



Matthew: The King and His Kingdom

Series: A Centurion's Faith and the Messiah's Authority

Matthew 8:5-13

September 11, 2011

Pastor Nick Shaffer

Last week we looked at the great compassion of Christ to reach out, before all that were around him and looked on, and to touch an outcast, a leper, a man despised and rejected and to heal and cleanse this man. We saw how this disease is such a graphic picture of our sin – grotesque, defiling, loathsome. And yet just as Christ was compassionate to this leper and stretched out His hand and took hold of his unclean flesh with the grip of eternal and gracious love, so He has done the same for all who have trusted in Him as Savior and Lord. He has laid hold of us by His grace, out of His grace, cleansing us by the soul cleansing blood of the Lamb of God, and by His atoning death on the cross, has washed us of our iniquity and corruption and from the filthiness of our sin and has made us to be clean before the Lord, clothed in His righteousness and restored to fellowship with the Father.

This week, as Jesus reaches out to yet another outcast – Gentile, we are going to see the display of Christ's great authority as Messiah and learn a lesson regarding grace and faith and the proper way to approach Christ. So look at this text with me in Matthew 8, beginning in verse 5.

Introduction and Backstory

Now to get a full understanding of this text today, we need to set a foundation by understanding three things. First, we need to have an understanding of the mindset of most of the nation of Israel at this time. Israel was the "chosen people of God." They were God's nation in the midst of this world. That does not mean that everyone who was an Israelite was saved – Jesus would make clear in His ministry that just being Jewish did not mean that you were saved – but the vast, vast majority of those who were saved by faith were from this nation through whom God advanced His redemptive plan in this world culminating in the coming of Jesus Christ, the Savior King.

God called this chosen nation to be separate from the nations around them, to be holy and faithful to Him, and to live in a manner that reflected their submission to God and their obedience to Him. For that reason, God had given to them specific laws – laws about the way they were to live, laws about what they could eat and laws about how they could approach God in worship – all of them intended to show that this nation was different from the ones around it. Now they were called to this lifestyle, to this kind of living, not so they could be puffed up with pride at being God’s chosen people but so they could be a missionary nation which shined as a light in the world and which called others to come and to worship God. They were to call others to embrace the worship of the one true God. In fact, the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers contain several descriptions of the treatment and inclusion of “the sojourner” – the Gentile convert to Judaism anticipating that the nation of Israel would again be a missionary nation. The problem is that Israel’s place as the chosen people of God degenerated, for the most part and for most people, into an arrogant and self-righteous disgust of all Gentiles. Moreover, the nation of Israel, again as a whole – not all of them, had the arrogant mindset that simply being Jewish gave them the right to the blessing of God, no matter what – even if they were disobedient. God would always side with them, they thought. They thought that God existed for Israel’s glory, to make much of Israel, rather than the other way around. For that reason, by Jesus’ time, most of the Jews – again, not all but most -- understood the salvation of God to belong only to the nation of Israel and that all the people of all the other nations were on their way to hell – good riddance. That was the majority mindset of the religious leaders of Israel.

The second thing we need to grasp as we look at this text is the importance of the town of Capernaum. At the time of Christ, the nation of Israel was under Roman occupation and was a part of the Roman Empire. For that reason, there was a Roman garrison in all of the strategic towns and cities. Capernaum, the base of operations for the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ, was one such town. What made it a strategic location in Israel was that Capernaum was on the main road that ran from Damascus up north down through the Jezreel Valley and over into Egypt. It was the main highway for caravans, traders, and for military troop movements. That explains the military presence in Capernaum and the presence of this centurion in our text.

And last, as we get into this text, we need to understand a little about this centurion. As the name suggests, a centurion was a military officer who was in charge of a unit of at least 100 men and many times that figure could be higher. He would have been a skilled and effective commander and warrior. Centurions were the backbone of the Roman military machine and were, as a rule strong, hard, no-nonsense, combat oriented men, who did not have anything to

do with the populace of the cities that they occupied, except to rule them with an iron fist, which is what makes the description of him, offered by the Jews, to be so interesting.

