

1. There's No-one Like Jesus: Faith is not difficult

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[0 : 00] Well, let's take our Bibles, if you'd like to follow the reading, and we'll turn to Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 8, which you'll find on page 813 in our Pew Bibles, page 813.

I'm due to be with you here for these Wednesday services for this month of September, four Wednesdays, and what I want to do is to take this eighth chapter of Matthew as our passage for study.

Under the overall title, There's No One Like Jesus. So today, verses 8, 5 to 13, Chapter 8, verses 5 to 13.

When Jesus entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him, Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly.

And he said to him, I will come and heal him. But the centurion replied, Lord, I'm not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed.

[1 : 02] For I too am a man 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. When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, Truly I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith.

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. And to the centurion, Jesus said, Go, let it be done for you as you have believed.

And the servant was healed at that very moment. And may the Lord God add his blessing to this reading from his word. Well, you will be aware, most of you I'm sure, that in Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7, we have just had Jesus' great sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus has unfolded for his listeners what the Christian life really looks like, as lived out by the followers of Jesus, the Christian life looked at from the inside.

[2 : 29] And you'll see at the end of chapter 7, verses 28 and 29, that as Jesus spoke, he was teaching the people as one who had authority, and not like their scribes.

So Jesus spoke with unprecedented authority. They'd never heard anything like it. And as we move from the end of chapter 7 into chapter 8, we move from a section of Jesus' authoritative teaching to a section on Jesus' authoritative deeds.

Actions. There is no one like Jesus, either in his speaking or in his doing. So he's not like some politicians, not all politicians, but some politicians who are all promise and no performance.

Jesus speaks and acts with equal authority and power. Now I want us to look this afternoon at verses 5 to 13, where Matthew tells this story of the encounter that Jesus had with a Roman centurion.

At Capernaum. And this is clearly a story about faith. Yes, there's a healing miracle here. There's also the question of Jews and Gentiles raised for us.

[3 : 40] Also that the matter of the Roman occupation of Palestine is touched on at a tangent. But the centurion's faith, that is the central point of the story. And Jesus makes that as plain as a pike staff in his punchline, which you'll see in verse 10.

Punchlines generally come at the very end, but in this case it comes part way through. So here is verse 10. When Jesus heard this, in other words, what the centurion had just said, he marveled.

Now, don't you think it's astonishing that anything should make Jesus astonished? What could it be that takes Jesus off guard, makes him surprised, and filled with a sense of marvel?

Well, let's read on. He marveled and said to those who followed him, truly I tell you, with no one in Israel, no one amongst the Jews, have I found such faith.

In other words, the way that this centurion has just acted and spoken in verses 5 to 9 is an extraordinary example of real faith.

[4 : 47] Now, friends, is your interest beginning to be aroused? Are you beginning to smell the salt and vinegar? You see, we all want to know what real faith is, don't we? We'd all love to be able to exercise faith more truly if we're Christians.

If we're not Christians, we'd love to know what real faith is. So this is a passage for those who want to know more about the Bible's teaching on real faith. Now, before we look at the centurion and what it was about him that made Jesus marvel, let me just observe in passing that all of us exercise faith every day in all sorts of things and people in ordinary life.

So just to give a couple of examples, if for my lunch I go into Greg's shop and I buy myself a nice cheese sandwich, I have faith that the person who has made that sandwich has not slipped in a couple of grams of cyanide into the sandwich.

I don't send the sandwich off for laboratory analysis as to whether it might contain poison. Not at all. I have faith that the good Miss Greg has only used wholesome ingredients in making the sandwich. Or another example. Look at these chairs that you're sitting on. Just feel them under you. You are exercising faith that that chair that you're sitting on is going to hold you for at least 30 minutes. So whether you weigh 7 stone or 17 stone, you're putting your faith in the chair that is not going to let you down.

[6 : 13] Now we could multiply examples, couldn't we? All of us exercise faith in many things and many people every day. And presumably, Jesus' contemporaries were just the same.

Exercising the same kind of faith in the same kind of things and people. We are all accomplished practitioners in exercising faith. So what was it about this centurion and his faith which made Jesus, who is the world expert on faith, what was it about him and his faith that Jesus found so remarkable?

Let's notice four things. First, real faith is faith in Jesus. Look with me at verse 5 at the beginning. When Jesus entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him.

Now Matthew expresses it there in such an ordinary way that it's easy not to notice it. But it's to Jesus that this man comes with his pressing need. He doesn't turn to the local doctor.

He doesn't turn to the local homeopathic healer. He doesn't approach the rabbi in the synagogue.

He doesn't call on Jupiter or one of the Roman gods. I mean, he was a Roman. No, he goes to Jesus because, as we'll see in just a moment, he realizes that Jesus is the one who is able to meet his need.

[7 : 33] Now the New Testament consistently teaches us that Jesus, as the Son of God, the image of God, is the one in whom to exercise faith. And having faith in Jesus is very much more than just believing that he exists.

