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Luke 7:1–10

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John Hanneman

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# EXTRAORDINARY FAITH

*SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE*

All of us are familiar with how a story breaks in the news. At first we get the headlines and then, as the days pass, the media fills in more and more details. This is how the gospel works. Each story adds to what we know about Jesus. Now, most of us have the advantage of knowing how the story ends, and we have Paul's letters that fill in even more details about Christ. But this knowledge can also be a disadvantage; what if each day we were tuning into CNN to get the latest developments in the life of Jesus? "Today in the city of Capernaum, Jesus speaks in the synagogue. Today Jesus heals a leper. Today Jesus healed on the Sabbath. Today Jesus speaks to a large crowd of people on the north coast of Galilee and makes some remarkable claims." What if each night we were pondering what Jesus did or said that particular day or reading the story for the first time? We would naturally be trying to understand exactly who Jesus is. Our understanding of Jesus would be sifting and sorting with each new development.

This is Luke's concern as we begin chapter 7. Each story from chapter 7, verse 1 until chapter 9, verse 50 fills in more and more details which shape our understanding of Jesus' identity and his Messianic claims. In order to keep the gospels fresh, we need to hear these stories as they were intended to unfold and to imagine the shock, confusion, bewilderment, and wonder that would have resulted from Jesus' outlandish actions and the surprising faith of unexpected people. What happens in our text today would have been shocking and confusing if you were a Jew, because it involved the extraordinary faith of a Gentile centurion and Jesus' equally extraordinary response. Let's first look at the story and then draw some application for our own life.

## The Setting

**After he had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. Now a centurion had a servant who was sick and at the point of death, who was highly valued by him. (Luke 7:1–2 ESV)**

This story takes place after Jesus had finished all his sayings, i.e. the Sermon on the Plain, which was the subject of our studies for the last three Sundays. Jesus enters Capernaum and is confronted with a crisis: a life and death issue. There is a centurion there who has a highly regarded servant who is about to die, and is hanging onto life by a thread. Matthew tells us that he was paralyzed. We sense that this servant is not just a valued commodity, like an ox or a donkey, but rather someone for whom the centurion cares deeply.

Even though the centurion does not appear in Luke's version of the story, he is the central figure. Who is the centurion? What do we know about him? A centurion is a military officer who commands 100 soldiers. This one probably reported to the authority in Caesarea. Since no Roman centurions appeared in Israel until 44 A.D., the centurion's nationality is unknown. Centurions were mercenaries of different nationalities; he is not a Jew, nor is he Roman. What we

do know is that he is a Gentile, the first Gentile to appear in Luke's gospel.

We also know that the centurion was wealthy. His salary was 100 times the salary of an ordinary soldier. We know that this man was generous with his wealth, since we discover in the next verse that he built the local synagogue. Most centurions were uncultured and uneducated, however this centurion is presented as a man of character who was highly regarded. We know this centurion is humble because, as we will see in verse six, he conveys to Jesus that he is not worthy for Jesus to enter his home and we know that he is tenderhearted because of the compassion he shows towards his servant.

## The First Messengers – Jewish Elders

**When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant. 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." And Jesus went with them. (Luke 7:3–6)**

The centurion has heard about Jesus, and believes that God is working through him. So he sends the first of two delegations to enlist Jesus' help. First, he sends the elders of the Jews. These Jews could have been the synagogue leaders but more likely they were civil and social leaders. It is interesting to note that the word for "Jew" here is the word that Gentiles would use and thus indicates Luke's audience.

The centurion wants Jesus to come and heal his servant. The word "heal" has the root meaning "to save." It "refers to bringing someone safely through an ordeal or to rescue someone."<sup>1</sup> Five out of the eight times that the word is used in the New Testament it refers to how Paul escaped various dangers, including the shipwreck on his way to Rome.

The elders approach Jesus and, as we learn in verse 9, the crowd of people with him on the streets of Capernaum. This is a very public scene, taking place for all to see and hear. The elders urge Jesus earnestly, i.e. they made their request on the centurion's behalf whole-heartedly and zealously. Their effort is based on the fact that the centurion is worthy. He is a good man, a man of weight and character, who has benefited and graced the community. He loves the Jewish nation and had built the synagogue for them. The synagogue was an important fixture in Jewish life both for gathering the community and for maintaining order and morality. The elders have a higher view of the centurion than he has of himself, as we shall shortly see.

The centurion may have been a proselyte, a convert to Judaism, but most scholars believe he wasn't. He loved the nation, not God. The centurion came to Israel and developed a love and respect for

the country and the people. He is like an ambassador who goes to a foreign country and falls in love with the place and the people. This was my experience early in my life when I worked in Germany for a period of three months. Coming from the United States, I was a foreigner in a unfamiliar country. However, when I went there I fell in love with the place, the people, the food, and everything about it.

