

The Marvel of Saving Faith

Luke 7:1-10

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Do you possess saving faith? There is no question more important. The pages of your Bible contain countless warnings against the deceptions of a spurious faith.¹ The apostle Paul warned his young protégé Timothy of perilous times to come due the prevalence of “a form of godliness” which serves only as a cloak for moral decadence (II Timothy 3:5). In our time, we are witnessing Paul’s warning being fulfilled right before our very eyes. Decades of so-called “seeker-sensitive” evangelism have laid the groundwork for what will now become generations of moralistic, sanitized church-goers who know little or nothing of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But it is not as if the word of God has failed. If we are willing to stop being ashamed of the gospel of Christ, and return to Christ-centered, biblical preaching, perhaps God will revive our churches with a renewal of saving faith. In this discourse, we will take a closer look at the essential characteristics of saving faith with the hope that we may long for its return, and perhaps, by the mercies of God, overcome the damning religion of our times.

The Faith of the Elders (Luke 7:1-5).

Having completed his discourse in the hearing of the people, Jesus entered Capernaum. It is not clear what the people did with what they heard. But we do know the Lord ended that discourse with a severe warning to those who hear and do not act on his word (Luke 6:46-49). Now, Capernaum became the center of our Lord’s Galilean ministry after those in his hometown synagogue attempted to kill him. And what sparked their murderous rage? They tried to kill Jesus because he confronted their long heritage of unbelief and ethnic-based exclusivism (Luke 4:14-30). Throughout redemptive history, those who trust in themselves that they are righteous, have persecuted and even killed those who preach that salvation is of God, and God alone. Throughout her history, Israel forsook the true God for gods of their own design, and then killed

¹ Here are just a few: Isaiah 29:13-16; Jeremiah 7:1-11; Matthew 7:21-27; 25:31-46; Luke 6:46-49; Acts 20:28-30; I Corinthians 6:9-10; Galatians 1:6-9; Ephesians 5:5-7; Colossians 2:20-23; Hebrews 6:1-8; James 1:5-8; 3:13-18; II Peter 2:1; Jude v.3-4; Revelation 2:19-23.

the prophets who called for a return to true faith in the living God. By the first-century, Israel no longer practiced open idolatry, but had instead developed an apostate form of religion based upon personal and ethnic merit. Jesus continually exposed this form of Judaism as being grounded in unbelief and sourced in the demonic (Matthew 5:20; Mark 6:6; John 5:39-47; 6:41-66; 7:1-24; 8:31-59). They professed faith in God, but practiced a man-centered, works-based righteousness, centered upon the traditions of the elders, and not the word of God (Mark 7:1-13). And this distinction between saving faith grounded in the Scripture alone, and damning faith grounded in the schemes of men is precisely where the spiritual battles continue to this day. And one thing we must take from today's text is that unbelief is never more insidious than when masked by man-made religious tradition. Atheists and agnostics are better off spiritually than those who cloak their unbelief in religious tradition.

Misery and its Remedy

We are told a Roman centurion had a servant for whom he had great affection, and that this servant was sick and about to die. This reminds us of the universal condition of fallen humanity—spiritually dead, physically sick, and ready to die. Sickness and death are the consequence of a fallen humanity in rebellion against their Creator. But human sickness and death are not in accord with God's design for humanity. Jesus came as the Spirit-empowered Messiah to save God's people from this miserable condition, both Jews and Gentiles. And when the centurion had heard the news of Christ's authority and healing power, this hearing produced faith.

The Folly of Personal and Ethnic Merit

Therefore, when the centurion heard about Jesus' ministry, he took action and sent Jewish elders asking Jesus to come and save the life of his slave. *But mark it down:* The elders did *not* say, "The centurion has heard of your authority and power over sickness and death, and having heard, he now has faith that you are able to heal his servant." Such a statement would not have been consistent with the faith of the elders. For the faith of these elders was grounded in personal merit, plain and simple. The rabbis taught the erroneous notion that God chose Abraham because of the patriarch's piety and personal merit before God, and as Abraham's children, they believed this merit passed to them. Therefore, even though the centurion was a

Roman, the appeal of the Jewish elders was based upon what they perceived to be the accrued merit for he had done for them. Listen again to the basis of their appeal: “He is worthy for You to grant this to him; for he loves our nation and it was he who built us our synagogue” (v.4-5). There was nothing wrong with loving Israel or building a synagogue, the error came in thinking those actions earned the centurion the merit necessary to invoke Christ’s saving action. In their minds, if you wanted something from God, you must first show yourself worthy. In the final analysis, the faith of the elders was simply Judaized paganism.

