

When Jesus had finished saying all this in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. 2 There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. 3 The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. 4 When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, 5 because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." 6 So Jesus went with them.

He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. 7 That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. 8 For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

9 When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." 10 Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

Do you have a strong faith or a weak faith? How do you really know? Professor Becker once told the story of how he was convinced that he didn't have faith when he was a child because the pastor said something to the effect of, "When you have faith you won't worry about dying." So when Professor Becker worried about dying he was convinced that he didn't actually have faith. Every time he said the Creed he wouldn't say "I believe" but he would say the rest of the Creed. He said that he believed Jesus died for his sins. He believed Jesus rose from the dead. The only problem was that he didn't believe that he believed. It was an interesting introspection on his thought process. Do you ever have the same worries about your faith? The topic of today is faith, and we especially focus on the centurion's faith - which Jesus was amazed at. What made his faith so amazing and great?

Amazing Faith, What Makes it What it Is?

Jesus knew the centurion had great faith partly because he is God. But we can't see into people's hearts. However, God does tell us to look at people's works as evidence of their faith. Jesus said, "**By their fruits you will recognize them.**" Good works do not always mean that people have faith, but they can be good indicators of faith.

From the perspective of the Jews, this centurion was an exemplary man. He had built a nice synagogue for them to worship in with his own finances. I would imagine that he also provided protection for the Jews in Capernaum and didn't allow them to be abused in any way. What we see is a powerful and rich man using his power and his position to the glory of God. He wasn't ashamed of his faith in the LORD. He lived it.

It has been said that there are two great tests when it comes to your faith - when you are poor and when you are rich. Now you might ask why it would be a test to be rich? It is because you might tend to be proud or forget that you need the Lord when you are so well provided for. I think of those who reach high political positions but then seem to abandon their religion after they get there. Michelle Bachman used to be a member of the

Wisconsin Synod until her opponents started using our beliefs against her when they weren't politically expedient for her. But that didn't happen for the centurion. He was unashamed to be associated with the synagogue and the LORD, and he used his gifts to glorify the worship area there. Lydia is another example of that happening in the Bible, along with Joseph of Arimathea and Abraham.

It can be a very powerful thing when a powerful or influential man or woman is brought to the faith. Think of athletes like Reggie White or Tim Tebow. Think of politicians like Abraham Lincoln or Frederick back in Luther's day. Frederick helped to keep Luther from getting arrested and Lincoln helped to free the slaves. They can make wonderful donations or use their influence to make sure that good laws are passed. Their lives can be used as examples and role models on what blessings can come from living according to God's plan.

You don't have to be a pastor or a teacher. As a matter of fact, if the kingdom were made up of only pastors and teachers it wouldn't be much good at all. We have some very talented musicians and carpenters and jacks of all trades in our congregation, and they help to make a mark on our congregation and on our society when they serve to the glory of God. It is a strong witness to the people they work with when they do what they do to the glory of God's name. I am amazed by the talents that some of you have and use to the glory of God.

Here's another thing about the centurion . . . **a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die.** It may seem like a small thing, but we shouldn't overlook it. He valued his servant very highly. He didn't look at him as just a piece of property. Later on, the Greek says in vs. 7 that he refers to him as "**my child.**"

When I was over in India there were servants in one of the households that I visited, and they wouldn't speak with the servants like you and I might carry on a conversation with someone we hired to put in windows or fix a garage door. They weren't mean to them, but it still seemed to me like they were purposely ignored. When we are in Christ, we don't think this way. We have a God who came down to speak with us and pay special attention to us: to cover our sins and heal us. God thinks highly of us even though we should be by nature repulsive to Him. The centurion thought highly of his servant. He was genuinely concerned for him when he was dying. The centurion showed his faith in the way he cared for those under him. When you care for people it leaves a strong witness.

Think about the people that are put in positions of service to you. What kind of concern do you show for your teachers? Your children? Your parents in their older years? Your nurses when you are in the hospital? Do you cherish them as gifts from God? Do you pray for them? Do you care for them and appreciate their service to you? Do you only look at them as a product to give you what you want? Think about when a spouse gets sick. Do you first and foremost feel compassion for them in sickness? Or is your first thought, "Now I'm going to have to do more!" Self centered thinking only gets angry when others can't serve us, when our primary concern should be for those who are hurting - especially those who are precious and useful to us. The centurion was a genuinely caring man. It reflected a strong faith in the way he thought of his servants.

All of these things were impressive to the Jewish leaders of the synagogue. They felt he deserved Jesus to come and heal his servant because of who he was and how he acted as a Gentile believer. But that doesn't seem to be what impressed Jesus. It was how the centurion looked at HIMSELF and how he then looked at JESUS.

First of all, he said, **“Lord, don’t trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you.** The centurion felt a great sense of unworthiness to have Jesus come to his household. Why? Because he recognized Jesus as the Christ! The Promised Messiah! While the Jews were saying “worthy” the centurion was crying “unworthy.” This was a strong reflection of his strong faith, because he believed what God’s Word said about HIM - that all of his righteous acts were like filthy rags. He was nothing but a Gentile sinner, so he had no right to ask Jesus for anything - much less to come under his roof. It was such a contrast to the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, who were constantly trying to fluff themselves up with their clothing and their dietary practices. Here was a guy who actually saw himself for what he was - an unworthy sinner - even though he was a rich and powerful man! Everyone else was trying to puff him up, but he didn’t believe any of their hype. He just saw himself as a simple sinner who needed God’s grace and mercy.