We see that the elders were successful, for “Jesus went with them.” There was no hesitation due to racial barriers. Even though the centurion was highly regarded, he was still one of “them” as Bernard talked about a couple of weeks ago. He was part of the hated Roman army who occupied the country. The reason that the elders felt they needed to “sell” the centurion to Jesus as worthy was because he was a Gentile. But Jesus hardly needed convincing; he is doing what he preached in Luke 6:27: loving enemies and doing good to those who hate you. He is eliminating the barrier between “us” and “them.”

It is hard for us to imagine the shock value of this situation—Jews and Gentiles working together, Jews lobbying on behalf of a Gentile. We might envision a white man helping a black man in 1960’s Mississippi or an uptight Christian reaching out to the gay community. This is what Jesus teaches us to do with both his words and his actions.

### The Second Messengers—Friends

**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. Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed. 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.” (Luke 7:6-8)**

Before Jesus can get to the centurion’s home he is met by a second set of messengers, this time friends of the centurion who have a personal message from the centurion himself. The centurion does not want Jesus to trouble himself by coming to his house because the centurion feels unworthy. Luke uses a different word here for “worthy,” meaning qualified, able, or sufficient.

Perhaps the centurion is being sensitive to the fact that Jesus would become ritually unclean if he came into his home. But more likely the centurion simply has a high view of Jesus because he also does not presume (literally “count himself worthy”) to come to Jesus himself. The centurion’s humility and sense of unworthiness is reminiscent of Peter in chapter 5 after the great catch of fish, who fell to his knees and told Jesus: “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” (Luke 5:8)

However, the centurion does not abandon hope that Jesus can do something. His request is for Jesus to simply “say the word” so that his servant will be healed. The centurion understands and trusts in Jesus’ authority. He knows that Jesus does not need to be physically present in order to heal.

The centurion explains his understanding of authority by comparing Jesus to himself. Like Jesus, the centurion is a man who is both under authority and has authority over others. He gives a command and the soldier or servant does what is commanded—go, come, do. Authority in the military is absolutely imperative for the training of soldiers and successful military operations depend on the ability of soldiers to follow orders to the letter.

Some of you have served in the military and you understand this kind of authority. Or you have grasped the idea of authority through administrators at school or officials in government. Perhaps you have learned authority from the IRS or, like me, through the local police department. I remember getting a speeding ticket as a brash, rebellious college student. When I went to court I was ordered to pay a fine. I told them that I didn’t have any money and I was sure they would feel sorry for me and let me go, but they didn’t. They told me to sit down and think about it. After a while I realized that if I didn’t pay the fine I would go to jail. So finally I called a friend to come and loan me some money. I learned an embarrassing lesson in authority.

The centurion knows that Jesus is also a man under authority. He is a servant under God’s authority. But Jesus also has authority over the created universe. The comparison is from lesser to greater. If earthly soldiers obey the centurion then how much more will spiritual forces obey Jesus? Jesus is like a military commander with authority over sickness and health, even from a distance. The centurion’s grasp of Jesus’ authority is remarkable.

I can’t help but think of the story of Naaman in 2 Kings 5, another Gentile military commander. Naaman had leprosy and he came to Elisha in order to be healed. Elisha did not come out to meet Naaman but gave instructions for healing through his servant. Naaman was furious that Elisha did not come out to meet him personally. It took a while but eventually Naaman humbled himself, obeyed Elisha’s word, and was healed. The centurion in our story had a greater grasp of Jesus’ authority than Naaman initially had of Elisha’s and is humble from the outset.

### Jesus’ Response

**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.” And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well. (Luke 7:9-10)**

Jesus responds to the word of the centurion with surprise and amazement. The word “marvel” is used 13 times in Luke, but usually it is used to describe people marveling at what Jesus has done or said, not the other way around. Jesus turns to the crowd and speaks to the onlookers like he did when he healed the man with the withered hand. He praises the centurion’s faith and tells them that a Gentile has shown more faith than anyone else in Israel. Jesus wants the crowd to listen and learn, to have the same faith as the centurion.

The story ends with the friends returning to the house and finding the servant well. The word for “well” is generally used in the Old Testament for shalom and implies a sense of well-being. This is what happens when the prodigal son returns home. He is “safe and sound.” In the epistles the word is used for sound doctrine or teaching. This is what Jesus does—saving, rescuing, and restoring people to wellness, soundness, and wholeness. This is what the gospel does when someone responds to it by faith.

### The story expands the reader’s understanding of Jesus’ authority.

Now let’s look at some application for our own lives. If you are a first-time reader, Luke has unveiled a new dimension to Jesus’ power. Jesus has healed when present, but now we learn that Jesus’ authority extends over space, distance, and disease. He no longer has to be present, which was important for Luke’s 1<sup>st</sup> century readers to understand. And it is still important for us to realize as well. Jesus

is not with us in person. We can't see him, even though we wish we could, but we don't have to. We can send messages through our prayers. He receives them. And so we ask not arrogantly or demanding; but humbly and confidently like the centurion. We simply know that the universe obeys Jesus' every word. He may not always act according to our wishes, but this isn't because he does not have the authority.

