

INTRODUCTION

In our last message from Parables and Miracles we met the leper that Jesus touched and healed. The title of that message was "The Power of Jesus' Touch." You may be thinking if Jesus was here and He could literally touch you, then your life would be different. Well, today we're going to talk about "The Power of Jesus' Word." I hope you'll learn that Jesus doesn't have to be physically present with you for a miracle to happen. We're going to meet a Roman centurion whose faith astonished Jesus. It's all about faith—trusting that Jesus can do what He says.

We live in a skeptical world, and there are a lot of offers we shouldn't accept. Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess who was walking through the forest surrounding her castle. As she sat down to admire the lovely forest, a large bullfrog hopped up to her and said, "Elegant Lady, I was once a handsome prince until an evil witch cast a spell on me. One kiss from you will break the spell. I'll turn back into a dapper young prince and I'll marry you and move into your castle. My mother can join us and you can cook my meals and wash my laundry, bear my children and you can enjoy my charms for many years." That same night as the princess sat down to a delicious dinner of lightly sautéed frog legs seasoned with butter and herbs she said to her meal, "Thanks but no thanks, but you're right about one thing—I am enjoying you."

There are some offers we shouldn't accept, but when Jesus offers us help, healing, hope and forgiveness you should accept His offer. But the only way you can receive the blessings of Jesus is by faith. In this message I'm going to show you how feeble faith can be transformed into great faith.

Let's read about this miracle in Matthew 8:5-13.

"When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. 'Lord,' he said, 'my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering.' Jesus said to him, 'I will go and heal him.' The centurion replied, 'Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself [the best translation is "I too"] 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.' When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, 'I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' Then Jesus said to the centurion, 'Go! It will be done just as you believed it would.' And his servant was healed at that very hour."

Have you ever noticed Jesus often talked to people the crowd rejected? He spoke to tax-collectors, prostitutes, lepers, and even little children His disciples tried to shoo away. And here Jesus speaks with a Gentile—and worse than that, a Roman soldier! The Jews hated Gentiles, and they *despised* the Romans. This Italian was not just a soldier; he was a commander of 100 other Roman soldiers who were occupying Israel. Most Jews avoided the Roman soldiers and spat on the ground when they passed. We're reminded here that Jesus receives any kind of

person who approaches Him. That should give us hope today that none of us are too sinful to be outside the love of Christ.

Jesus made an amazing observation about the centurion's faith. He was astonished. Jesus said and did a lot of things that astonished people, but this is the *only* time in the New Testament it says HE was astonished! He told His disciples He hadn't seen such great faith in all of Israel. That's quite a statement coming from the Son of God. If Jesus was commenting on my faith or your faith today, how would He describe it? Would He say you have great faith? If you'd like to have great faith, let's examine five characteristics of a person with great faith.

1. A PERSON OF GREAT FAITH IS CONCERNED ABOUT THE NEEDS OF OTHERS

The first thing the centurion said to Jesus was, "Lord, my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering." He didn't ask Jesus for something for himself, he was there for his suffering servant. In the parallel passage Luke points out the centurion was very wealthy. The word for servant really means "slave." The Jews couldn't own slaves, but the Romans in Israel used slaves as their servants. As a powerful, wealthy leader, it would have been easy for the centurion to find another slave to replace the sick one, but he cared enough about this person to seek Jesus' help. A mark of someone with great faith is they are constantly concerned for the needs of others. If Jesus stood before you today and said He would give you anything you asked, would you ask for something for yourself, or would you ask for Him to help someone else? Are you more concerned with your own needs or do you care more for the needs of others?

Frank was 70 years old and his wife, Alice, was also 70. They were celebrating his wife's seventieth birthday at a friend's house and Frank wandered into a display room with a lot of old artifacts. He picked up a strange looking lamp and, "poof" a female genie appeared. She said, "Because you have freed me from the lamp, I will grant you one wish." Frank thought about how Alice was getting old and cranky and how nice it would be to have a younger wife, so he said to the genie, "I want a wife 25 years younger than me." The female genie said, "Are you sure?" Frank said, "I'm sure." The genie blinked her eyes and suddenly Frank was 95 years old!

