

Humility and Faith

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Let us begin with the following dialogue between Jesus and His disciples:

And he [Jesus] said to his disciples, “Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that that he should cause one of these little ones to sin. Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.”

The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” And the Lord said, “If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”

“Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at table’? Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’” (Luke 17:1-10)

It is easy to just pick up here with verse 17:1, however, the fact that it starts with, “*And he said*” leads me to investigate further back. When studying the gospels it is important to keep in perspective the entire range of verses for a given context. This is especially true in the book of Luke, because he wrote it in chronological order.

It turns out that we have to go all the way back to 14:25, where we pick up with Jesus amongst a crowd of people:

Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my

Humility and Faith

disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. ... So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.”

“Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” (Luke 14:25-27, 34-35)

Then, after revealing the love of God for the lost in the presence of tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees, and scribes, Jesus teaches His disciples the parable of the dishonest manager. He summarizes its key points by saying to them:

“One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” (Luke 16:10-13)

It is my suspicion that the apostles who exclaimed to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” were already reeling internally from several blows of Jesus’ beautiful “death to self” doctrine. Let us recap what He had just said to them:

1. You cannot be my disciple if you love anyone or yourself more than me.
2. You cannot be my disciple if you do not bear your own self-sacrificial burden (“own cross”).
3. You cannot be my disciple if you do not renounce all that you have.
4. You cannot serve two masters, because you will hate the one and love the other and be devoted to the one and despise the other.
5. You cannot serve God and money. (“Money” here is the Greek word, *mamonas*, or mammon, which was a common Aramaic word for “riches.”)¹
6. You must constantly forgive one another.

Jesus had made it perfectly clear to the apostles that self-sacrifice was essential to following Him. Perhaps it was with a bit of self-centered exhaustion that they cried out to Him, “Increase our faith!” as they realized that their ways would not cut it. This is a significant distinction. *Humility is an entrance to faith* as we realize that we cannot please God doing things our way.

Humility and Faith

Jesus then says if you have it, “you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.” For a man to actually speak to a mulberry tree and have it come out of the ground and be planted in the sea is outrageous and that is the point. Jesus wants it to be clear to us that the works of God are impossible for man to do. Only He can do them.

At this point we have Jesus making it abundantly clear that to really be His disciple there must be a self-denial. Taken serious, this leads to humility which opens the door for the Holy Spirit to begin to reveal God’s will to the disciple. The Holy Spirit does not reveal man’s will. Humility is essential here because a man has absolutely no ability to do the works of God. *Faith is then believing in the current Spiritual reality of God’s will that is not yet visible.*

A disciple going through this process is going to be hearing from God. He is going to be receiving wisdom, understanding, and direction from the Holy Spirit. He is going to be receiving commands. This is why Jesus goes on to talk about the relationship of a servant and his master. Here it is again for easy reference:

“Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at table’? Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, “We are *unworthy* servants; we have only done what was our duty.” (Luke 17:7-10; emphasis mine)

Jesus finishes this teaching with, “So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’” The word “unworthy” here is the Greek word *achreios*, which means “useless or good for nothing.” In this context it implies absolute humility and an understanding that one’s own life is worthless in serving God. The word “duty” is the Greek word *opheilō*, which means “to owe, to be in debt for, or to be under obligation.” Jesus gave his life for us. If we receive and follow Him, then we are indebted to Him and obligated to serve Him.

A disciple with great faith is one who realizes that he has nothing in himself of any value for serving God. He demonstrates his faith by living a life totally dependent on hearing and doing what God says. This is his focus because he understands that

Humility and Faith

he has no ability in himself—in his self-life—to serve God. I like to refer to it as self-life to clearly differentiate it as our own life separate from God's Spirit filling. In other words, it is the operation of our own soul, not being filled and led by God's Spirit. A disciple of great faith understands that he is a created being. Like Adam at the beginning, he has been designed to function with God's Spirit breathed into him. He has been designed to live in constant communion with the Creator.

