

Title: Unworthy Faith
Text: Matthew 8.5-13
Theme: The Authority of Christ
Series: Matthew #46
Prop Stmtnt: Only the unworthy can have a worthy faith.
Aim: I aim to convict the self-righteous that their "faith" is not genuine until they see themselves as unworthy.

Read Text:

Last week I said at the end of the sermon that the only sin that Jesus cannot fix is the sin of self-righteousness. I did not mean that the sin of self-righteousness could not be forgiven. I meant that as long as a person held on to his self-righteousness, that he would never recognize his need for Christ. You cannot rescue a person who does not admit his need and surrender control.

I spent a couple of summers working as a lifeguard. A lifeguard's biggest fear (besides sharks) is having to rescue someone who thinks you are the enemy and it happens. A person who is drowning can be in such a state of panic that instead of seeing the lifeguard as one to help him, he actually fights against the lifeguard and in some cases, they both drown. When I was going for my certification the instructor lined up a body-builder as one of the possible people we had to rescue. Sure enough, I was selected to rescue him and sure enough, true to the script, he pretended to panic when I was attempting to save him. If I had a brick I would have hit him in the head just to knock him out. As it turned out, he just about did me in. I had to get him in a lock and just hang on as long as I could, which seemed like forever. Eventually, he gave up, (meaning, he had pity on me) and I was able to complete the rescue. But again, you cannot help a person who refuses to admit his real need.

It is so difficult for us to admit that we have a need. It is particularly difficult for us to admit that we have a need as long as we have something that we think we can be proud about, or if we think that while we are not perfect, we are at least better than others that we know. In other words, "I may not be perfect, but at least I am not like ____." That is self-righteousness.

In Matthew's account of the life of Jesus, we repeatedly witness this collision between Jesus and self-righteous people. Sitting here and reading these stories, we can see it. At least we can see it in these accounts. The problem is that we fail to see it in our own lives. We look at how some of the self-righteous Jews rejected Jesus and we think, "I may not be perfect, but at least I am not like a self-righteous Jew." But when we think that way, we reveal that...we are. We need to hear the message of this text and we need to listen with our hearts.

In these two chapters (8-9), Matthew is recording a series of miracles that Jesus performed. Each of these accounts is designed to underscore or illustrate teaching that he has done, or is about to do. In the first account, Jesus stopped and listened to a leper. Then he touched the leper and healed him. So, following that same idea of what kind of people did Jesus come to rescue, is this story about a Roman centurion. When you compare this account to the rest in these two chapters, this is about the longest one. The dominant theme of this account is authority. This is a theme

that Matthew is continuing from 7.29. The issue is how are you going to respond to this authority?

There are two men who are in charge who are in view. The one man had the title, the uniform, and the position. He was a centurion. He was part of the Roman army that was occupying and ruling Israel. He was not necessarily Roman. He was likely of Syrian or Lebanese descent and he was living in Capernaum. Now, the further we go into Matthew's gospel, the more we will see that Jesus was not only rejected by his own people (Jews), he was rejected by his own town (Capernaum), where he was living. Here is a Roman centurion, a despised Gentile, who has more discernment and humility than the people who were conquered. The irony is amazing. Here is a man who is in charge, who recognizes that he is not in charge. Know what I mean? And he admits this in front of the people who are not in charge, but who refuse to admit it. The entire scene is set up for us in v.5 and when you stop and consider all that is happening here, it is really stunning.

"When he (Jesus) entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him..." Do you see what I am talking about? A centurion was a representative of the government of Rome. He was in charge. He could order any Jew around him to do anything that he wanted. In fact, he could order his own soldiers to do anything that he wanted. But, instead of ordering Jesus, he is begging. He is appealing. Wow! That is amazing! The centurion who is an officer in the occupying army is in a position of begging a man who is a citizen of a country that his empire has conquered. Which means that even though the centurion is a man who possesses authority that has been vested in him, he recognizes that Jesus does not have vested authority; Jesus has inherent authority. When the centurion speaks, he speaks with the authority of Rome. He can only speak with the authority of Rome as long as he is in the military. When he retires, the centurion (named as such because traditionally each one was in charge of a 100 men) will no longer have any authority. So, the theme is authority. What is at stake here is how people respond to that authority. What is at stake for you is how do you respond to the authority of Jesus Christ? When you read Luke's account you realize that the centurion himself is not actually there. He has sent representatives who speak on his behalf. It is as if he is speaking. We do the same thing. The press secretary will hold a press conference and will make an announcement. Then, the media reports what? They report that today, "the President said..." They say this because when the press secretary speaks on behalf of the president, it is as if the president is saying it because the president sent him to say it. So, while it is as if the centurion is there, and he obviously believes in Christ, which is the point that Matthew is focusing on, he may have thought it best to send representatives for reasons I will mention later on.

