

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
April 3, 2014

Lesson Text: Luke 7:1-10
Lesson Title: Healing Faith

Introduction

By the fall of 29 A.D., Jesus' Galilean ministry had begun and was gaining in popularity. His teachings and miracles had attracted huge crowds of people. Some were true believers while others were just curious and desirous to take advantage of the miracles He performed. Jesus never taught or worked miracles to gain a crowd. Although He cared deeply about people and healed many who were sick or diseased, his purpose in every miracle He performed was to find genuine faith.

If you read the Gospel's carefully you will notice Jesus is unimpressed by everything that impresses us. Position, power, wealth, talent, and human achievement fail to impress our Lord. The only thing our Lord mentions that impressed him was the presence or absence of faith. In Mark 6:6, Jesus "*marvelled*" at the absence of faith where he expected it. In our lesson text, Jesus "*marvelled*" at the presence of faith where he expected it to be absent.

The story of a centurion's faith in Jesus' power to heal is most interesting. There are at least seven different characters in this story. The centurion, the sick servant, the elders of the Jews, the friends of the centurion, the people who followed Jesus, some unnamed person who told the centurion about Jesus, and Jesus Himself. Sometimes a crowd can hinder faith. However in this case it seems nothing could hinder this Gentile from believing Jesus could heal his servant.

The Presence of Faith (Luke 7:1-2a)

Verse 1-2a

"Now when he had ended all his sayings in the audience of the people, he entered into Capernaum. And a certain centurion's..."

Luke tells us this incident occurred when Jesus "had ended all of his sayings in the audience of the people." This is a reference to Jesus completing the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:20-49). He had taught "in the audience of the people" which means everyone listening had heard what it meant to be a true disciple. The Roman Jesus now mentions was characteristic of true discipleship and genuine faith.

Sometime after Jesus finished His teaching, “he entered into Capernaum.” “Capernaum” was Jesus’ adopted hometown and unofficial headquarters for His Galilean ministry. It was only a short walking distance from the Sea of Galilee and the hillside where He delivered the Sermon on the Mount.

The words “And a certain centurion’s servant...” must have caught the attention of those who first heard Luke’s Gospel. Imagine yourself in a small Palestinian village, with a group of Jewish friends in the early part of the second century. It is Sunday morning and you have gathered to hear the reading of a copy of Luke’s Gospel. You have been amazed and intrigued at Luke’s description of the Messiah as he writes about His love and compassion. But now you hear the word “centurion.” What is surprising about this is the “centurion” is a Gentile.

The “centurion” was a religious outsider. As a Gentile, he had no background in the word of God. He knew little if anything about God. Can a person who has no religious background have faith? Can someone not raised in your church have faith?

The “centurion” was a racial outsider. He was non-Jewish. This man was most likely a Greek or Roman. Can a person of a different race from you have faith? Can someone who does not have your skin color walk into your Sunday and have faith?

The “centurion” was a political outsider. He was a soldier working for Herod Antipas. Herod Antipas was a political ruler hated by the Jews. A “centurion” commanded a hundred men in a Roman legion of approximately six thousand soldiers. In terms of modern-day rank, he would be an infantry captain, or perhaps, a major. Can someone employed by your enemy have faith?

Note: Faith is seen in an unlikely person like this “centurion.” Some people are more likely to have faith than others. Those who grew up in Sunday school would seem more likely to have faith than the “outsiders.” However, in this story, faith is present in the “outsider.”

The Nature of Faith (Luke 7:2b-8)

Verse 2b-3

“...And a certain centurion’s servant who was dear unto him, was sick, and ready to die. And when he heard of Jesus, he sent unto him the elders of the Jews, beseeching him that he would come and heal his servant.”

The “centurion” had a “servant who was dear unto him.” This “servant” was actually a slave. The institution of slavery in the Roman Empire, while sometimes brutal, was nothing compared to the slavery of seventeenth-and

eighteenth-century England and America. Some Roman masters treated their slaves like animals, but more often than not, slaves were given the same respect given to employees today. In this case, the “centurion” cared deeply about his “servant” and went to great lengths to get him the physical help he needed.

Luke records the affection and actions of the “centurion” because genuine faith is more easily demonstrated than defined. Jesus had just finished teaching in the Sermon on the Mount the character of true discipleship (Luke 6:27-38). One of the truths Jesus taught was a true disciple loves (Luke 6:27) and gives (Luke 6:30). The “centurion” demonstrates these characteristics.

The “centurion’s servant” was “sick.” “Sick” means he had some type of grievous or miserable physical disease. Matthew 8:6 tells us the “servant” had “the palsy” and was “grievously tormented.” The point is this “servant” is “sick” and at the point of death. The situation is serious for the “servant” and very personal for the “centurion.”

“And when he heard of Jesus, he sent unto him the elders of the Jews, beseeching him that he would come and heal his servant.” Because he understood the delicate nature of Jew-Gentile interactions, he asked some Jewish elders, men of influence in the local synagogue, to ask Jesus to come and heal his servant. This is a sign of humility. Humility was not characteristic for a captain in the Roman army. Centurions did not normally have a soft heart! They were battle tested and hard hearted. But when this centurion “heard of Jesus,” he sent a delegation to ask Jesus to “come and heal his servant.”

