

Matthew 8:5-13 [NIV]

When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. ⁶ "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly."

⁷ Jesus said to him, "Shall I come and heal him?"

⁸ The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹ For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

¹⁰ When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. ¹¹ I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. ¹² But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

¹³ Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that moment.

Just this week, Annette and I started pre-marital mentoring with another young couple who are considering marriage. We've done a couple of these this year already, and it's typically a very fun thing to do – to get to know their story and what God's doing between them.

It's actually a very happy thing to be doing, especially in these different, difficult days. A young couple in love looking to the future is a good reminder that, in spite of all the conflict and politics and fires and sickness, the world still moves on, people still fall in love and marry and have children and make plans – trying to follow the Lord.

Because, the fact is, until Jesus comes back, this is the world they know and they'll deal with, just like we've all dealt with the world we were given. And, as others invested in us and prayed that we'd be, above all things, faithful to Christ, so we invest in, and we pray that those who come behind us will be faithful to Him too.

Anyway, one of the things we usually ask couples to tell us is what it was that first attracted them to each other – and what it is that keeps them attracted? What about the other was provocative enough to you to get to know them, then to go out with them and now to consider marrying them – spending the rest of your life with them?

Those answers are fun to hear, and it's all quite encouraging to talk about.

In fact, maybe you who are married or seeing someone should talk about those things with your significant other. Tell them – let them know – what it was and is that's attractive about them.

Attractiveness. What is that? What provokes "attractiveness," if that is even a word?

I suppose that's a pretty subjective question and, at least sometimes, the answer would be, "it depends."

Just like it's said that *beauty* is in the eye of the beholder, so is *attractiveness*, at some level.

For example, if I made the statement, "Jesus was an attractive person," that would be only *partly* true. Jesus *was certainly* attractive to *some*, and yet He was quite *unattractive* – and even *repulsive* – to *others*.

It depends on the person.

Jesus was actually quite threatening to some people. Consider all the stuff He said about doing as He says, submitting our will to His will, giving up our rights to ourselves, laying down our lives for the good of others, offering to let someone hit us again after they've hit us once, all of the "last will be first and the first will be last" stuff, and the "when you're weak you're strong" stuff – and on and on. You know, that kind of talk made *some* people so *mad* they wanted to *kill* Jesus – which is, of course, just what they did.

And you know, that kind of talk from Jesus still makes people mad *today*, and it makes some *church* people mad.

I mean, sure, they're good with Jesus – until the stuff He says starts *interfering* in the way they want to live their lives. They don't like to hear Him saying that His followers ought to lay down their rights and think of others before they think of themselves and all that stuff.

But you know, that's who Jesus is – that's what He said.

And more than saying it – that's what He did. His whole life – and His death – was an example of, "I am here to give myself for the good of others."

The fact is, it takes a certain kind of person to find that sort of talk from Jesus attractive.

Most people don't.

To people who always need to win, always need to be proven right, and to those who have a need for personal control and power, like most of the people in leadership in Jesus' day (and today, for that matter, whether religious or secular – either one), Jesus proved to be deeply offensive, because to them, He exuded weakness. So, He did not provoke attraction in them. He provoked in them anger and resistance.

Lots of people react like that when someone comes along and tells them the truth – about themselves – that they don't want to hear.

And it was true even for some of those in Jesus' closer circle – even some in His family – who were telling Him, "Hey, if you're going to try to be somebody – if you're going to go after influence and power and make a splash in the world, then you've got to take a different path than what you're doing. You have to show people who you are. You need to get some exposure! You'll never be a *winner* if you hang out your whole life in all these little, backwater towns, hiding your power from the important people of the world. Nobody's going to see you, nobody's going to follow you, nobody's going to be impressed."

It was the very same sort of temptation that *Satan* hit Jesus with in the *desert*.

It's a very earthly-centered – this-world-centric – perspective. And people with that kind of mind-set just aren't attracted to Jesus. Political people. Wealthy people. People who are always admiring themselves in the mirror. Those proudly self-sufficient, "I'll-do-it-on-my-own" sorts of people. Generally speaking, people with earthly power and status and position. Now, not all of them, but a lot of them – maybe even most of them, are not really attracted to Jesus, because they already have everything they want.

I mean, Jesus said, *"It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich person to enter God's Kingdom."*¹

And of course, in that assessment, Jesus isn't saying there's a problem with the mechanism of salvation. Jesus is saying, rather, that there's a problem with the attitude of the person.

