

Jesus the Merciful
May 15, 2001
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There's an interesting point of conflict in the movie *Gladiator* (that's what makes good movies... conflict). The new emperor in Rome, Commodus (PIC), is on this self-serving quest to establish himself and his legacy. And ever since his nemesis, the good guy in the movie named Maximus, gets called merciful by the people of Rome, he wants to be called merciful, too. Commodus the merciful; he's obsessed with that title. But he's not. He wants the title, but doesn't work for that legacy. How will I be known and remembered?

The scripture writers are on a quest to make Jesus known, too. They have this quest of making Jesus known. That's the only way we will trust in and believe in Jesus. Unless we believe Jesus is good, powerful, gracious and trustworthy, we won't trust in him; we can't trust in him. We can't give our life to someone we don't know to be good. The section we are beginning this morning starting in Luke 7 has this focus - making Jesus better known. But instead of telling us what Jesus is like, Luke shows us what Jesus is like. He strings a series of incidents and occasions together to give us an answer our questions. Is Jesus good? Is he good to everybody? How about him and her? And ultimately, will Jesus be good to me?

Another thing we see Luke doing in chapter 7 is revisiting the divine purpose of Jesus and showing us that Jesus indeed fulfills the promise of God. I say *revisit* because when you read Luke 7 and the stories included it almost feels like we've covered this ground before. Didn't Jesus already heal a bunch of people? And didn't he show kindness to the outcasts of society? And weren't we already told that Jesus is the fulfillment of the OT prophecies? It almost feels redundant. And it is; Luke covers the same ground and very similar themes in chapter 7 as he has already touched on previously. There will be new twists and insights, but it's not like there's brand new information in chapter 7. And there's something very informative about that.

We are so tempted to think that we know Jesus. We've read the stories, we've heard the sermons. I mean, how many times can you sit through sermons on Christmas Eve about the birth of Jesus and sermons on Good Friday and Easter and hear about the death and resurrection of Jesus and not think, "Yeah, yeah, I've heard this already?" Yes, Jesus feeds 5000; I've got it. Let's move on to the meat of the word, Pastor!

We never *know* Jesus as well as we need to know him. We're going to be disappointed if we turn to the scriptures always looking for new information; if that were the case, we'd read the Bible one time and never pick it up again. The point of reading is always to see more of Jesus. See, this is who Jesus is! This is what he's like! This is why you can trust him! This is why you should follow him! Friends, we can never get enough of that. We need to know Jesus more and more so that the more he probes the deep and secret thoughts of our souls through the trials he brings in our lives we will trust him and believe in him the entire time.

But you're not cramming for a test; do you know what I mean? It's not about gathering more *facts* about Jesus. It's not a contest who can know the most. The pursuit of knowledge is a pursuit of communion; we want to know more to have a deeper relationship. Korby and I don't keep dating to learn more facts about each other. We date and spend time together to increase and deepen our relationship. Because as we keep dating and relating, what we keep seeing helps us keeping loving and trusting each other; the very thing that's needed for our relationship to grow. When I've been a bad husband and have neglected dating my wife, a relational disconnect grows and with it a slow decaying of the bond we have as husband and wife. That's the knowledge you are pursuing with Jesus; deeper communion, stronger trust, greater conviction of his love, his power and his grace. And the way you see more of Jesus is by probing the scriptures more and more, his very words given to us so we can't grow in him.

So, let's read the first story in the chapter and let's look at the text with eyes to see more revelation of Jesus so are more greatly convinced we can give our lives to him (READ Luke 7:1-10)

(PIC) Jesus moves from the countryside of Galilee to Capernaum, the major metropolis of the region. Capernaum was an international city with wide ethnic and cultural diversity. And we are introduced to this diversity with the presentation of a centurion in this story. A centurion was a military leader of the Roman army. He led a battalion of 100 soldiers and most likely was a trusted man by the Roman government. We also learn from the text that he was a respected man among the Jews. In vs. 5-6 we're told that the Jewish leaders commend the centurion man to Jesus because he actually built the local synagogue, which was a place of Jewish teaching and worship. By all accounts (even by Jesus, as we'll talk more about in a minute), this centurion was a well-regarded man.