A serious disciple will be focused on the work he has been given to do. It is in this realm of raw serving—hearing and doing—that the impossible works of God become possible for the disciple, because God is working through him. This is the essence of the connection of humility and faith. Consider what the Apostle Paul wrote:

I have been crucified with Christ ["my self life died"]. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh *I live by faith in the Son of God*, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20; emphasis mine)

By now, it should become increasingly clear why Jesus repeatedly preached death to one's self. There is no other possible way. The slightest hint of another possible way is a wind of deception. I am an American. Being told that you are a worthless servant is difficult for us American Christians and it is exactly why so very few of us really live by faith and have a life of constant communion with God. We are surrounded by false teachers—inside and outside of church *buildings*—inundating us with deceitful messages to build up our self-lives. From cradle to grave we are bombarded with them.

I remember the time when I began to realize just how deep the lie of self is. I was teaching a Sunday school and one of the girls came in with a little ball that said on it, "believe in yourself." No doubt she received this at the local public school. "Believe in yourself" is perhaps the most prominent self lie out there. This lie attempts to lead you 180 degrees away from a life of total dependence on Jesus Christ. The message for the believer should be "believe in Christ (in you)."

Now oftentimes when you hit a believer with a strong death-to-self punch their selfish life will try to rise back up again and keep boxing. The next section will land another blow that will hopefully knock it out for good.

Humility and Faith

“... with no one in Israel have I found such faith.”

First, the scriptural backdrop:

When he [Jesus] had entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him, “Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly.” And he said to him, “I will come and heal him.” But the centurion replied, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I too am a man 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.” When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” And to the centurion Jesus said, “Go; let it be done for you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed at that very moment. (Matthew 8:5-13)

For further insight, we must also include Luke’s account of the same event:

After he had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. Now a centurion had a servant who was sick and at the point of death, who was highly valued by him. When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant. And when they came to Jesus, they pleaded with him earnestly, saying, “He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue.” And Jesus went with them. 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. Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed. 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.” 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.” And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well. (Luke 7:1-10)

Humility and Faith

Capernaum was a city where Jesus spent a considerable amount of time. He taught in the synagogue and did many mighty works there, yet, He would ultimately condemn it for its lack of repentance when He declared: “And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades” (Luke 10:15). Keep this in mind as we explore His interaction here with a gentile, Roman centurion.

Jesus tells the centurion that He is going to come and heal his servant, and what is his reply? Matthew records this response:

“Lord, *I am not worthy* to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed” (emphasis mine).

Luke reveals that the centurion did not actually speak to Jesus in person, but sent this message to Him through friends:

“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 say the word, and let my servant be healed” (emphasis mine).

Let us pause here and consider what is going on.



Photo courtesy of Luc Viatour (www.Lucnix.be)

A Roman centurion was generally a commander of about one hundred men, so this man was in a position of significant authority. As a leader in the occupying Roman army, he also would have been a prominent figure in Capernaum. Yet, he still did not think he was worthy of having Jesus enter his residence, nor did he presume he was even worthy of Jesus’ attention. He possessed humility, revealed by his understanding that man does not deserve God’s grace.

I am sure this centurion could have easily forced a Jewish person to come to his home, however, he recognized that this man was no ordinary Jew. He *believed* that He was

Humility and Faith

God. He demonstrated this when he said, “only say the word.” He approached Jesus from the standpoint of one understanding that He is the Creator and head of all things physical and spiritual. Comparatively, the apostle Paul described Jesus like this:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ... For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. (Colossians 1:15-16; 2:9-10)

The centurion knew that Jesus possessed the power and authority to instantly change the life of his servant. All He had to do was utter the command to the angelic being(s) under His authority. Recall what Jesus told Peter in the Gethsemane: “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than *twelve legions of angels?*” (Matthew 26:53). This centurion knew that Jesus was also a military commander of sort. This is clear from his subsequent response: “*For I too* am a man 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.”²

Religious People Lack Humility

“Religious” people are those who try to serve God their way, instead of His. Their way tends to include all sorts of “standards” that God has never actually prescribed. The beautiful thing about Luke’s account of the centurion is that he also revealed this telling aspect:

When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant. And when they came to Jesus, they pleaded with him earnestly, saying, “*He is worthy* to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue” (emphasis mine).

Did you catch that? The Jewish elders said he was worthy. The centurion said he was not worthy. This revealing contradiction in the scripture was the work of the Holy Spirit through Luke and no coincidence. The Capernaum elders *presume* they

Humility and Faith

know who is worthy of God's grace. They seem so upstanding, yet they are filled with pride—the opposite of humility. (Remember that Jesus would later declare judgment on the city). In my life I have come to learn that some of the most pride-filled people are *nice* Christians. They are often kind, dependable, thoughtful, and hard working, however, under the cover, they lack humility. Like the Capernaum elders, their pride can lead to them telling God what He should be doing, based on their standards.