What do you suppose this “centurion” had “heard” about Jesus? Most likely he “heard” of Jesus’ power to heal. Maybe someone had told him how Jesus loved and cared about people. What you hear about Jesus affects what you believe about Jesus. Faith is connected to what we hear.

Note: Unusual things are happening in this story. A” Gentile centurion” is asking Jewish leaders for help. “Jewish leaders” are running errands for a “Gentile centurion.”

Verse 4-5

“And when they came to Jesus, they besought him instantly, saying, That he was worthy for whom he should do this: For he loveth our nation, and he hath built us a synagogue.”

When the Jewish delegation “came to Jesus, they besought him instantly...” to help the centurion. The word “besought” means “to invoke” or “call near.” These Jewish leaders are going to bat for this Gentile centurion.

We normally hear the worst about race relations and racial interactions, but in this case, the Roman centurion had earned the affection of the Jewish community. The Jewish leaders said “he was worthy” of this favor. The word “worthy” means morally “fit,” or “deserving.” Because of his kindness in donating money to build the Jews “a synagogue” they believed he deserved the Lord to come and heal his servant. But, there is more going on than rewarding the centurion because he had built their synagogue. The leaders said, “He loveth our nation...” The motive for his financial gift was love.

A Gentile giving Jews money to build a synagogue was an unheard of act of love. The lesson is faith grows in a loving heart. Hatred and bigotry kills faith. Racial pride kills faith. Feelings of physical, spiritual and racial superiority kills faith. This centurion was a loving man, a giving man, and a humble man. Faith grows in that type of soil!

Verse 6-7

“Then Jesus went with them. And when he was now not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to him, saying unto him, Lord, trouble not thyself: for I am not worthy that thou shouldest enter under my roof: Wherefore neither thought I myself worthy to come unto thee: but say in a word, and my servant shall be healed.”

Luke tells us “Jesus went with them” but he does not tell us why he decided to help the centurion. Matthew’s account tells us Jesus said, “I will come and heal him” (Matthew 8:7). While the friends of the centurion felt he was “worthy” to ask Jesus to come, somewhere between the sending for Jesus and Jesus being “not far from the house,” the centurion “sent friends to him, saying unto him, Lord, trouble not thyself: for I am not worthy that thou shouldest enter under my roof.” The first word “worthy” (verse 6) is the Greek word *hikanos* {hik-an-os} expressing the idea of social sufficiency. The centurion felt “insufficient” or “not important enough” for Jesus to enter his house. He would have felt the same way if Caesar or some other high ranking official were to come to his house.

The second word “worthy” (verse 7) is the Greek word *axios* {ax-ee-o’-o} the same Greek word “worthy” in verse 4. In addition to feeling unworthy *socially*, he did not consider himself *morally* worthy to have Jesus in his house. The use of the word “worthy” here emphasizes the centurion had no claim on Jesus and was not “good enough” on the moral balance scale to deserve such a visit.

Note: Genuine faith cannot live in the heart of those who feel superior to others. Faith grows in a humble heart.

Verse 8

“For I also am a man set under authority, having under me soldiers, and I say unto one, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it.”

The centurion knew a Jew could be declared unclean if he came into the house of a Gentile. So he says, “I also am a man set under authority.” In other words, he knew the protocol and the rules to be followed. In the mind of the centurion he believed Jesus could heal his servant without ever setting foot “under his roof.”

The centurion understood what it meant to be “under authority” and have others “under” his authority. He realized his own limited “authority” in comparison to Jesus’ divine authority. He did not feel worthy of God’s kindness, but he never doubted Jesus’ “authority” to solve his problem. His confidence in Jesus’ ability to heal his servant never wavered, yet he refused to presume upon His grace. He believed Jesus could “say in a word” (verse 7) and his servant would be healed. He understood Jesus had the authority to heal up close or at a distance.

Note: Faith knows Jesus is in control.

The Approval of Faith (Luke 7:9-10)

Verse 9

“When Jesus heard these things, he marvelled at him, and turned him about, and said unto the people that followed him, I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel.”

This verse presents an interesting twist of terms. Usually it is men who “marvel” at Jesus. Here, Jesus “marvelled” at the centurion. The words “he marvelled at him” are as miraculous as the healing of the servant. Jesus said, “I have been up and down this land from Dan to Beersheba, and I have not found this kind of faith in Israel.”

Jesus approved the centurion with these words. His friends said he was “worthy” (verse 6). The centurion said he was not “worthy” (verse 6). But when Jesus speaks, His is the only word that matters!

Verse 10

“And they that were sent, returning to the house, found the servant whole that had been sick.”

Jesus rewarded the centurion's humble faith with a miracle of healing for his servant. By the time the centurion's friends returned "to the house," the servant who was "sick" was now "whole." "Whole" means "having sound health." He was completely healed and all because of simple genuine faith.

Conclusion

There is a message for all of us in today's lesson. Like most of us, this Gentile centurion was outside the covenant promises of God to the Jewish people. He realized how unworthy he was to be a recipient of God's compassionate grace and healing mercy.

The centurion, like most of us, never saw Jesus. At a distance he made his appeal by faith. At a distance the Lord responded. He can still do the same for you. Jesus said, "*Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed*" (John 20:29).

Amen.