In the parallel account that is found in the book of Luke, we see a contingent of Jewish elders approaching Jesus saying: “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.”” (Luke 7:4–5, ESV) This is an extremely uncommon description that is given of this centurion and it is a description that leads the majority of commentators, and I happen to agree with them, that this man was proselyte of the Jewish religion, a Gentile convert to Judaism. He loves the nation, he built the synagogue – these are significant statements. God, it seems, had drawn this man to Himself, to love and to worship the God of Israel -- the God who is holy and righteous, the God who judges sin but has great mercy on sinners, the God who is faithful and who keeps His promises. Moreover, what can gather from this account is that this Gentile convert to Judaism discerns that Jesus is the Messiah of God. The fame of Christ had spread throughout the land. Remember the words of Matthew 4: (Matthew 4:23–25, ESV) He had heard of Christ’s fame, of His power, of His teaching, and He had heard the promise of the coming of the Messiah, the Savior King of Israel, and by God’s grace and by the illuminating work of the Spirit of the Living God, He had come to see Jesus as the fulfillment of that promise. And in this text, today, he will demonstrate far greater faith and understanding than anyone that Jesus had come into contact with in the nation of Israel.

One other thing, you will notice that there is a significant difference in Matthew and Luke’s account of this interaction between the centurion and Jesus. In Luke’s account, the centurion sent word to Jesus through Jewish spokesmen, the elders of Capernaum and again when Jesus drew near to his home that the centurion, again through representatives, his friends, spoke to Jesus to explain that he was not worthy to have Him in his home. By contrast, Matthew understands the centurion to be speaking to Jesus face to face. How do we understand this? There are chiefly three ways to understand this. First, it was not at all uncommon for someone in the ANE to send word through a proxy, through someone who was delegated to speak for him and on his behalf and that could have been the case here. In that case the representative is seen as speaking directly for the person. A second possibility is that Jesus engaged in two separate conversations – one with the delegations and one with the centurion. The third possibility and I think the one that makes the most sense is a combination of the two -- that the centurion sent both delegations to Christ and after dispatching them followed his friends to make sure they didn’t mess it up. With all of this in mind, let’s look at this story and first I want for us to see

A Spiritually Ignorant Appeal (Matthew 8:5-7, Luke 7:3-5) Matthew records for us: (Matthew 8:5-7, ESV) Jesus enters into his “base of operations”, into Capernaum and immediately he is met with an appeal from a centurion in the town. He has a servant – Matthew makes it clear with the Greek word that he uses that it is a child. This child is paralyzed and suffering greatly and the gist of it all is that he is near death and that his only hope is Christ. But in all of that, I want you to notice the way that Matthew presents this centurion’s appeal. Though it was within his power as a centurion to send for Christ and have Him brought to Him, instead the centurion approaches Christ, in fact as Luke describes it, he sends this delegation of Jewish elders to Christ, because in the words of Luke account, he did not presume to think himself worthy to come to Christ. He simply makes the need known to Jesus and waits for Jesus’ response. At least from Matthew’s gospel, we understand that was his intention, but Luke tells us the Jewish elders are not nearly so reverent toward Christ.

Look at the way that Luke describes this scene: (Luke 7:3-5, ESV) The Jewish elders, whom you would think would have a clue, instead of approaching Jesus with humility and with awe, come pleading incessantly that Jesus would do something and heal this centurion’s servant based upon his worth, based upon his merit, based upon the good things that he had done for the nation of Israel. You almost get the sense of these guys coming to Jesus with the attitude of saying, “You know Jesus, this guy has done us a real solid, he’s a good dude, he has our best interests at heart, he is all about our nation, all about setting up synagogues, you really own him one because he’s on our team.” Not only are they presumptuous to think that they can advise Jesus of what he should and shouldn’t do, they are presumptuous to think that Jesus approves of them. They would never have come to Jesus on behalf of this centurion had he not been for the benefits that they perceived this centurion had given to them. Their own glory, the glory of the nation is what motivated these men.

Moreover, this approach to Christ is faithless and here’s what I mean by that. No one can approach God or His Messiah based upon his own merit and yet that is exactly how they interceded for this centurion, based upon his merit. That is foolishness. What that demonstrates is a complete lack of understanding of the Law of God. Our sin has rendered us completely devoid of any merit with God, which is why we so desperately need God’s grace in Christ. The only thing that we deserve is hell and death. Worthiness of God’s favor, of His blessing, because of our personal performance guts the gospel of its meaning. And yet, this is how unbelieving Jews always approached Christ and it is how unbelievers today try to approach

God -- as if we deserve something from His hand. We don't. That is the point. Whatever good we receive from God is grace. Jesus is going to go with these men to heal the centurion's servant but it not because He was persuaded by their words but rather because there is a greater purpose at work here -- to reveal the proper approach to God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ.

