

OUR WORTHLESS WORTHINESS AND HIS COMPLETE AUTHORITY

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The woman came around the corner in her convertible sports car weaving quite a bit. As she passed the man in a convertible sports car going the opposite direction, she yelled out her window toward him, “Pig!” Shocked, the best he could manage to retort with over his shoulder in that instant was, “Cow!” And his car continued around the corner and he ran into a pig in the road.

Joel Barker uses this story to illustrate what a paradigm shift is. It isn’t so much a tiny progress in our thinking as it is a whole other dimension of thinking altogether. The passage we come to pushes us to shift our thinking and understanding to align with reality, to keep us from running into pigs.

“Make the Bible dear to our hearts because of your voice in it and the truth, wisdom, and revelation you bring to us through it and through this time. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

What Advent is to Christmas, what marinating a steak is to eating it, Lent is to Easter. It’s a time of preparation. For us our preparation is a study of *The Man Who is God* based in the gospel of Luke. Jesus is different – he has natural and supernatural in his birth. He is tempted like men but, for only the second time in the whole Bible, the first being Adam, he is tempted by Satan himself. Jesus is compassionate like others are, but he pardons sin, something only God does, and Jesus does it without any kind of discomfort. The man who is God. Today we see Jesus in an authoritative freedom that rearranges standard ways of relating to God. Is a standard way, your way?

Our passage is Luke 7:1-10.

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.

You know what I am talking about when I say, "I see you seeing me seeing you"? That phenomenon actually has a name. It is called *mutual interpersonal perspective-taking*. Today, in this passage, note who is looking at whom how. I want us to look at how the Jews look at the centurion, how the centurion looks at the centurion, and how Jesus looks at the centurion.

The Jews look at the centurion. The story starts off with a centurion and some Jewish elders. A centurion is roughly the equivalent of a captain in the US Army. Originally, they were set over a hundred soldiers, but that became obsolete. There were more men to be over. This centurion is in charge of the garrison near Capernaum.¹ He also has a slave that he values highly who is sick. And, when someone we care about isn't being helped by our standard efforts, we try new things. Such is the case with the centurion. He's heard of Jesus who has been in the neighborhood teaching and working miracles. So he asks the Jewish leaders to go and entreat Jesus' healing ministry on the centurion's behalf.

¹ Capernaum is on the north side of the Sea of Galilee, had about 1500 residents probably, and was home to Peter, Andrew, James, John, and Matthew (the tax collector).

As the Jewish delegation talks to Jesus for the centurion, they also talk to Jesus about the centurion. They say how they see him. We already know he is a military man, part of the occupying army, Roman not Jewish – we know these things automatically from the word “centurion.” We don’t know his name and maybe that’s because we’re supposed to look at something else more. Probably, we are to look at “he loves our nation and has built our synagogue.” In other words, he’s an admirer of the Jewish culture and homeland and a patron or local philanthropist. But all this tumbles forward into one word that sums up how they saw him and that is the word “deserving.” Verse 4: “This man *deserves* to have you do this.” That’s their view of him and their view of Jesus is that he should feel some compulsion to help a deserving man.

Do you know, by your standards, a deserving man? Woman? They work hard. They’re nice. God should be nice to them? Maybe it’s you? You’re a good boy, a good girl.

The centurion looks at the centurion. But did the centurion look at himself as a deserving man? We don’t have evidence of him patting himself on the back as a lover of the Jewish nation or the builder of the local synagogue. That is what the Jewish elders said about him. What we do have evidence of is him seeing himself in two ways.

First, he sees himself as a man under authority and with authority. It was not because of how big he was physically that made men do what he said anymore than it was because of his superior’s size that he did what they said. It all had to do with the power of the organization that the person represented. This experience with authority gives him a way of understanding Jesus. Just as the centurion did not have to touch physically a subordinate to make him respond, neither did Jesus have to touch the sick servant to make him better.² Just as Caesar did not have

² Some would have associated Jesus’ power only with his physical touch. It is a limited view of Jesus and the nature of power.

to be physically in Palestine to have his will done there, neither did Jesus have to be in the Centurion's home to have his will done there. By who Jesus was within a spiritual kingdom that undergirded the physical one, he had authority and power so he could, by a mere word, or even nod, cause to happen what he willed.

Secondly, in direct contrast to the Jewish leaders, he sees himself as undeserving. Before Jesus arrives at his home, he sends friends with this message for Jesus, "*Don't trouble yourself for I don't deserve to have you in my house, and I am not even worthy to come directly to you.*" I don't deserve. I am not worthy.

Jesus looks at the centurion. Only twice in the New Testament do we find Jesus amazed -- once at Galilee's disbelief and once here. You wouldn't think that someone who knows all things would ever be amazed or find things fresh or any number of things. I'm kind of glad he can be though. But here Jesus looks at the centurion in amazement and instructs the crowd with, "I haven't found such great faith even in Israel." There is something so stellar about this man's faith that Jesus commends to those then and us now. In fact, the story is really over at this point, isn't it? That the servant is healed seems like just an "Oh, yeah, and that happened too."

What exactly is it that is so commendable about the centurion? Is it he thought he was undeserving? In part. By the end of this chapter we will find Simon, a Jewish leader, set in contrast to a prostitute. Simon saw himself as deserving and she saw herself as undeserving. Jesus commends that woman just as here he is commending this centurion. So that these two do not have, what so many of us have, the idea that God has some moral obligation to us because we're deserving. Who really can, by who they are and what they have done, put God on any path of obligation?

