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Matthew 8:5 - 8:13



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this passage, Steve Gregg tells the story of a centurion who asks for Jesus' help in healing his sick servant. Despite being a Gentile, the centurion displays remarkable humility and faith in Jesus' ability to heal. Jesus is amazed by the centurion's faith and uses this as an opportunity to teach about the importance of faith in one's relationship with God, stating that Gentiles with faith will be accepted into the kingdom of God while those without faith, including some Jews, will be rejected. This story demonstrates the power of faith and the ability of even those seemingly "outside" the faith to access God's grace.

Transcript

Let's take up the story of the life of Christ again here in Matthew chapter 8. Matthew chapter 8, beginning at verse 5, we have this story. Now when Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him pleading with him, saying, Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, dreadfully tormented. And Jesus said to him, I will come and heal him.

The centurion answered and said, Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof, but only speak a word and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, go, and he goes, and to another come, and he comes.

And to my servant, do this, and he does it. Now when Jesus heard it, he marveled and said to those who followed, assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel. And I say to you, that many will come from the east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.

But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then Jesus said to the centurion, go your way, and you shall, as you have believed, so let it be done to you.

And his servant was healed that same hour. Now this story is significant. You know, there's there's a lot of stories of healing in the Gospels of Jesus healing people.

This one though, is a rare kind of healing story. In most cases, when Jesus was confronted with a sick person, he would lay hands on that person, or do some comparable thing in the presence of that person, and that person would then be healed. However, in this case, Jesus never set eyes on the sick person, nor did the sick person set eyes on him.

There are two other stories in the Gospels like this. In John chapter 4, we have a story of a nobleman whose child was sick, and Jesus healed his son this way. In the distance also, the man lived in a different city.

He came to where Jesus was, pleaded for the life of his son, and Jesus said, your son is healed, and the man went home, found his son was healed, a certain, you know, some distance away. Likewise, there's a story in a couple of the Gospels of the Syrophenician woman, a Gentile woman whose daughter was afflicted with demon possession, and Jesus, by a word, cured the daughter, though the daughter was not present. She was in another land, in another country.

So we can see that Jesus was able to heal people, and cast demons out of people, even when they were not present. Now, this is very significant, you know, because many people who are skeptics, who say, well, there are no such thing as miracles, really, yet many of them will not deny that Jesus did some kind of remarkable things, or else why would people have begun to think he was a miracle worker, and begin to claim he was God? There is a position that some people hold, that Jesus was a doer of remarkable things, but he certainly didn't do any real miracles, because such things don't really happen. Such people have to find some explanation of miracles that eliminates the miraculous element.

People like that sometimes try to argue that when Jesus appeared to be walking on water, he was actually walking on a coral reef, just below the surface of the water, which was invisible to those who saw him, but he was simply walking on solid ground that was at the water's surface, and he appeared to be walking on water. Now, of course, that's an interesting suggestion, although it seems strange that the fishermen, who were so amazed by this, who had fished in that same lake, all their lives would not have been aware of that coral reef there, and yet Jesus knew of it, and walked on it. Of course, we reject this story entirely, and there are many other attempts made to say that the miracles of Jesus are not really miracles.

They were tricks, and in the case of healing, it is often said that Jesus worked like many others can, by playing upon the mind, that many sicknesses and conditions are psychosomatic, and by simply doing some kind of a rigmarole that will convince the person that they are healed, you can actually cause them to improve, because the sickness was mostly in their mind in the first place, and by doing something that that changes their mind, you actually end up changing their physical condition, too. And so,

some have suggested that Jesus worked cures, but he did so by psychosomatic means, that is, the mind over the body. Now, you know, even if some of the cures that Jesus did could be explained in this way, it could hardly be that this kind of story could be explained that way, because the sick person, obviously, the person who, under that theory, would have to have his mind changed on the subject, was not even present to know that Jesus was doing anything on his behalf.

This was done by sheer power from God. It was nothing short of an unmistakable miracle. Now, the man who came to Jesus with this request was not a Jew.

He was a centurion, which means he was a Roman official. He was an officer in the Roman army, and he, as a centurion, as the name implies, he had a hundred soldiers below him. He was a man of some rank, but not of the highest rank in the Roman army.

There were ranks higher and ranks lower than that of the centurion. He stood somewhere in the chain of command, you know, neither at the top nor at the bottom in the army. But the Jews generally did not appreciate the Romans at all, and especially not the Roman armed forces, because the Jews had been conquered.