The elders, supposing that they can approach Jesus on the basis of human merit, thinking they can make an appeal because of all that this man had done for Israel demonstrates that they think too highly of themselves, too highly of the centurion because of what he had done for them, and too little of God or of who Christ is as the Messiah -- they demonstrate their spiritual ignorance. The centurion, by contrast, demonstrates spiritual understanding. He approaches Christ by humility and faith, comprehending grace and understanding authority. Jesus determines to come to his house to heal his servant and look at what happens next -- and we will stay here in Matthew the rest of the way. Look with me at

An Appeal that Understands the Truth (Mathew 8:8-9) Jesus determines to go to the centurion's home to heal this child servant and the centurion responds by saying: (Matthew 8:8-9, ESV) Notice what can only be the Spirit-wrought humility of this man. Where the Jewish elders had presented him as worthy of the blessing and the favor of God, this centurion sees himself in an entirely different light. "I am not worthy to have you come under my roof." This is the response of a believing heart beloved. This is the proper response to grace and mercy, to the proper understanding of Christ's power and person and authority. His response to Christ's gracious willingness to come to his house and heal his servant is met with the confession that he is unworthy to receive him in his home. He is acutely aware that he is unworthy to receive anything from Christ. It was an expression of this centurion's realization of Christ's great majesty and power and a feeling that he was so beneath Christ that he did not deserve to have him in his home. Who is he to compared to this exalted one of matchless power and authority?

When he says that he is not worthy of having Jesus come to his home he means it. It may be that he is concerned that Jesus will be made ceremonially unclean by coming to his house. But I think it is more than that. It is clear in the way that the centurion refers to Jesus. Just as the leper last week, he refers to Jesus as Lord. Now again, I know that word can be translated merely as "sir", but again that is not what is going on here. For a Roman centurion to call a Jewish rabbi "sir" would have been astonishing enough, but again, there is more to it. As I said before, I believe that He had heard of Christ's fame, of His power, of His teaching, and He had

heard the promise of the coming of the Messiah, the Savior King of Israel, and by God's grace and by the illuminating work of the Spirit of the Living God, He had come to see Jesus as the fulfillment of that promise. He believes He has the power to heal paralytics.

Not only does the centurion see that he is unworthy to receive Jesus in his own home, he realizes that there was not need for Christ to come to his home. He understood Christ's authority was so great, our Lord's power and authority were so great that all he had to do was to speak a word and his servant would be healed. As a soldier, he knew that his military authority ultimately rested in the emperor; and that his authority was derived from the emperor's authority. When he gave a command, people obeyed him because to not do so would be the same refusing the emperor. But he recognized that Jesus is One who possessed an authority greater than even the emperor. He had authority over diseases, and illnesses, and leprosy, and even over demons. Here was a man who was vested with supreme power and authority over all things. Jesus even would later testify to the truth of this: (Matthew 28:18; John 5:26–28, ESV) If all the centurion had to do was simply speak the word and it was done; how much more can Jesus simply speak a word and heal his servant. This was an expression of the centurion's deep conviction that when Jesus spoke, God spoke and therefore His words carried with them the power of God.

The centurion responds with real faith. Beloved, when we look at these words, we have to ask ourselves, "Is this the way that I approach God and His Christ? Do I approach him on the basis of his grace and mercy or do I try to approach him on the basis of my merit?" Even more, do I recognize and submit to Christ's authority like this? Do I hold His word, His commands, and His power in such high esteem? Do I comprehend and believe and live as if His words have such authority and power? Our understanding of Christ's authority of Jesus is shown by the manner with which you approach Him. We should never forget that He is our greatest Friend; but we should also never forget that our greatest Friend is also the King of heaven, the Lord of Glory, the King of the Universe. Grace perceived and received results in humility, it sees and submits to Christ's glorious authority and majesty, and it responds in faith...

A Faith that Makes Christ Marvel (Matthew 8:10) Now this not the full blown, full-orbed faith of a man who understands all of the aspects and facets of the gospel, that is yet to be revealed. But this is the faith of a man who by God's grace has come to recognize the identity of the Messiah and trusts in Him fully. This is the kind of faith that sees and perceives the truth about Jesus Christ and sees Him as the only answer for our every need. It knows the truth about

Christ, believes the truth about Christ is true, and trusts all of life to Him as Savior King. It is such faith that Jesus says that he had found in no one in Israel. What was it about this man's faith that Jesus found amazing? Maybe the fact that it was well reasoned and logical. Maybe it was because he believed in the sovereign authority and power of Christ. Maybe it was because He understood and submitted to Christ as the Messiah while the Jews who had all the spiritual advantages of the patriarchs and the Scriptures and the history of God's faithfulness to them missed it. I believe He was amazed at its simplicity. I know who you are and I trust you completely. Simple, real faith. Faith that brings

