸

This servant was *highly valued* by the centurion. He wasn't valuable as *property* but as a *person*.⁹ This was genuine care - the servant boy was *precious* to the centurion. He wasn't just some stone-cold killer, but a man with a heart beating in his chest. Not what you'd expect from a Roman centurion, but that's because this man had been transformed from the inside out.

Luke 7:3 - ³When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, requesting him to come and save the life of his servant.

What did the centurion hear? First of all, he heard that Jesus was back in town. But it's clear he had heard a lot *more* about Jesus. We discover that the centurion had heard a lot of things but he made *his own* decision about what he thought about Jesus.

Here's what we know: We know he had contact and relationship with the Jewish elders in the area. We know he paid to build a synagogue for the Jews. That's probably a good indicator that this centurion was what was called a "God-fearer," meaning a Gentile who believed in the Jewish God and embraced much of the Jewish religion, though they weren't circumcised. They would attend synagogue and worship there, but they didn't follow all of the purity laws.¹⁰

What would this centurion have heard about *Jesus* in the synagogue, *from* the Jewish elders? Capernaum served as Jesus' headquarters at the time.¹¹ He would've been well-known there, but

⁶ *Harper's Bible Dictionary*

⁷ Utley

⁸ *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary Of Old And New Testament Words*

⁹ *The NET Bible First Edition Notes*

¹⁰ *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*

¹¹ Bob Utley *The Gospel According To Luke*

the news of Jesus' miracles had already spread far and wide,¹² but as that news spread, so did the resistance among the Jewish religious elite. By this time, Jesus had already been labeled a blasphemer by the scribes and Pharisees.¹³ They were already following Jesus around to complain that He ate with tax collectors and that His followers didn't fast the way they did.¹⁴ And as recently as Luke chapter 6, we are told the scribes and Pharisees were "filled with rage" after Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath and were actively conspiring against Him.¹⁵

So, the centurion would've heard a *lot* of things. But then he considered the truth on his own. He did not allow the local elders or the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem to determine what he thought. We'll find he had a remarkably robust understanding of Christ, but in the moment he might say, "Ok, I know you don't like this Guy, but I'm pretty sure He can save the life of my dying servant."

Don't let other people decide truth for you. Jesus once said to those who believed in Him, "If you continue in My word, you really are My disciples. You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."¹⁶ We live in a time where it's commonplace to let someone else tell you what to think. But, God invites *you* to seek His wisdom, and He promises that it will not be withheld from you.¹⁷ The centurion heard a *lot* of things about Jesus, but he sought the truth of these things himself.

In the second part of the verse: "He sent some Jewish elders to [Jesus]." Now, I find this funny because these guys did not like Jesus, did not believe in Jesus, were part of the greater conspiracy to kill Jesus, *but*, they felt indebted to the centurion and wouldn't deny his request.

The message they were asked to deliver was, "Come save the life of this servant." Maybe the story is giving us a hint about how upset they were, because they didn't actually get the message right. The centurion never asked Jesus to *come* to his house, but just if He would heal this boy.

Luke 7:4-5 - ⁴When they reached Jesus, they pleaded with him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy for you to grant this, ⁵because he loves our nation and has built us a synagogue."

Some linguists suggest that the Jewish elders were sharp and demanding of Jesus. They say the Elders didn't *request* at all, but were *summoning* Jesus,¹⁸ and kept on hastily beseeching Him.¹⁹ The literal rendering of what they said to Jesus was, "He *for whom you will do this* is deserving."²⁰ Now, why? *Why* did they categorize the centurion as *worthy*? "Because he did things for us."

¹² Luke 4:14, 37

¹³ Luke 5:21

¹⁴ Luke 5:29-33

¹⁵ Luke 6:11

¹⁶ John 8:31-32

¹⁷ James 1:5

¹⁸ John T. Carroll *Luke: A Commentary*

¹⁹ A.T. Robertson *Word Pictures In the New Testament*

²⁰ Carroll

Isn't it telling - the Jewish elders *hated* that Jesus spent time with tax collectors, or when He said Gentiles were worth saving, but it was ok for *them* to like *this* Gentile, because, after all, he shelled out for their building.

People love to show grace to some but not others. We'll overlook a thousand flaws in a friend or someone we think will get us something, but that *other* guy? Oh I *hate* that guy! Look at those flaws. Look at the mistakes he's made. He is not worth kindness or grace or the time of day.

Jesus showed grace to Matthew the tax collector *and* Simon the Zealot *and* Nicodemus the Pharisee *and* the woman caught in adultery *and* the rich young ruler *and* the Syrophenician woman *and* the lepers *and* Jairus, the leader of the synagogue in Capernaum, whose daughter had *not* yet been raised from the dead. He very well may have been part of this delegation.

Jesus cares about you, not because of what you can do for Him, but because He has loved you from before the earth was created.²¹ Now grace doesn't mean He's fine with the life we're living. Whether someone was a wealthy Pharisee or a penniless sinner, Christ called all to repentance and to forsake their sin and to devote themselves to God. But grace is extended freely to all.

Luke 7:6 - ⁶ Jesus went with them, and when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to tell him, "Lord, don't trouble yourself, since I am not worthy to have you come under my roof.

Have you ever prayed, "Oh, Lord, You're doing too much for me. Don't worry about helping me out so much." I certainly haven't! But, in a sense, that's exactly what the centurion said. This time he sent some friends out, making sure they got the message right.

