

September 11, 2016

“The Centurion’s Servant”

Matthew 8:5-13

FCF: Confusion about hope

PROPOSITION: (anchor) There was a purposefulness to Jesus’ miracles.
(magnet) As we examine them, we can see the grounds for hope.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

It’s worth noting how definitions differ. That is, sometimes words and concepts can mean different things, depending on your viewpoint. Think of “hope”. The popular definition is “*to want something to happen or to be true.*” It’s a wish. The biblical definition is “*the expectation that God will fulfill promises made in the past.*” More than a wish, that’s certainty.

Why the difference? The popular definition cuts God out. So there’s no certainty. All we can do is wish without any guarantee. But what if we can do better? What if we can listen to what God has said, look back to the things He has done, and build hope, true hope, from there?

SCRIPTURE READING: [Matthew 8:5-13](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

You can learn about someone’s priorities and purposes by looking at the choices that they make. Here’s a thought experiment. An epidemic has swept the land - worse than the flu, the Bubonic Plague, or Ebola. It’s a dire situation. But you have come across a cure, a vial with ten doses of a vaccine. Who will you give it to? Your spouse and children, parents and siblings? Quite possibly. But what of world leaders or even research scientists? There’s a lot riding on this decision. The choices have to be made. And it will reveal your purposes and priorities.

Jesus is not limited in terms of His resources. That said, there’s something worth noting here ([READ Matthew 4:23](#)). So many heard and were healed. But clearly not everyone. In fact, not all the instances of hearing and healing are reported by Matthew. There’s intentionality here, an obvious purposefulness - not just in what Matthew relays but in what Jesus actually did. Or, if I can put it this way, there was a purposefulness to Jesus’ ministry and His miracles. And as we examine this, we find great cause for encouragement. And deep grounds for hope.

“How so?” you ask. How does this purposefulness and intentionality to Jesus’ ministry and miracles give us hope and encouragement? In how we see measures of these three things. First, the kindness of God. Second, the grace of God. And, third, the faithfulness of God.

I. THE KINDNESS OF GOD

So, first, the kindness of God. The centurion was a man in need without any resources.

A) *The Situation*

Let me try and paint a picture of the situation and what drove the man to do what he did.

1. The bond between these men

To start, we need to see the bond between this man and his servant. Roman centurions were forbidden to fraternize with their men. They were well paid but forbidden to marry during their long 20 years of service. Which means, for this man, his personal attendant was his only family.

2. The despair of the centurion

So, while we don't know the nature of the disease, we hear the despair ([READ Matthew 8:5-6](#)).

B) *The Desperation*

So this centurion is despairing. And he is desperate. How do we see that?

1. The fact he went to Jesus

In the fact he went to Jesus. Romans soldiers didn't seek the assistance of Jewish preachers.

2. The way he went to Jesus

We see his desperation just in the fact he went to Jesus. And then in how he went to Jesus. He addresses Him as "Lord" - at minimum with respect, possibly with reverence. And he does this publicly, in full view of his men, of the townspeople, and even of the crowds following Jesus.

And Jesus heals his servant. Which is clearly a measure of the kindness of God.

Illustration:

Some of you may remember Jim Bakker, the televangelist tried and imprisoned for his financial dealings. This was a huge scandal. Jim Bakker was persona non grata. Listen to his story of how Ruth Graham reached out to him when he was released from prison ([READ IV2](#)):

So when I got out of prison the Grahams sponsored me and paid for a house for me to live in and gave me a car to drive. The first Sunday out, Ruth Graham called the halfway house I was living in at the Salvation Army and asked permission for me to go to the Montreat Presbyterian Church with her that Sunday morning. When I got there, the pastor welcomed me and sat me with the Graham family. There were like two whole rows of them—I think every Graham aunt and uncle and cousin was there. The organ began playing and the place was full except for a seat next to me. Then the doors opened and in walked Ruth Graham. She walked down that aisle and sat next to inmate 07407-058. I had only been out of prison 48 hours, but she told the world that morning that Jim Bakker was her friend.

Afterwards, she had me up to their cabin for dinner. When she asked me for some addresses, I pulled this envelope out of my pocket to look for them—in prison you're not allowed to have a wallet, so you just carry an envelope. She asked, "Don't you have a wallet?" And I said, "Well, yeah, this is my wallet." After five years of brainwashing in prison you think an envelope is a wallet. She walked into the other room and came back and said, "Here's one of Billy's wallets. He doesn't need it. You can have it."

Application:

It's a great story. And it's an extension and reflection of the kindness of God. But do we believe that? We might be able to envision what Matthew is relaying and even acknowledge it actually happened. But can we connect there to here, then to now? Do we believe that the Lord is that kind? And are we willing to see how desperately we need Him - just as this centurion?

There was a purposefulness to the miracles. And they can give us deep grounds for hope.

II. THE GRACE OF GOD

They show us God's kindness. And also His grace. Why do I say that? Why did Jesus heal the servant? The centurion was a doer of good deeds. But they were without any merit.

