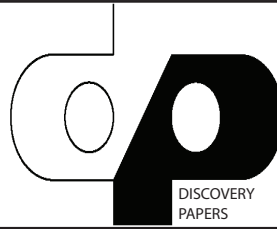


# MARVELOUS FAITH

**SERIES: INVITED: STORIES OF  
WELCOME IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE.**



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Luke 7:1-10  
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*Luke 7:1-10*

## Marvelous Faith

When I was younger, I LOVED watching fireworks on the 4th of July. I would look forward to them with anticipation weeks in advance. When the 4th came, my family would head out to whatever spot we had picked out that year. Growing up in Minnesota — the land of 10,000 lakes — this was usually someplace where we could sit on the lakeshore, out a dock, or sometimes even on a boat and watch as the fireworks lit up both the sky and the water. It was always a highlight of the summer.

But as I grew up, I noticed that for some reason, the fireworks shows became less and less impressive. At first I thought we maybe just picked a bad spot that year. Or maybe the city had some budget cuts and needed to scale things down a bit that year. But as the years went on, I continued to be less amazed by these festive displays of American patriotism.

Eventually, I realized that the problem was not with the fireworks displays. It wasn't the atmosphere or the location or the weather or any other factor that I could identify. The problem wasn't really a problem at all — it was just fact of life. *As people get older, it takes more and more to truly amaze us.*

This past 4th of July, my wife Linzy and I drove to San Jose to watch the fireworks. I was pretty pessimistic on the way down. The crowds were going to be huge. The traffic was going to be terrible. The fireworks were going to be disappointing. To my surprise, it was actually the best firework show that I had seen in many years. I will even admit that a little bit of that childhood excitement came back.

But there was a family that was sitting next to us with three little kids—probably all under ten. And these kids were AMAZED by the fireworks. They were captivated and having the time of their lives. And watching these kids reminded me that fireworks would never be as amazing for me as they were when I was kid. The times in life that leave us, as adults, truly amazed are few and far between.

This is week four of our nine-week summer series called *Invited: Stories of Welcome in the Gospel of Luke*. In this series, we are looking at stories in which Jesus extends hospitality to outcasts, outsiders, people on the fringe. Today, we are looking at another one of these interactions. But this one is unique, because by the end of it, we see that Jesus finds himself **amazed**—marveling at this outsider with whom he is interacting.

Between the four Gospel accounts, we see Jesus marvel three times. One time he marvels at the unbelief of the people of Nazareth (Mark 6:5). The only other times are in our story today (Luke 7:9), and the same story as it appears in Matthew (8:10).

In contrast, people always seem to be amazed by Jesus. The crowds marvel at Jesus seven times (Matthew 9:33; 15:31; Mark 5:20 ;Luke 4:22; 9:43; 11:14; John 7:21), the disciples marvel at Jesus five times (Matthew 8:27; 21:20; Luke 8:25; 24:41; John 4:27), Jewish or Roman leaders also marvel at Jesus five times (Matthew 22:22; 27:14; Mark 15:5; Luke 11:38; 20:26), and Mary and Joseph marvel at him once (Luke 2:33). A lot of people are amazed by Jesus.

But in our story today, it is Jesus that is amazed. This is the only time that Jesus is said to be amazed in a positive sense. As we will see, he is amazed because he witnesses Marvelous Faith from an unlikely source—a Gentile centurion.

Our story today is found in Luke 7:1-10.

## The Centurion

**Luke 7:1-3:**

**After he had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. 2 Now a centurion had a servant who was sick and at the point of death, who was highly valued by him. 3 When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant.**

Our story starts off in Capernaum—a Jewish city that became somewhat of a focal point for much of Jesus’ ministry. As Jesus enters Capernaum, Luke introduces a new character—a centurion. What do we know about this man?

Based on his title, we know that he was an officer in the Roman army. As his title suggests, he was a commander of roughly 100 soldiers. While this was not the highest position in the army, it was certainly a position of influence. He was probably the most powerful soldier in Capernaum—and well-compensated as well. A centurion was paid somewhere between 50 and 100 times more than the base salary for a soldier. (I hear Google has better benefits than the Roman army, but still it was a pretty good gig.) So we know that this man was a man of power, influence, and wealth.