And Jesus also says that there are lots of people like that – it's the difference between the wide and narrow gates and roads.² There are lots of people on the wide road, and they just don't find Jesus attractive – or provocative, in any positive way.

But, there *are* people in whom Jesus *does* provoke attraction. There are people who encounter Jesus and are immediately compelled to engage with Him – they want to know more about Him, and so they follow Him around and begin to listen to Him and to consider what He says, and then finally, they fully embrace Him.

And, again, it has nothing to do with Jesus being in any way different with different people. Jesus' manner and message are both completely consistent. From person to person, He's the same, the same.

What it has to do with is the attitude – the mind-set – of the person.

Some people do choose the narrow gate and the narrow road, and a great example of one is this centurion of Matthew 8.

You probably know that every time a centurion is mentioned in the New Testament, it's positive. Scripture always honors centurions.

Polybius was a Greek historian who describes the character of a centurion as, "One who is no seeker after danger but one who can command, who is steady in action, and who is reliable. Centurions are never over-anxious to rush into combat, but when hard-pressed, they will hold their ground and, if necessary, die at their post."

Each one commanded 100 men – thus their title, "centurion," and it's said they were the cement that held the Roman army together.

And yet, as powerful a person as he was, *this* centurion knew that he was not sufficient to handle, alone, the challenges of life.

He was strong, he was brave, he was sure; he was a leader.

But he was also compassionate and caring – and humble.

And he knew those traits were not incompatible, unlike many believe today.

The former – his compassion and care – we see in his concern for the paralysis of, as verse 6 states, "his servant."

Literally, the word is the word for "boy." The phrase is, *"my boy has been laid aside."*

And the word for boy is strange to find here. He doesn't say, explicitly, "slave." But neither does he explicitly say this was his "son," so it actually could have been either that he's speaking of. We don't know for sure, but either way, this centurion's concern for this young one of his household, and the effort he makes to seek out Jesus, tells us of his compassion and care.

But, you know, even more impressive is this centurion's *humility*.

Our world and especially our nation have nearly demonized being humble. More and more seem to almost despise humility as a trait of character.

We prize self-sufficiency, self-assertion, personal power, status, and pride of position. "We'll do it ourselves. We don't need anyone's help – only the weak need the help of other people."

And all that thinking has crept into the Church, and particularly the American Church. Friends, here me say this: that is not of the Kingdom of God, and this is why: that sort of thinking conveniently forgets a major truth about humanity that is taught all though the Bible, and that is the fact that we are broken, we are fallen, we are weak and we are needy – every one of us in some way or another, and all of us spiritually.

There are simply some things that we will never be able to do, successfully, ourselves. And, let me just say, healing the hurts of this nation is one of them. All these many things that we're going through as a people – from the fires to the virus and everything in between – do not constitute a pull-ourselves-up-by-our-bootstraps moment. This is neither a "defund-the-police" nor an "arrest-them-all" moment. This is a fall-on-our-face-before-God-and-beg-Him-to-save-us moment, because we are wholly unable to fix all this ourselves.

And honestly, I'm convinced God is trying to tells us that. Just as He's done with nations throughout history, He's allowing things in our land in order to try to get our attention – and not so much out of anger as out of mercy.

He doesn't want to destroy us. He wants to heal us.

But He can't heal the proud.

He can't heal the self-sufficient.

He can't heal those who demand their rights – even their right to themselves.

Whose land *does* God heal? God heals the land of *"those who will pray and turn from their wickedness and seek Him – in humility –"*³ That's what 2 Chronicles tells us.

And that brings us right back to humility – recognizing that we're inadequate – and admitting that we need help.

And you know, that is just so hard for some people, and it's especially hard for us Americans. But it's a mark of godliness that Jesus appreciates and honors.

¹ Matthew 19:24

² Matthew 7:13

³ 2 Chronicles 7:14

In fact, it's what so impressed Him about this centurion.

As strong and masculine and powerful and successful as this centurion was, he was also humble. He knew that what he faced was beyond him, and he was humble enough to ask for help.

And, he knew where to go to get it.

Verse 5 there tells us right off that he came to Jesus asking for help.

But you see, his humility went beyond that.

This wasn't just one of those instances where someone says, "I can't do anything about this, and I'm not sure whether or not *you* can either, *but*, if you *can*..."

No.

Jesus, right away declares, "*I'll go and heal him.*"

But the centurion then replies to Jesus in two ways that tell us even more about his character.

First, he makes this extraordinary admission in verse 8 there, where he says, "*Lord, I do not deserve...*"

And right there we see how different this man was from most of the rest of his world – and frankly – most of our world today.

In a world filled with people who are saying, "I *do* deserve," here's a guy who realizes what he *doesn't* deserve.

This Roman with no Jewish history in just this one statement here, shows us that he understands the idea of grace better than nearly all of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries, and very likely better than many church-going people today.

Because you see, so many people today hit a little hardship, and their first reaction is, "This shouldn't be happening to us. We *deserve more* – we *deserve better* – than this!"

But you see, here's this centurion who knew the truth.

He *knew* he *didn't deserve anything*, least of all to have Jesus *come to his home* – to *stoop to enter* into his *world* and his *troubles* and his *pains*. He didn't *deserve* anything from Jesus, and he knew it!

But in humility he asked Jesus, not for something he thought he deserved, but for something he knew he didn't deserve. He asked for grace. He asked for mercy.

And that's the posture of humility, you see?

And man – that gets Jesus' attention. That makes Him smile, actually.

And then, the centurion follows that with just an amazing confession of faith in Jesus' power and authority. He totally gets that Jesus doesn't have to *go anywhere* to accomplish *this* or *anything else*, because Jesus has authority over stuff like this *in just His word*.

Same as him – same as the centurion.

He doesn't have to go anywhere to command his soldiers. He doesn't have to go and have tea with them and talk it over and maybe come to some sort of compromise. All he has to do is send his word: "Do this," and it happens.

That's the nature of authority, and he knew Jesus had it. In fact, he knew that better than nearly everyone else around him. Later on, in chapter 11, Jesus castigates Capernaum – an almost exclusively Jewish village – because of its utter lack of faith.

The one guy in town who got Jesus was the Gentile. Against the dark backdrop of faith in Capernaum, this centurion was a supernova, which is why Jesus goes on to talk as He does there in verses 10-12, about how it's not lineage or ethnicity or geography or family or any right we think we have that's going to put us in His Kingdom.

What puts people into His kingdom and keeps us there? Humility. Recognizing Jesus for who He is – and recognizing ourselves for who we aren't – and asking Jesus for mercy.

It's recognizing that Jesus is Lord and sufficient and powerful, and that we're none of those things.

It's realizing that Jesus needs nothing, and that we need everything, and that anything we get from Him we don't deserve. It's all sheer mercy.

As soon as we think, "*well, we deserve,*" we have something to learn from this Centurion.

Jesus is the provocateur of humility.

If we feel we deserve, then we have a misguided conception of Jesus.

If we feel we deserve, then, unfortunately, there's very little room in our life for Jesus to operate – which is precisely what's so wrong with so many in our nation today.

We are a people who truly believe we're entitled – to wealth and health and ease. We think we're entitled to God's favor and blessing. We think we deserve all that and lots more. We are so proud that we're proud of our pride.

We refuse to see that healing requires humility.

To some degree we can repent of this pride on behalf of our nation, and we should and we do from time to time. It may well be that the church's prayers of repentance are all that's keeping our nation afloat.

But you know, in the end, all we can really speak for – the only person's path we can determine is our own.

Jesus is happy to heal all that paralyzes us.

But God's healing requires humility. It's part of faith – the part that admits, "I don't deserve that for which I'm asking – I don't even deserve to ask. But since you made the offer, Jesus, I'm asking just the same."

I wonder if someone here needs healing today – if you need healing, as this centurion did, for yourself? For someone around you, for someone you love? Your neighbor? Your family?

Would you be willing to ask Jesus for that, not because you believe you deserve it, but because you know you don't?

Is that kind of humility a part of your faith – your relationship with Jesus?

If not, how about praying for that – that God's Spirit might use the example of this centurion to change your perspective about yourself and Jesus and humility and mercy?

Prayer:

Lord, would You break down all that would make us prideful – all that feeds any entitlement mentality within us, all that makes us believe we deserve anything from you – and would you make us a truly humble people, that

we could see ourselves for who we really are, and so we might see You for who You really are. Amen.

Closing Song: *Humble Thyself in the Sight of the Lord*

Benediction:

In Matthew 8 here, you notice there is a grouping of healings, and notice who Jesus healed: He healed someone with leprosy, a Gentile, and a woman—all of whom were powerless and marginalized in the Jewish society of His

day. Jesus picked, not the strong, but the marginalized—the weak, you see—to demonstrate His power in and through.

And He still does that today.

He looks for truly humble people—and people that life has humbled—to deliver and to make whole.

May He find in you and in me and in us, together, that sort of faith-filled humility, so that He might heal us and make us whole.

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