But he also had a problem. Vs. 2 tell us the problem, "Now a centurion had a servant who was sick and at the point of death, who was highly valued by him." Remember, Jesus' fame is spreading; we were told in chapter 6 that people were traveling from Judea, Tyre and Sidon to get to Jesus; these were multi-day hikes. So when the centurion learns that Jesus is in Capernaum and his valued servant is sick, he starts figuring out a way to get Jesus' help.

But how does the centurion pursue Jesus? Vs. 3 says, "When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant." Rather than going to get Jesus himself, he sends a delegation. But he doesn't send a delegation of his friends (at least, not yet) and he doesn't send a cohort of his soldiers. He sends Jewish leaders. Now, we know they have a good relationship, right? The Jews said, "He's a good man! He's built our synagogue." Clearly, the Jews want Jesus to grant this favor because the centurion has done them a favor.

But why didn't the centurion go himself? Why did he send a Jewish delegation? Remember, Jesus is Jewish. There were strict rules that regulated the kind of interaction Jews

could have with gentiles. That's who this centurion was; he was a gentile. The word *gentile* means non-Jewish. This centurion wasn't a cultural, ethnic or religious fit to Jesus.

And we learn later in the story what the centurion thought of himself in relation to Jesus. Somehow the centurion learned that Jesus was on his way. Did he want that? Did he expect that? Look at vs. 6-7a (READ). The words of the centurion are telling, "Jesus, the reason I didn't come to you was because I was unworthy. So don't come into my home; I'm unworthy to have you here." That's strange. Didn't the Jews say he was worthy? Look at vs. 4-5 (READ). Well, who's right? Is he worthy or not worthy? The centurion doesn't think so; the Jews do. Why do the Jews think he's worthy? Because he performed well, right? "Jesus, this man has done some really great things for us. He's worthy of your help." Well, what if the centurion didn't do these really great things. What if the centurion said, "You build your own synagogue; I'm not going to stand in your way, but I'm not going to do it for you." Is he still worthy? And what if he said, "You can't build a synagogue here; I won't let you." Is he now unworthy?

We kind of think this way, don't we? I'm worthy, someone else is worthy, when they do a really good thing. When we obey the rules, when we do the right thing. When we perform the way that we think we're supposed to perform, then we are worthy. And if we don't, we're not worthy. So, a person is worthy by how well they perform, by how good they are? And, of course, when we buy into the performance mentality, there's a lot more questions. Well, how well must we perform to be worthy? And how often? And what happens if I don't perform so well, can I make that up with even more performance? And how do I know if I've performed well enough and who decides that?

Friends, I'll be honest: I get exhausted just thinking about those questions. Getting on the hamster wheel trying to perform for God is not the rest God promises every weary heart. God has a better answer and it's found in this story.

It's obvious from this story that Jesus accepts this man; he doesn't reject his request, but answers it. I think we can say that rather confidently by observing two facts. First of all, Jesus indeed comes and heals the man's servant. Jesus didn't say, "A centurion! I'm not helping a centurion no matter what he's done; he's not one of us!" The second reason we know Jesus views the centurion in a positive light is that he commends the faith this man has in Jesus. What faith was that? What did the centurion believe and trust about Jesus? The answer is rather clear; it was the authority of Jesus. The centurion says, "Jesus, don't bother coming to my house; I'm unworthy. Say the word, Jesus, and the man will be healed. I know authority when I see it. I'm a man under authority; I have men under my authority. You, Jesus, have all authority. Just say the word and my servant will be healed."

