

Sermon for May 29, 2016 - 2nd Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 7:1-10 NIV84

Theme: **Our Worthiness before God . . .**

1. . . . *does not come from who we are and what we've done.*
2. *It comes through faith in Christ's undeserved mercy for us.*

When Jesus had finished saying all this in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. ² There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. ³ The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. ⁴ When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, ⁵ because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." ⁶ So Jesus went with them. He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. ⁷ That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁸ 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." ⁹ When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." ¹⁰ Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

The scene is all too familiar at a non-Lutheran funeral. A man gets up to speak about the deceased, saying something to the effect: "Jane was a good person. Look at everything she did for her family and community. If anyone deserves to be in heaven, it is Jane."

What do you think about statements like that? Does our own "goodness" in life earn God's favor? Does the LORD want us to point to either our own deeds or the deeds of others as the reason why he should hear our prayer? "Lord, you have to help my friend. Look at all the good he has done for others. He deserves your help!" If God is not moved by such a prayer, what moves Him?

With the account of the Centurion of Capernaum as our guide, let us answer these questions, under the theme: **Our Worthiness before God** 1) *does not come from who we are and what we've done.* 2) *It comes through faith in Christ's undeserved mercy for us.*

Part One: *Our worthiness before God does not come from who we are and what we've done.*

Our sermon text takes place almost immediately after Jesus preached his famous Sermon on the Mount. We read: *When Jesus had finished saying all this in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum.* Jesus had made that little city his home base for all his mission work in Galilee. It was Peter's homeⁱ and the place where Matthew collected taxesⁱⁱ before becoming a disciple. Jesus performed many miracles in that town.ⁱⁱⁱ He even healed a demon possessed man –

probably in the very synagogue mentioned in our text.^{iv} He was, therefore, well known in Capernaum – not only to the Jews, but among the Gentiles as well.

There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die.

Centurions were highly respected military officers in charge of 100 Roman soldiers. From the little information we can gather about this particular man, it seems as if he was the very definition of what it means to be “good.” He was well respected by the Jewish community (which was no small feat for a *Roman* soldier). He seemed to have treated his servants humanely and with respect – even going so far as to seek help when a particularly well-liked slave was lying paralyzed^v and near death. But the most stand out feature of this centurion was that he was a “Gentile believer” – someone who adhered to the Jewish religion, but had not undergone circumcision.

³ *The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant.*

Wow: Jewish elders agreeing to speak to Jesus on behalf of a gentile Roman soldier? This almost seems like a miracle in and of itself. It speaks volumes as to the kind of man the centurion was. Most Jews hated the Roman occupation of their land; but they didn’t hate this guy. He expressed love for the Jews, their culture and, most importantly, their religion. Could you imagine if some rich person had built this Church for us - paying for it completely out of his own pocket? This is what the centurion did for the Jews in Capernaum.

Is it any wonder that the Jewish elders granted the centurion’s request? Of course they would bring his appeal before Jesus. In fact, they had such admiration for the centurion that they decided to do more than he asked: they would take it upon themselves to convince Jesus that the centurion was worthy of his help!

⁴ *When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this,"* ⁵ *because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue."*

Brothers and sisters in Christ, did you notice anything wrong with the way the Jews presented their appeal to Jesus? It’s not found in what they are asking, but in why Jesus should grant their request. “*This man deserves to have you do this,*” they claimed.

Was that true – did the centurion “deserve” Jesus help because of all the good things he did? Well, let me ask you this: Does a servant “deserve” his master’s praise for simply doing his duty? Does a child “deserve” to be rewarded with candy for simply obeying its parents? If the answer is no in these cases, then how can a sinful human “deserve” anything from his almighty and holy God? We are his creatures, not his business partners! On top of this, God demands perfect love and obedience to his Word. Was the centurion perfect? He would be the first to confess he wasn’t; and that is exactly why he appealed to Jesus for help.

Jesus went with the Jewish elders – not because the centurion’s good deeds compelled him to help, but because of the centurion’s humble faith in Christ that would soon be revealed.