While we might assume that such a wealthy and powerful Roman soldier might be mean and coldhearted, that is not at all the case with this man. Instead, he is a man of compassion and empathy. He had a servant who was sick and about to die. This servant was “highly valued” by his master, something that could certainly not be taken for granted in a time where slaves were often considered to be disposable. The concern that this man has for his slave is seen in his desire for Jesus to come heal him.

We also know that this man was a **Gentile**, and this is where the tension comes. In that day, the Jew/Gentile boundary line was a thick one. Jews believed that Gentiles were sinful and deserving of God’s judgment. Jews were exhorted not to marry Gentiles, or even to eat with them. And Gentiles were not allowed to worship in the temple. Though the centurion was respected and even well-liked by the Jews in Capernaum, **he understood his place as an outsider.**

Over the past two weeks, Corrie Gustafson has introduced us to two other outsiders that Jesus encounters: a demon-possessed man who lived among the tombs and a bleeding woman who had been ritually unclean (and therefore isolated from much of her contact with family, friends, and the religious establishment) for twelve years. While being quite different from each other, these two characters were similar in that they were very clearly on the fringe, even beyond the fringe, of their societies. They were looked down upon, ignored, and mistreated.

The centurion in our story is quite different. He is not an outcast. He is not suffering or poor. Instead, he is rich and influential. He is well-liked and highly respected. He is successful in his career.

He is, in many ways, like the people that you and I interact with every day in the Silicon Valley. He is your co-worker, your neighbor, the parent you stand next to at your kids’ soccer game.

He doesn’t come to church. It’s not that he hates church, but he just doesn’t feel like he belongs here. And if you’re honest with yourself, you’re pretty sure that he doesn’t belong here either. He’s never even heard of Ray Stedman, after all. Words like atonement and eschatology mean nothing to him. He is an outsider.

This is how the centurion viewed himself. That’s why in verse 3, he sends the elders of the Jews to ask Jesus to come heal his servant. He felt that he did not have access to Jesus, but he wanted his request to get through.

Let’s see what happens next in verses 4-6.

## **The First Delegation: Elders of the Jews**

**Luke 7:4-6a:**

**And when they came to Jesus, they pleaded with him earnestly, saying, “He is worthy to have you do this for him, 5 for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue.” 6 And Jesus went with them.**

In the first century Greco-Roman world, social relationships relied heavily on the concept of patronage. When somebody with power or access had something that you had no way of getting, you could ask them for it. If they chose to grant your request, then you would become indebted to them. You would then pay off this debt by honoring the person publicly and returning the favor, should the need arise.

When the Jewish leaders approach Jesus, they appeal to this system of patronage. The centurion, we learn, had become a benefactor to the people of Capernaum. He had built a synagogue for them—something they were presumably unable to do through their own means. In exchange, the whole town owed him a debt of honor—and possibly some favors in return.

“This man is worthy to have you do this for him. Jesus, we owe him. He deserves this. He loves our nation. He built us our synagogue. He has been nothing but kind to us. And now we owe him. You must do this for him.”

Do you ever notice your prayers starting to sound like this?

We are instructed at numerous points in Scripture to ask God for things. Bringing our requests before God is a privilege that we should exercise because it shows our dependence on God and recognition of his power. And God loves to answer our requests—to give good gifts to his children.

But asking God for things can quickly turn into thinking that we deserve these things, especially when we live in a world that is constantly telling us to demand what is rightfully ours or to fight for our rights.

If you have been paying attention to the election news recently, then you may have noticed that a huge part of the conversation of both parties is demanding that somebody gets what they deserve. They debate about who deserves to have their rights protected—immigrants, gun owners, women, business owners, the LQBT community, or some other group. But both sides are advocating that such-and-such a group deserves this and that; oh, and by the way, that’s why you should vote for my candidate.

Don’t get me wrong, there are things that we all deserve. There are rights that are worth fighting for. And sometimes it is unjust when people are not given the rights that they deserve.

But it is easy to start to think that we deserve things that we actually don’t deserve at all. I’ve worked hard, so I deserve that vacation. I’ve managed my money well, so I deserve that new car. I’m a good husband, so I deserve my wife to... fill in the blank.

And how easy it is to let that kind of thinking creep into our relationship with God. God, I love you. I’ve been faithful to you. I give to the church. I even gave to the Remodel Fund. I’m trying to do the things that you ask of me. I’ve done all these things for you. So I deserve... to be healed, to have a good marriage, to get that job I applied for, and on and on.