I believe Jesus still has this authority, my brothers and sisters. That doesn't mean that we can name it and claim it by the authority of Jesus; that's presumptuous. You won't find that kind of talk in the Bible. But what you do see is that Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth. In Matthew 28, Jesus says, "All authority has been given to me." In Eph. 1:21-22 we are

told that Jesus is “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church.” Everything answers to Jesus. Nations answer to Jesus. The weather answers to Jesus. The ground and the plants answer to Jesus. Sickness and disease answer to Jesus and do what Jesus says. And you and I, every person who has ever lived or will ever live, answers to Jesus. He is in complete authority. And the centurion knew that. I don’t know how he knew, but he did. Believe it, my brothers and sisters.

What’s really cool about this passage is how Jesus turns everything around. At the beginning of the story, the Jews are the ones who are in. They are the accepted ones; they are the ones who can get close to Jesus. And the centurion, this foreign gentile, is the outcast. He’s the one who is unworthy; he’s the one who can’t approach Jesus. And with one sentence, Jesus turns everything upside down. Look at vs. 9 (READ). Look what Jesus is saying, “Hey Israel, here’s your example of faith. Here’s what you should be doing and what you should be looking like. Be like this gentile and you will find healing, too.”

Friends, that is a radical statement. The thought, the idea that a gentile could teach the Jews about God and faith was unthinkable. They were children of Abraham! They knew the law! They observed the commandments! How in the world could Jesus say that the faith of this Roman centurion exceeds the faith of those in Israel? Easy. This man knew he Jesus was and believed in him from a position of humility. The Jews rejected Jesus in pride.

Friends, who are you this morning? Who are you more like? Are you like the centurion or are you like the Jews? If you’re like the centurion, you might be wondering, “Will God accept me? Would God help me?” If you’re like the centurion you might not think that’s possible. That’s what the centurion thought. So he sent Jews because he couldn’t see how Jesus would accept him; he wasn’t the right fit. But Jesus would; Jesus would accept him. He would bless him and serve him in his need. And friends, Jesus will do that for you. That’s what Jesus is like. He doesn’t respect people and help people for any other reason than humility. The centurion was a humble man who said, “I’m unworthy.” The centurion didn’t pull up his pants and say, “You see that synagogue there? I built that... for the Jews. If anyone deserves (there’s that word again) the help of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, it’s me!” No, he didn’t deserve it. And as soon as he humbled himself he got the help he needed. You can find that help, too. Just practice the faith and humility of this man.

Or are you more like the Jews? What are the Jews like? They are presumptuous. They think they are already in. They think they are already good with God. But not because of grace. I can confidently say that I know I am good with God. But I don’t believe that presumptuously; do you know what I mean by that? I don’t believe that because I’m a pastor. I don’t believe that because I grew up in a church and got baptized. I don’t believe that because I try and read my bible or because I try not to cuss. None of those things gets me good with God. God gets me good with God. Jesus dying on the cross for my sins gets me good with God. I’ll never be good

with God because of my family or because of my job. I'm only good with God because of grace; because God gives me a gift. But that's not what the Jews thought. Perform. Be better than the next guy. Keep the rules and you're good. No, you're not good. Follow the example of humble faith and you'll find yourself good with God.

This is what Jesus is like, FBC. He's good to people who think God could never be good to them. If that's where you're at this morning, I'm so glad you've heard the good news. Nothing stops Jesus from helping those who are humbling looking for help. Your family background won't stop Jesus. The ugliness of your sins won't stop Jesus. Your past mistakes won't stop Jesus. Your addictions won't stop Jesus. Your scars. Nothing. The only thing that will stop Jesus is your own pride. Your presumption. Your unwillingness to turn to Jesus. Your failure to call out to Jesus for help. Thinking you know best and ignoring Jesus' words. That stops Jesus. Be humble and ready; he's good a God.

Key verse: Luke 7:9 ~ When Jesus heard these things, he marveled at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."

Questions for the week

- Are you ever tempted to think you know what you need to *know* about Jesus? Where does this temptation come from?
- How might you live your life differently if you truly believe Jesus has all authority in heaven and earth?
- Are you tempted to think more like the centurion or like the Jews? What's the remedy of going in this wrong direction?