Part Two: Our worthiness comes through faith in Christ's undeserved mercy for us.

It seems as if someone from the meeting with the Jewish elders must have run back to tell the centurion about the conversation they had. This news disturbed the centurion. Why? Because they misrepresented him and his request! For this reason, when Jesus *was not far from the house . . . the centurion sent friends to say to him: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof."*⁷ *That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you."*

The centurion was well acquainted with Jewish law. He knew that Jesus could be considered ceremonially unclean if he entered his house.^{vi} That would cause Jesus undue trouble, and the centurion didn't want that. Why not? Because the centurion believed that Jesus was the Messiah – the LORD incarnate. Through the words of his friends, the centurion confessed: "I am an unclean sinner and am unworthy of your mercy. And yet I call to you for help, dear Jesus. Why? Because I know who you are and firmly believe what the Scriptures say about you and your love."

Here's another problem: if Jesus were to come into the centurion's house now to heal his servant, that would be to the centurion's glory instead of Christ's. How so? Because everyone had heard the Jews explain that he "deserved" this miracle. The centurion did not want that. In everything, he wanted Christ's name to be glorified. For this reason he says: *"But say the word and my servant will be healed."*

And what was the centurion's reasoning behind this strange request? He says:⁸ *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."*

In other words, the centurion is saying: "I am a man subject to others. You, however, are subject to no one. If I, someone who is subject to the authority of others, can simply speak and have my servants do my bidding, how much more will all heaven and earth do what you command - since you have all authority and are subject to none?"

⁹ *When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him.*

Think about this verse for a moment. Jesus, the almighty God, was amazed. At what? The good deeds this centurion performed? No, rather at the humble faith this centurion confessed. He, a gentile, saw, understood and believed what few Israelites did: that Jesus is the Messiah. The centurion did not come before Jesus relying on his works, but on God's mercy. In no way did he try to glorify his own name, but sought Jesus' glory in everything. He freely confessed his uncleanness and unworthiness. And yet, this did not stop him from expecting Jesus' mercy and love. Why? Because the Scriptures promised it!

Turning to the crowd following him, [Jesus] said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel."

Since the centurion, through his humility and faith, sought to glorify Jesus' name above all else; Jesus' honored the centurion by publicly praising his confession and faith. Jesus also granted the centurions' request, as we read

¹⁰ *Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.*

Let's go back to our original question: does a person's "goodness" ever make him deserving of God's favor? The answer is clear: Our worthiness before God does not come from who we are or what we have done. Being sinners, we have no right to expect anything but eternal wrath and punishment from him – even if we lived a most helpful and self-sacrificing life. No, our worthiness can only come from Jesus' work on our behalf. He lived the perfect life we all failed to live - thereby winning the righteousness we need to stand before God. He suffered death on the cross in payment for our sins - thereby forgiving them in full. We receive these gifts of God's love only through repentance and faith. In other words, our "worthiness" to receive God's favor does not come from within us. It is given to us as a gift, for Christ's sake.

And so the proper way to approach God is not by confessing our deeds, but our need for the forgiveness and mercy he offers us in Christ, as the Scriptures say: ¹⁶ *You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.* ¹⁷ *The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*^{vii}

God wants us to come before him with humble hearts that joyfully believe his promises. Yes, we deserve nothing, and yet we can expect to receive everything. Why? Because He promises to answer us for Christ's sake. Like the centurion, we can make bold requests before God to heal friends who are sick, and rescue those facing any problem. We can make these requests trusting that Christ will hear us and do what we ask – all according to his will and to the glory of his name.

Our Worthiness before God *does not come from who we are and what we've done. It comes through faith in Christ's undeserved mercy for us. May the Holy Spirit prevent us from ever forgetting this wonderful truth. Amen.*

ⁱ Cf. Matthew 8:14

ⁱⁱ Cf. Matthew 9:9

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Luke 4:23

^{iv} Cf. Luke 4:33-37

^v Cf. Matthew

^{vi} Cf. Acts 10:28 & 11:2-3

^{vii} Psalm 51:16-17 NIV84