A Gospel Mystery Brought to Light (Matthew 8:10-13) I want to make sure we understand something. This word that is translated as marveled does not have to mean that it comes as a complete surprise, okay? It doesn't have to mean that. We know that Jesus knew what was in man, we know that this interaction with the centurion was foreordained, we know that He is God in the flesh and nothing came a surprise to Him. But this word "marveled" does not have to mean that something comes as a complete surprise. Instead the idea is that it is noteworthy and significant and worthy of contemplation and that is what this word means here. In fact this word "marvel" is used only two times in the gospels with reference to Jesus. In Mark 6, Mark describes Jesus' rejection in His own hometown when He went to the synagogues there to preach and to teach. Mark tells us that he marveled at their unbelief.

In one context the word is used to describe Jesus' reaction to the unbelief of the Jews and in the other context, the word is used to describe Jesus' reaction to the faith of this centurion – a Gentile. Jesus uses this expression of faith on the part of this man as means to teach a very important truth – the way of reception into the Kingdom of heaven is by faith in Him as Messiah. It is by grace through faith that we come into the Kingdom. It is not on the basis of race, or self-righteousness, or obedience to the Law. It is not by your own power or goodness that you come into the Kingdom but by humble, broken, self-abasing and Christ-magnifying faith in Jesus as the Messiah of God. What Jesus says here is shocking. He says: "I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

It was a reference to the great banquet in the Kingdom of God at the table of His Messiah which Isaiah wrote of In Isaiah 25: (Isaiah 25:6–9, ESV) The Jews had talked themselves into believing that this text spoke only of the Jews – it was theirs by nationality, because they were God's

people. They believed that the Messianic banquet was their personal possession. But Jesus says something else.

Gentiles and Jews would be coming to the table with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and the way they would come is by faith in the Messiah and the point is that the children of Abraham are not those who are physically descended from him, but those who believe God and believe in His Messiah. The centurion, though his faith was in its infancy was the perfect illustration of this truth. Many who were physical descendants of Abraham – the sons of the Kingdom – would be cast away precisely because they refused to believe in the Messiah who is Christ.

The faith of this centurion was a faith in Christ as Messiah and it was a faith that was rewarded by Christ in the moment. Matthew tells us: (Matthew 8:13, ESV) His faith in the Messiah was rewarded with the healing of his servant in that very moment, and with the reward of eternal life.

What do we take away from this text?

Now in light of what we read here this morning, beloved we need to understand something very clearly. We have Americanized Jesus. Just as the Jews redefined Jesus, so have we. We have made Him out to be the patron God of conservative politics, of proper morality, of the Constitution of the United States of America. We act as if Jesus is Pro-America and His primary purpose is to make America strong again. We act as if Jesus was born in a stable in Iowa and laid in a manger. But we need to see something here and we need to understand it deeply, that the Kingdom that Christ is concerned with building is a Kingdom that embraces all nationalities and knows no geographical boundaries, a Kingdom that is not of this world, a kingdom that is populated by regenerated, believing, and sanctified people who have trusted in Christ for salvation, a Kingdom over which He is King. The idea that Jesus is pro national Israel or pro national America is simply wishful thinking. He is pro-Kingdom of God.

Salvation is all by grace, by the unmerited favor of God. How that grace should grip our hearts and drive us to greater worship and obedience and faithfulness to Christ. How it should produce in us a sense of our own unworthiness to receive the grace of God and yet at the same time spur a deeper gratitude that we have indeed been recipients of a great grace. God does not save men or women on the basis of religion, good character, philanthropy, humility,

culture, education, good works, not any of these things. God saves men and women on the basis of what Christ has done on the cross, His work as Messiah to save His people through His death in their place paying the debt that their sins deserved. He saved people based on the gracious work of Christ to be the sin-bearer for all who would believe in Him and receive Him by faith.

We need to ask – what does my faith look like? Is it real? Is it evident? Is it humble and dependent and simple and strong?

Last, We must come face to face with the question of how we perceive Christ's authority. We are by and large a people who question and rebel against authority at every level and yet, Jesus' power and authority are on display here in this text very clearly. Do I recognize and submit to Christ's authority like this? Do I hold His word, His commands, and His power in such high esteem?

There is much in this text to consider, much to meditate upon, and much to submit to – may God impress His Word upon your soul and grant you repentance and faithfulness and simple faith in Him.

document is preferred. Anything beyond these guidelines will require prior approval by West Salem Baptist Church.