And now we sound like these religious leaders. “Jesus, this man is worthy for you to do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue.”

But God does not give us things because we deserve them. He does not bless us in order to reciprocate the kindness that we have shown to him. Everything that God gives us is an overflow of his love for us. It is pure grace.

Jesus is not persuaded by the argument of the Jewish leaders. And yet, we are told, Jesus went with them.

## The Second Delegation: Centurion’s friends

### Luke 7:6b-8:

**When he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends, saying to him, “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. 7 Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed. 8 For I too am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me: and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes; and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”**

As Jesus approached the centurion’s house, the centurion sends a group of friends to stop Jesus before he arrives. The message that he sends with these friends is quite different than the message that the Jewish leaders expressed. Yes, this man wants Jesus to heal his servant, but not because he deserves it! No, he says, I am not even worthy for you to come under my roof.

Now, there were probably many people in Capernaum that believed that the centurion was not worthy to have Jesus enter his home. After all, according to Jewish law and customs, a Jew would become unclean—defiled—if they entered the house of a Gentile. Furthermore, a Jew would become unclean if they touched a dead body, which may in fact be in this man’s house if Jesus arrives just a little too late. So most of the Jews in Capernaum probably would have agreed with the assessment of this Gentile centurion: You are right; you’re not worthy for Jesus to enter your house!

The centurion certainly would have been aware of these customs, and they may have played into his response to Jesus. But that is not actually the reason that he gives. Rather, the reason that this man sees himself as unworthy has to do with Jesus’ authority.

Verse 8 begins, “For I too am a man set under authority...” I too am a man set under authority. The centurion recognized that Jesus was a man of authority, but that this authority was not derived from himself. Rather, this authority was given to him by God. And

while the culture dictated that he, as a Gentile, may not be worthy to have a Jew enter his home, the centurion recognized that he, as a sinner, was not worthy to have one sent with the very authority of God enter his home or to do anything for him. What an incredible example of humility.

But it is not actually the humility of this man that Jesus is going to be amazed by. It is his faith. The centurion displays an incredible amount of faith. He believes that Jesus can heal his servant without ever even entering his home.

Long before the advent of modern medicine and a more thorough knowledge of health and anatomy, there was a lot of mystery and superstition around sickness and healing. It was common in that day (or at least much more common than it is today) to believe that healing miracles were possible.

Not just anyone could heal a person, however. Rather, people believed that the **power to heal someone physically was divine power**. So anyone who had the ability to heal another was in some sense sent by God, or by the gods. This was not just a Jewish belief. This was also a common belief among pagans.

We see this belief play out in Acts 14, when Paul heals a crippled man.

#### **Acts 14:8-11:**

**Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. 9 He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, 10 said in a loud voice, “Stand upright on your feet.” And he sprang up and began walking. 11 And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!”**

The people of Lystra assumed that Paul must have been a god, because only gods can heal—in the same way the centurion, in thinking that Jesus could heal his servant, recognized that Jesus had divine power.

But the centurion’s belief went beyond that. He believed that Jesus had a unique kind of power—something over and above “normal divine power,” if there is such a thing.

The default assumption at that time was that **healing could only take place through physical touch**. We saw this last week when the bleeding woman just wants to touch the fringe of Jesus’ robe to be healed.

This centurion not only believes that Jesus can heal his servant, but that he can do it **without touching him!** Most people would assume that this is impossible. But the centurion believes that Jesus, operating with the very power of God, could do the impossible.

Do you believe that God can do the “impossible”? For those of us in the church, we are probably quick to affirm that God can do the impossible—he created the universe from nothing, he calmed the storm, he raised Jesus from the dead. Sure, God can do the impossible. But do we believe that God can still do the impossible?

When I was about five years old, my family took a trip to Florida. On one of the first days, we spent most of the afternoon at the pool. As I was in the water, I kept wiping my eyes to get the water out, and also washing away all of the sunscreen that my mom had so carefully covered me in. By the end of the day, my face was completely sunburned.

The burn was so bad that I was going to have to stay out of the sun for the next several days. As my mom sat me down that evening to explain this to me, I burst into tears, thinking that my vacation had been ruined.

I turned to my mom and asked her if we could pray about it. Of course she said yes. And I prayed the most earnest prayer I have probably ever prayed, begging Jesus to make my sun burn go away. My mom was broken-hearted, knowing that I would be spending the rest of the vacation out of the pool and in the shade.