There are 3 issues that are all interwoven by this theme of authority.

The issue of faith - What exactly is genuine faith?

The issue of race - What kind of people are in the kingdom of God?

The issue of what is at stake? - What happens to those who reject Christ?

What is genuine, saving faith?

This text does not tell us everything about genuine faith, but it tells us a lot. Matthew is building a case for faith in Christ, and this story is part of that case. Let me give you an example. Whenever you are watching a movie or a drama, the writer will often give you clues in the beginning of the story that appear to be loose ends or random events until the end of the story when those clues now turn into “Aha moments.” That is exactly what is going on here in this account. This story is not only part of the bigger story of Matthew’s gospel, but Matthew’s gospel is part of the bigger story of the Bible. In this little account we have some very important clues about very important truths. The clues themselves do not tell us the entire story, but they point to it. For example, one of the issues that this account deals with is that of faith. Jesus is surprised at this centurion’s faith and says so. In fact, he says that up to this point he has not seen this kind of faith with anyone else in Israel (10). The language that Jesus uses suggest that while he has witnessed some faith, it is not valid faith, like this guy’s faith. This, of course, raises the question: What is genuine saving faith? This particular text does not answer that question in totality, but it points to the answer. So, in these first two points, I am answering the questions that this text points to. In other words, I want you to see how this story is part of the Bible’s bigger teaching on faith. What is genuine saving faith? It has three components.

A. The right knowledge.

In order to have authentic saving faith, your faith must be in the right object. Genuine saving faith has an intellectual content and it must be the right intellectual content. There is only one person who can save you. Good intentions and dedication is useless if you are believing in the wrong object of your faith. There are truths that you must know and understand. (Rom. 10.17)

For example, let’s say that for your birthday you are going to go skydiving. You get into the plane with all of your gear and the plane gets to the proper altitude and you jump out and begin falling. You recently watched a National Geographic special on flying squirrels and you thought, “I can do that.” So, while you are falling, you refuse to pull the ripcord and open your parachute because you really, really believe that you can fly and land softly. But you can’t, no matter how much you believe you can, you cannot! Remember that great theologian, Woody, in Toy Story who says to Buzz, “YOU ARE A TOY!” If your faith is not in the right object, it does not matter how sincere you may be, it does not matter how genuine it may be, it is not saving faith unless you are believing in the right object. You have to know who to put your faith in. This is the case that Matthew is building. The only One who is worthy of your faith is Jesus. Everything in the OT has pointed to Christ and now, here he is and the Jews are hesitant to believe him. But, not this Gentile centurion. He believes! Genuine saving must have the right knowledge; that is, this is true and it makes sense. So, not only must faith be apprehended, it must be affirmed.

B. The right assent.

This is exactly what is going on here in v.13. Jesus is acknowledging that this centurion believes that Jesus is not only capable in a general sense, but Jesus is capable in a personal sense. He cannot not only help others, he can help me. He can help my servant. Matthew points this out again in 9.28 and 13.23.

Again, back to the skydiving story. Before you get into the plane, the instructor provides you with a class that explains how parachutes work. You see video evidence and hear people talk about their experiences of skydiving. You not only believe that a parachute can save people who rely upon it, but you get into the plane with the parachute on your back believing that this parachute can save you too. Genuine saving faith not only acknowledges that this is true, but that this is true for me! Finally, genuine, saving faith means...

C. A personal commitment.

This means that you embrace it for yourself. This means that if you are skydiving, that you actually pull the ripcord. You entrust yourself to the object of your faith. Christ is the object of your faith. You learn that he is both King and Savior. You believe that he is both King and Savior. And then you trust Him as King and Savior. That is, you surrender your life to him and you accept him as the One who died on the cross for your sins. Genuine, saving faith not only acknowledges that this is true and that it is true for me, but genuine, saving faith says, "I'm all in." That is, I am not trusting in anything or anyone else. I am no longer my own ruler, or king. Here, Matthew is not giving us a lecture on all of the ingredients of faith, but he is giving us an example of it. The example comes from someone that you would not expect; a Roman centurion!