Their land of Israel had been conquered 70 or more years earlier, actually at this time about a hundred years earlier, by the Roman army, and the Romans who were in their midst were an occupational army who were trying to keep the Jews under Rome's thumb. The Jews were fiercely independent people and hated this, and generally hated the Jews, excuse me, hated the Romans, and the feelings were mutual. The Romans hated the Jews typically, and in many cases there were Jews who would actually attack Roman soldiers and so forth to try to drive them out.

Now, here's a case of a Roman officer coming to Jesus, a Jewish man, and Jesus being followed by all these Jewish people, and here's a man who is a leader in the occupational army oppressing the people of Jesus, and he's asking Jesus for a favor. He certainly must have recognized in Jesus a merciful fellow, a man of grace, to think that he would do a favor like this for a member of the opposition, as it were, a member of the oppressing army. But the man nonetheless came.

He was desperate. He had a servant who he clearly cared about. Now, a man in authority or a man of rank would not always care about his servants.

In those days, there was a tremendous social disparity between a servant and a free man, and yet this centurion was unlike many, unlike most, certainly. He was a man of rank and authority, but he was also a man who had compassion on his slaves, on his servants. He was rare in other respects, too, because Jesus later said that the man had more faith, although he was not a Jew, than Jesus had found among any of the Jews in Israel.

And so this man was exceptionally a pious and generous and soft-hearted man, and his servant was sick, and he came to Jesus. He swallowed his pride and came to Jesus and asked for help. Now Jesus, his, you know, the grace that the man presumed upon turned out to be all there.

Jesus said, okay, you want help for me? I'll be glad to give it. And Jesus said, I'll come to your house. I'll come with you and heal him.

Now the man's response was, I'm not worthy to have you come under my roof. Now, it's, this could have been meant in one of two ways. Either way is a very commendable attitude for the man to take.

On the one hand, the Jews, the pious Jews, the religious Jews, would never go into the house of a Gentile. It was against their tradition. It was considered that if they would walk into the house of a Gentile, they would be defiled.

And therefore, religious Jews simply stayed away from the houses of Gentiles. We see this later on when Jesus, at the end of this gospel story, has been condemned by the Sanhedrin, the Jewish court, and they take him to Pilate, the Roman governor, to have him condemn him to be crucified. And we read that the Jews would not go into Pilate's house.

They stood outside and waited for Pilate to come out to them. This is because of the Jews' scruples against entering the house of a Gentile. Later still in the book of Acts, when Peter went into the house of Cornelius, who was a Gentile, and also a centurion like this man, later on, he was criticized by his Jewish friends.

They said, you went into the house of a Gentile. He was criticized for it. So you can see that the Jews, generally speaking, would not enter the houses of Gentiles.

And this man was a centurion stationed in Israel. He knew very well what the Jews felt about such things. And here was Jesus offering to go into his house.

Jesus, a Jew, offered to go into the house of a Gentile in order to heal the Gentile's servant. The man thought that was too magnanimous of Jesus. That's more than he could ever ask Jesus to do.

He said, I'm not worthy to have you come under my roof. Now, he could have simply said that as a Gentile, recognizing that he should not inconvenience a Jew in this way, and should not subject a Jew to a violation of his Jewish scruples. Or he might have said it coming from a deeper place, of course.

He may well have realized that Jesus was not just a Jew, but that he was a man like no other. He might have even recognized that he was the Son of God. We don't know to what degree the man understood who Jesus was.

But he knew that Jesus could do what no other man could do, and he revered him. He revered Jesus. And he said, my house is too humble an abode to accommodate you.

I'm not worthy to have you there. Now, that's interesting, because the man was not a man of low rank. He was not a peasant.

He was not a beggar. He was not a man, you know, lowly esteemed in his own circles. He was a man of authority and power.

Probably a man not only of prestige, but of some wealth. And yet, when it came to comparing himself with Jesus, he felt unworthy to have Jesus in his house. Before I go any further, let me just say, point out what this tells us about the whole issue of self-esteem.

Here's a man who had in the world, in society, a position that might encourage high self-esteem. But in comparing himself to Jesus, which is, of course, the right thing for people to do, make that comparison rather than some other, he saw himself as low, very low, so low that he wasn't even worthy to play the host to Jesus in the house. He wasn't even worthy to welcome Jesus into his home.

