

What Makes Faith Great?
Luke 7:1-10
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You may have heard stories or even had experiences with other Christians who talk about some incredible things that are possible if your faith is great enough. Speaking in tongues, miraculous faith healings, and so much more. Yet what happens when someone finds themselves in one of these churches and not seeing these kinds of miraculous results? They may wind up devoting nearly every waking breath to prayer and putting forward seemingly their whole effort to believe that they would be healed, only to be told their faith is still not great enough. Is this really what great faith looks like? Our gospel for this morning answers that question. What makes faith great? It recognizes its own unworthiness and trusts in God's greatness.

We just heard about an example of great faith: a Roman centurion. The centurion had a problem. One of his servants was very sick and dying. In faith, he turned to Jesus to solve his problem, but what was it that made his faith great? Was it based on his own worthiness? Those Jewish elders seemed to think he deserved to have Jesus do this for him. After all, this was a Roman centurion. That in and of itself would give him some importance. But we also know countless stories of leaders abusing their power over people and not acting in a way worthy of their office. Was that happening here? Was this Roman big shot extorting money or accusing people falsely, like John the Baptist warned the soldiers at the Jordan River about? It sure doesn't seem like it. So often we hear about the tensions between the Jews and the Romans, but the Jewish elders don't seem to have a single word to say against this centurion, and they even "plead earnestly" for Jesus to heal this servant: "This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." Besides all of that, this centurion with so many people under his authority was willing to go through all of this trouble for one lowly servant. It's clear that he truly cared about the people he was stationed over. If we're going off of outward things, this was a thoroughly good guy.

Don't we often look at things like the Jewish elders? We try to approach God in prayer and expect him to answer our request based on our own worthiness. Maybe we have a position of wealth or importance similar to the centurion, either in the world or in the church, and boldly approach God based on our great position. Maybe, like the Pharisee, we compare ourselves to the openly sinful, the tax collectors of our day, and boldly approach God thinking that we're not like the immoral outcasts of our society. Or maybe we look at ourselves and think that we don't even need to compare ourselves to others. Our good works in the church and community, like the centurion, speak for themselves. We regularly go to church. We're actively involved in the choir, outreach, or other ministries. We give generously to both the church and charity. We are generally kind to people. We help out others during the week as we are able. Won't God listen to the request of a good person like that?

Those Jewish elders may have thought the centurion deserved to have Jesus do this, that he could approach Jesus on the basis of his own worthiness. But the centurion saw things differently. He realized he did not deserve Jesus' help. He didn't even deserve to have Jesus come under his roof or to visit Jesus himself in person. First and probably most apparent to those Jewish elders, he knew that he was a Gentile. He came from an unclean and idolatrous people. According to those extra laws the Pharisees added to God's law, entering the centurion's house would make Jesus ceremonially unclean. He knew this alone made him unworthy. But that wasn't all. But that wasn't all. He knew there was a much greater reason that he was unworthy to approach Jesus with his request. He was a sinner. His sin made him unclean and unworthy to stand before the holy God of the universe. Despite all of his seemingly good works, he had failed the standard of perfection God had set for him. He not only deserved Jesus to deny his request, but also deserved Jesus to sentence him to eternal death then and there.

Despite what we may think at times, there is nothing in and of ourselves that would make us worthy of approaching God. We, like the centurion, are unworthy. We can't approach God thinking we deserve anything from him. We may try to point to our position or those outward acts, but we only deceive ourselves into thinking that the expectation for us was anything less than perfection. We, like the centurion, have fallen short of the perfect standard of God's law, and in and of ourselves deserve only God's wrath and punishment.

The centurion knew that there was nothing great in his own works, and he was not deserving of Jesus' help. Instead, he recognized his own unworthiness. What then made his faith great? He wholly trusted in God's

greatness, despite his unworthiness. He knew that God's great power and love could overcome his unworthiness. Jesus just needed to say the word, and it would be done. This centurion knew a thing or two about power. He was an important part of the great Roman military machine. He had power over the roughly 100 soldiers in his unit. He simply needed to say the word, and his men would carry out his will.

Jesus may have simply looked like a poor travelling rabbi, but the centurion realized that he was so much more. This was the God and Lord of all. If this minor officer in an earthly army had this much power, how much greater power would the one controlling the very fibers of the universe have? The centurion wholly trusted in God's great love to reach out to him despite his unworthiness and God's great power to heal his servant with only a word. That is what made his faith great, and Jesus marveled at it. He said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." He then healed the servant with a word. Matthew's account of this miracle tells us that the servant was healed that very moment.

Just as Jesus reached out to the Gentile centurion, he reaches out to us. Out of his great love for us, despite our unworthiness, he came down and lived up to the perfect standard of God's law when we could not. He died as our substitute to pay the penalty we deserved. He rose on the third day to destroy death for us and pave the way for our resurrection. Now when we stand before God, he doesn't see our unworthiness, but Christ's worthiness.

This loving power of God is able to break down boundaries we see on earth. The centurion was a Gentile, outside of God's chosen people, yet Jesus still reached out and healed both his servant and the centurion's soul. In the same way, this loving power reaches us, no matter our religious background, culture, or race. Our past circumstances don't matter, whether we were raised in the church surrounded by the Word, persecuted the church like Saul, or convert late in life like the thief on the cross. We all stand condemned in our sinful nature, but justified freely by faith in Christ.

We can now approach God boldly with confidence, not in ourselves but in Christ. We can pray confident that anything we ask for is well within God's power. He has already defeated sin, death, and the devil. Nothing is outside of his power. He can certainly provide for any of our physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. Whether it's that promotion at work, healing for a sick relative, or simply the means to get by, God is able to provide anything we ask according to his will. The centurion got the answer to his prayer he had hoped for, but what if we don't? If we don't get the answer we had hoped for, we can remain confident that whatever we had wanted wasn't the blessing we thought it would be, we simply have to be patient, or he has something much better in store for us, whether in this life or the next.

So often when we hear those stories about great faith, when someone is aiming for a great healing or miraculous display of power, it's ultimately based on their own worthiness and efforts. When they don't get the answer they had hoped for, they increased their own efforts and simply try to believe more. The centurion, however, recognized his own unworthiness and trusted wholly in God's greatness. Even if God doesn't give us the answer we expect, we can always trust that God in his greatness has already filled our greatest need, and that he still uses his great power for our good according to his will. Trust the Lord. That is great faith. Amen.