So let's catch ourselves on this kind of thinking.

And we need to catch ourselves on not asking God for help because we are UNdeserving.

The Jews said, “The centurion did this and this and this *therefore* he deserves. That’s the way the universe works and you’re a part of it, Jesus. So give him some credit, feel compelled, meet him half way, and go heal, please.” The centurion, if he operated on *exactly* the same principle would have said, “I did not do this and this and this and *therefore* I do not deserve. That’s the way the universe works and you’re a part of it, Jesus. So I won’t even ask.” It’s like gluttony and anorexia. They seem to be opposite but they are both about food. Here they are opposite. He deserves. I don’t deserve. Opposite but both about *deserving* and that is the system under which Jesus operates.

We do the same I-deserve-I-don’t-deserve thing. Isn’t it true that you and I ask boldly and expectantly when we have done well with not swearing and had hour-long times of prayer for seven days in a row? But if we have just come off of a drinking binge or seriously fudging on our taxes, we would not dare ask anything really from God?

But what I want you to see is that what Jesus was commending was a whole paradigm shift that had to do with who Jesus is *and* how Jesus operates.

What’s interesting in this passage is that the Jews have a “faith” in Jesus and the centurion has a faith in Jesus. Both have come to him with the thought or faith that Jesus can heal. But there is a critical difference between them that has to do with their view of the universe and how Jesus operates. We’re Jews, we deserve healing. He’s one of the good Gentiles, he deserves healing.

Either way – with the Jews, the Centurion, or us -- the problem is thinking of Jesus as operating on the basis of I deserve or I do not deserve. Such faith, in the final analysis, is more faith in me than it is faith in Jesus. It is more in who I am and what I

have done than who he is and what he's done. He reacts to me and my worthiness than me to his.

Let me try to come into this story and the amazing faith from another angle. Jesus is seeing that the Centurion has an understanding of how things work. There's this understanding that I deserve, don't deserve, therefore. We've just gone through that. But the centurion employs how the empire works to how the universe works. What the centurion observed and deduced was that there is, akin to the structure of the empire, an inner and transcending structure. There are interlocking pieces and someone can move them to his will based on power, resources, intellect, relationships, charisma, and role or position. This is how authority works. Deserving, undeserving, whatever ... this is how things work beyond that. This is how a centurion says to a hundred or more men, "Move," and they move. The centurion doesn't fret if this is the way the Roman army works. It is the way it works. He operates accordingly and the centurion sees that Jesus has an authority over whatever causes disease. If the centurion knew about germ theory, it would have been him knowing Jesus had authority over germs. And he doesn't have to be physically present to effect the germs, any more than a CEO of a multinational corporation has to be present. He can pick up his cell phone and speak an order. If that's true for us, how much more so for Jesus. I'll voice my will and by virtue of my power, resources, intellect, relationships, charisma, role and position, even the winds and waves will do what I say.

Police have authority. Doctors have authority. Generals have authority. We really believe and understand that, and live and conduct our lives within that framework of understanding. Do we have a framework of understanding that Jesus has ultimate and complete authority and live our lives accordingly?

Here's a story and it is about the authority of Jesus and the quantity of faith. Two men fall off a cliff. They land on a tiny ledge. There's an outcropping of rock that leads one way and an

outcropping that leads the other. One man sincerely and boldly proclaims, “I will go this way and be saved.” The other man says, “I don’t feel very sincere or bold but I think this is the way.” The first man goes and the rock gives way and he falls. The second goes and the rock doesn’t give way. Which one was saved? The one who didn’t fall. And what was that a matter of – the men’s deserving or sincerity? No, not the strength of sincerity, but the strength of the rock.

Don’t go the way that has to do with you. Don’t even go the way that has to do with how much you believe in Jesus. Go the way that has simply to do with him really being there, and really being God, and really being strong, and really being the man who is God.

Prayer time:

As we go to prayer today, I’d like you to close your eyes and hold out your right hand with the palm open upward. I want you see in it, like words written on tiny pieces of paper, the answer to the question, “What impresses you about you?” He’s a good son. She’s a good mother. He tithes. She gets good grades and is quite athletic. He has good fashion sense. She talks to people who look lonely. He’s really helped in some strategic committees of the church. She has led four people to Christ. He has a doctorate. She doesn’t ever park in the handicap spot. He’s never had an affair. She makes time for the kids and prayer. Put your own in.

With the other hand, the left hand, have it open. There answer the question, “What depresses me about me?” He lets busyness choke out spiritual things. She has shoplifted a few times. He keeps lusting. She knows she shouldn’t hold on and be bitter, but she is. He watches too much TV. She is one way on the outside and another way on the inside. He eats too much. She prays too little. Put your own in.

See all that stuff in both your hands? That's all about you. It is not about you. Flip your hands over and drop all those bits of paper on to the floor. And with your hands grab the feet of Jesus, the scarred, resurrected feet of Jesus. That's where to look. Look on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.

Look at your hands on the feet of Jesus. Are there any little bits of paper still in them? Let go of them. Jesus is absolute – he does not help, he does it all. Let go of your worthless worthiness. Just him.

If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors and elders of the church would welcome your call.

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