Sort of like John the Baptist said, I'm not worthy to take his sandals off and carry them. Which was what, of course, slaves did. He said, I'm not even worthy to be his slave.

Now, here's the man who Jesus said is the greatest prophet who ever lived. Yet, compared to Jesus, he says, I'm not worthy to even be his servant. Here's a centurion, a man of rank in the Roman army, a man who probably had wealth and respect from others.

He even says so. But he sees himself as so low, so small in rank compared to Jesus, that he says, I'm not worthy to have you come under my roof. And then he explains, he gives Jesus a different suggestion.

Instead of you coming to my house, why don't you just stay here? Don't inconvenience yourself. If you would be so kind, just speak the word. Just speak the word of healing, and my servant will be healed.

Now, Jesus, of course, was astonished at this man's faith and said, I've never seen such faith, not even in Israel. Think about it. There were people who were watching Jesus heal people, but they probably in their own minds were thinking, you know, this is a good trick.

You know, he's got something up his sleeve, or there's some other thing going on here. But here's a man who knew that Jesus had raw divine power at his disposal, and that he did not have to manipulate situations. He didn't have to go in there and do some kind of hocus-pocus on the sick person to somehow make something happen.

That Jesus could speak an authoritative word, and that word would get the job done. The man knew this because he knew the concept of authority. He says, I'm also a man under authority, and I have servants under me.

And, you know, I say this to a servant, go, and he goes, and I say come, and he comes. Now, what the man is saying is this, Jesus, the reason I'm confident that you could heal my servant from a distance without even setting foot in my house is because I understand how a chain of command works. I understand how a chain of authority works.

I'm in such a chain. I'm a centurion. I am under authority myself.

There are men who are, in other words, of higher rank than me that I must submit to. But I'm also a man who possesses authority over others, and they have to submit to me. In other words, I am a mere link in a chain that goes both directions, above and below me.

And I understand how that is, that if I am standing under proper authority, under the one who is above me, then those who are below me are obligated to do what I say. That's how authority works. And if I obey him that is above me, I'm obeying the one who is above him, and above him, and above him, all the way up to Caesar himself.

And if I disobey the one that is over me, I disobey all the way up to Caesar himself. My disobedience to my commander is disobedience to his commander, and to Caesar who ordained them all. Likewise, the servant who obeys me, the foot soldier that's below me, by obeying me, is obeying Caesar too, because I'm just part of that chain of command that goes all the way up to Caesar himself.

Now, the point he's making is this. I don't have to go do everything personally. I'm a man in authority, but I'm under authority.

As long as I'm under proper authority, I also possess the authority to have things done for me at my bidding. I don't have to go do every little thing myself. I can give a command to a servant, and he'll go do it.

It'll take place. I don't have to go there. It'll do it.

It'll happen because I command it to happen. Because I stand in a position of authority. Now, what did this have to do with his faith in Jesus? Well, obviously, he's saying that Jesus stands in sort of a comparable, though of course vastly superior, position.

Jesus is under authority. That is, under the authority of his Father. Jesus came to do his Father's will, not his own.

He always did the will of his Father. He always did the things that pleased his Father. He came to submit to his Father.

The Bible says, Jesus said, I can do nothing but what my Father shows me to do, and so

forth. So, Jesus was a man under authority. That is, under the authority of his Father in heaven.

And because he was under authority, he was part of an authority chain that there were others under him. And he doesn't have to do everything himself. He can just give the command, and it'll get done.

Now, it's not entirely clear what the centurion pictured in his mind as to how this would get done. I mean, in the case of soldiers, the centurion speaks to some actual person and tells him to do something, and he goes and does it. Did he imply that if Jesus gave the command, that there were invisible soldiers, invisible legions that would obey him? For example, did the centurion believe that perhaps if Jesus gave the command, the angels would go and heal this servant? Perhaps he did.

Or maybe even if he believed that demons were afflicting his servant, did he believe that the demons must obey Jesus' commands, whether Jesus went there or not? Maybe that's how he was thinking. We don't know exactly what he was thinking. But the general position he was taking is this, that just as he, an officer in the Roman army, stood under his proper authority and therefore had the right to command others, and that would, by the power of his command, cause things to transpire without him going there himself, so Jesus, who is standing under proper authority, that is, under the authority of his father, was also able to give commands without going necessarily to the place where the job had to be done.

