

October 20 Lesson 8 (NIV)

HUMBLE FAITH

DEVOTIONAL READING: James 5:13–18

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Luke 7:1–10

LUKE 7:1–10

¹ When Jesus had finished saying all this to the people who were listening, 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.

KEY VERSE

I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed.—Luke 7:7

RESPONDING TO GOD'S GRACE

Unit 2: Responses to God's Faithfulness

LESSONS 6–9

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List elements of surprise in the healing of the centurion's servant.

2. Explain how humility strengthens faith.
3. Demonstrate humble faith in a way that may surprise others.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. A Twist Ending
- B. Lesson Context
- I. Request (LUKE 7:1–5)
 - A. Jesus' Arrival (v. 1)
 - B. The Centurion's Need (v. 2)
 - C. Jewish Emissaries (vv. 3–5)
- II. Protest (LUKE 7:6–8)
 - A. On Worthiness (vv. 6, 7)
Man of the Century
 - B. On Authority (v. 8)
- III. Impressed (LUKE 7:9, 10)
 - A. Great Faith (v. 9)
Marvelous Models
 - B. Good Health (v. 10)

Conclusion

- A. Simply Marvelous
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Capernaum Kuh-*per-nay-um*.

centurionsen-*ture-ee-un*.

Galilee Gal-*uh-lee*.

synagoguesin-*uh-gog*.

Introduction

A. A Twist Ending

Bob Newhart starred in two popular television series. In *The Bob Newhart Show* (1972–1978), he played a Chicago psychologist, Dr. Robert Hartley. In the later series, *Newhart* (1982–1990), he played Dick Loudon, a New York author who moves to the country to operate an inn.

The second series is memorable for its twist ending. In the finale, viewers are shown what looks like Dr. Hartley's Chicago bedroom. Bob Newhart sits up in bed and says, "Honey, wake up! You won't believe the dream I just had!" Suddenly, we learn that the entire eight-year series has been nothing more than Dr. Hartley's dream.

Twists in television are great entertainment. Similar surprises in real life can be much less delightful. Sometimes we set ourselves up for unpleasant surprises with preconceived ideas about other people. When a stereotype gets debunked, we feel ashamed because of our newly revealed prejudice. We learn that this person is a unique and complicated human being—just like ourselves.

Stereotypes abounded in first-century Israel. Jews had their stereotypes of the Romans, and Romans had their stereotypes of the Jews. But occasionally, someone broke out of the mold. Broken stereotypes change the whole story, just like a twist in a television show.

B. Lesson Context

Matthew 8:5–13 contains another record of the healing of the centurion’s servant found in Luke. The context for the parallel accounts in Matthew and Luke is nearly identical; in Luke it comes directly after Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17–49), and in Matthew it is shortly after the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7).

The text of the sermon in Luke is shorter than in Matthew, but the two share a great deal of material (compare Matthew 5:3–12 with Luke 6:20–23; Matthew 5:38–42 with Luke 6:29, 30; Matthew 5:43–48 with Luke 6:27, 28, 32–36; etc.). For this reason, scholars tend to treat the sermons as two accounts of the same event. The seeming contradiction between the setting for the sermon on a “mountainside” (Matthew 5:1; 8:1) and a “level place,” or plain (Luke 6:17) is easily resolved: Jesus found a wide, flat place on the mountainside from which to deliver his sermon.

This sermon helps us place this healing within a time line of Jesus’ ministry. Assuming that Jesus’ crucifixion occurred in AD 30, scholars work back to place the Sermon on the Plain in the fall of AD 28 during Jesus’ ministry in Galilee. Though this was early in his ministry, Jesus’ reputation was already solidifying as both a teacher and a miracle worker (Luke 4:36, 37, 42–44; 5:15).

The placement of the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law poses a momentary chronological difficulty. In Matthew, her healing comes immediately after the healing of the centurion’s servant (Matthew 8:14, 15), but Luke places her healing prior to Jesus’ sermon and, consequently, also the healing of the servant (Luke 4:38, 39). It appears that Matthew made the rhetorical decision to place the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law, as well as other miracles in Capernaum, after the centurion’s story as a topical connection with Capernaum. The event likely happened before the sermon, as in Luke.

