

## ***Understanding Jesus***

*Authority*

*Luke 7:1-10*

One thing I love about the Bible is that it “gets” me. As I study the Bible, I am often struck by how it knows me better than I know myself. Today’s passage is no exception. Luke 7:1-10 introduces us to a category of people we might call spiritual outsiders.

Some of you here today would probably put yourselves in that category.

- \* Perhaps you feel like a spiritual outsider because you haven’t gone to church very much or you haven’t studied the Bible like other people you’ve known. You might feel like you have tons of disadvantages when it comes God.
- \* Perhaps feel like a spiritual outsider because of your past. Perhaps you’ve done things that fill you with guilt and shame. You can’t imagine that Jesus would want anything to do with you.
- \* Perhaps you feel like a spiritual outsider for other reasons.

Whatever the case, today’s passage has great encouragement for you. I think you will see that being a spiritual outsider is not inherently a liability. It may be a great asset.

Some of you (perhaps most of you) here today would be spiritual insiders. You know how churches work; you’re seeking God through the Scriptures and prayer and community; you have all sorts of experience (good and bad) in churches. Of course there’s nothing inherently wrong with being a spiritual insider. But today’s passage has an implicit warning for those of us in that category. This passage actually stops me in my tracks. I love that about the Bible; it “gets” me, it diagnoses me, and shows me a path forward.

Today as we begin a sermon series we’re calling “Understanding Jesus” from Luke 7 & 8, let’s consider what Luke 7:1-10 says to spiritual insiders and outsiders.

In verse 1 we read:

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

The Romans had been occupying the nation of Israel for almost a hundred years. They placed their troops in cities and towns around the country. The centurion would have been a powerful, influential man in charge of about a hundred troops. We learn in this passage that the centurion in Capernaum was an exceptional person.

For starters, he was compassionate. We don’t know the circumstances, but this centurion had one specific servant that had become sick and was about to die. Luke tells us that the centurion “highly valued” this servant. We don’t get the impression that he valued this servant for selfish reasons; we get the impression that he legitimately cared about this servant.

3 When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant.

We know from chapter 4 that Jesus had previously performed a miracle in the synagogue at Capernaum (he cast a demon out of a man). Luke specifically mentioned that the report about Jesus' miracle had gone out to the surrounding regions (4:37). It is likely that the centurion had heard about Jesus' ability to perform miracles from that incident.

Luke tells us that the centurion sent "elders of the Jews" (leaders of the community) to ask Jesus to come and heal his servant. Since Jesus was Jewish, he probably thought that these Jewish elders would be persuasive. We see in verses 4 and 5 that they had no trouble giving reasons why Jesus should come and heal the centurion's servant.

4 And when they came to Jesus, they pleaded with him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy to have you do this for him, 5 for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue."

Their appeal was that the centurion *is worthy* of the miracle he's requesting. They gave two reasons. First, "he loves our nation." That's no small thing. It would be more likely that a centurion stationed far away from home would resent or hate the nation he was occupying.

Second, he had funded the building of their synagogue, the local place of worship (just as Herod had funded renovation of the temple in Jerusalem fifty years earlier). That type of generosity is no small thing either; not everyone with wealth uses it for the good of others. And it's certainly possible to give as a way of getting (if I do this for them, they'll do what I want); but that doesn't seem to be the case here. The impression we get is that the centurion was a genuinely generous person who was sympathetic to the Jewish faith.

[The gospel of Luke tells us that how a person uses their wealth says a lot about that person's heart. For example in Luke 19 we read about the rich young ruler whose wealth kept him from following Jesus; and in Luke 20 we read about Zaccheus who became a follower of Jesus and began freely giving away his money.]

In verse 6 we read:

6 And Jesus went with them. 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."

Here we see that the centurion was an incredibly thoughtful man. He reconsidered his request to Jesus, concluding that he'd asked too much, something that was too much "trouble" for Jesus. Whereas the elders of the Jews argued that the centurion "*is worthy*," the centurion's estimation of himself was, "I am *not worthy* to have you come under my roof." As we'll see, it wasn't merely a Gentile being sensitive to a Jewish rabbi

who might not want to enter his house; his reason was much deeper than that. His reason involved the identity of Jesus himself.

7 Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed.

Again, it's likely that the centurion got this idea from the report that went out about Jesus casting the unclean spirit out of the man in the synagogue in Capernaum (the synagogue he had funded). In Luke 4 we read that. . .

36 . . . they were all **amazed** and said to one another, "What is this **word**? For with **authority and power** he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out!"

They were amazed that Jesus had such authority and power that he could speak a word and unclean spirits obeyed him! In verse 8 the centurion explains his thinking in those very terms:

8 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."

The centurion's logic is that because he is a man under authority, he has the authority to command others. When he commanded his soldiers and servants, he spoke with the authority of the Roman Empire. In the same way, because Jesus is under the authority of God, when he speaks, he speaks with the authority of God himself. Since Jesus spoke with the authority of God, the centurion said, "Just say the word and my servant will be healed." The centurion believed that Jesus had authority over sickness. [Luke also explains in his gospel that Jesus had authority over unclean spirits that oppressed people, authority in his teaching, and authority over the wind and the waves.]

