

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: April 21, 2013
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“HOPE, EVEN FOR US”

Luke 7:1-10

● **“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you”** (Luke 6:27-28).

● **“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful”** (Luke 6:36).

● **“Do not judge... Do not condemn... Forgive”** (Luke 6:37).

● **“Take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from the other person’s eye”** (Luke 6:41-42).

● **“Each tree is recognized by its own fruit.... Good people bring good things out of the good stored up in their heart, and evil people bring evil things out of the evil stored up in their heart”** (Luke 6:44-45).

● **“Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?”** (Luke 6:46).

Radical love for God and others is fundamental to Christian discipleship. How are we doing?

Sometimes, by the grace of God, I catch myself thinking and living like this. I come to Jesus, hear his words and put them into practice.

Sometimes I do not. My growth is slower and more erratic than it might be. Too often I take three steps forward and then fall two steps back.

I gather that I am not unique in this.

‽ *Is there any hope for us?* If it depended on our natural goodness and our self-generated faith and effort, then the answer would be “No!”

Thank God, it does not depend on us. There is hope!

■ Please turn to Luke 7:1-10.

“When Jesus [finishes] saying all this” (these startling teachings in chapter 6) **“to the people who [are] listening, he [enters] Capernaum. There a centurion’s servant, whom his master [values] highly, [is] sick and about to die.”**

This **centurion** is an officer in the Roman army that is desecrating the Holy Land. The unit he commands is stationed in Capernaum, on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. He is responsible to maintain the empire’s grip on the area by ensuring that taxes are collected and crushing Jewish opposition.

He wears the uniform of the occupation army. He implements imperial policy, with violent force if necessary. He is the face of Rome in Capernaum.

Such a man might realistically hope for professional advancement. He could be promoted to the higher rank of Chiliarch, or maybe even Hegemon (which is equivalent to a General). {Mt 20:26} Yet real greatness is found not in giving orders to underlings, but in serving others.

Such a man might realistically hope for enormous riches. He could extort huge sums of money from tax collectors and merchants, or wed a wealthy woman. {Mt 6:19} Yet earthly treasure is often

lost or stolen; even when it isn't, you cannot take it into life beyond the grave.

Such a man might realistically hope for elite standing. He could climb the social ladder by winning a notable military victory or marrying into a noble family or going into politics. Still, {Lk 9:25} **“What good is it...to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit your very self?”**

But can such a man hope for salvation, for abundant, eternal life, for reconciliation to Holy God?

Given his pagan heritage, his investment in the materialistic, power-hungry, status-obsessed Roman system, and his participation in the subjugation of Israel, we might suppose the answer to be “No!”

Thank God, we are wrong. There is hope for this centurion!

There is compelling evidence that the Living God is drawing near to him, and he is drawing near to the Living God.

■ The 1st clue is in verse 2: **“There”** (n Capernaum) **“a centurion’s servant, whom his master [values] highly, [is] sick and about to die.”**

📖 Many translations soften δούλος (doulos) into servant, but the word means “slave.” The law defines a δούλος as a living tool, and most Romans treat them as such. When the cost of keeping a slave exceeds the monetary value of their labor, the slave is thrown out to die of starvation or exposure.

Greco-Roman culture reduces slaves (and other human beings) to objects, and it calculates their value according to their economic and social productivity.

But this centurion does not {2 Co 5:16} **“regard [his slave] from [this] worldly point of view”**; he regards his slave as a human being. He highly values his slave even though he or she is **“sick and about to die”** and unable to work.

He has embraced this countercultural mindset because God is drawing near to him, and he is drawing near to God.

■ The 2nd clue is in verse 3: **“The centurion [has] heard of Jesus [and sends] some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant.”**

This centurion has **“heard of”** Jesus, and not in a casual way. He has been *listening*, and he perceives that Jesus is not just another teacher.

● The reference to hearing links him to Luke 6:27 where Jesus uses the same verb: **“to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies.”**

● And it connects him to Luke 6:47-48 where Jesus uses the same verb about **“those who hear [his] words and put them into practice.”**

{Ro 10:17} **“Faith comes from hearing,”** and so Jesus repeatedly challenges his audience {Lk 8:8}: **“Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”**

Jewish culture is saturated in Scripture, and all of Israel should have **“ears to hear.”** Still, most are deaf.

Yet this Gentile, who was raised apart from the Bible, hears. He hears because God is drawing near to him, and he is drawing near to God.

■ The 3rd clue is in verses 4-5: the elders **“[plead] earnestly... “This man deserves to have you do**

this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue.”

First century Jews despise Gentiles. Every day these elders bless God **“for not having made [them] Gentile”** – yet, they come and plead on behalf of *this* Roman!

First century Romans call the Jews {Barclay} **“a filthy race.”** **“They [accuse them] of worshipping an ass’s head and...sacrificing [gentiles] to their God”** – yet the centurion **“loves [Israel] and has built [a] synagogue”** in Capernaum!

The Romans tolerate minorities so long as they embrace the empire’s values and participate in civic life. Yet most Jews self-segregate, so they are viewed with suspicion and resentment.

But this centurion respects Israelites. He relates to them as through there is no {Eph 2:14} **“barrier, [no] dividing wall of hostility”** between Gentiles and Jews.

He loves Israel because God is drawing near to him, and he is drawing near to God.

■ The 4th clue is in verses 6-7a: **“Jesus [goes] with them. He [is] not far from the house when the centurion [sends] friends to say to him: ‘Lord, don’t trouble yourself... 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’”**

Good Romans seek to embody *Via Romana* (the Roman Way). It consists of cherished fifteen virtues which they believe are essential to Roman strength and success.

📖 The first virtue is *Auctoritas* (“Spiritual Authority”) pride in one’s standing gained through experience, hard work, and respect for the natural order.

Social humility has no place on the *Via Romana*. But this centurion says he is not worthy to meet a homeless Jewish rabbi from a tiny, backwater village. He relates to Jesus as one who knows that {Mt 23:12} **“those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted”!**

He humbles himself because God is drawing near to him, and he is drawing near to God.

■ The 5th clue is in verses 7b-8: **“Say the word, and my servant will be healed. 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.”**

We must not imagine that this first century man is gullible about miraculous healings. Sure, the uneducated masses generally accept all religions as equally true; however, the educated elite (of which the centurion is one) generally reject all religions as equally false; and the imperial bureaucracy (which he serves) generally endorses all religions as equally useful.

But this centurion recognizes Jesus as the unique agent of the unique God of Israel. Maybe he believes Jesus is the Messiah. Even if he is not quite there his faith is real – and faith {Eph 2:8} **“is not from [ourselves], it is the gift of God.”**

He believes because God is drawing near to him, and he is drawing near to God.

■ The 6th clue is in verse 9: **“When Jesus [hears] this, he [is] amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he [says], ‘I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.’”**

Not only is this comment stunning, it is all the proof we need that there is hope for this unlikely man – and I hope you have seen that this centurion is an exceedingly unlikely candidate for spiritual hope.

■ **“Then”** in verse 10 **“the men who [have] been sent [return] to the house and [find] the servant well.”**

However, the focus of this narrative is not on the servant, or even on the miracle by which he is healed. It is on the centurion.

If a man with a pagan heritage – who is invested in the materialistic, power-hungry, status-obsessed Roman system – who has participated in the subjugation of Israel – can hope for salvation and abundant, eternal life through reconciliation to God, how much more can we hope to draw near to God and become true disciples as God draws near to us?