A similar account regarding the long-distance healing of a nobleman’s son in Capernaum is unrelated to this story, though it may contribute to general knowledge about Jesus that was circulating in Capernaum prior to the centurion’s request (see John 4:46–54). Such a healing in a reputable family would not have gone unnoticed by a centurion posted in the city. Taken with other events recorded in the first three Gospels, the groundwork for faith had certainly been laid in Capernaum (Mark 1:23–34; Luke 4:33–35).

I. Request **(LUKE 7:1–5)**

A. Jesus’ Arrival (v. 1)

1. When Jesus had finished saying all this to the people who were listening, he entered Capernaum.

Jesus' Sermon on the Plain comprises the sayings that he *finished* just before going to *Capernaum* (see Lesson Context). The location for the sermon was probably somewhere near the city. To say Jesus *entered* Capernaum rather than "traveled to" or similar suggests he was just outside of town.

Capernaum has become Jesus' residence and the headquarters for his ministry (Matthew 4:13; Mark 2:1). The precise location of the ancient city is unknown. From Matthew's description, scholars conclude that it would have been situated on the northwest coast of the Sea of Galilee.

B. The Centurion's Need (v. 2)

2. There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die.

We are not told the *centurion's* name or regiment (contrast Acts 10:1). His title reveals him to be the leader of a group of Roman soldiers. The term implies that the group numbers 100, though it may in fact be somewhat less than that.

Still, he is a person of status and rank. He has charge of both servants and soldiers to do his bidding. Other centurions mentioned in the Gospels and Acts point to the potential for righteousness and faith in Gentiles, an important theme in the New Testament (see Matthew 27:54; Mark 15:39; Luke 23:47; Acts 10; compare Acts 11; Romans 9:30, 31; Galatians 3:8, 14; etc.).

Romans can legally treat a *servant* as nothing more than a tool. Many servants suffer gravely because of this legislation. However, a servant of great merit can be treated quite well. Though the centurion might also feel some affection for the servant, the primary bond between them exists because of the servant's good work. Given that the servant is *valued highly* (elsewhere translated "precious"; see 1 Peter 2:4, 6), the servant probably has a specific set of skills that the centurion greatly appreciates.

Luke uses a general term for servant in this account, but Matthew uses a different word that can be translated "child." Children are not cherished in Jesus' day as they are today (see Matthew 19:13–15). Though the centurion can certainly care for a young servant, more likely the value of the servant points to his being an adult.

Luke's account mentions the severity of the illness but not a specific diagnosis. Matthew's account notes that the servant is paralyzed in some way (Matthew 8:6). This same ailment afflicted the man who was carried by his four friends to Jesus (Matthew 9:2; see also 4:24; John 5:3; Acts 8:7). Outside of divine intervention, paralysis is untreatable and incurable in the centurion's time.

C. Jewish Emissaries (vv. 3–5)

3. The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant.

The statement that *the centurion heard of Jesus* likely means when the centurion hears that Jesus has returned to Capernaum, not when he first heard of Jesus at all (see commentary on Luke 7:1). The centurion seizes the opportunity to find relief for *his servant*.

Some elders refers to the leaders of the Jewish community in Capernaum. Israel has depended on elders for leadership since the time of Moses (Exodus 3:16; Ruth 4:1–12; 1 Samuel 30:26; 2 Kings 10:5; Ezra 10:16; etc.). In spite of the centurion's role as a leader among the occupational force dominating Judea and given the animosity common between *Jews* and Gentiles in Judea, these elders are on friendly terms with the Roman centurion.

4a. When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him,

Here is another surprise in the story: the elders come *to Jesus* and seek his help. This is the first mention of “elders” in Luke, but elders will later be listed among those who oppose Jesus, even seeking his death (see Luke 9:22; 20:1, 2; 22:52, 66–71). Jesus has already been criticized by other Jewish leaders, including scribes and Pharisees (see 5:21, 30). In contrast, these elders appear to have great respect for Jesus.

