

## The Centurion and His Servant



*The Healing of the Officer's Son | James Tissot, c.1880 | Brooklyn Museum | PD-US*

<sup>1</sup> When he had finished all his words to the people, he entered Capernaum. <sup>2</sup> A centurion there had a slave who was ill and about to die, and he was valuable to him. <sup>3</sup> When he heard about Jesus, he sent elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and save the life of his slave. <sup>4</sup> They approached Jesus and strongly urged him to come, saying, "He deserves to have you do this for him, <sup>5</sup> for he loves our nation and he built the synagogue for us." <sup>6</sup> And Jesus went with them, but when he was only a short distance from the house, the centurion sent friends to tell him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof. <sup>7</sup> Therefore, I did not consider myself worthy to come to you; but say the word and let my servant be healed. <sup>8</sup> For I too am a person subject to authority, with soldiers subject to me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come here,' and he comes; and to my slave, 'Do this,' and he does it." <sup>9</sup> When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him and, turning, said to the crowd following him, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." <sup>10</sup> When the messengers returned to the house, they found the slave in good health. (Luke 7:1-10)

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"When he had finished all his words..." reminds us that Jesus has just finished the "Sermon on the Plains", the Lukan parallel to Matthew's "Sermon on the Mount." One of the principal elements of the sermon provides a backdrop for this account: if love is to be offered even to enemies, are there any limits on the extent of Jesus' and apostles' ministry and mission? Does the good news extend even to the Gentile world?

### **In the background**

While somewhat foreign to our society in North America, in other parts of the world the system and relationships of the patron is very much alive. In Jesus' time the importance of patronal ethics was quite

present in Jewish and Roman society. Some scholars see this ethic at play in the pericope. The repeated language of honor and even the presence of Caesar’s representative in Capernaum point to the presence of the social relationship of patronage. For example, the centurion has placed the Jewish council and the people in his patronal debt by building the synagogue; that obligation is serviced by the laudatory tone the Jewish elders use when speaking of their benefactor and, it is hoped, by Jesus’ assistance in healing the centurion’s slave.

Recall the pericope of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth, when he “*was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me”* (Luke 4:17-18). After an initial positive reaction by the people: “*And all spoke highly of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They also asked, ‘Isn’t this the son of Joseph?’*” (v.22). At one point in the dialogue, Jesus says to the people: “*Again, there were many lepers in Israel during the time of Elisha the prophet; yet not one of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian*” (v.27).

In the gospel pericope we have an echo of that same reference. Jesus is alluding to the account of Naaman, a Syrian general, in [2 Kings 5](#). The Jewish prophet Elisha cures Naaman of leprosy - and as the verse says, no leper in Israel was afforded the same healing. Consider the parallels:

Luke 7	2 Kings 5
The centurion: a well-respected Gentile officer	Naaman: a well-respected Gentile officer
Intercession of Jewish elders in the healing	Intercession of a Jewish girl in the healing
The centurion does not meet Jesus	Naaman does not meet Elisha
The healing takes place at a distance	The healing takes place at a distance

As a centurion, he was a commander of approximately 100 men, a Gentile, and a Roman citizen. His identification as an officer in the military might well afford him a connection with those soldiers who had responded positively to the good news (Luke 3:10–14)

Joel Green also offers: “He is known further in relationship to his slave, terminally ill, whom he held in high regard. His desire to see his slave returned to health need not imply an extraordinary humanitarian concern on his part, since care for sick slaves was advised in Roman antiquity as a way to prolong their usefulness. At the same time, such care was not universally practiced, and Luke’s language suggests that the centurion not only regarded the slave as useful, but actually esteemed him. There is no socio-historical reason to doubt that, as an urban slave in the home of a wealthy master, this dying man might have enjoyed friendship with the centurion, even if this characterization also serves Luke’s wider concern with the raising up of the lowly. Finally, Luke notes that the centurion, having heard of Jesus, regards him as a savior (for healers were often regarded as “saviors” in Roman antiquity) to whom he had no immediate access. As a Gentile, he did not presume to contact Jesus directly, but did so only through those Jews with whom he had a previous bureaucratic association, the Jewish elders—that is, the local Jewish council or sanhedrin.” (*The Gospel of Luke*, p.286 | Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997)

**The Gospel Account**

It is good to remember that Luke is also the sacred writer of *Acts of the Apostles*, perhaps “vol. 2” of the gospel story. Luke would have been well aware of the debates in the early church concerning the mission to and inclusion of Gentiles in the nascent Christian movement. Here, this account foreshadows the

various statements in Acts that God knows no partiality; for example, “*Then Peter proceeded to speak and said,\* ‘In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him.’*” (Acts 10:34–35). If even the observant Jews of Jesus’ own time brought a non-Jew to Jesus, and if Jesus went to him without concern — the church’s argument must have run — why shouldn’t Jewish Christians accept Gentiles?

