

## Matthew 8:5-13

### Introduction

Last week, a Jewish leper came to Jesus. When Jesus healed this leper just because He willed to do so, we saw the rule and reign of God demonstrated with great power and authority. When Jesus stretched out His hand and *touched* the “unclean” leper, and healed him, He showed that in the new age of the kingdom, the leper who believes will be no less spiritually privileged than anyone else. In the kingdom, ceremonial/outward cleansing gives way to the finished reality of the inward cleansing of our hearts.

We remember that there were many, *many* miracles stories that Matthew could have included in this “collection” (John 20:30; 21:25), so we know that he chose the ones he did very carefully and for specific reasons. We will also see that Luke (7:1-10) and Matthew tell the story of the centurion in two very different ways. Each has his own unique agenda. And for right now, we are concerned with Matthew’s agenda, not Luke’s. Matthew has another very specific lesson that he wants to teach his church. And so we can assume that the Holy Spirit wants to teach us this same lesson today.

**Verse 5** – When [Jesus] entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him...

In our last study, a Jewish leper came to Jesus. Now we meet a Gentile centurion coming to Jesus. Just like the leper, a Gentile was considered unclean. He was not part of the Jewish people of God, so he was ethnically “underprivileged”. This is true! Paul says that in the Old Testament, the advantage of being a Jew was great in every way (Rom. 3:1). In general, the Gentiles *were* unclean because they did not observe the laws of Israel or worship the God of Israel. But the Jews had wrongly concluded from these distinctions that they were *automatically* holier and more *worthy* than the Gentiles. Luke does tell us that this centurion loved the nation of Israel and actually financed one of their synagogues, so it would seem that he was at least a “God-fearing” Gentile (though maybe not a full convert to Judaism). But Matthew doesn’t tell us any of this – probably to keep our focus squarely on the fact that the centurion is still a Gentile, and as such he would have been considered by many Jews to be “unclean” and “second-class.”

**Verse 6** – “Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly.

In spite of all that we’ve just seen, it was still true that the centurion was *socially* superior to Jesus, not to mention the fact that he was a member of the Roman army that occupied Israel. And yet, amazingly, the Roman centurion “appeals” to this Jewish healer, calling Him “Lord”. And just like the leper in verse two, he never comes right out and *asks* Jesus to heal his servant. His servant is lying paralyzed *at home*, suffering terribly. Apparently, the servant was in no condition to be brought to Jesus. But the centurion is fully aware of the fact that for Jesus (as a Jew) to go to the Gentile’s home (which was unclean) would have been culturally unacceptable. We read in Acts 10:28 – “And [Peter] said to them, ‘You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation.’” So in light of these things, the Centurian very humbly tells Jesus about his servant, and waits to see what He might do. And so do we.

**Verse 7** – And he said to him, “I will come and heal him.”

In the Greek, this verse can be either a statement (“I will come *myself* and heal him”) or a question (“Am *I* to come and heal him?”). However we take it, Jesus’ reference to Himself is in the emphatic position (*myself / I*). But this doesn’t make sense if it is a statement (why should Jesus emphasize that He *Himself* will go?) On the other hand, if Jesus is asking a question, it makes perfect sense. So far, the centurion has simply *stated the fact* that his servant is lying paralyzed at home. He has not technically *asked* for anything. And so now Jesus rather uncomfortably forces the issue by asking the centurion: “Am *I* to come and heal him?” “Are you asking a Jewish teacher to enter the house of a Gentile? Is *that* what you’re asking?” Jesus doesn’t say that He won’t come, but He implies that He *shouldn’t* (cf. Mat. 15:21-28).

If we were to read this story in Luke, we would discover that the centurion never does actually talk to Jesus in person. Luke tells us that the centurion sent to Jesus some elders of the Jews with the message that his servant was sick. (The elders added to this simple message their own personal entreaty.) When *Matthew* tells us that the *centurion* came to Jesus, he’s just following the standard protocol (literary conventions) of his day. After all, the Jewish elders came carrying the *centurion’s* message and so they came on *his* behalf. Matthew just doesn’t want the “distraction” of the messengers. *He* wants us to see only the *Jewish* Messiah and the *Gentile* centurion. After the Jewish elders relayed the centurion’s message to Jesus, Luke tells us simply that Jesus went with the elders of the Jews to go to the centurion’s house. But we can assume from Matthew that Jesus must have sent someone ahead of Him with His own message for the centurion. We don’t know if the centurion knew that Jesus was on His way, but we do know that in spite of Jesus’ objection, He *was* willing to go. Luke then tells us that the centurion sent some friends to Jesus with another message. They met Him when He was not far from the house. We assume from Matthew that this second message was actually the centurion’s *answer* to the question that Jesus asked (“Am *I* [a *Jew*] to come and heal him [a Gentile in a Gentile’s house]?”). Now if you were the Gentile centurion, how do you think *you* would respond? Would you become angry? Would you give up? Would you ask Jesus to come anyway? Leaving out any reference to the messengers, Matthew tells us how the centurion responded to Jesus...

