

Text: Matt. 8:5-13

Title: "A truly marvelous veteran"

Time: 11/10/2024 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: Since 1961 American pop culture has been familiar with a phenomenon known as Marvel Comics. It is today our country's largest comic book publisher. Marvel Comics was launched with the introduction of the Fantastic Four, a team that gained superhuman powers due to exposure to cosmic rays while on a mission in outer space.

The leader of the four, Mr. Fantastic, could stretch his body into incredible shapes and lengths; Invisible Woman could turn invisible and create force fields; Human Torch could emit flames at will and fly; and a guy called the Thing had stone-like flesh giving him superhuman strength and endurance. When the world creates marvelous characters for an enterprise called Marvel Comics, these are the kinds of characters it imagines.

*To marvel* at something is simply *to find it surprising*. This can be a positive thing, such as the marvel created by superheroes, or it can be something negative. Jesus caused people to marvel over and over again. Sometimes this was a positive experience for those who were marveling at Him, such as the time He spoke and the winds and the waves obeyed Him in Matt. 8:27. Sometimes this was a negative experience for those who were marveling at Him, such as the time Pilate marveled at Jesus' refusal to answer his accusations in Matt. 27:14: "the governor marveled greatly."

The New Testament describes the Lord Jesus as marveling at something only twice, and one of those times occurs in verse 10 of our passage. What we read about here was in

some important sense surprisingly impressive to Jesus. Our Lord, as the incarnate God-man, was both completely God and completely human, and He was completely human not only in terms of His human body but also in terms of His human spirit, which would include the emotions He experienced and His ability to learn new things.

What Christ finds truly marvelous in this passage is not a superhero with superhuman powers. It is rather a very human Roman centurion. Tomorrow is Veterans Day, and in this passage Jesus marvels at a military veteran.

I have titled our study this morning, "A truly marvelous veteran," and I want us to notice what Christ found marvelous about this soldier. Notice first that it was not what others liked about him.

I. Others believed this veteran to be a worthy man, but this is not what made Jesus marvel.

Application: We know that there are at least two groups that saw this veteran to be a worthy man.

1. The Roman army thought highly of this man (vv. 5-6).

The Roman centurion was the backbone of the powerful Roman army of New Testament times. The centurion was a commander of about 100 men, and there were typically sixty of these in a Roman legion. It was his job to drill these soldiers in preparation for battle, and to command them in the field. He was a man who understood the importance of obeying orders (v.9).

The New Testament refers to centurions on a number of occasions, and when it does so it always pictures these men in

a favorable light: (1) it was a centurion who stood before the cross of Christ and confessed, "Truly, this was the Son of God" (Matt. 27:54); (2) it was a centurion named Cornelius who was the first Gentile to become a member of a local church (Acts 10:1); (3) it was centurions who rescued Paul from the angry Jewish mob (Acts 21:32); (4) it was a centurion who notified his superiors of Paul's Roman citizenship rather than beating him unlawfully (Acts 22:25-26); (5) it was a centurion who aided the boy who knew of the plot to take the life of Paul (Acts 23:17); and it was a centurion who was responsible for the safe passage of Paul and other prisoners to Rome (Acts 27).

Clearly, the Roman army relied heavily on its centurions, and even more than this, the Scripture speaks of their military service as an honorable thing. The Bible never teaches pacifism; instead, it recognizes a nation's need for a strong national defense, and it honors those willing to serve their countrymen in that capacity. We should too.

B. The Jews thought highly of this man (Luke 7:1-5).

Luke provides some details about this episode that Matthew does not. This centurion was appreciated by the Jewish people because of his generosity. The ruins of the synagogue he built for them in Capernaum can still be viewed today and are quite impressive. The Lord Jesus never had to teach him what He taught others, that it is more blessed to give than to receive. Paul mentioned this teaching of Jesus asking the Ephesian pastors to be examples in this regard (Acts 20:35). This centurion was such an example.

Many others, Jew and Gentiles alike, may have believed that this centurion was a worthy man. He obviously cared for his servants, and they likely thought he was a worthy

man. He may have been a great husband and father, and so thought a worthy man by his family. Yet no such quality causes the Lord Jesus to marvel at him in this passage. Instead, Jesus focused on something that the Roman army and the Jewish members of the synagogue did not.

II. This veteran believed himself to be an unworthy man, and this is what made Jesus marvel (vv. 7-13).

Illustration: Aesop told a fable about two fighting roosters and an eagle: Two roosters were fighting to rule the farmyard. One became the victor and the other hid in a corner of the yard. The victor pranced around the yard, flapping his wings and crowing with all his might. Just then an eagle, sailing above, swooped down, caught up the crowing rooster and carried him off. The vanquished rooster immediately left his corner and humbly ruled the yard from then on.

Application: We are all roosters. There are no eagles here. But by nature, we sinners are quite blind to our own unworthiness and quite taken with our worthiness. It is experiences like those suffered by the defeated rooster that help us to see our unworthiness and that then make us useful to the Lord. The centurion's experiences had taught him two things about his unworthiness.