Does this merit-based mindset shock you? It should. But what is more shocking, is that this a mind-set is painfully present within modern Christianity, though most Christians are in denial of it. But unbelievers see it quite clearly. For instance, many unbelievers define Christianity as a set of propositions and rules to which one must comply in order to ensure heaven after death. The unbeliever will also tell you that Christian religious tradition is comprised of people who believe they are advantaged over others because they belong to that tradition, and because they perform certain rites and rituals. They will also say most Christians hold unbelievers in contempt. What the unbeliever is essentially describing is a throwback to apostate, first-century Judaism, masking as Christian religion.

We ought not to be shocked by this perception. For merit-based, rules keeping, religious tradition like that of the Jewish elders is the natural default point of the unregenerate mind. Apart from a sovereign, saving work of the Spirit, the natural mind is religious at best. Any attempt by an unregenerate mind to approach God will be self-serving and merit-based. This is especially important to understand, for after decades of consumer-based evangelism our churches are now filled with unregenerate religious professors. Eventually these people will establish a religious tradition based in moralistic, sanitized practices designed to assure them they are better than those outside of their tradition. And such religion represents fallen man at his worst, not his best, no matter how pious and sanitized he may appear.

The “faith” of the Jewish elders was in truth not faith at all, but a spurious religion of the flesh. Just as those who attempted to kill Jesus at Nazareth proved, their man-made religion is in truth hostile toward God, and does not truly subject itself to the law of God, “for it is not even able to do so” (Romans 8:7). The faith approach of the Jewish elders therefore was nothing more than unbelief and hostility toward God masking as piety. This apostate form of Judaism was constantly seeking to corrupt the early gospel message to the Gentiles. The apostles were faithful

to repeatedly condemn it as “another gospel” sourced in Satanic influence (Galatians 1: 6-9; II Corinthians 11: 1-4, 13-15). Tragically, most of Christendom has since adopted a Judaized form of teaching based in personal merit in some form or another.²

Even most evangelical Christians believe they are saved because they said a prayer at a crusade or came forward at an altar call, and they believe they remain saved by cooperating with grace as well. In this religious scheme, man is the deciding factor; grace is necessary, but not sufficient. Man must add to grace in order to become saved and stay saved. In the final analysis, it is a religion of human achievement, and not of divine accomplishment.³ They may have indeed come forward and said a simple prayer, but not because they are better than those who did not. And if they were indeed saved, it was *only* because of the prior work of the Spirit in producing saving faith. Jesus made it crystal clear that the initiation to come to him originates with God, and not the sinner (John 6:44, 45). The regenerating work of the Spirit always precedes saving faith, and therefore, even saving faith itself is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8). What is more, divine acceptance, based on grace alone, always precedes repentance. If you get these principles reversed, and make yourself the procuring cause of your salvation, you will never know peace because you will be opposed to the gospel of God.

So, the faith of the Jewish elders was in truth no faith at all, but instead an apostate form of Judaism grounded in personal and ethnic merit. And this is a good reminder that any dead faith tradition comes to the people through their leaders. People tend to believe any “gospel” which they hear often enough, even if it is unbiblical and cannot save. And like Nicodemus of old, such people are often shocked and bewildered if, by the mercies of God, they later hear the truth that no one enters the kingdom of God apart from a prior, sovereign work of the Spirit (John 3:3-21). Let’s look now at the faith of the centurion.

The Faith of the Centurion (Luke 7:6-10).

