

FAITH DEMONSTRATED

Matthew 8:5-13

According to various polls, many people in our country identify themselves as Christians. Many say they pray, attend church, give money, etc. We tend to talk about faith with regard to “what we believe” and do not usually make an association with “what we do.” We sometimes focus more on the correctness of our doctrines (the person of Jesus, the Trinity, how we baptize, inerrancy of Scriptures, etc.) than on the correctness of our actions. If we see Christians behaving in sinful ways and we may wonder “What good is their faith?” On the other hand, it rarely (if ever) crosses our mind that there is more to the “Christian life” and “walking by faith” than just saying the right words and avoiding evil. If we don’t step out in faith on the “positive” side, then perhaps the same question could be applied to us: “What good is our faith?”

Many times the emphases regarding demonstration of faith in our Bible studies focus on the behaviors of various people as they approached Jesus for help. Examples that come to mind include the leper who approached Jesus with an affirmation of faith that He believed that Jesus could heal him if He was willing to do so. A Canaanite woman whose daughter was possessed by a demon appealed to Jesus to heal her daughter and faithfully persisted even when Jesus told her that His ministry was to the Jews. We recall the story of the woman who demonstrated faith by reaching out and touching the edge of Jesus’ coat and was healed. We remember the blind man beside the road who would not stop calling out to Jesus as He came by where he was even though people tried to stop him from “bothering” Jesus.

Let’s look at the other side of this coin of demonstrated faith. Jesus was very effective in teaching His disciples and others who would listen to Him about the Kingdom of Heaven and the importance of embracing the spirit of the law. According to the account given by Matthew, after Jesus had completed the first significant discourse that included the beatitudes, the need to go beyond the letter of the law, and the importance of our motives, we see nine significant miracle accounts. These are found in chapters eight and nine. These nine are given in three groups of three miracles separated by brief comments regarding the demands of following Jesus such as having our priorities right and the importance of compassion over the letter of the law. In these miracles, Jesus demonstrated His authority by showing His power over a multitude of things such as physical illness, demonic forces, and natural phenomena. People had already noted that He taught with great authority (contrasted with the Jewish teachers) and with these miracles He demonstrated that He believed and implemented what He taught. In other words, Jesus demonstrated His faith by going beyond teaching and proclaiming the Word of God and the Kingdom of God by implementing the benefits and blessings of the Word and the Kingdom.

How important is it for all who proclaim the word for us to demonstrate that we actually believe what we are proclaiming by stepping out in faith and taking action that is appropriate for that faith? We hear arguments that are made that tell us that the miracles that Jesus did were for the purpose of confirming His ministry and His teaching. This same argument is extended to the miraculous accounts given in Acts that these miraculous acts were needed since the “Bible” had not been completed. But now that we have the Scriptures readily available, such supernatural affirmations of the word and ministry of believers are no longer needed. Really? Is this an attempt to explain the weakness of our faith and the fear we have of demonstrating what we believe by acting on the faith that we have?

In his book, *The Insanity of God*, Nik Ripken wrote about the church in China that is growing at a phenomenal pace:

I asked the question this evening: “If I were to visit your home communities and talk with the

nonbelieving families, friends, and neighbors of the members of your house churches— and if I would point out your church members and ask, ‘Who are those people? What can you tell me about them?’— what answer would I get?” Many people started to answer at once. The response that jumped out at me, though, was the answer of a man who told me that his church’s neighbors would probably say, “Those are the people who raise the dead!”

Then, as if to validate the claim, people around the table began recounting story after story from their own churches— stories of healings, stories of miraculous answers to prayer, stories of supernatural occurrences, stories that could be explained only by the activity of God. These miraculous events seemed to be milepost markers in their personal faith journeys. These were the happenings that had forever proven God’s power in their minds. These were the stories that had drawn unbelievers into Christ’s Kingdom.