2. What is the evidence of saving faith?

Matthew tends to abbreviate some of the events in order to focus primarily upon the point that he is seeking to make. Here the faith of the centurion is evidenced in what he says and in what he does. The apostle Paul will formalize this in his letter to the Romans when he explains faith as confessing with your mouth and believing in your heart. The question is, how do you know if you actually believe in your heart the right things about Christ and trust him? Well, there will be evidence of that. As I like to say, if it's a dog, it will bark. That is why the book of Romans is answering the question – how are we saved from our sin? The answer is "by faith alone in Christ alone. The book of James is answering the question – how do we know if the faith is genuine? The answer is seen in how that faith lives. Now, again, Matthew is not explaining the evidence of genuine faith as much as he is illustrating it. A person who truly believes in Christ is going to say it! That is what we see happening here. Look at the language of the centurion.

A. What you say (confession -the expression of belief)

In the first place, the centurion refers to Jesus as "Lord." In fact, he does this twice (6, 7). Then he acknowledges his own unworthiness to have Jesus come to his home. Again, this is an astounding confession of faith because the centurion is in a position of authority whereby he could command any Jew to anything that he wanted. And here he is saying, "I am not worthy of you." In fact, he goes to explain that he recognizes that Jesus possesses not only authority to heal, but Jesus has an authority that is so powerful, that all that he has to do is speak the word and his servant will be healed. (8) His illustration (9) is very telling. He acknowledges that he is under authority and that he also has men who are under his authority. His point is, when I speak, they have to do what I say. Therefore, I know that when you speak, sickness and disease has to do what you command. You are Lord!

B. **What you do** (obedient submission)

The evidence of genuine faith is more than just words. Evidence is seen in action. Jesus has entered Capernaum. The centurion is in Capernaum. He (his representatives) comes forward to Christ and submits himself to him. What he says along with what he does reveals an obedient and submissive faith. This is what causes Jesus to be amazed.

This, by the way, is a wonderful example of the person of Jesus Christ. He is God, he knows all things. And yet, even though he knows all things, he is still able to experience events in real time with real responses. As God he would have known that the centurion was going to do this. As a man, he was amazed, he was surprised to go to his hometown and find that it is not the Jews who are believing in him, but a Roman centurion. This is not what you would expect. But that is what is happening, so Jesus now, stops the conversation with the centurion and instead turns to his followers to make the point that I am trying to make in this sermon. This is incredible! Here is a man in power, submitting himself, humbling himself and believing that I have power to do something that others are going to reject.

Here is a question that you need to answer? Is your faith in Christ genuine? I did not ask if your faith in Christ was perfect. Your faith is not perfect. I asked, is it genuine? Are you willing to confess Jesus as your Savior? By the way, that is what Jesus commands us to do. He commands us to confess him as Savior, which is what baptism is. Baptism is the public confession of your faith in Jesus Christ. Baptism does not save you. Christ saves you. But, if you claim that Christ is your King and Savior, and you treat his commands as mere suggestions, then are you not making your confession of him as your King doubtful?

I know people who love to talk about their problems. They will read books about it. They will study, investigate, seek counsel, and get advice. But, how do you know if they are really serious about their problem? You know they are serious, when they actually DO something about it.

So, here we have a preview. The Jews are going to be engaged in these long conversations about who Jesus is, and what we ought to do about him. They are going to talk, talk, talk, argue, fight, debate, And BAM! Here is a centurion who already gets it! No embarrassment, no hesitation. He believes!

3. **Who is most likely to believe?** (5-10)

A. **Those who are desperate**

The centurion is desperate because his servant is lying paralyzed at home and is suffering terribly. The word that Matthew uses here for servant describes one who is not under compulsion as much as he is committed to his master. The centurion obviously cares deeply for this man and is desperate. The centurion is in a position of authority as we noted, but this is out of his league. And here is the beautiful thing: he knows it. Here is a man who recognizes that he has a problem that he cannot fix. Now, in his case, the problem is the health of his servant. Matthew uses this story to point to a greater story. The centurion cannot fix his servant, neither can we fix ourselves. We need a savior. We need someone to rescue us and in order to truly turn to Christ,

we have to recognize that there is no one else or nowhere else to turn. That is why, often times, God will use a crisis in our lives to reveal how much we need him.

Some people respond to a problem with anger and resentment. They believe that they deserve better treatment than this. "Why is such a good person like me having to go through something so bad like this." We think that way because we really believe that we are better than others. We think that way because we believe that we are intrinsically superior to others, which is not the case. Another amazing aspect to this story is how the centurion did not assume his own superiority. In fact, he assumed that he was not worthy.

B. Those who are "unworthy"

When Jesus says that he will come and heal the servant, the centurion's response is that he is not worthy for Jesus to come. What does that response tell you? Here is a man whose attitude is, "I don't deserve your goodness." This is the opposite of the attitude that says, "you owe me."