I believe that the North Pole exists. But I have no intention of having close dealings with the North Pole. I would hate to have to go and look at it. And many people in the world today know perfectly well that Jesus existed and perhaps believe that he still exists.

But they don't want to get any closer to him than I want to get to the North Pole. But look at verse 5. The centurion came forward to him.

Came forward, presumably, there was a crowd gathered around and this man had the courage to step forward towards Jesus. And then he appealed to him. He spoke to him. So real faith steps forward and speaks to Jesus.

If that centurion had simply hung back anonymously in the crowd, if he'd failed to come forward and speak to Jesus, no blessing, no help would have come his way.

[8 : 41] He had to come forward and make his appeal. Real faith is faith in Jesus. You know, sometimes if a man is struggling in life with illness or adverse circumstances, a friend might come along to him and lay his hand lovingly on his shoulder and say to him, come now, John, have faith, have faith.

Now, it's a well-intentioned thing for a person to say, but the question is, who is John supposed to have faith in? Is he supposed to have faith in fate or destiny or the social services or the kindly passage of time?

In the New Testament, faith is always faith in Jesus and faith steps forward, makes a move, expresses itself, speaks to Jesus.

So there's the first thing. Then second, real faith is urgent yet humble. There's urgency there, do you see, in verse 6.

Lord, he says, my servant is paralyzed at home, lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly. Now, it's a slightly ambiguous appeal. What is he asking Jesus to do?

[9 : 51] Is he asking Jesus to heal the man or to pray for the man? You know, people will sometimes come to a minister and say to him, my dear aunt, Dora, is lying sick in the hospital.

Will you please pray for her? However, Jesus sees the real need and he says in verse 7, I will come and heal him. But just notice the humility of the centurion.

It's there in the first word that he utters in verse 6. Lord, he says. Lord. Now, just think of that. It's an extraordinary thing for the man to say.

This man was a soldier of some rank. Centurions in the Roman army were approximately the same kind of rank as a regimental sergeant major would be today in the British army.

And the Roman army in first century Palestine was the occupying power. And Jesus was a Jew. He was a member of the conquered, subjugated, resident people.

[10 : 49] Now, you wouldn't expect a centurion to treat a member of the conquered people with great respect, would you? Yet here is this Roman centurion treating one of the subjugated Jews as if he were so exalted in rank that it would be quite unfitting for him to come to the humble home of a man like him.

Lord, he says, I'm not worthy to have you come under my roof. This is a question of rank, not of race. He's not saying, I realize that you're a Jew and I'm a Gentile and I realize that you'd become ceremonially defiled by coming into my house.

No, it's not that. He's simply saying, I am a man whose character and life are not good enough to have a man of your greatness come and visit me. I'm grubby, you're shining and that's why it would be unfitting for you to come to my home.

Now this is what real faith is like in the Bible. It's urgent, it presses forward, it appeals, but always with a sense of how great the Lord is and how unworthy and morally sinful are we who approach him.

We can't come to him as it were with our heads held high. We have to come humbly. We can't come self-satisfied and complacent like that Pharisee in Luke's Gospel who stood up to remember in the temple and prayed, Lord, I thank you that I'm not as other men are and particularly not like that tax collector standing over there.

[12 : 17] Not at all. The Lord won't have us approach him like that. This man comes humbly. So real faith is faith in Jesus. It's urgent and yet humble.

And third, and this I think is the point that brings us to the heart of what is going on here. Real faith believes that Jesus will deliver what he promises because he has the power to do it.

Now let's look carefully at what the centurion says in the second half of verse 8 and in verse 9 because it's here that he says the words that make Jesus amazed at his faith.

So halfway through verse 8, only say the word and my servant will be healed. In other words, I believe Lord that all you need do is speak and my servant will be made well.

I don't believe that you have to come physically to my house. I don't believe that you have to perform any kind of religious rigmarole or rituals. I don't think you even have to touch the sick man or kneel at his bedside or go through any kind of performance.

[13 : 25] All you need do is speak say the word and my servant will be restored. And then in verse 9 the man unpacks his reasons for saying what he's just said in verse 8.

He draws on his experience of the power of words in the Roman army. So verse 9 For I too am a man under authority with soldiers under me.

I say to one go and he goes to another come and he comes to my servant do this and he does it. In other words I know I'm experienced in the power of the word of command.

I often use that power. So he speaks as a man who is both under authority and yet who also exercises authority. Now a centurion you might say a senior non-commissioned officer like him he would have senior officers over him but also men of lower ranks beneath him.

and if a senior officer gave the centurion a word of command he would obey and if he gave a command to a man of junior rank then that man would obey him.

[14 : 33] It's the only way an army can work. Orders have to be obeyed. And the authority structure of the Roman army in the first century went right back up to the emperor himself.

So if the emperor gave commands to his generals his generals obeyed him and they passed the command right on down through the line to the various ranks the centurions and down to the most junior soldiers.

Now this centurion understood the system deeply. He knew it like the back of his hand. It was the thing that made the Roman army work. In the Roman army the power of the word of command made things happen.