**Verse 8** – *And* [Greek: *kai*] the centurion replied, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed.”

The centurion is not “put off” or offended by Jesus’ “objection”. Instead, he willingly admits that he *isn’t worthy* to have Jesus come under the roof of his house. However, he doesn’t know of any reason why Jesus should have to come to his house to heal his servant. Jesus has only to “say the word”, and the centurion knows that his servant will be healed! If you really think about it, this kind of humble, confident faith is absolutely astonishing coming from an “unclean” *Gentile*!

**Verse 9** – “For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”

Now tell me that you don’t see a problem with this line of reasoning! The centurion’s point is that just like he “says the word” and his word is carried out, so also Jesus has only to say the word and His word will be carried out. But certainly there is a big difference between telling a servant to go somewhere and ordering a specific physical infirmity to leave someone without

even being present! Would we have really made such a *simple* (naïve?) comparison? And yet the centurion seems to have no doubt whatsoever. Wherever Jesus happens to be, He has only to speak a word into the air (as it were) and the servant, lying in some room at the centurion's house, will be healed. And this in spite of the fact that of the many Jewish "healers" in Jesus' day, none of them even pretended to be able to heal from a distance. Humanly speaking, this Gentile's confidence in Jesus is nothing less than shocking.

In verses 10-12, we will discover the reason *why* Jesus "protested" against going to the centurion's home. Yes, He could have made a statement easily enough by entering the "unclean" house of the unclean Gentile and healing his servant. But Jesus wants the healing of the Gentile centurion's servant to speak as loudly and powerfully as possible. So He "protested" with a question in order that the faith of the Gentile might first be put on full display.

**Verse 10** – When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith."

When Jesus says "truly, I tell you" it's a signal (or a reminder?) that He is about to say something of profound importance. "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith." On the one hand, this is shocking, and certainly a little offensive. This unclean Gentile has a faith greater than any that Jesus has found in Israel?!? But on the other hand, we're not necessarily sure of *why* this statement is so profoundly significant. So the Gentile has a greater faith – other than maybe just trying to be offensive, what's the point? Well Jesus doesn't leave us guessing.

**Verse 11** – "I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven..."

Who are these people from east and west? Well, in the Old Testament, they were Jewish exiles, returning home.

- ✓ Psalm 107:1-3 – Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever! Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, whom he has redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the *east* and from the *west*, from the *north* and from the *south*.
- ✓ Isaiah 43:5-7 – Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the *east*, and from the *west* I will gather you. I will say to the *north*, Give up, and to the *south*, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."
- ✓ Isaiah 49:8-9, 11-12 – Thus says the LORD: "In a time of favor I have answered you; in a day of salvation I have helped you; I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages, saying to the prisoners, 'Come out,' to those who are in darkness, 'Appear.' ... And I will make all my mountains a road, and my highways shall be raised up. Behold, these shall come from afar [*east*], and behold, these from the *north* and from the *west*, and these from the land of Syene [*south*]."

These passages all describe the future return of the exiled Jews from the four corners of the earth to their homeland – to the city of Jerusalem. And these passages were all *partially* fulfilled in the

days of Zerubbabel and Ezra and Nehemiah five hundred years before Jesus came. So in the Old Testament, the people from east and west are clearly ethnic Jews.

But when Jesus quotes from these verses, He shows that the final fulfillment of Israel's "regathering" will actually include Gentiles. Without apparently ever converting to Judaism, these "unclean" Gentiles will one day enter the Messianic kingdom and eat at the same table (as full equals) with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Isaiah 25:6; 65:13-14). How can Jesus take what in the Old Testament referred to ethnic Israel and apply it in His day to a Gentile centurion? Because just like with the Jewish leper, with the coming of Jesus even a Gentile who simply *believed* could be cleansed within – he, too, could be a "true" Jew. No longer was a Gentile any less spiritually privileged than a Jew. Jesus clearly teaches us here that with His coming, all the Old Testament promises to the believing nation of Israel will actually find their ultimate fulfillment in the Church, the *true* Israel that includes not only Jews, but even a Gentile centurion. With the coming of the rule and reign of God in the kingdom of the Messiah, the Gentile centurion's house is no less "clean" than any other house in Israel. But that's not all.

**Verse 12** – "...while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness."

In this context "sons of the kingdom" refers to ethnic Jews, the ones who were "clean", the ones whose homes Jesus could enter without fear of "defilement". The "sons of the kingdom" are those who had first received the promise of the kingdom and who now assumed that this privilege would give them automatic entrance to the kingdom. But now Jesus says that there will be many "clean" Jews who will be handed over to the weeping and gnashing of teeth of the outer darkness while the "unclean" Gentile centurion along with a multitude of others just like him will take their place at the same table with the likes of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob! I don't think we can ever fully comprehend how revolutionary these words would have been in Jesus day.