A) *Laudable Works*

Let me explain what I mean by his being a doer of good deeds and laudable works.

1. Capernaum

Capernaum sat on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was a trading city at a crossroads. The Romans had a garrison there and recent excavations have uncovered a nearby outpost.

2. Synagogue

The ruins of a 3rd century synagogue are visible there today. That structure was built on top of the foundation stones of its 1st century predecessor - which Luke tells us that this centurion paid to have built. Think with me. Those were laudable works. But hardly the emphasis of the text.

B) *Necessary Faith*

The clear emphasis of the text is not his laudable works but his necessary faith.

1. The exchange

We learn of that in his exchange with Jesus. Note that the centurion doesn't actually ask for help. He just states the need. We might wonder why. Likely, he's afraid of rejection. But Jesus draws him out (**READ Matthew 8:5-7**). Literally, "Shall I (emphasis) come and heal him?"

(**READ Matthew 8:8-9**) The centurion expresses his unworthiness, a humility and understanding of who Jesus is, basically saying, "*I am a lord and you are a lord. I command and soldiers obey. But you command and creation obeys. You can heal however or from wherever you so choose.*"

2. The lesson

The lesson? (**READ Matthew 8:10**) Jesus marvels not at the man's good deeds but at his faith.

This miracle is a measure of the grace of God as we see this centurion looking to, leaning on, relying on, and trusting in nothing but the grace of God. Not his goodness but God's grace.

Application:

Which was surely utterly alien to his life experience. Think with me. This man has the status he has because of promotions for good performance. He had to evaluate others according to how well they carried out their responsibilities. Grace is otherworldly, alien to his experience.

And to ours. But if we come to God with what we think we merit from Him and what we think He owes us, it all unravels. Let me just point to two things, two questions to consider. First, "*When is it ever going to be enough?*" tearing the heart out of our assurance. And, second, "*How is what Jesus has done not enough?*" giving real offense to Jesus in view of His cross. Our peace, our rest, our hope, is found by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

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III. THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

They show us God's kindness and His grace. And then His faithfulness as well. How do we see that here? The centurion was a man of power and influence. But with really no standing.

A) Deep Estrangement

Let me explain what I mean by that by pointing out the deep estrangement here.

1. Part of an occupying army

This is not a two-dimensional figure. Keeping in mind what we've noted about the centurion, he was also part of an occupying army. He is like a Nazi captain in occupied France during WWII.

2. Despised as a Gentile

He was despised as a Gentile, known as "the uncircumcision", viewed with contempt by the Jews. He was seen as a dog, a scavenger of fields and streets, feeding off of trash and corpses.

B) Sweet Fellowship

And yet, with that backdrop, how does Jesus respond to him? (**READ Matthew 8:10-12**)

1. Warning His fellow Jews

This is a warning from Jesus to His fellow Jews. Salvation is not by race or our pedigree but by faith and God's promises. He uses the strongest of language here, the grimmest of imagery.

2. Assuring peoples of all nations

So Jesus gives this warning to His fellow Jews. But then this assurance to peoples of all nations. "You may have a place at this table" - not a conference table but a banquet table, a picture of sweet fellowship, intimacy, solidarity - with Him and one another. Just as promised to Abraham in Genesis 12. Just as predicted by the prophets. Just as God had in mind from the beginning.

Jesus heals this man's servant. And that is a measure of the faithfulness of God.

Illustration:

I think of those beautiful announcements of a couple's 50th wedding anniversary. Some of you no doubt have been to such celebrations. And they are cause for celebration. And a testimony to faithfulness, each able to count on, rely on, and trust in the other through the years.

Rightly understood, it should be like that for the Christian every day - not looking back over just 50 years of God's faithfulness to us but thousands and in too many ways to even count.

Application:

I've heard it often said (and I fear that it's too lightly heard), "God has promised to take care of your eternity. Can He not, will He not, take care of today?" Surely the answer is yes.

Is anything too great for Him to handle? Is there anything - and think here of whatever troubles your heart this morning - is there anything He cannot transform into our deeper good?

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CONCLUSION:

What struck me just yesterday in reflecting on this was how much Jesus wants us to know of His kindness, grace, and faithfulness. You see it in the trouble He takes to convey it. Think

of a host who takes into account every need of the weary traveler. Or the cook who prepares not just a meal but an experience. Or the carpenter who makes not just a structure but artistry.

For it wasn't enough for Jesus that He would leave the pleasure, beauty, fellowship, and perfection of heaven to enter the brokenness, ugliness, rebelliousness, and foolishness of earth. The Author of creation, the Maker of time and space, the Bread and Fountain of Life put death to death through His death. And brought forgiveness through His bearing our guilt and shame.

But not even that was enough for Jesus. We want us to know - to really know - the good news of the kingdom that He would then do all of that in a way that even His miracles would make clear His kindness, His grace, and His faithfulness. I can't quite get my head around that.

How He wants us to know. And how we need to know. And it comes out in the lengths to which He has gone and the purposefulness of His miracles. Which is grounds for our hope.

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