When I woke up the next morning, my mom looked at me and said, “Danny, Jesus took your sunburn away!” Sure enough, what should have been a beet-red face was perfectly back to normal. Jesus had done the impossible.

Healing a sunburn...it’s a trivial example. Whether or not God chose to answer that prayer when I was five, my life would be much the same today.

But there have been other times since then where I have been faced with impossible situations. Sometimes I have brought these things to the Lord, sometimes I have not. Sometimes he has answered these prayers and performed miracles, and sometimes he has not.

Do you believe that God can do the impossible? Do you ask God to do the impossible?

Ephesians 3:20 tells us that we serve a God who *is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think*. He is a God who can do the impossible, and he is waiting for us to ask.

The centurion recognized this. In humility and faith, he asked Jesus to heal his servant without seeing or touching him.

### Jesus' Response

#### Luke 7:9-10:

**When Jesus heard these things, he marveled at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." 10 And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well.**

It's funny that Luke never tells us that Jesus healed the servant. Did you notice that? It just says that when the centurion's friends returned home, they found the servant well. Why is this? Because the miracle is not the point. The miracle itself is almost presented as an afterthought. The miracle is not the marvelous thing about this story.

What does Jesus marvel at? The incredible faith of a Gentile centurion. As I mentioned before, this man is the only person in the Gospels with whom Jesus is amazed in a positive sense.

Surely, Jesus is amazed by the quality of faith that this man exhibited, as we have already seen.

But equally (if not more) amazing is the source of faith. A Gentile. An outsider. One of them, not one of us. "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."

Imagine what it would have been like to be sitting in the crowd. Imagine what it would have been like to be one of Jesus' disciples in that moment. This man? Jesus is more impressed by this man than by me? Than by us? He doesn't even go to church! He doesn't serve in children's ministry. He's never cooked a meal for R&R. He doesn't go to Bible study. He's not even in a small group! Jesus, how can you be more impressed with this man than with me??

But Jesus is not impressed when we show up for church. He is not impressed when we serve. He's not impressed when we study the Bible. Certainly, those are good things. But they aren't the most important thing. The most important thing is humbling ourselves before God almighty and putting our faith fully in him.

In this story, Jesus is the only person who accurately sees the centurion for who he is. The Jewish leaders saw him as a deserving benefactor. To the crowds, he was an unclean Gentile. In his own mind, he was an outsider who didn't deserve access to Jesus.

But Jesus saw him as a man of marvelous faith, from whom the people of God have much to learn.

In Jesus' assessment of the centurion, **there lies a warning** for all who consider themselves to be on the inside. And here at PBC we are, by and large, a group of insiders. Many of us have been around church for a long time. We know the Bible. We know theology. We know what to say and do in any given situation. So this warning is for us.

The warning is twofold: **First, be careful about who you assume to be an insider.**

There were many in Israel who assumed that they were insiders. They were God's chosen people, so they had nothing to worry about. But in this situation with the centurion, Jesus reprimands them for their lack of genuine faith.

Let's not be guilty of the same mistake. Let's not presume on our position before the Lord. Let's not assume that we are right with God just because we show up here every week. Instead, let's learn from the example of this centurion, acknowledging our unworthiness and trusting in the saving power of Christ Jesus our Lord.

The first part of the warning is to be careful about who you assume to be an insider. The second part of this warning is to **be careful about who you assume to be an outsider.**

Everyone, including the centurion himself, believed that this man was an outsider—that he didn't belong in the people of God. But these assessments were based on external things. Jesus, however, saw past the externals to this man's heart, and he was amazed.

Who are the centurions in your life? Who are the people that seem like they may not belong at church, but are primed for an encounter with our Lord and Savior? Invite them in. If we do this, we will find our church body growing in depth, in diversity, and love with Jesus our Lord.

## **Conclusion**

This story is one of several throughout the Gospels that foreshadow the full inclusion of the Gentiles. Today, as people of the new covenant, we all have direct access to God through Jesus Christ. Access to God is not limited by the color of our skin or our ethnicity or our education or our jobs or the places that we live. Those are not the things that make us “us.” Those are not the things that make us the people of God. Those are not the things that unite us. Rather, it is an attitude of humility and faith that recognize that all that we have and all that we are is a gift of grace from God our Father through our Lord Jesus Christ.