As though that were not surprising enough, the elders approach Jesus on behalf of a Gentile. The term translated *earnestly* is elsewhere translated “[search] hard” and “do everything you can” (see 2 Timothy 1:17; Titus 3:13). Contrary to the duplicitous behavior of the Jewish leaders who later seek to trick or trap Jesus (Luke 10:25), these elders are sincere in their request. From beginning to end, the elders’ actions seem out of character with that of most other Jewish leaders.

4b. “This man deserves to have you do this,

The elders’ earnest plea shows their high regard for the centurion. In their opinion, the centurion’s acts mean he *deserves* not only to ask Jesus for healing but also to receive it (see next).

5a. “because he loves our nation

The centurion is not merely a successful diplomat who maintains a good relationship with the leaders of the subjugated nation. In yet another surprise, he genuinely *loves* the *nation*. Luke gives no insight into why the centurion loves Israel. His affection suggests that he is a God-fearing Gentile. A God-fearer comes from a pagan background but believes in the one true God. Often God-fearers are attracted to the high moral code evident in Jewish law. However, they live outside of Judaism because they do not choose to go through all the rituals that are necessary to be fully incorporated into the nation (contrast “God-fearing Greeks” in Acts 17:4, 17 with “convert[s] to Judaism” in Acts 6:5; 13:43).

5b. “and has built our synagogue.”

As a tangible expression of his love for the nation of Israel, this centurion has *built* a *synagogue*, presumably in Capernaum. This does not mean he personally erected the structure. Instead, he financed the project, paying for the construction out of his own resources.

II. Protest

(LUKE 7:6–8)

A. On Worthiness (vv. 6, 7)

6a. So Jesus went with them.

Apparently, Jesus gives some kind of affirmative answer to the elders and begins walking toward the centurion’s home.

6b. He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him:

The second delegation to meet Jesus is called *friends*, and no mention is made of their nationality or ethnicity. One might suppose these friends are also Jewish. If so, the fact that they are with *the centurion* at home emphasizes the very special and unusual bond he has with the Jewish community (contrast Acts 10).

6c. “Lord, don’t trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof.

The friends deliver the centurion’s message faithfully. The centurion refutes the elders’ witness about him, saying that he himself does *not deserve* to have Jesus visit him. The centurion may be sensitive to the Jewish law cited by Peter: that it is unlawful for Jews to enter Gentiles’ homes (Acts 10:28). If the centurion is sensitive to Jesus’ becoming unclean by entering his home, then

he may be unaware of Jesus' earlier actions of touching the unclean to effect healing (Luke 4:40; 5:12, 13).

7a. "That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you.

The centurion's surprisingly humble message continues. Not only is he unworthy for Jesus to come to him, he considers himself to be *not worthy to come to* Jesus. This statement suggests that the centurion was not primarily worried about imparting uncleanness to Jesus if he visits the centurion's home. Instead, the centurion recognizes Jesus' greatness and power and concludes that his own accolades are paltry by comparison. In his own opinion, he does not deserve an audience with Jesus.

This verse emphasizes different details between Matthew and Luke in retelling this story. In Matthew's account, there is no delegation of elders or friends; the centurion himself presents the request to Jesus (Matthew 8:5). When Jesus consents to come, the centurion expresses in person his faith that Jesus need not be physically present to heal the servant (8:7–9). The easiest and best reconciliation of this seeming contradiction is that Matthew simply condenses the account. Having the centurion act and speak for himself cuts out the middlemen and takes the story from beginning to end quickly.

The different emphases of these accounts may also help explain the difference between them. The theme of whether or not the centurion is worthy to host Jesus or even meet him is not entirely absent from the shorter account (Matthew 8:8). Matthew emphasizes instead the centurion's status as an outsider of great faith (8:10–12). Luke highlights the humility of the centurion's faith by revealing that the centurion's friends and the elders speak on his behalf.