That reminds me of our prayers. Our prayers often become so selfish that they become what I call, Polly-wanna'-cracker-prayers. This miracle is a great parable about intercessory prayer. When we pray for others, we're doing the same thing the centurion did. We come before Jesus and ask Him to help others. If you want to strengthen your faith, try praying more for the needs of others instead of your own needs.

2. A PERSON OF GREAT FAITH APPROACHES GOD WITH HUMILITY

Jesus offered to accompany the centurion to his home, but the centurion said, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof." Luke also tells us the Jewish leaders asked Jesus to help the centurion, because he had given money to build the synagogue in Capernaum. In other words, this man was what we call a big shot. He was a VIP, and most VIPs demand special treatment. And Roman soldiers had the authority to compel Jews to do work for them. In Matthew 5:41 Jesus said, "If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles." He was talking about the right of any Roman soldier to demand a Jew to carry their equipment for a

mile. But rather than strutting up to Jesus and demanding a miracle, the centurion demonstrated humility. He called Jesus, "Lord." That was both a term of respect, like "sir" as well as profession of faith that the centurion believed Jesus was Divine.

By telling Jesus he didn't expect Him to enter his house; the centurion was also politely helping Jesus save face, which is very important in the Eastern and Middle Eastern culture. Jesus was under the constant scrutiny of the Jewish leaders. According to their oral tradition, Jesus would have violated the Jewish Kosher law and become "unclean" if he entered a Gentile's house. The Jewish leaders accepted the centurion's money, but they would have never have been caught dead entering his home.

The Bible says in James 4:6, "the Lord opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." If you strut into God's presence and demand He bless you, don't expect a positive answer to your prayer. Sometimes we pray something like this, "Lord, I'm a good person. I've been faithful to this church for years. I give my money to your church. I *deserve* this healing. I *deserve* this blessing!" How different that is from the humble attitude of the centurion who said, "I don't deserve to have you come under my roof."

A group of tourists were visiting the house where Beethoven, the great composer, spent his last years. They came to the conservatory where his piano sat. The guide quietly said, "And here is the master's piano." A thoughtless woman pushed her way from the edge of the crowd, sat down at the bench and began to play one of Beethoven's sonatas. She paused and said to the guide, "I suppose a lot of people like me enjoy playing Beethoven's piano." The guide said, "Well, miss, the great Paderewski was here last summer and some in his group begged him to sit and play, but his answer was, 'No, I cannot, I am not worthy.'"

That was the attitude of the centurion. And it should be our attitude. "God, I am not worthy to receive anything good from you." I have never done anything to deserve or to earn God's grace and forgiveness. Every good thing we receive from God is because of His love and grace, not our worthiness. Great faith is always married to true humility.

3. A PERSON OF GREAT FAITH DOESN'T NEED VISIBLE EVIDENCE—GOD'S WORD IS ENOUGH

The centurion didn't need to see any visible evidence of a miracle. He said, "Just say the word and my servant will be healed." The essence of great faith is to believe God without seeing any evidence. Unbelief says, "I'll believe it when I see it." Great faith says, "I believe it whether I see it or not."

Great faith isn't talking about the *quantity* of your faith, it's about the *quality* of your faith. We often pray for more faith, but Jesus said if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you can move mountains. Do you know the difference between a seed and a mountain? A seed has life in it and a mountain is dead rock. In the spiritual world, life always trumps death, not the other way around. At the corner of my street, a seed fell into the center of a stop sign pole. And now there's a tree growing inside the corrugated steel pole and the branches are poking out through the holes. Given time, if someone doesn't come along and kill that tree, do you know what will happen?

That plant will move and bend that steel pole. Why? Because the seed has life and the steel is dead. That's the same principle of a mustard seed of faith moving a mountain. If you have a mustard seed worth of living faith can move any mountain you're facing.

The centurion didn't just have faith that his servant would get better; he put his faith in Jesus. Faith is only as good as the object of your faith. Great faith is great because of the Great God who is the object of our faith.