That his bidding would be done because he stood under proper authority under his father. This man's words indicated that he recognized something about Jesus that even many of his disciples did not recognize. Namely, that Jesus was operating as an agent of God, of his father, and what Jesus did was not some kind of a self-glorifying, self-promoting act, but it was actually simply obeying what God sent him to do.

Jesus was under authority, like the centurion was under authority, and Jesus was faithfully doing what his authority, his father, wanted him to do, and therefore he recognized that Jesus standing in this position under proper authority also possessed authority to get the job done. So he was acknowledging Jesus's relationship to the father as well as recognizing Jesus's ultimate authority over all circumstances, and he was so confident of it that he knew that whatever Jesus said it would happen, even if Jesus never went and confronted the place of need where the servant lay dying. Just this grasp of who Jesus was and of what Jesus's authority was, that this centurion, who was a Gentile, he was not a Jew even, had was an astonishment to Jesus.

You know, it's interesting to see a statement like this, Jesus marveled. Usually Jesus was the one who's doing things that made other people marvel, but here we read, as in a few other places, Jesus marveled. Wouldn't it be something to do the kind of thing yourself that would cause God himself to marvel, that you could astonish God? Wouldn't that be

something? Well, this man did.

And what was it that Jesus found so marvelous, so astonishing? That this man had faith, and that his faith was of such a degree that it eclipsed and shamed the level of faith that the Jews themselves had. Now consider this, because the Jews were God's chosen people throughout the Old Testament era. The Gentiles had absolutely no standing.

This man was a Roman. He was a Gentile. He had no standing before God on a racial basis.

But Israel, the Jewish people, they had standing with God. You certainly would have expected that the people of God, the Israelites, would be the ones who really showed the faith in the Messiah. And you'd expect the Gentiles, who were really, you know, cut off from God, you'd expect them to not really have any interest in the Messiah, or any faith at all.

And that's what was so marvelous to Jesus. Here was a Gentile, not even an adherent to the Jewish faith at all. Not one of the people of God at all, in terms of racial identity.

But here he exhibited greater faith than had anyone up to that point who had the racial identity of a Jew. The ones you would have expected to have faith, were the ones who didn't. Now Jesus, when he encountered this Gentile who had faith, took it as an opportunity to make a prediction.

The prediction is actually, that many other Gentiles would indeed come to faith, as this man had, and would put to shame many Jews who did not have faith, as this man's faith did put to shame the faith, or the lack thereof, of all the Israelites of Jesus. I haven't found this kind of faith in Israel. And so Jesus says in verse 11, I say to you that many will come from the east and the west.

He means from outside Israel, from other countries, from the east and the west, the Gentiles. Many will come of them. Just like this man has come to faith, there are many others like him, Gentiles from the east and the west, who will come and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God.

That means that they will enter the kingdom. This is not necessarily talking about heaven, though it could include heaven. The point is that Jesus was offering the kingdom of God to anyone who would enter.

And he's saying there will be many Gentiles who will enter. Of course, this is fulfilled right now, as the gospel has been preached in all the world. There are more Gentiles than Jews who have accepted the gospel and have indeed come into the kingdom.

This is what Jesus is predicting. And he says these Gentiles from the east and west will come and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom. But the sons of the

kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness, and there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Now the sons of the kingdom, by that he means those who were born into what you'd think was the natural inheritance of the kingdom of God, the Jews, the natural born members of the kingdom of God, many of them will be rejected. Why? Well, for this very reason, they didn't have the faith that this man had. What he is saying is that many Gentiles will have faith, and many Jews will not.

And that is a tremendous reversal of what the Jews thought. The Jews thought they were the people who possessed God, and the Gentiles weren't left out. Jesus is saying, no, it's not race, it's faith.

It's not being a Jew or a Gentile, it's having faith that puts you in right standing with God. And there will be many Gentiles who have no racial standing with God, but who will come into the kingdom of God and participate along with the Jews' ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of God. But the actual offspring of those men, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, many of them will be cast out because they didn't have faith.

So Jesus is predicting what actually came to pass in the church age when the gospel was preached and is being preached to us, Gentiles, many Gentiles have responded favorably, many Jews have not. Then Jesus said to the centurion, go your way, and as you have believed, so let it be done for you. And he said, it says his servant was healed at that same hour.

So the man's faith was rewarded with seeing what he requested, and he a Gentile. Praise the Lord. Your faith will also be rewarded if you put it in Christ, though you be a Gentile or a Jew.

Join us next time, and we'll continue our study in the life of Christ in Matthew.