### **The story foreshadows the gospel going to all nations.**

We will encounter another centurion at the end of Luke's gospel who stood at the cross and when he "saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, 'Certainly this man was innocent!'" (Luke 23:47) And in Acts 10 we will read of another centurion by the name of Cornelius, and how Peter came to understand there would no longer be a distinction between Jew and Gentile but simply men and women in Christ.

Luke is preparing us for the spread of the gospel to all nations and the beginnings of a new humanity in Christ. This was God's plan from the beginning and there had been hints of this throughout the Old Testament, examples of Gentiles who embraced the God of Israel—Rahab, Ruth, Naaman, or those in Nineveh who responded to Jonah's preaching. The gospel cuts through racial hatred and divisions among people based on race, gender, age, and social status. Anyone can come to Christ and become part of God's family. No one will be turned away. Again, we are getting new information as the gospel unfolds.

### **The story provides a vivid picture of faith.**

This is the main point of the story; the story is not so much about a servant being healed, but the extraordinary faith coming from a totally unexpected source. This is the third story of faith in Luke. Mary had faith in chapter 1 and "believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." (Luke 1:45) The four men in chapter 5 who lowered the paralytic down through the roof also acted out of faith and it resulted in forgiveness and healing.

There is a word in our text that catches our attention and it is the word "hear," which we encounter three times in the story:

**1 After he had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum.**

**3 When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews**

**9 When Jesus heard these things, he marveled at him**

This word takes us back to the Sermon on the Plain, where we see it several times. It occurs at the beginning of the sermon, the middle, and then at the end.

**And he came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon, who came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. (Luke 6:17-18)**

**But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, (Luke 6:27)**

**Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when a**

**flood arose, the stream broke against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built.**

**But the one who hears and does not do them is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the stream broke against it, immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great. (Luke 6:47-49)**

What strikes me is that the centurion, who was a Gentile, had heard about Jesus and he was doing what the Jews were not doing. And what particularly strikes me is the connection of this story to the last metaphor in the Sermon on the Plain, the metaphor of building a house on a foundation. The centurion was digging deep and building the foundation of his house on rock. And the foundation for his house was faith in Jesus.

We use the word faith frequently, but what exactly is faith? We say that we hold to the faith. This means that we believe a set of statements or doctrines about God to be true. We recite creeds like the Nicene Creed or the Apostles Creed. I repeated the Apostles Creed every Sunday growing up in the Methodist Church. But living by faith is a lot different than confessing a faith.

The writer of Hebrews helps us: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1) The writer goes on to cite several examples of faith:

**By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain ....By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. ....By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. .... By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age .... These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. (Hebrews 11:3, 4, 7, 11, 13-14)**

The apostle Paul helps us when he writes:

"We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." (2 Corinthians 4:18) And he goes on to say that, "we walk by faith, not by sight." (2 Corinthians 5:7)

Living by faith means acting on a promise or hope that cannot be substantiated by visible means. Living on faith has to do with trusting the promises of God more than the promises of the world; obeying the word of God when everything in us wants to disobey; believing in the ways of God when everything in us wants our own way. Living by faith is trusting that God is working when everything has run amuck; believing that we can live with fear and anxiety without taking control; trusting that the home we long for will be ours eventually in heaven; seeing true wealth as our life in Christ; believing that loving an enemy is the right thing to do and can result in God's goodness.

Frederick Buechner writes: "Faith is a way of looking at what is seen and understanding it in a new sense. Faith is a way of looking at what there is to be seen in the world and in ourselves and hoping,

trusting, believing against all evidence to the contrary that beneath the surface we see there is vastly more that we cannot see.”<sup>2</sup>

The story of the centurion challenges us to examine the presence of faith in our lives. Are we living based on what is seen and temporal or on the unseen and eternal truths that God has spoken to us? As we think back on this past week, when were we trusting God? When were we taking control and trusting in ourselves?

How do we build our house on the foundation of faith? Again Jesus’ metaphor of the house and foundation helps us. The metaphor tells us to dig deep until we get to bedrock. Living by faith is hard work. It requires digging. We have to dig through our fears, anxieties, insecurities, and false dependencies. We have to rip out the old foundations, the things we have based our life on, and lay a new foundation based on what God says. We know ourselves so that we can know God in a deeper, more tangible way and lay all of our trust on him.

And what will motivate us to go to all this trouble? Like we see in the story, faith in Jesus saves us and results in being made well, whole, sound, and fully human. When the storms of life assail against us, as surely they will, our foundation will hold. We will not be swept away by sudden storm waters because our faith is on the unchangeable, solid rock of Christ. Jesus marveled at the centurion and he will delight in us as well if we put all our weight on him and trust in his authority. The psalmist writes: O LORD of hosts blessed is the one who trusts in you. (Psalm 84:12)

1. Darrell Bock, *Luke Volume 1* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 63

2. Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006), 70