I read about a pioneer preacher who traveled on his horse preaching in villages. One winter, he needed to cross the frozen Mississippi River and he was nowhere near a bridge. Not knowing the thickness of the ice, he tied up his horse and began to slowly walk out on the ice. As he got further from shore, he began to doubt the strength of the ice to hold him. Soon he completely lost his nerve and decided to turn back. He feared the ice was too thin so he began crawling on his hands and knees back toward shore. Suddenly he heard a loud noise and, thinking the ice was cracking under him, he prayed to God for deliverance. But then he looked up at the source of the noise and saw it was a local lumberjack leading a team of horses dragging a load of heavy logs across the ice. When he saw that, the preacher jumped up and claimed his horse and crossed the ice without fear. The river hadn't changed, and the thickness of the ice hadn't changed. The only thing that changed was the faith of the preacher.

Do you have the kind of feeble faith in God's promises that makes you crawl on thin ice, or do you have the kind of faith that God's Word is as solid as the ground beneath your feet?

4. A PERSON OF GREAT FAITH UNDERSTANDS SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY

The centurion made an important statement you might miss unless you pay close attention. He said, "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 didn't brag first that he was a man *in* authority. He said he was a man *under* authority. Some people are so enamored by their rank or their position that they like to flaunt it.

A newly commissioned Lieutenant was sitting behind his desk on the first day of his new assignment. He heard a knock at the door, and he wanted to impress whoever it was. He quickly picked up the phone and said, "Come in." As the private entered, the Lieutenant said, "Yessir Colonel, I'm glad to be here, I appreciate you calling to welcome me. General Rogers just called me a few minutes ago to welcome me, too. Yes sir, I look forward to working with you. Good day, Colonel." The officer slammed the phone down and said to the private, "Yes, what do you want? Can't you see I'm a busy man?" The private said, "Yes sir I can tell. I'm here to hook up your phone."

The centurion didn't pull rank. He understood that spiritual authority is much like the military chain of command. The centurion didn't say what I expected him to say. After he said, "I'm a man under authority" why didn't he say, "And when Caesar or my commander tells me to do something, I do it." Instead after he talked about being under authority, he mentioned he has authority over his soldiers and servants. He was saying, "I live under authority, therefore I have

authority.” That might not be too astonishing to you, but what was it about his profession of faith that astonished Jesus? In the NIV he says, “I myself am a man under authority. But the best translation is, “I TOO am a man under authority.” That little three-lettered word, “too” caught Jesus’ attention—and caused Him to be astonished.

What the centurion really said was, “Lord, I’m a man under authority like you, and I’m a man in authority like you. I don’t have to run my own errands. I just command one of my soldiers to do it.” And I know you have the authority over sickness and suffering. All you have to do is give the order and the sickness will say, ‘Yes sir, I’m leaving now, sir.’” Now that’s great faith.

You may be wondering under whose authority did Jesus live. When Jesus came to planet earth He placed himself under the authority of his Father in heaven. He said he came to do his Father’s work, and that he did only what he saw his Father doing. Because he was under God’s authority, he possessed God’s authority. In the same way the Roman centurion was under the authority of the emperor, he had the emperor’s authority over his soldiers.

What’s the application for us? In the Great Commission, Jesus said all authority in heaven and in earth had been given Him. In Luke 10:19 He says He is giving *us* authority to overcome all the power of the enemy. The only way we can exercise spiritual authority is if we fully submit to the authority of Jesus Christ as our Lord. Whatever He tells us to do we must salute and say, “Yes sir!” Obedience to the command of a higher ranking officer always requires faith the officer knows what is best. Great faith always surrenders to Jesus as our commander and chief.

5. A PERSON OF GREAT FAITH RECEIVES GOD’S REWARD

When Jesus heard the request of the centurion He said, “I tell you the truth. I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith ... Go! It will be done just as you believed it would.” And the Bible tells us the servant was healed at that very hour. God rewarded the Centurion’s faith.

Meanwhile Jesus made a cryptic remark about how people from the East and the West (that’s us) would gather around a heavenly feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Jews didn’t like that because they thought they had a monopoly on God and heaven. Then Jesus said subjects of the kingdom would be cast into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. That’s a description of hell. He was contrasting the kingdom of this world with the kingdom of God. He said this in the presence of the Gentile Roman Centurion to reinforce that salvation has nothing to do with race, it’s all about grace. And the greatest reward of faith in God is the ultimate reward of heaven.