In his book *A Hill on Which to Die* Judge Paul Pressler related an account of talking with the pastor of First Baptist Church in a town in New Hampshire where he was just beginning prep school at the age of sixteen. He went by the church to meet the pastor before he joined and he introduced himself as follows: “I am Paul Pressler, I am from Houston, Texas. I was saved when I was ten, I am going to be here for two years, and I will want to be part of this church.” He said that his pastor-to-be, a seminary graduate, looked at me and said, “I don’t know what you people from the South mean when you say somebody has been saved.”

I hope that most of us would be amazed almost to the point of not believing that a seminary-trained pastor of a Baptist church would make such a statement. We might think that this person did not have a clue about true Christianity. Do you think that if we told people in the Chinese church that we teach that miracles are no longer happening and are not needed since we have ready access to the Scriptures that they might wonder the same thing about us?

When Jesus went out and demonstrated His faithfulness in walking out what He had been teaching, then many people responded in faith and sought His help in their needs. Those who responded cut across socioeconomic lines and nationality barriers.

Recognize the Need – 8:5-7

⁵ And when Jesus entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, imploring Him, ⁶ and saying, “Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, fearfully tormented.” ⁷ Jesus said to him, “I will come and heal him.” Matthew 8:5-7 (NASB95)

Jesus entered into Capernaum immediately after He had completed the Sermon on the Mount. Word spread and people came and others were healed and He began teaching about the Kingdom of God and His mission and He called more to follow Him. He healed in disregard for the rules of religious leaders. According to Luke’s reports of this incident a request was made by some of the Jewish elders (town officials) on behalf of the centurion and a follow-up request was made by some friends. Matthew wrote that the centurion made the request. There is a very similar report in John’s Gospel regarding a “nobleman” whose son was very ill and was healed. We need not get caught up in the differences of the details, but look for the truths and the principles of the accounts. Why was it recorded and what can we learn from it?

A truth that we can learn from what we see so far with this story was that Jesus was demonstrating the message that He had taught and people responded because they were in great need and, in some cases, they had exhausted all other alternatives. Most of the people whom Jesus had helped (up to this point) were the poor and the common people – people without means to help themselves. Up to this point, they were the only ones who sought help. When we have no resources in which to put our trust, then it becomes somewhat easier to look for help and not rely on our own strength.

On the other hand, the centurion was a person of economic resources and (perhaps) demonstrated a higher degree of faith in his “acknowledging his need” for help than that demonstrated by those who asked for help because they had no other choice. What takes more

faith: to put our total trust in God when we have lost everything or when we have everything (material) we think we need? Losing everything (or having no resources) does not guarantee that a person will turn to God. However, it is an opportunity to turn to Him and to see what faith in God will do.

In Matthew's account, the centurion did not even ask Jesus to heal his servant, but simply stated the fact of the paralysis and the pain that the servant was experiencing. The centurion's statement was a simple recognition of a need that was beyond being helped by any resources that he had. If this man had not believed that Jesus was capable of healing the servant, then there would have been no reason to bring the matter to His attention. Jesus' response has been generally translated to say that Jesus stated that He "would go and heal the servant." Some scholars have noted that, grammatically, Jesus' response could have been a question such as "Shall I come heal him?" That response would fit into the narrative that the centurion had not asked for anything at this point. The "question alternative" also fits into the next statement from the centurion.

Humility Acknowledges Authority – 8:8-9

⁸ But the centurion said, "Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed." ⁹ "For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, 'Go!' and he goes, and to another, 'Come!' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this!' and he does *it*." Matthew 8:8-9 (NASB95)

A brief look at Luke's account of this event can give us deeper insight to the statement of the centurion. According to Luke the elders of the town requested that Jesus heal the servant of the centurion since the centurion was a very "deserving person" because he had treated the Jews kindly and had provided funds to build them a synagogue. Notice that the words of the centurion delivered by his friends (in Luke's account) attempted to correct the misrepresentation of the elders that he was worthy to have his servant healed and his feeling of unworthiness was why he did not personally come to Jesus. How many people today are so lacking in humility that they will question why seemingly "bad things" happen to "good" people as if because they have done "good things" for others that they deserve to escape any problems in life? I would think that all of us have had such thoughts.