Our text tells us the centurion heard about Jesus (7:3). The *first* principle of saving faith, is that it comes through hearing the gospel, and not through sacraments, or other religious

² Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Evangelical Arminianism all hold to a synergistic form of salvation, which in the end, represents an utter denial of salvation by the finished work of Christ alone. Some form of contribution and cooperation is always viewed as necessary to *complete* the work of Christ. Paul was correct to level an apostolic curse against such a blatant distortion of the gospel of Christ (Galatians 1:6-9).

³ See John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Paul*, p. 24-25.

activities. “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word concerning Christ” (Romans 10:17; NASB margin notes). Now the words of the centurion in verses 6-8 contain other necessary elements of saving faith. Let’s read them again.

⁶Now Jesus *started* on His way with them; and when He was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends, saying to Him, “Lord, do not trouble Yourself further, for I am not worthy for You to come under my roof; ⁷for this reason I did not even consider myself worthy to come to You, but *just* say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁸For I also am a man placed 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.”

Jesus is Lord

First, we learn here that saving faith comes from hearing the gospel. *Second*, the centurion addresses Jesus to as “Lord.” The Greek word translated here as “Lord” is *kurios*. And depending on the context, this word conveys the meaning of one in supreme authority, controller, master, sir, or God. This, by the way, is the same Greek word used by Luke in 6:46, “Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say.” Therefore, we can speak of this term “Lord” as Jesus did, that is to say, as One possessing supreme authority which, by implication, belongs only to God. This Roman centurion recognized unquestionable authority when he saw it, and he believed Jesus could command the healing of his dear slave. And this type of faith comes only by the prior operation of grace (Ephesians 2:8). The centurion’s faith was not the result of natural character, intuition, or intellect. He may not have been conscious of it happening, but clearly the Father was drawing this centurion to Jesus, and granting him the gift of saving faith (John 6:44). And this saving faith bears certain infallible characteristics, one of which we learn here is confessing Jesus as Lord (Romans 10:9).

And I am here to tell you, if there is one element of faith the centurion could teach modern evangelicals, it is the supreme authority of Jesus as Lord. For the most popular theological system within evangelicalism today denies the necessity that one must acknowledge the Lordship of Christ to be saved.⁴ It is little wonder why there is so much nominal Christianity

⁴ My reference here is to Dispensationalism, also known as “Darbyism” after its chief founder, John Nelson Darby. Dispensationalism denies any need to submit to the Lordship of Christ, only that one believes in him as Savior. This discredited system produced the rapture teaching of the popular “Left Behind” series of the 1990’s. It is a great error which has done serious damage to unsuspecting souls both within and without the church. Dispensationalism also teaches a heretical two-people of God theory, Israel and the Church, which guides much of popular evangelical

in America. Most of evangelicalism only pays lip-service to the Lordship of Christ. But there is no way to receive half of Jesus. One cannot receive him as Savior and not as Lord. To think otherwise is simply heresy, for heresy always diminishes the person and work of Christ and destroys souls. It is not possible to even begin to address the mischief this system has brought into the church, and the blasphemy it brings to the name of Christ.

Let me stress this point further: The Lordship of Christ is not something we give him; he is Lord whether we think so or not. And no one makes Jesus Lord of their life. The centurion did not make Jesus Lord; rather, the gift of faith led him simply to acknowledge this great spiritual reality. The Bible declares Jesus is Lord over all by appointment of the Father, *not* by men (Philippians 2:9-11). It is in this sense also that everyone, believer or unbeliever, has a relationship with Jesus. The only question being the *type* of relationship one has with him. By this I mean is Jesus your Savior or is he your judge? And every person who has ever lived, is living, and will ever live is one side of that divide or the other. And on that great day to come, when every person will confess Jesus as Lord; some will also know him as Lord and Savior, while others, only as their Righteous Judge.

So then, the *first* characteristic of saving faith is that it is a gift which comes by hearing the gospel, and not by sacraments and rites, nor can it be inherited. *Second*, saving faith recognizes and confesses Jesus as Lord of all. The *third* point now has to do with the basis upon which one comes to Christ.

No One comes to Christ Based Upon Personal Merit

Twice in this text the centurion conveys how he does not consider himself worthy of Jesus. The central issue here is that of personal merit. Whereas the Jewish elders freely approached Jesus within a paradigm of accrued merit, the centurion held no such paradigm within his faith. And this was not a self-esteem issue or a psychological neurosis on the part of the centurion; rather, such humility is a characteristic of saving faith. No one legitimately comes to Jesus based upon personal worthiness. There is nothing within fallen human nature that desires God or seeks after God (Romans 3:11; 8: 6-8). And modern, evangelistic marketing

support for national Israel and therefore even national conservative political policies in the United States government.

schemes represent an utter denial of this basic, biblical truth about the human condition. To listen to most preachers today, one would think it is Jesus who is not worthy to come to the sinner! This is because modern evangelical preachers have redefined the biblical Jesus to make him more marketable to so-called “seekers.” There is an abiding ignorance and denial that prevents these preachers from confronting the truth that sinners are dead in trespasses and sins, hostile toward God, and under his judgment even in the present moment (John 3:18-21). They believe people are basically good and just need to be coaxed and wooed into accepting Jesus. Worship then becomes a concert with an inspirational message at the end. I see it and hear it often. Jesus is presented by modern preachers as your pal who simply wants you to know him and enjoy his love for you. He makes no demands. Indeed, Jesus is just really happy that you are at church, and he hopes you are comfortable with the service. He even invites you to fill out an on-line survey to let him know if there is any way he can improve your church experience.

The New Testament knows nothing of this “Jesus,” and the time has passed for evangelicals to repent of this silly approach to evangelism. I will say it clearly: this is not evangelism; rather, it is a sales job that actually damns souls by assuring them they possess something they do not have. This approach stems from the faulty theology that says the deciding factor in salvation is the free will of the sinner, and not the prior action of sovereign grace. We see the results everywhere; this approach has made evangelism into a consumer-driven, retail scheme, and the preacher into a smiley, enthusiastic salesperson whose primary job it is to “sell” Jesus. Consequently, “converts,” respond as if they chose Jesus as they would any other product. Christianity has become big business, and it is the business of hell, not heaven.

The Word of Jesus is Effectual

So then, *first*, the centurion heard of Jesus, and *second*, through the instrumentality of faith alone, he recognized Jesus as One possessing supreme authority as Lord, and *third*, this produced great humility within the centurion as opposed to a sense of worthiness. And now, *fourth*, the centurion displayed absolute confidence in the effectual working of our Lord’s commands. The centurion knew whatever Jesus commanded would in fact, come to pass. The centurion was also a man under authority. He commanded one “Go!” and he would go; and to another, “Come” and he would come, and to his slave, “Do this!” and the slave would do it. All his commands were absolute. There was no hint of suggesting, inviting, asking, wooing, or of

inquiry of availability. What the centurion commanded, happened. And possessing that type of authority aided the centurion in his discerning the Lord's word as bearing supreme authority and fully *effectual*. This man knew that whatever Jesus commanded, would happen.

Is this your view of Jesus' word? Do you see him as the living Lord? Do you recognize his authority as supreme? Do you recognize you could not possibly possess any merit with which to commend yourself to him? And do you believe that what he commands, will indeed come to pass? Or do you have a very American view of Jesus as being subject to you and your choices? If you do not view Jesus as Lord; if you have come to him based upon your own merit; if you believe he only makes salvation possible, subject to your initiation and choice, then your faith is placed in a Jesus of your own imagination, and not the Jesus of the Bible; you possess a spurious faith of the flesh. And I beg you to repent and seek the truth as revealed in the New Testament message of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ *alone*.

The Absence of Saving Faith Among the People of God

If you discover yours is not a saving faith, this is now a matter of utmost urgency for you. And you now know you are one among millions of people who bear no warrant in believing they possess eternal life. This is because religion in our day is much as it was in Jesus' day. The New Testament records two times when Jesus marveled: Once at the unbelief in Nazareth (Mark 6:6; and here again, at the faith of the centurion (Luke 7:9). We, too, should marvel both at the prevalence of unbelief within our churches today, and marvel again, when someone actually believes. This is the character of the times in which we live. We should marvel at the number of mega-churches with sophisticated media centers, professional musicians, and fun and entertainment for the whole family, but no saving message. And if we come across someone from outside that paradigm who actually bears evidence of possessing saving faith, we again, should marvel and seek to affirm and nurture such a person into discipleship.