Until we get to heaven, we must exercise faith now to receive the blessings of God.

When you go to the store, you use money as an exchange for products. Faith is the only currency accepted by God. Charles Spurgeon said: “Bible promises are like checks drawn on heaven’s bank that we endorse by faith and present to God for payment.”

Faith is your greatest asset and unbelief is your greatest liability. God doesn’t accept logic, reason, good works, or American Express. Faith is not His preferred currency, it is the ONLY

currency accepted in heaven. Perhaps the most instructive verse in the Bible about faith is in Hebrews 11:6 "Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."

You don't have to understand everything about faith to employ it; you only have to know that without faith, you can never please God. It is faith that allows you to believe there is a God. It is faith that allows you believe God is good. In other words, He is not out to punish you or to play hide-and-seek with you. He wants to reward you when you seek Him.

Faith is simply our acceptance of the love and grace that God offers

It is not our faith that causes God to act. He has already initiated a love relationship with us. Faith simply allows us to receive the blessings He offers.

There was a movie a few years back called "Field of Dreams" in which Kevin Costner played a farmer who built a baseball field in his corn field. In one particular scene, Ray Kinsella is playing catch one afternoon with his "dad" who has come back as a younger ballplayer. The first time I watched that simple scene, I found myself crying. My dad had recently died and it reminded me of one of my fondest memories with him: Playing catch. I'll never forget the day we went to Sears and he had bought me a Nellie Fox baseball glove. We'd go in the back yard and my dad showed me how to catch and throw the baseball. Then he would toss the ball to me and I would put my glove out to snag it. We would keep count to see how many I could catch in a row. I still remember the joy in his heart when I caught my first ten in a row! At first the throws were slow grounders and easy pop flies thrown right to me. As I got older, the throws got harder and I would sometimes have to run forward or back to catch the fly balls. One day I was distracted by our dog and I didn't notice my dad had tossed the ball to me. When he yelled I looked up ... just in time to have the baseball hit me squarely on my forehead...Bam! I've always been pretty hardheaded. The ball bounced off my head for a ground rule double! The problem was I didn't hold the glove up to catch the ball. I learned a painful lesson that day. When my Father tosses a ball toward me, I ought to raise my glove and catch it. Later when I played real baseball I learned that when I got under a pop up I would shout, "I've got it! It's mine!" Even before I caught the ball, I claimed I already had it. What a great lesson about faith!

Our Father is in the business of tossing blessings to you. He tosses us grace, mercy, forgiveness, healing, peace and many more. Faith is simply our response to reach out and snag it. Then we toss it back to Him as love and obedience and He tosses us back some more grace, love, and forgiveness. Great faith is simply catching God's blessings even before they arrive. We should have the kind of faith that says, "I've got it! It's mine!"

CONCLUSION

If you went to a track meet at Steilacoom High School in Steilacoom, Washington a few years ago you would have seen an unusual sight. One of the members of the girls track team was Natalie McCarthy. As Natalie crouched at the starting line for the 100-yard dash, you would have noticed she looked like the other teenage girls except for one difference: She had an earpiece in one ear connected to a small radio in her fanny pack. Natalie is blind. Her father was

sitting in the stands with a transmitter and after the starter's gun sounded, Natalie flew out of the starting blocks running at full speed. As she ran, her father gave her slight course corrections to keep her on track. Natalie competed in the 100 and 200-meter dashes and the long jump for her high school track team. For the long jump, she would sprint down the track guided by her father and when she approached the line he would say, "Jump!" And she would launch herself out into the air based simply upon the voice of her father.

What a great illustration of faith! The Bible teaches us that life is like a race. We are moving toward a goal we cannot see with our physical eyes. But our Father speaks into our spiritual ears with His Word, the Bible, and He guides us through the obstacles of life toward our goal. The Bible says we walk by faith and not by sight. And sometimes we find ourselves at a place where He says, "Jump!" Our only response should be "How high?"

Have you ever heard of a leap of faith? Someone said faith is coming to the end of all we can see and hearing God say, "Jump!" Faith is obeying Him and believing there will either be something solid to land on, or that God will teach me to fly!

OUTLINE

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes