

I walked out of an exam one time feeling pleased and confident because I knew the material and had certainly done very well. But when I got my exam back, I was stunned and disappointed. The grade I received was a lot lower than I expected, so I arranged to meet with the professor to find out why. In his office, he agreed that my answers were right, and that clearly I knew and understood all the material. Then he explained that he had marked my grade down because I hadn't listed specific citations from the readings. When I pointed out that he'd never indicated that was what he wanted or expected, he replied that next time, I would know. When we aren't told what is needed, wanted or required, uncertain or unclear expectations are horribly frustrating. **Both of the Scripture passages today relate to what God wants and what pleases the Lord.**

In the Luke 7 text, there are several unexpected details that make it much more than just a simple miracle story. In the ancient world, centurions were the backbone of the Roman military, capable characters tough enough to achieve that high rank. These were well-trained and experienced warriors, veterans who were generally in charge of 100 soldiers, and who could exercise considerable power and authority. It also helps to know that the region around Capernaum was a land conquered and occupied by the Roman army, **and a particularly difficult and unpleasant assignment.** It was isolated and far from their Roman home land, and the Jewish people were nearly impossible to govern. These folks were unusually obstinate and rebellious, with their seemingly fanatical religious rules and rituals, and tradition of avoiding any contact with gentiles... all of which tended to create even more tension and resentment, and so generally, the Roman soldiers were often brutal, hated having to be in Israel, and they despised the Jews. **But the centurion of the Luke 7 story does not fit that image.**

vs. 2-5

A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us."

In the ancient world slaves were valued only for their labor, and seen as little more than **living tools** for their owner's use. Slave owners typically had very little concern for the health and well-being of their slaves, but this officer had compassion for his sick servant and was willing to put himself out on his behalf. And typically, as a matter of pride and honor Roman officers did not ask or expect Jews in occupied Israel to do them any favors. **But this centurion does not fit that common stereotype.** He demonstrated compassion and kindness toward his slave, and had earned the support & respect from the Jewish leaders... and so they tell about what he has done for them, and earnestly appeal to Jesus on his behalf. Continuing,

vs. 6-7

And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed.

Respecting that observant Jews did not enter the homes of gentiles, the message he sent demonstrated respect and humility in saying he was unworthy of having Jesus come to his home, and the centurion expressed his faith by believing that Jesus could heal even from a distance. * Clearly Jesus was pleased by what he heard,

vs. 9 When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."

What a shocking declaration that must have been for the crowd, for praiseworthy faith to show up in such an unlikely person. But that verse, that statement is at the heart of this passage, and perhaps the reason it was included in the Gospel of Luke. When the Gospel of Luke was written, more and more gentiles were coming to faith, and there was some tension as the Jews and gentiles (former pagans) **were trying to work out how to be the Church together...** and this passage has much to do about the issues and concerns they were confronting. **This centurion represents an ideal or model gentile Christian** ~ who believes in Jesus Christ without ever having seen him, ~ who shows compassion for the sick and powerless, ~ who respects the traditions of Judaism and the Jews, ~ and who demonstrates humility and has trusting-faith in Jesus. **And to look a bit deeper, there is another lesson in**

this text. The religious leaders asked Jesus to heal the servant because of the centurion's righteousness and good deeds,

vs. 5

"He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us."

There is no indication that Jesus was impressed by his good deeds. But it says, Jesus was amazed, pleased and impressed that the centurion considered himself unworthy of a visit, and that in his humility and compassion, by faith he trusts that Jesus could heal his servant. Jesus never mentions that the centurion had built a synagogue, but notices that his faith has exceeded any seen in Israel. Clearly, something about this centurion that impressed Jesus. **So what was it about his faith that amazed and pleased the Lord?** That aspect of this story is the core and addresses what may be the most important questions we ever ask... **what does God want, and how do we please the Lord?** Unlike my professor, who didn't say what he wanted up front, God is quite clear, and spells that out specifically as we see for example, through the prophet Micah. During the time of the prophet Micah, outwardly, the nation of Israel was very religious, and they were doing rituals and sacrifices perfectly, and yet the nation of Israel had become exceedingly corrupt. For five chapters, the prophet explains various ways the nation has abandoned God and how they had been instructed to live. Micah lays it out like evidence being presented in a lawsuit, stating that God has a complaint against these same people whom he saved them from Egyptian slavery and oppression, and then gave a homeland flowing with milk and honey. **It is painfully obvious that the nation has broken God's covenant.** Confronted with the truth of God's accusations and their guilt, listen, and hear how the people of Israel respond:

vs. 6-7

"With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

How typically human !! 'what can I do to atone for the harm I have done? 'What will it take to buy God's mercy and good will? 'What can I do, what can I give to make up for my past? **The bad news**, is that we can't do enough or give enough, and there is really nothing we can do or give to make it happen. * **And the good news**, is that, there is nothing we need to do or give to make God's grace happen. God was not interested in any huge payment of stuff or sacrifice, as if God's favor & love were some commodity to be purchased. God's focus is not our stuff or deeds -- but actually **God wants us**. It's not about what we have, or even what we do, **but who we are. God wants to be our God, to have an authentic relationship with us, so that God can bless and guide us toward living in truth, in the wonderful and meaningful life God intends for us... and for us to look at life through the lens of that relationship.** * **God has given us this time and place in which to live and learn, in which to grow in our faith and walk closer with our God. So how does experiencing God's gracious love change how we live?, and what does God really want? ... and how can we please the Lord?** Through the prophet Micah, God gives us the answer

vs. 8

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

1st -- to do justice

In the Old Testament, justice is a very broad concept, which includes God's desire and intention for us to live together in peaceful community, following the ideals of justice, mercy and fair treatment. God's justice calls us to be balanced and caring relationships which places the good and welfare of other people ahead of our own wants, desires and inclinations. Justice is making decisions and choices in life that honor God's truth and gracious love for us. **To do justice is difficult, but not complicated.**

2nd -- to love kindness In Hebrew, loving-kindness is a word that describes God's love, mercy, nurture and compassion toward us, and our call to respond by showing that same compassion, mercy and kindness to other people. It describes a life that is defined by God's grace, that then guides our affections, our treatment of all others... **again, it's not all that complicated, but can be very difficult.**

3rd -- to walk humbly with God Humility is recognizing our need and dependence before God. It's when our relationship with God is our life's anchor and we are sensitive to God's presence & blessings. **It is living to honor and deepen our relationship with the Lord.**

So as I considered the message of these texts this week, I tried to recall the specifics of my own spiritual journey, and the circumstance and instances of my faith increasing... and one thing in particular seemed to unify all of them: **my moments of truth and insight, of deepest inspiration, were when the reality of God's love became most clear in wonderfully new, transforming & significant ways...** and these unexpected surges in my faith and walk with God were when in a refreshed and more personal way, **I understood and believed that the scope of God's love extends far beyond where I had previously believed...** in ways beyond reasoning, logic or cognitive understanding. And though I had thought I understood God's love and power, suddenly **in a flash** I saw that there is so very much more. In my experience, my significant surges of growth toward God have never been anything I have done as in a behavior or deed, **but my spiritual spurts have always come as an enlargement of my appreciation of God's great mercy & awesome love.** Certainly it's helped to become more disciplined in prayer. It has helped to read more of the Bible more regularly, and it was important to be a Christian in fellowship, and to actively and faithfully serve in the church. Certainly I had to be where I could hear and respond to God's voice, but it was not by my deeds or good works that spurts & surges of spiritual growth were accomplished... **but rather, it has always been , totally the gracious work of God, as step by step, I would increasingly recognize in a progression of revelation, in a process of experience,** as more and more I learned what it truly means to say, "God is love", **and that God loves me, and desires to love all of creation through me.** And it is because we do recognize that God is love, **and loves us,** that we want and are able to respond in faith, and we desire to know and do, what it is that God wants. To personalize Micah's message in vs. 8, which is also why and how the centurion pleased Jesus:

Norm, He has told you what is good; and what does the Lord require of Norm but that you do justice, and that you love kindness, and that Norm walks humbly with his God?

The call today is not to take a specific action or try harder. It's a call to reflect, and then **respond from within** according to the powerful truth of God's love and grace, for it's that which leads to a living faith that pleases the Lord.