

We're thinking about what a disciple of Jesus is and how we might go about the task of making more disciples.

We sang the song, O Praise the name, because of the words toward the end – speaking of Jesus it says:

*He shall return in robes of white
The blazing sun shall pierce the night
And I will rise among the saints
My gaze transfixed on Jesus' face*

2 Thessalonians 1:10 *All these things will happen when he comes. On that day his glory will be seen in his holy people. Everyone who has believed will be amazed when they see him. This includes you, because you believed the witness we gave you.*

Everyone who has believed will be amazed at Jesus. Not amazed at angels or mansions or new bodies or new creations. Paul doesn't measure the joy of encountering the apostles or embracing our loved ones. I assume we will be amazed at those things, but they will be as nothing compared with Jesus. We will be amazed at Jesus. It shouldn't surprise us that Jesus will be the most amazing person in heaven; he was equally amazing on earth.

The scribes and the sceptics were amazed at his teaching. The hungry and hurting were amazed by his miracles. An adulterer and her accusers were amazed by his love. And two millennia later, Jesus is no less amazing.

Today I want to ask what might amaze the most amazing person who ever lived? The Greek word translated amazed in all of these instances means to stand outside oneself. It's very similar to our phrase "he was beside himself," and it has the idea of jumping out of your skin. What could cause God incarnate, to jump out of his skin? The Gospels record two moments in the life of Christ when Jesus was amazed. The first is found in Mark 6, when Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth and was amazed at their unbelief. He was amazed by their lack of faith.

But on the second of these two occasions Jesus is amazed for precisely the opposite reason. He had been traveling the countryside and just finished up his famous Sermon on the Mount, when our story begins.

The account which we have just read is a remarkable account of the amazing grace of our Saviour, the great faith of a Gentile soldier, and the common misconceptions of the religious people of the day. Luke records that after Jesus wrapped up his Sermon on the Mount, he entered Capernaum. It wasn't as though Jesus taught in the morning and then entered the town that afternoon. Capernaum was many miles from where Jesus had been teaching, so this could have been days later.

We are told about a centurion, a professional officer in the Roman army who would have commanded a unit of about 80 men. What makes this story unique isn't that someone came to Jesus for help, but that the person seeking help was Roman. He wasn't Jewish. He didn't grow up hearing the stories of Noah, Abraham, and Joseph in Sunday School. He didn't spend a week every summer at Hebrew Camp. He probably never attended a holiday club. This Centurion came from a pagan society—a culture steeped in the worship of countless gods and goddesses. Yet, after being assigned to Capernaum, he must have heard the stories of the Old Testament from local rabbis and overheard the singing of faithful Hebrews lofting through the streets at night during their family devotions. Those stories and songs must have worked their way into his soul. Not only did he embrace this Jewish community that he'd been assigned to watch over, but he even built them a house of worship.

Archaeologists have uncovered the remains of the synagogue this Roman Centurion built in Capernaum. At the highest elevation in town stood a beautiful basalt structure that testifies to us even today of this man's generosity and kindness. What's even more amazing is that gentiles, like this Roman Centurion, were not even allowed to enter a Jewish synagogue. So he couldn't even go into the building he built. He could come to the synagogue, but not in it. He could provide food for the Jews, but couldn't eat it with them. He could provide them with the freedom to celebrate their feasts, but could not celebrate with them.

In Luke 4, the Bible tells us that Jesus spent a lot of time in Capernaum and taught there in this synagogue on the Sabbath. I don't know about you, but when I picture Jesus teaching in this synagogue, I see a Roman Centurion standing just outside the entryway listening to Jesus. It's no wonder then that he knew what Jesus was capable of and that he sought Jesus out in his time of need. But even his request isn't a selfish one. He's asking Jesus to heal his highly valued slave at a time when slaves were not highly valued.

As much as the Jews hated the Romans and their rule over them, they had crawled in bed with this Roman soldier to play political games with him for their own personal gain. Now he calls in a favour and sends them to meet with Jesus. He knows Jesus is a great man, perhaps even a god, but a great Jew to whom he thinks he has no access. But these Jews – they can go and talk with Jesus for him – they could get Jesus to come?

When they got to Jesus the Jews began their pitch. “Look, Jesus, if anyone is deserving of your goodness it is this man. We know he’s a Gentile but look at all the good he’s done for us. We really need you to come through for us on this thing.”

Verse 6 says that Jesus went with them, but as they were going the centurion sent a second delegation, this time with a different message. I tend to think that as he waited he had begun to think about how the Jewish leaders might misrepresent him. Surely he wouldn’t want to give the impression that he was something great when he was just a man in need of help. “Lord, don’t trouble yourself because I’m not worthy to have you in my home.” He then explains just how well he understands authority and Christ’s ability to say the word for a thing to be done. It’s interesting that it wasn’t more Jewish leaders this time, but friends – people who knew him well and could be trusted to pass on the message properly.

When Jesus heard all this the Bible says He was amazed, then turned to the crowd that was following Him and told them, verse 9 *“I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.”*

When both delegations returned to the centurion’s home they found that the slave had been healed.

I said a while ago that this is a remarkable account of the amazing grace of our Saviour, the great faith of a Gentile soldier, and the common misconceptions of the religious people of the day, but understanding the message running through this text and why it’s even included here is found in the sermon Jesus preached in chapter 6.