It must have been a comical scene. We have to speculate a bit, but Jesus and the Jewish elders... they aren't buddies, but there they are walking together. And now this other delegation comes up and says, "No, stop, you don't need to actually come. It's too much hassle for You."

Let's notice what the centurion did. First, he didn't send a message berating the Jews he sent. They messed up, but he wasn't mad about it. He didn't try to distance himself from them or call them out. He was gracious even though they made a mistake.

Second, he acknowledged that Jesus is Lord. Now, maybe he was just being respectful, but what he said next indicated that he had a faith in Jesus as *the Christ*.

His belief in Jesus not only gave him hope that his servant might not die, but it shaped the way he thought of himself. From the human perspective, he's a great warrior, a great leader, wealthy and successful, respected by friends and foes alike. The leaders of the Jews said, "*This* guy is *worthy!*" But he considered Christ and evaluated himself and said, "Oh, I'm not worthy *at all*. Who am I that Jesus would come to my house? I have no place to demand anything from God."

²¹ Ephesians 1:4

Faith in a heart grows fruit in a life. Everyone worships something. Everyone puts their hope for the future in something. And, like a tree, that faith grows and produces fruit. In the centurion's heart we see the fruit of humility, kindness, meekness, a willingness to trouble *himself* on behalf of a servant.

The centurion was the total opposite of Naaman. Remember Naaman? He was another Gentile military commander in need of healing. When the man of God didn't come out to meet him, he pitched a fit. "Do you know who I am?!?" But here, the centurion says, "I *know* who I am. I don't deserve it. I'm not clean enough. I'm inadequate." And, on a spiritual level, he was absolutely right.

C.S. Lewis once wrote this to a friend: "*The one essential symptom of the regenerate life is a permanently horrified perception of one's natural and (it seems) unalterable corruption. The true Christian's nostril is to be continually attentive to the inner cesspool.*"²²

The centurion's message continued:

Luke 7:7 - ⁷That is why I didn't even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed.

His faith was his own, not determined by what other people said. His faith had shaped his heart and his attitude toward himself and others. And here we see a glimpse of how big this man's faith was. The centurion believed that Jesus speaks and the cosmos obeys. And he believed that though he was unworthy, God desires to save. Do we believe these things? Do we really think that Jesus' love and righteousness and grace and power are the answer to the problems in this world?

Luke 7:8 - ⁸For I too am a man placed under authority, having soldiers under my command. I say to this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

The centurion acknowledged that Jesus commands everything! He's not summoning Jesus, even though the centurion has a lot of earthly authority. Instead, he put himself *under* the authority of this Teacher from Nazareth and in his request submits to whatever Jesus' decision would be.

In his analogy, he assumes that Jesus' commands are *good* and that they are *compassionate*. "Say the word. Give the command. And *when You do*, compassion and mercy and goodness will be the result." The unbelieving world sneers at the commands of God. It accuses God of arbitrariness and repressiveness, but God's commands are *good* because He is a God of love and compassion.

And now, the response:

Luke 7:9 - ⁹Jesus heard this and was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found so great a faith even in Israel."

²² C.S. Lewis *Letters To Malcom: Chiefly On Prayer*

There are only two times that we're told Jesus was astounded like this (your version may say He *marveled*). One is at the great faith of the centurion and the other is at the *lack* of faith in Nazareth.²³ Where He *should* have found faith, it wasn't there.

Many people had a very hard time believing Jesus. The scribes and Pharisee struggled of course. But so did the disciples. Even John the Baptist, Jesus' own cousin, the forerunner of the Messiah sent by God, in a few verses would say, "Hey...are You *really* the Christ?"

How's our faith? What group might we fall into on this spectrum? The centurion wasn't better than us. He didn't have some special understanding. In fact, we have *way* more revelation and understanding than he did. It's not a question of cleverness or specialness, it's a matter of willingness. The centurion, despite the cultural, relational, personal pressures, decided to surrender to the truth that had been revealed to him and to live by faith. He allowed his *living* faith to shape his mind, his perspective on life, and his activities.

And because of that, Jesus had the opportunity to do something unique: to heal from a distance. "Well, big deal, of course Jesus can do that." It was a big deal. *We* know Jesus can do that, but *they* needed to see that He could do that. To see that He was even greater than Elisha. Remember how Jesus pointed out that He was greater than Solomon, greater than Jonah. He wanted the Jewish people to understand that He really was the Messiah they had been waiting for and here the Lord has this special opportunity to heal from a distance because of the centurion's faith.

Luke 7:10 - ¹⁰When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant in good health.

Luke leaves out a few last details. Matthew records that Jesus said, "Go. As you have believed, let it be done for you." And the servant was healed that very moment.²⁴ The centurion didn't have to buy his way into relationship with Jesus. He didn't have to prove his "deserved" it. He agreed that he *didn't* deserve it. And the Lord was so excited to minister to him and his dying servant.

This kind of faith is possible for any of us. And our lives are each an opportunity for God to do something unique for His glory - to reveal His love and kindness to a needy world. If faith is alive and well in our hearts, we will be more like the centurion, less like everyone else in the scene. Living faith keeps a proper understanding of how poor in spirit we really are, but holds confidently to what we know is true about our Savior - His power, His grace, His desire to work in and through our lives. It's not always easy. I find myself feeling like the disciples in Luke 17 saying, "Lord, increase our faith! I don't think I can live out the Christian life." But we can. And God is with us to accomplish it in us if we are willing to surrender to Him, *exercise* our faith, being strengthened and encouraged in it as we walk by faith and live in faith.

²³ Mark 6:6

²⁴ Matthew 8:13