A. The centurion's experiences taught him something about himself (vv. 7-8a).

Illustration: This centurion was not only a friend of the Jewish people, he also must have understood something of their customs and ways. He says that he is not worthy to have a Jewish rabbi under his roof. The Jewish rabbis of the apostate Judaism of this era taught that the homes of Gentiles were unclean places, and that to go into such a home was to defile yourself.

One Mishnah or instruction in *Oholoth* (18.7) spoke of regulations related to purchasing the home of a Gentile: “The dwelling-places of heathens are unclean. How long must [the heathen] have remained in [the dwelling-places] for them to require examination? 40 days, even if there was no woman with him. If, however, a slave or [an Israelite] woman watched over [the dwelling-place], it does not require examination.”

So if a Jew were to buy a dwelling owned by a Gentile for more than forty days, that dwelling would have to go through a special examination to remove uncleanness from it. This centurion lived around people like this. He did not call them crazy. In fact, he agrees with them. He said to Jesus Christ, whom he knew to be a Jewish rabbi, “I am unworthy to have you come into my house.”

Our nature is to always defend our worthiness. But when the Holy Spirit deals supernaturally with our hearts, we become convinced by the truth, “I am unworthy.”

I have had people tell me from time to time, somewhat jokingly, that if they stepped foot into our church building the walls would come crashing down. Well, when that sentiment is no longer a joke, but a real understanding of a hopelessly lost, sinful, and unworthy condition before holy God, it comes from the beginnings of saving faith. The centurion’s sense of unworthiness told him something about himself – that he was a sinner condemned before holy God.

2. The centurion’s experiences told him something about Jesus (vv. 8b-10, 13).

We can see the worthiness of Christ only when we first see our own unworthiness. The centurion understood his need to depend upon Christ by faith alone. He uses an important

word in verse 9 that goes untranslated there in our KJV, but not in Luke's account, which says: "For I also am a man set under authority" (Luke 7:8). In both Matthew and Luke, the word *also* appears in the Greek.

In other words, the centurion recognizes that Jesus has the ability and the authority to simply issue a command and make a miracle happen. He explains that he knows that a person with that kind of authority can do that kind of thing, because he also has some experience with issuing commands. He believes that Jesus has his servant's health and the disease that was afflicting him under His command.

Jesus' response to this simple faith was to call it marvelous, surprising, exceptional, that which secured not only the centurion's servant's recovery, but that which put this Roman veteran along side Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. The centurion's sense of unworthiness and faith in Christ's authority saved his soul.

Jesus speaks not only of the destiny of this centurion in this passage. He speaks also of the destiny of those who do not share the centurion's sense of unworthiness and saving faith. When Jesus mentions *the children of the kingdom* in this context, he is speaking about the natural descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This was Israel's earthly kingdom in contrast to the kingdom of heaven in verse 11.

Jews called themselves *sons of the kingdom*, but their claim was a false one because it was based on their own worthiness as the natural-born children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jesus says they shall be cast out into darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth because they had no faith. They had no faith because they thought that they were worthy.

*Gnashing of teeth* in Scripture always refers to a response of great hatred and rebellion. One of the horrors of hell is that its occupants are eternally angry at God and eternally rebelling against Him. They believe in their own worthiness forever. They never stop claiming that they deserve better.

To believe in your own worthiness is to fail to trust the worthiness of Christ for your salvation. Those who maintain their worthiness commit the sin of final unbelief. C. H. Spurgeon describes this sin in his sermon, "The Sin of Unbelief": "Let me remark that you will observe the heinous nature of unbelief in this – that it is the damning sin. There is one sin for which Christ never died; it is the sin against the Holy Ghost. There is one other sin for which Christ never made atonement. Mention every crime in the calendar of evil, and I will show you persons who have found forgiveness for it. But ask me whether the man who died in unbelief can be saved, and I reply there is no atonement for that man. There is an atonement made for the unbelief of a Christian, because it is temporary; but the final unbelief – the unbelief with which men die – never was atoned for. You may turn over this whole Book, and you will find that there is no atonement for the man who died in unbelief; there is no mercy for him. Had he been guilty of every other sin, if he had but believed, he would have been pardoned; but this is the damning exception – he had no faith."

Conclusion: I mentioned that there were two times that Jesus marveled during His earthly ministry. The other time Jesus marveled was at the unbelief of people (Mark 6:1-6).

The people described here did not recognize Jesus as God, nor did they trust Him as Savior. They were convinced that they were worthy enough to get along without faith in Him. Jesus marveled at their unbelief.

By way of contrast, Jesus not only marvels at the faith of this centurion, He heals his servant (v. 13). His servant was allowed to live a few more years before becoming sick again and finally dying.

More importantly, the centurion today still sits down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus found this veteran's faith, He marveled at it, and He saved him from his sins for it.

Does Jesus marvel at our unbelief or at our faith this morning? Do we maintain that we are worthy, or do we see our unworthiness? We are here with the word of God before us and the example of the centurion's humble faith to urge us to believe and to be saved from outer darkness, weeping, and gnashing of teeth. May Jesus never have to marvel that we have failed to believe on Him as our Lord and Savior.

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*