The centurion is a compassionate man seeking the compassion of Jesus. His Jewish friends argue in his favor that he has been generous to their people. In the light of what Jesus has just said about selfless generosity, this would not have been the compelling motive of his action. The centurion surprises him with his humility and his faith. Possibly the officer’s thoughtfulness is implied here, too: he would have known that entering the house of a Gentile rendered a Jew ritually unfit for worship. But it is the centurion’s faith, not the good works that captivated the man’s Jewish friends, that Jesus wants to impress on his listeners. The healing is mentioned almost as an afterthought.

*“And Jesus went with them, but when he was only a short distance from the house, the centurion sent friends to tell him, ‘Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof. Therefore, I did not consider myself worthy to come to you; but say the word and let my servant be healed.’”* (Luke 7:6-7)

Consistent with his earlier awareness of Jewish sensibilities, the centurion communicates with Jesus a second time through emissaries. Why the second communication? One can only speculate, but the net effect is that the centurion removes his request from the patronage ethic. He makes clear that he neither has any claim nor presumes any claim on Jesus’ assistance. What is more, he does so via persons more likely to represent him faithfully to Jesus, his friends; indeed, the mention of friends recasts this episode along fresh lines that emphasize (at least as a Roman ideal) mutuality and commonality, not the obligation of patronage. The centurion repeatedly denies what the Jewish elders have asserted as he emphasizes his lack of worth, he insists that Jesus not defile himself by entering his home, and provides a rationale for urging Jesus to assist him without causing Jesus to raise questions about his faithfulness to Jew custom and law.

### **Authority and Trust**

*For I too am a person subject to authority, with soldiers subject to me. And I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and to another, ‘Come here,’ and he comes; and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”* (v.8)

The centurion, then, is present as a model of deference, but his discourse focuses even more centrally on his understanding and recognition of authority. As one “*under authority*,” he gives directives, knowing that they will be carried out; similarly, he can trust that Jesus’ authoritative word, even if spoken at a distance, will achieve its intended results. This centurion seems to understand the deeper things at play in the scene. One might speculate that just as we the readers know that Jesus has been commissioned by God and that the power of the Spirit is operative in his ministry; the centurion seems to act on the basis of similar awareness. In this way, he sets himself apart not only from the Jewish council in Capernaum, but also from those Jewish observers within the narrative thus far who fail to recognize or acknowledge the authority of Jesus.

The centurion had “heard about Jesus” and acted accordingly; Jesus, now having heard the words of the centurion through his messengers, responded with amazement and with an astounding proclamation. He makes explicit what the account has already made implicit—namely, the disjunction between this Gentile and Israel. Unlike Israel, he recognizes Jesus’ authority and trusts that Jesus will exercise it on his behalf, even though, as a Gentile, even as one who had acted on behalf of Israel, he does not deserve such

treatment. Perhaps Jesus is more subtle, but the force of his proclamation is reminiscent of the words of John negating the special status of Israel (3:7–9). Are not the people of Israel the people of faith? Not in comparison to this Gentile centurion.

Jesus' proclamation presents this Gentile as exemplary. The return of the two envoys to find the terminally ill slave in good health validates the centurion's insight. Jesus does have the authority to heal, even from a distance, and even when that distance is measured as much in religio-cultural terms as in meters or yards. As in earlier episodes, faith and the healing power of Jesus overcome socio-religious barriers

### **What we have learned**

Jesus responds to faith, not status or background. Even though the centurion was a Gentile and a Roman officer (part of the occupying force), Jesus responds positively to his request. This shows that Jesus' compassion and power are not limited by ethnicity, social status, or religious background.

Jesus honors genuine humility and trust. The centurion's humility ("*I am not worthy*") and his faith ("*just say the word*") deeply impress Jesus who marvels at the centurion's faith—something rare in the Gospels. This shows that Jesus values sincere, humble faith even more than outward religious credentials.

The story also foreshadows the inclusion of Gentiles in the kingdom of God, highlighting the universal scope of Jesus' mission.