The media, for the past couple of weeks have focused on the story of the high school senior in New Jersey who left home because she did not want to live under her parent's rules. After all, she turned 18, and when you turn 18, you get to do anything that you want and your parents are supposed to pay for it, right? Isn't that somewhere in the Bible, or the constitution, or the bill of rights? Just because you are legally able to be on your own, does not mean that you are ready to be on your own. So, this girl leaves home, moves in with a friend and sues her parents because she wants them to pay for her private education and other bills, including her college. Now, I have no doubt that there is a whole lot more to this story than this. In fact, the good news is that the girl has moved back home and her family is seeking to work this out, and I sincerely hope that they do. My point is, this girl certainly appeared to have this attitude toward her parents that said, "you owe me." How many of you teachers want a student with an attitude like that. How many of you owners and managers, want a worker with an attitude like that? How many of you spouses want a spouse with an attitude like that, or with a kid with an attitude like that? Why do people have attitudes like that? They act as if their parents owe them something because they assume that God owes them something. That is SO fundamentally flawed. That is what is so commendable about this centurion. He says, "I am not worthy." And Jesus says, That's the kind of faith that I will respond to. Only the faith of the unworthy is a worthy faith. The faith of the worthy is actually an unworthy faith. That is why those who are most likely not to believe are those who "have it all." They do not need a Savior because from their perspective, they have nothing to be rescued from.

4. What happens if you do not believe? (12)

This is not a minor issue. Jesus uses this phrase, "sons of the kingdom" as a reference to the Jewish people who assumed that they were already accepted by God because of their national and religious identity. One of the problems that Jesus runs into over and over is how the Jewish people try to take Jesus and stuff him into their OT law. He has to fit into their interpretation of the law, instead of accepting that he was the author of that law and has come to fulfill it.

The gentiles, who did not have the law, tended to believe on Christ much easier than the Jews who had the law. (I will address this issue in more detail tonight in my Romans study.) But, here, the sons of the kingdom are described as not believing in Christ, like the centurion does and the consequence is that they will be thrown into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Again, Matthew does not say anything else at this point, but the language that Jesus uses here, he uses again later on where it is clear that he is speaking about hell. And this really takes us to the crux of the matter. Jesus is spelling out what it means to follow him. It means to believe on him, on his terms. It means to trust, follow and obey him on his terms. There are benefits to following Christ and many people want the benefits of following Christ, but they want to “follow” Christ on their terms, which means they do not really want to follow Christ. And when you call them out on it, they get angry.

I was talking with a man who wanted to divorce his wife, but he had no grounds for the divorce. He just did not want to be married to her anymore. He claimed to be a Christian, but was not acting like a Christian. No matter how he spun it and rationalized it, I kept saying to him, a follower of Christ follows Christ. Here is what Jesus says. Will you or will you not live under the authority of Christ? If you refuse to live under the authority of Christ, you cannot legitimately call yourself a follower of Christ.

5. What happens if you believe? (11, 13)

The statement by Christ in verses 11 and 12 are both blessing and warning and again, this is a huge clue that Jesus is dropping on us. He is amazed that the centurion believes. So, he points out that he is not the only Gentile who is going to believe. Look at this (11)!! Many will come from the east and the west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness.” The ones who were far off end up getting in, while the ones who thought they were in, were not! And part of the reason for it, is that they thought that they were better than everyone else. In other words, it’s all about me, and just me and people like me. What is Jesus doing here? He is laying the groundwork for the church, which is going to be made up of people from many different ethnicities and backgrounds. Do you see this? This is part of what you are saved to? This is part of what it means to be in the body of Christ. Here is my point. When you believe in Christ, you not only get a savior, you get a kingdom. You get an entire community of believers, many of whom do not look like you or have the same background as you. If you say, I want Christ, but I don’t want his community, then you don’t want Jesus.

Let me ask you something. Do you expect all of the people in a local hotel to get together and all eat a meal together? Of course not! If, on your way home from church today, you stopped at 5 different drive-thrus so that each member of the family could have exactly what they each wanted and you went home where each one went to his own room and ate, I would say, you really don’t have a home, you simply have a hotel. A good family does not do that. Families eat together, so that we learn to give up rights and conveniences for the sake of others. As time goes on, you gain so much from the lives of others. All of that is previewed right here. But, the fulfillment of that will have to wait. For now, the servant was healed, at that very moment. For Jesus said, “Go; let it be done for you as you have believed.” His belief was true belief, because he believed in the authority and power of Christ.