In verse 9 we come to the highpoint of the passage. We know what the Jewish elders thought about the centurion, and we know what the centurion thought about himself. Now we learn what Jesus thought about the centurion.

9 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."

Jesus "marveled at him" (Jesus was amazed at him). The only other time we're told that Jesus marveled at someone was in Mark 6:6 when Jesus "marveled at" the unbelief of the people in his hometown of Nazareth. But here he marveled at the centurion. What's so striking is that everywhere else in the gospel of Luke people **marveled at Jesus** (eight times): when he was twelve-years-old talking to the teachers in the temple; when he taught in the synagogue as an adult; when he performed miracles; when he responded to random theological questions; when he was raised from the dead. But here Jesus marvels at the centurion.

Specifically, he marveled that the centurion (a Gentile) understood something better than anybody else in Israel (the Jewish people); he marveled that an outsider understood something better than all the insiders. **He understood Jesus' authority.** Jesus calls that **faith**. It's as if Jesus thought, "Finally! Finally somebody 'gets' that I have authority accomplish things by speaking." He had a simple, childlike faith.

Almost as an afterthought, Luke mentions in verse 10.

10 And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well.

Jesus "[said] the word and healed [his] servant."

If we want to understand Jesus, **we have to understand his authority.** In other words, we have to have faith, believing that he has authority to act. He has "say" over every circumstance we face. Let's spend a few minutes thinking about what the centurion's experience means for spiritual insiders and outsiders.

**First**, if you consider yourself to be a spiritual outsider, the centurion's experience should give you great encouragement. Maybe you are like the centurion in that you have "heard reports" about Jesus, but you've never encountered him directly; you've never entered into a relationship with him yourself.

The centurion's experience tells us that being a spiritual outsider is not a liability at all. If you want to know Jesus, the issue isn't your lack of experience or knowledge of the Bible or sense of being unworthy or your past. The issue is whether or not you understand Jesus' authority - whether or not you believe that he has the authority to meet your deepest need. And your deepest need - whether you realize it or not - is to be forgiven for your sins so that there's no barrier between you and God. We all sin by nature and by choice; that's why we walk around dripping with guilt and shame. And none of us can remove our own sin. We can't work it off or pay it off; sin needs to be forgiven.

In the gospel of Luke Jesus' **authority to heal** pointed to his **greater authority to forgive sins**. In Luke 5 Luke records how the Pharisees objected to Jesus claiming to forgive a man's sins. In response, Jesus said (Luke 5:24):

"But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" —he said to the man who was paralyzed—"I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home."

Jesus did something miraculous that they could see (healing the man) as evidence that he had done something miraculous that they couldn't see (forgiving the man).

Jesus not only has authority to forgive sins; he has made payment for our sins by dying on the cross. If you believe/trust that Jesus has authority to forgive your sins based on

his death on the cross, your sins will be wiped out and you will enter into a relationship with God.

If you don't yet believe that Jesus has that type of authority, but you're open to believing, put yourself in a position to hear and understand this message about Jesus. Faith comes from hearing the word of God. Come on Sunday mornings and hear the Word taught, read the Scripture along with someone who's already a believer, ask questions and be curious. Seek and you will find. [If you need help finding a safe person to talk with, let us know.]

**Second**, to those of us who are spiritual insiders, there is an implicit warning in this passage. Jesus said that he hadn't found faith like the centurion's in all of Israel. The people of Israel were spiritual insiders - they read the Scriptures, they went to church every week, they had a rich spiritual heritage - but the vast majority of them didn't have a simple, childlike faith.

Something similar can happen to us: we can lose the childlike faith that we had when we first came to Christ; we can develop a rather sophisticated faith that doesn't really believe that Jesus has authority over the circumstances we face. We can forget what it's like to live by faith.

Here's the question I'm going to be asking myself this week (and I'd invite you to ask yourself this same question): Am I relating to Jesus as someone who has all authority **and** who is radically "for me"? The fact that Jesus has all authority AND that he died for my sins is a powerful combination. **A couple of examples to think about:**

- \* Prayer. If we understand that Jesus has all authority, we won't pray half-hearted prayers for things that we think will probably happen anyway. We will pray strong, wise, faith-filled prayers. And we'll be satisfied with how God answers.
- \* Spiritual battle. Paul told us that in this world we aren't fighting against flesh and blood (other people) but against spiritual forces of evil. He also told us that Jesus is raised up and seated far above such spiritual forces; he is seated in the place of power and authority - at the right hand of God. In the battles I'm facing - whether temptation or discouragement or anxiety or fear - am I merely trying hard or am I trusting in the One who has all authority? There's a world of difference between the two.

This week join me in asking yourself the question, *Am I relating to Jesus as someone who has all authority? Am I living by faith?*