The only way we can have faith in God is when we don’t have faith in ourselves. It’s contrary to everything we are taught by today’s society and religion, to NOT believe in yourself! We try to get this across in our theology and especially in our worship. I stand in front of the font and begin in the name of the Triune God. I wear a robe. I need to be clothed and so do we - because our sins need to be covered. It’s a reminder that we can’t come into the presence of God without baptism to cleanse our sins away. We continue with an absolution, a blunt confession that we deserve nothing from God. But then God tells us to speak forgiveness, so I speak His forgiveness to you IN CHRIST. Only then do we go to God.

Here’s another interesting contrast if you think about it. The centurion didn’t feel worthy to come into his home. But here, at God’s house, God invites us into HIS home. He washes us with His bloody grace. He comes into us at baptism. He sacrificed Himself and paid for our sins so that we COULD be here! He then gives us Himself to eat and drink in the Lord’s Supper. Who are we to receive such grace and mercy!?! But nonetheless He invites us in and welcomes us into this holy place! What an invitation! It is a privilege to be here! Those who have a weak faith or no faith say, “No, he can’t mean me.” Others smugly look at this invitation and say, “What’s the big deal? God loves me. Yeah I know all that already.” So they see this as no big deal because they don’t see their sins and they don’t really think about who they are approaching. But a great faith receives the invitation with humility and honor and joy! We are walking into the palace of the Gracious and Giving King! This is how we want you to feel when you come here. We want to give you a sense of holiness and reverence. This isn’t supposed to be like walking to a concert or a movie.

What else gave this centurion such a great and amazing faith? It was his sheer inability to do anything for his servant. All of the money in the world couldn’t pay for a miracle cure. The man was desperate. When life puts us into those impossible moments where there is no other way out: no more schemes: no more plans: no more remedies: we are forced to do nothing but pray and look to God who is more powerful than doctors and nature. We have no choice but for faith. Those moments can be great blessings to us, because they strip us of any power and we have to stop thinking about how we can find the remedy. With all of our modern inventions and medical cures we have become more and more godless through the process, even though these too are gifts of God. It is the nature of sinners to look to God LAST, and that harms faith as well. So it is through the HARDSHIPS that God grows faith, as James says in the epistle for today.

But even that wasn’t what ultimately gave the centurion his strong faith. He had heard that Jesus had healed other people. Earlier in Capernaum Jesus had the power to chase a demon from a man. Perhaps the centurion

saw the difference in that man. He knew and believed that Jesus had power: that He was even the promised Messiah that was prophesied in the Bible. So he reasoned to himself, “If Jesus could do that, and if Jesus was indeed the Messiah, all He had to do was speak the Word. After all, God spoke the universe into existence. Jesus could just speak the Word and it would be done, regardless of whether He was actually in the centurion’s home or not.” What made his faith amazing? It was the object of His faith - Jesus, and his trust that Jesus wanted to do something and could do something for his servant. It was also his trust that Jesus’ simple Word and command would work just fine. He just asked Jesus to speak on behalf of his servant. He had the audacity to ask and knew Jesus had the power to answer with a simple Word. And what happened? Jesus answered his prayer! **“Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.”** He wasn’t just recovering. He was WELL!

I think of what recently happened with Brian Abraham in our congregation. If you had seen him in the ICU you would have no question in the miracle of how God answered those prayers. If you want to know what happened to him, he was riding to the store with his son when his heart stopped working. He had some sort of a heart attack, and by all means he should have died. He was in ICU for weeks and months. Many people prayed, and God answered. To tell you the truth, sometimes I go through the motions of prayers, especially when the writing seems to be on the wall. Maybe I shouldn’t tell you that as your pastor. But thankfully it’s not the power of faith that answers prayer but the power and grace of God: the One who ANSWERS the prayers. I wasn’t the only one praying either, not by a long shot. God told us to pray, and we did, and God answered. The fact that he is still here worshipping is a miracle of God. It encourages my faith when I see God work in these ways. It reminds me of who God is when I see him here in worship.

Do you have a strong or a weak faith? How can you tell? And how can you have an amazing and strong faith? Think about the centurion. It had nothing to do with how rich he was or how much he gave to build the synagogue. It was reflected in his humility and his trust that Jesus could work a miracle by His Word. His great and amazing faith was due to the fact that he was focused on Jesus and His grace. It reminds me of Peter. When he was focused on Jesus, he was able to walk on water. But when he lost his focus and thought about the fact that he was walking on water - the wind and the waves - he fell. Instead of worrying about how strong your faith is, think about how strong and gracious your Jesus is. Stay focused on Him, and God will strengthen your faith. It’s like balancing a broom. If you want the broom to stand up, don’t look at the hand that holds the broom. Look up at the top of the broom. So it is with faith. The strength is not in the grip of the hand, but in the object of the eyes. Look up to Jesus, and hold on to Him. See how gracious He is. See how strong He is. Without even looking at it, your faith will be strong and amazing, because it will be focused on Jesus, who grace and mercy and forgiveness is the strongest and most amazing of all. Amen.