**Verse 13** – And to the centurion Jesus said, "Go; let it be done for you as you have believed."  
And the servant was healed at that very moment.

It is here that Jesus demonstrates and proves the truth of His words. When Jesus healed the centurion's servant, He showed that in the kingdom, God makes no distinctions between Jews and Gentiles. And so He eliminated the ethnic distinctions that the Jews had wrongly used to excuse their smug "holier-than-thou" attitudes. When Jesus healed the centurion's servant, He showed that a person's ethnic background had never been the main point, because even a "clean" Jew can be inwardly filled with unbelief. In the kingdom, even an outwardly *uncircumcised Gentile* will have full and equal status with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Because what has truly mattered all along – is *faith*.

### **Conclusion**

- ✓ Ephesians 2:11-12 – Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

Paul commands us as Gentiles to regularly remember these things! Because it's only as we remember these things that we can really and fully love the story of Jesus and the Gentile centurion. Paul beautifully sums up the true meaning of this story:

- ✓ Romans 4:3, 11, 16 – For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” ... He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well... That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all.
- ✓ Ephesians 2:13 – In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.
- ✓ Galatians 3:14 – In Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham [has] come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

Do you have the faith of the centurion? Do you believe with the centurion that *whatever* word Jesus speaks, it will *always* have its fulfillment? Do you believe this like the centurion believed this? Because it's when we simply believe and trust His *word* that we will be granted a place at the table along side Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob. Paul said to the Jews:

- ✓ Romans 3:27 – Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith.

And then Paul said to the Gentiles:

- ✓ Romans 11:17-20 – If some of the branches were broken off [ethnic Jews], and you [Gentiles], although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree [the promises to Israel], do not be arrogant toward the branches... You will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear.

The second we start boasting, we are no longer walking by faith. So then, let us *cling* to faith. As Paul says, we must stand fast *through faith*. And that means that **we must *only believe His word* (as it is revealed in Scripture), and then (this is important) *confidently watch* for it to be done for us *according as we have believed*. This is the simple essence of faith.**

And one more thing... we see very clearly from our text today that it is just as “easy” for a Gentile to believe as it is for a Jew – and vice versa. We remember that it's just as easy for a leper to believe as it is for the model on the magazine cover. And the same applies to the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated, the adult and the child, the male and the female, and the “red, yellow, black, and white”. I really believe that it is *only* when we really *get* this that we'll ever truly succeed at showing partiality to no one. To the extent that we *don't* get this, we *must forever* be guilty of showing partiality.

- ✓ James 2:1, 5 – My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ... Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom?

Do you truly believe like the centurion believed? And having believed, will you show partiality to *no one*? One last question: Wouldn't it be wonderful if by God's grace, Jesus could "marvel" even at our faith – just like He did the centurion's?

### Teaching our Children

- Q. In Matthew 8:1-4, who came to Jesus for healing?
- A. An unclean leper
- Q. Who came to Jesus in our study today?
- A. An unclean Gentile
- Q. Why were most Gentiles unclean?
- A. Because they didn't worship the true God. They didn't have the temple or the Law.
- Q. What did many of the Jews wrongly think about the Gentiles (even Gentiles that believed in the true God)?
- A. Many Jews thought that all Gentiles were second-rate, second-class human beings.
- Q. Why didn't the centurion just ask Jesus to come to his home and heal his servant?
- A. The centurion knew that as a Jew, Jesus was not "supposed" to enter a Gentile's house.
- Q. When Jesus hinted that He should not go to the centurion's house, what did the centurion say?
- A. "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed."  
(Talk with your children about what an amazing faith this was – and coming from an unclean Gentile!)
- Q. How many times had Jesus seen this kind of faith among the Israelites?
- A. Never!
- Q. Who did Jesus say would come into the kingdom and eat at the same table (as equals) with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?
- A. Many *Gentiles* – including the Gentile centurion!
- Q. What did Jesus say will happen to many of the Jews who thought they were clean and looked down on the Gentiles.
- A. They will be thrown into the outer darkness – a place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.
- ✓ Read and reflect with your children on the first four Scriptures under the Conclusion.
- ✓ Think again about the story of the Gentile centurion in light of these Scriptures.
- ✓ **Rejoice greatly!!!**
- ✓ Reflect with your children on the faith of the centurion (Jesus *marveled!* See top of page 3; SEE bolded portion, bottom of page 5)
- ✓ **Challenge and call your children to this same kind of faith.**
- Q. Can a Gentile believe just as well as a Jew? Can a Jew believe just as well as a Gentile? Can a child have just as much faith as an adult? (Suggest other examples: rich, poor, black, white, boys, girls, "smart", uneducated, etc.)
- Q. What does this tell us about how we should treat others? (See James 2:1, 5 top of this page)