7b. "But say the word, and my servant will be healed.

Even more surprising than the centurion's humility is the faith that is coupled with it. He believes in Jesus' power to heal by a *word*. Perhaps he has heard of the nobleman's son (John 4:46–54; see Lesson Context). If so, he does not mention it. But just as he knows he needs only to speak a command for his soldiers or servants to obey, so the centurion has confidence that Jesus needs only to speak for his will to be accomplished.

B. On Authority (v. 8)

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."

The centurion knows about *authority* from personal experience. He accomplishes his will not by personally attending to every detail but by giving orders. Rather, he commands *soldiers* and servants alike, and they do his bidding. He does not question his own authority over the soldiers; in the same way, he assumes Jesus' authority over the servant's sickness.

Most of Jesus' healings take place with the sick or possessed person before him (just one chapter in Mark contains many examples; see Mark 1:25, 26, 30–34, 40–42). The centurion remains confident that Jesus can give the word to effect his servant's healing. The centurion has grasped something that many in Israel never will: Jesus has the authority and the power to heal whomever he chooses as he ushers in God's kingdom on earth (see Luke 4:18–21).

III. Impressed

(LUKE 7:9, 10)

A. Great Faith (v. 9)

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.”

Strictly speaking, to be *amazed* at someone or something does not require expressing surprise but only recognizing that person or thing as being worthy of admiration: “amazing.” We too may marvel at the centurion’s *great faith*. It is a thing of wonder, even though it does not surprise us after many readings.

Jesus frequently draws a crowd wherever he goes. Now he simply turns to the elders and *the crowd following him*. Jesus points out the irony of the Gentile’s faith in the face of Jewish unbelief (compare Acts 13:46, 47). This dovetails with rejection Jesus has already faced (Luke 5:21, 30; 6:7, 11) and is yet to face in the months ahead (7:30; 9:22; 11:53, 54; 15:2; 16:14; 22:52).

These elders, for their part, act unlike most other elders in response to Jesus’ ministry. So Jesus may commend the elders for their faith as well. Approaching Jesus shows that they too believe that he can heal the servant. This serves to highlight as well the centurion’s faith that Jesus need not even be present in order to heal the servant.

B. Good Health (v. 10)

10. Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

No mention is made in Luke’s Gospel of Jesus’ dismissing the group or of assuring them that their mission has been successful. In Matthew’s account there is such a word: “Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would” (Matthew 8:13). Jesus accomplishes precisely what the centurion anticipates: he makes *the servant well*. Does Jesus even have to speak in order to heal the servant? The centurion would not be surprised to hear that Jesus never spoke a word after commending his faith.

Conclusion

A. Simply Marvelous

Faith can be found in surprising places. When my oldest son was critically injured in an automobile accident, he was flown by helicopter to a university hospital. I had taken classes at that university several years before and had my faith questioned. I chalked it up to the way things are in secular universities. With my son in the hospital associated with that university, I assumed his caregivers would be secular in their approach. But I marveled at the doctor when I overheard him say something to the effect of, “I simply could not do this job without faith.”

As a leader of the occupational force in Judea, the centurion faced hatred and resentment from the Jewish people who didn’t know him. The easy and typical response would be to return the sentiment. But this centurion loved the Jewish nation. He trusted Jesus before and better than many in Israel ever would. His life experiences made him humble in the face of the true authority he recognized in Jesus. For this reason, his faith was simply marvelous.

B. Prayer

O God, make us humble in our faith. Help us to expect you to work in our world even when we cannot see you. Give us confidence that you make all things whole. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Humility sets the stage
for great faith.¹

¹ Underwood, J., Boatman, C. R., Taylor, M. A., & Thatcher, T. (2019). [Humble Faith](#). In R. L. Nickelson, J. A. Kenney, M. K. Williams, & J. Gerke (Eds.), *The NIV Standard Lesson Commentary, 2019–2020* (Vol. 26, pp. 65–71). Colorado Springs, CO: Standard Publishing.