Matthew's gospel was written to the Jews. This comes out in his account of the centurion where he records Jesus also saying:

I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The humility of the centurion was in stark contrast to the crowds of faithless Jews following Jesus around for only what they could get out of Him. Jesus was saying that many gentiles will enter the kingdom of God with the believing Jews, while many unbelieving Jews—though they were Abraham's descendants in the flesh—will be cast into hell. The door would soon be closed on the Law and the Lord himself would strike a new covenant with all people. The gospel would soon flow throughout the Roman empire—the people of the centurion. Humility attracts God's grace.

The Israel that Jesus lived in is just like America today. It has been saturated with the gospel and it is filled to the brim with religious people, yet one is hard pressed to find real faith. A great many people are familiar with Jesus and not afraid to ask Him for whatever they want without regard for what He wants. It is not real faith, but a lukewarm selfishness clothed in religion. This is evident from the pride (the opposite of humility) and the self-reliance of the people, constantly living by their own self-direction. The lack of humility means God's grace is flowing elsewhere.

A Formula for Faith

Remember what Jesus told his disciples: “So you also, *when you have done all that you were commanded*, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty’ (emphasis mine). This revelation of humility and faith does not come

Humility and Faith

through reading and reflection. *It must come through the trials of faithful service.* During the time of faithful obedience to God's commands the disciple learns humility, which prepares the ground for the works of God to be done through him. The trials of faithful service cause disciples to develop the attitude of humility that God desires. This is why Jesus told His disciples to "say" they were not worthy and only did what required. God wants us to have such an attitude of humility, that the words we naturally speak from our heart reflect it. When we are questioned, it should be evident that the powerful works were done by Christ in us. Thus God receives all the glory.

The centurion was "a man under authority" who had learned humility through faithful service. His belief that Jesus was the head of both the physical and spiritual command realms led Jesus to marvel and exclaim, "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith."

What is the connection between what Jesus taught His disciples when they declared, "Increase our faith!" and the faith of the centurion? *Obedience to God's commands and faithful service, instill the humility that is necessary for the proper, total dependence on the Lord.* This is the formula for faith.

A disciple who believes Christ is the head of all things and understands that he is utterly incapable of doing the works of God himself, will live with His ear tuned to the Holy Spirit and his hand on the plow. For him there is never a question of God's ability, all He has to do is release the command. This is how the centurion operated. What was Jesus' response? "Go; let it be done for you *as you have believed.*" We must be sensitive to how we believe. We can limit the power God if are own faithless actions derail His ability. Our safety net is to live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. This leads to humility and a dependence on God that will not limit Him. The more humility we have, the more we will naturally rely on Him first. Our humility becomes an outlet for the power of God.

Remember how the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!?" The fact that they asked the Lord to increase their faith and did not think they could do it themselves is revealing. They were beginning to understand that as they followed Jesus He would create the environment where they would learn the humility necessary for "great" faith. They could not do it themselves.

Jesus responded to their request by saying, "If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed" A mustard seed is tiny and barely visible. In essence, Jesus was saying that

Humility and Faith

faith is not really quantifiable. If one has the right internal condition, their faith will shine forth and appear “great,” in human terms. Jesus’ subsequent teaching focused on the lifestyle that is necessary for the disciple to be able to do this. This lifestyle will lead the disciple to have an attitude that declares: “We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.”

If we look closely at the centurion we can see that he had the sort of internal soil necessary for faith to grow and bear fruit. His humility did not hinder the powerful working of God, but instead attracted it. It seems to me that it is really the humility that is quantifiable (or observable). In his state of great humility, he only needed a mustard seed portion of God’s working. He only needed Jesus to speak the word.

Endnotes

1. In *The Life of Messiah from a Jewish Perspective*, Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum mentions that “mammon” was a rabbinic term for all the world offers materially.
2. One could speculate that the centurion thought Jesus could send his disciple(s) to heal his servant, however, at this point in Jesus’ ministry He had not commissioned His disciples to heal anyone so there is no reason to assume the centurion had this expectation. This is a detraction from the fact that the centurion understood is spiritual authority and power.