When Jesus heard the words of the centurion, he marveled at his faith. Please note: the centurion's faith was fixed upon Jesus, alone. True faith is saving not because of its quantity, but because of its quality, and quality is measured by the object of our faith, that being Jesus Christ, alone. Possessing faith itself is not the end goal, but possessing faith that has Jesus as its sole object. Many people have faith in faith, but that, too, is fallacious. To simply say, "I am a person of faith," is meaningless if that faith is not fixed on Christ alone. Likewise, anyone who thinks

they must contribute to Christ's saving work in order to be saved is in truth exercising faith in themselves, and not saving faith in Christ. The centurion appealed to Christ's saving power alone, and not any good thing he, the centurion, had done to merit it. And this we are told, resulted in our Lord stating he had not found so great a faith in Israel. Such a great, saving faith, has Jesus Christ as its sole object; it is fixed upon Him, alone. And Jesus found no such faith in Israel. What an astonishing, grievous state! Here is the measure of religion among fallen humanity—lots of tradition, lots of activity, but no salvation. Here Jesus is leveling another stinging indictment against the prevailing unbelief within Israel.

What had Jesus found in Israel? He found opposition and murderous rage; he found vile hypocrisy; he found his divine authority to heal and forgive sins challenged. There was simply no place for Jesus within the so-called "faith" of Israel (John 1:11). And apart from the sovereign, free, and gracious intervention of God, Israel, and all the world with it, "would have become like Sodom, and would have resembled Gomorrah" (Romans 9:29).

Is there room for Jesus within the church, today? There was a time even within the early church that Jesus was put outside and left knocking on the door (Revelation 3:20-22). And time and time again, throughout church history, much of what calls itself Christianity has thrust Jesus to the sidelines in favor of their own systems of man-centered, merit-based schemes.⁵ Do we find in the church today the great faith of the centurion, or the pseudo-faith of the Jewish elders of apostate Israel? Is Christendom in a largely apostate state as was first-century Israel? I believe it is. But the word of God has not failed. And saving faith remains available as a gift of God to those hear the gospel and come to Christ, and Christ alone, apart from any works or cooperation on the part of the dead sinner (Ephesians 2:1-9).

How about you? Do you recognize Jesus as supreme Lord over your life? Does this produce in you a sense of genuine, godly humility? Do you, like the centurion, recognize you cannot come to Jesus on the basis of personal merit? And do you recognize whom the Lord commands to rise from a state of spiritual death, do in fact rise to new life? Jesus said it, "Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live" (John 5:25). The spiritually dead are enabled both to hear, and to respond, in new life. This is the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the power the centurion recognized in Jesus. The question before you, is this: Do you hear the voice of the Son

⁵ See T. F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers*.

of God calling you to rise from the dead and to enter new life in him? If so, come to him as Lord of your salvation, without one plea, and trust that he is alone is able to save you completely and forever (Hebrews 7:25).

The Effect of Saving Faith

When the messengers returned to the house of the centurion, they found the slave in good health. He wasn't just improved. He was fully restored to health. He was "whole" (KJV). Something miraculous had occurred. The centurion believed Jesus could do what was impossible for any mere man to perform. This meant that this Roman centurion, no doubt from a pagan background, now possessed the faith of Abraham, while the Jewish elders displayed only a form of pseudo-pagan faith. Genuine saving faith produces wholeness, but a dead faith leaves one sick and dying. If your profession of faith is without any power and life, then it is critical that you consider whether yours is a saving faith. Don't wait. Don't leave it to another day. Come to Christ now, and come to the Christ who is Lord over all your life. Come to the One who alone has the power to make you whole. And come to him *not* on the basis of accrued merit, but on the basis that he promised to save all those who trust in his power alone to save. For while it is true that no one can come to Jesus unless the Father draws him; included in this principle is also the promise that anyone who does come to him, he will by no means cast out (John 6:37). Come to him, now. **AMEN.**

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