And somehow this centurion realized that Jesus was in the same kind of position that he was in.

That's why he says in verse 9 for I too am a man under authority.

I also I like you am a man under authority. He's realized that Jesus too is part of a chain of authority.

[15:39] That he Jesus was under the authority of someone whose words and commands he obeyed. He realized that Jesus took orders from the commander in chief of the universe.

And you'll remember how Jesus tells us in John's gospel that his role is to do the will of the one who sent him and to accomplish his work. And somehow this centurion's understanding had penetrated to the reality of who Jesus was in relation to the God of the universe.

How God's bare word of command could command Jesus and how Jesus too was able to command events to happen simply by using his bare word.

So Jesus realized that the centurion understood pretty clearly who he was. Now most people when they met Jesus and heard him were clueless about who he was.

So some people said isn't this the carpenter's son? Aren't his brothers and sisters so and so?

Haven't we known him since he was a boy in short pants in the carpenter's shop in Nazareth? Other people said isn't this man a kind of Satanist who does his work by the power of the prince of demons?

[16:53] And here in Matthew's gospel we have to wait to chapter 16 before Simon Peter under the revelation of God the Father finally says to Jesus you are the Christ the son of the living God.

But this centurion had spotted this great truth about Jesus eight chapters before Simon Peter did.

And that's why Jesus was so thrilled and amazed.

This Roman Gentile this outsider had come to understand something vitally important about Jesus.

That's why Jesus says in verse 10 truly I tell you I haven't found faith like this in Israel not amongst the Jews.

But let's notice from verse 10 that what Jesus sees in this man is not simply understanding but faith.

This man has faith that Jesus' bare words will do exactly what they say they will do.

All you have to do Lord is to say be healed and my servant will be healed. Real faith believes that Jesus has the power to do exactly what he says he will do.

[18:01] Now this is the principle of course which runs right the way through the Bible. It's established back in Genesis chapter 1. God only had to speak. Let there be light and there was light. Everything came into being simply by his words.

Planets, constellations, suns, mountains, rocks, rivers, trees, lions, leopards, poodles. It all came into being simply at his command. As it's put in Psalm 33 verse 6 By the word of the Lord were the heavens made and all the starry host by the breath of his mouth.

So to have faith in Jesus is to believe that whatever he says will happen will indeed happen. So for example, does Jesus say that he will one day raise the dead all those who have put their trust in him who have died?

He certainly does say that. Do you believe that he has the power to raise the believing dead? I certainly do. Does Jesus say that at the end of everything he will bring salvation to all those who belong to him but he will make a distinction and send away to condemnation all those who have refused him?

Yes, he does say that. Does he really have the power to do it? I certainly believe that he does. And this is why a Christian can go through life with a light step and a joyful heart.

[19:23] We believe that Jesus will do all these wonderful things and so much more besides because he says that he will do them. He has the power to do whatever he says he will do and that's what the centurion came to understand about him.

Real faith believes that Jesus will deliver what he promises. And then fourth, real faith has eternal consequences.

Just see how Jesus goes straight on here in verses 11 and 12. I tell you, he says, 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. The centurion's faith, in Jesus' view, is not just a commendable blessing which is going to make his life on earth that bit happier.

It's something that has eternal consequences. In Jesus' teaching, faith, or the absence of faith in this life, is always linked to the eternal future.

[20 : 38] And in verse 11, Jesus makes the point that this centurion, like many other Gentiles, will be present, people who've come from north, south, east and west, will be present at the Messiah's banqueting table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, which is one of the pictures of God's heavenly kingdom.

But, and here we see the sadness of Jesus being expressed. There will also be others, including Jews. That's what he means by the sons of the kingdom, who will be thrown into outer darkness where people will weep and gnash their teeth, which is, of course, a picture of hell.

Faith, or lack of faith, has eternal consequences. Jesus' gospel is always focused on the long term, the eternal future.

Well, of course it is, because this life is so short. I mean, look at us here today, average age, 63 and 8 months, I would say, one or two exceptions as I look around the room.

See, some of us, friends, will have taken leave of planet Earth before the Commonwealth Games come to Glasgow, won't we? Isn't that true? We need to know where we're going. Isn't it wonderful, then, that Jesus' teaching is so unmistakable?

[21 : 56] This centurion believed the power and the truth of the words of Jesus. Do you? Jesus said of this centurion, truly I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith, the kind of faith that leads to the banqueting table in the kingdom of heaven.

Is that your faith? Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Lord Jesus, we thank you so much for your dealings with this man and we thank you for the man himself and how he was enabled to understand you and to put his trust in you to put his trust in the power of your words that you were able to perform exactly what you had promised.

And we look to you, Lord Jesus, and acknowledge gladly that that is your power to do what you have said you will do. And we pray that you will deepen this trust in our own hearts and help us to exercise it right to the end of our lives.

We ask it to the glory and praise of your name. Amen. Amen. Ladies and gentlemen, we make a työ come out to the many instructions and repeat these three come out to the marketplace and exhales■■■ and