In Luke 6:27-28, Jesus said,

*But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, **28** bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.*

He continues along this same thread, but I want to drop down to verse 33-36.

*And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. **34** And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. **35** But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. **36** Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*

The Jews started stacking up all of the reasons that this guy was worthy of help, that he had done some great things for them, that he needed his back scratched.

They had absolutely no understanding of how God works! And frankly, they remind me of many of God’s people today: having a form of religion, but not knowing the real power in it. How many people are sitting in pews today who think that God operates on the basis of these building blocks: The more we do for God or His church; the more we give, read the Bible, pray, evangelise, or whatever else, then the more deserving we are of His blessings. “When they came to Jesus, they instantly said to him that this man was worthy because of all he had done.”

But they had a second problem – and that was their motive. Not only did they misunderstand the basis of God’s goodness, but they were interceding for this man, not for his benefit but because of what they might get out of it. They couldn’t have been more contrary to what Jesus has just preached! Kingdom people do good, not because of how they might benefit, but because they are becoming like God!

The Jews had a problem with it, and unless we’re growing in Christ’s likeness we’ll struggle with it too. I find myself struggling with it as I get caught up in wanting to get something done around here, forgetting all the while that we’re not in the building or financial business, but the people business.

Consider Jesus – He gives us a great example of what grace and love should look like. He didn’t care about social boundaries. This man was a Gentile. He started heading for his house anyway. The man was a Roman soldier, an enemy of Israel. Jesus intended to help him anyway. The centurion was an unwelcome outsider – a stranger to the grace of God. Jesus treated him with grace and compassion. The man was unworthy – but Jesus didn’t work on the basis of merit.

Listen; if you’ve ever doubted the love and grace of God, you ought to reconsider this morning. Jesus doesn’t care who you are or where you’ve been or what you’ve done. He doesn’t care what age you are, how much money you have, whether you grew up in church or not, if you smoke, drink or swear. It doesn’t matter if you’re a great big sinner or if you’re just getting started – His love for you is the same. He loves His enemies, and those who call Him friend.

I work for the church, preach and teach through the week, bury the dead, and other bits and pieces. I even occasionally tell people about Jesus, but that doesn't make me any more deserving of His goodness than anyone else. Do you know why? Because God doesn't operate that way! Why does Jesus do good for His enemies? Why does Jesus love those who hate Him? Why can He bless those who curse Him? How can He love people when He gets nothing in return?

I'll tell you why – because He is love. He healed this centurion's servant, not because either of them was worthy, but because Jesus is inherently good. This man happened to be a pretty good guy, but think of all the others in Scripture who were not good: the Samaritan woman, the woman caught in adultery, Zacchaeus, Saul of Tarsus and more!

So, according to Jesus' sermon, if love is to be extended even to enemies, are there any boundaries limiting the goodness and grace of Jesus' ministry? In other words, is there any boundary that would stop Jesus from doing good in your life, or in the life of anyone else? If the answer is no, and it is, then how in the world can we set up boundaries unless we are not being the imitators of Christ we have been called to be?

The truth of the matter is that you and I have been called to reach our community for Christ. We've been called to be salt and light. We've been called to share the good news. We've been called to do good to others, full stop. If you've found yourself struggling to do good to those around you...if you've been prompted by God to do good to others but run up against a wall – some boundary that kept you from ministering to them, then you need to recognize that you're guilty of the same things the Jewish leaders were guilty of. You need to repent of it and surrender those boundaries to Christ. Jesus tore the veil between people and God in two when He died on Calvary. Everyone has free and open access to Him. If you've erected another veil – it could be fear, thinking it's someone else's job, it's too hard, they will not listen, or you simply don't care enough about them going to hell – something that's keeping someone from coming to Christ then you need to tear it down.

I know that each of us has at least some desire to be like Him and follow Him and we're all at different places in that desire. Some are on fire for God and would storm the gates of hell with a bucket of ice water. Others of you are more hesitant – more reluctant – and like Peter would prefer to follow from afar. Regardless of where you are – this much is true: that if the Holy Spirit lives within you He is calling to you today to become like Christ – the Christ who knew no boundaries, the Christ who could love even the most undeserving of people. The Holy Spirit calls to you today to be merciful, as your Father in heaven is merciful.

As He calls to you today, can you say with integrity before God that you desire to be more like Jesus? To get to the place in your life where you do good to others, not because they're worthy, but simply because as Christ lives in and through you, you too are good?

Today you might find yourself in the position of the centurion. You have some problem that's beyond your ability to handle. You've done everything you know to do, and now you're only left with that hopeless, helpless feeling that comes from not knowing where to turn.

The answer is Jesus! Just like this man did, you need to call to Jesus for help, but forget making bargains with God, just come to Him today in humble recognition of your need. Admit to Him that you can't handle your problem any more. Admit to Him that He alone is able, and while you're not worthy of His goodness, you appeal to Him on the basis of His goodness.

Will you put your faith in Him today? Will you recognise the absolute authority of Jesus Christ and His ability to handle your problem? Will you call to Him for help? Will your faith cause Him to marvel? To drop His jaw with wonder? Or will you only cause Him to wonder whether you have any faith at all?