This centurion was likely also aware of the barriers that existed between the Jews and the Gentiles and he was sensitive to the implications of such barriers. That sensitivity could also help account for the reticence to ask Jesus to do something that would make Jesus uncomfortable. Are there groups of people that we would feel very uncomfortable or perhaps feel threatened or endangered if we attempted to share the gospel or help them in other ways? Is that an excuse for not following the Great Commission? It may be a good excuse, but it is certainly not a good reason. We are as free to share the gospel or attempt to help those who despise and hate us as we are with those who may live next door to us. The consequences and reaction may be different but the freedom is the same in either case.

In addition to being aware and sensitive, he was also very insightful in that he recognized that Jesus was not just an ordinary Jew if there was any credibility to the accounts he had heard about Jesus. An ordinary person would not have the ability to heal and to cast out demons and defy nature. That would require that the person doing such things would have a position of authority over the physical, the natural, and the spiritual realms.

Since the centurion operated in a hierarchal relationship of being under authority and being able to exercise authority, he had an appreciation of the unique position that Jesus had as compared to the rest of humanity. We might go so far as to say that he recognized the "divine

character of Jesus.” If that is the case, then that realization was miles ahead of what the Jewish leaders were willing to recognize.

Is there a lesson here for us as a nation? While we as Christians recognize the unique position and status of the Bible as being truth by which we are to live, many others in our nation not only do not acknowledge that fact, but deny and strongly oppose that contention. Such a failure led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and it will (predictably) lead to the ruin of our nation as well.

The centurion was also a problem solver. He realized that if Jesus (a Jew) entered his house that He would come under severe criticism from other Jews and that Jesus would be ceremonially unclean by Jewish customs. Those potential problems could be solved simply by Jesus giving a command that the servant be healed. The realization of the fact that “spiritual actions and reactions are not limited by time and space” was something that showed the maturity and understanding of the centurion in spiritual matters. We realize that we can pray for someone who may be a thousand miles away from us. We can also pray for someone in our hometown without going on a “prayer walk” through the neighborhood. How does a “prayer walk” differ from standing on a “street corner” (Matt 6:5) and praying? The typical argument is that doing a prayer walk is a good witness to the community. Could the person to whom Jesus referred in Matthew 6:5 not make the same argument?

Anticipate in Faith – 8:10-13

¹⁰ Now when Jesus heard *this*, He marveled and said to those who were following, “Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel. ¹¹ “I say to you that many will come from east and west, and recline *at the table* with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven; ¹² but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” ¹³ And Jesus said to the centurion, “Go; it shall be done for you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed that *very* moment. Matthew 8:10-13 (NASB95)

The centurion’s humility was matched by his faith. He recognized the superiority of Jesus as a person of power and authority. He also realized and believed that Jesus could “just speak the word and it will be done.” We have nearly two millennia of the church age and seldom do we demonstrate such faith in the Lord of Glory.

Verse 10 raises an interesting theological question: Can it be that God is ever impressed or surprised? Both Luke and Matthew record that Jesus marveled or was amazed by the faith and understanding of the centurion. An alternate translation of the Hebrew word translated “amazed” is “had admiration.” When we read or hear about Christians living in areas of the world where persecution is as common as the sun coming up each morning we too should “marvel” or “have admiration” for those who are being obedient to Christ’s command to make disciples while we who have almost unlimited freedom use any excuse to avoid sharing our faith.

Saving faith is not limited to those who are like us in being “good church people.” On the other hand, not all “good church people” have such faith. Many practice the rituals and get involved in the activities but all do not walk by faith. In Matthew’s account, we see the importance of “what we believe” in the words of Jesus when He told the centurion, “As you have believed, so be it done unto you.”