

The Capernaum Centurion: He Didn't Pull Rank

[Matthew 8:5-13](#)

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

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There are some people who pull rank wherever they go. You've met them. They push their way to the front of the line at the after-Christmas sales. They insist on preferential treatment at restaurants. There are celebrities who think they can act any way they please in public and get away with it because of who they are. Perhaps you read about the rock star who got into a fight last week with a rival at a concert in Detroit, just because the rival had criticized his latest CD. He was surprised when he was arrested and arraigned for assault and battery. The Wayne County prosecutor said, "Far too often celebrities think that the law does not apply to them."

Some even try to pull rank on God. They imagine that their piety or their position in society will protect them from difficulty and danger. And if God doesn't give them preferential treatment, what's the use of going to worship and giving money to the church?

The Capernaum Centurion is not one of them. He certainly had the authority to make demands had he cared to. He was a high-ranking officer in the Roman military, and Rome was mistress of the world. Because he was a centurion he could move to the head of any line, he could have the best table at any restaurant, he could walk into any office and not have to cool his heels in the waiting room. Moreover, if he wanted to interrogate anyone he could issue a summons, sit back in his leather chair, and wait for that person to come running.

But when it comes to Jesus, it is the centurion who comes running. Nor does he demand anything of Jesus. He simply states his need: "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress." In the presence of Jesus, the Centurion has no right to pull rank. He can only come in humility and await the Savior's response.

And if the centurion has no right to pull rank, Jesus has no desire to pull rank. He could have done so, and the centurion knows it. When the centurion expresses his unworthiness to have Jesus come to his home, he is acknowledging that Jesus is his superior. And when he says "I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me," it's as if he were saying, "I command a small force with limited objectives; you, Jesus, command a divine force with universal objectives."

Nevertheless, Jesus doesn't pull rank. He doesn't say, "Look, I'm busy with more important matters right now, so leave your name and number and I'll get back to you." Jesus doesn't say, "Here, fill out this form so I can tell whether you're worthy of my attention. What honors have you received? What books have you published? What boards do you serve on? What is your IQ and your GPA? Are you a member of the Sons or Daughters of the Hebrew Revolution? Do you have any outstanding traffic citations or parking tickets? Are you in church every Sunday? Do you give ten percent of your income to the church and charity?" No, Jesus doesn't ask questions. Jesus says, quite simply, "I will come and cure" your servant.

Dale Bruner notes that "the word 'I' is emphasized in that sentence as if to say, 'I don't know what the response of others may have been to your request, but I want to come.'" Jesus, he goes on to say, is "extremely eager to help. The Lord we worship is almost inordinately ready to meet our needs." Do you believe that? Or do you imagine that God is too high and mighty to care about you? But the truth is, our Lord is eager to meet your needs.

Yet, for all his eagerness to go to the Centurion's home, the Roman stops him: "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed." And to that, Jesus replies, "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith." And what exactly was the nature of his faith? It wasn't an endowment he inherited from his parents. It wasn't located in a religious gene in his DNA, which some have and others don't. It wasn't a warm, fuzzy feeling he got in church. The Centurion's faith is simply trust in Jesus' word: "You don't have to be present in my home, Jesus, only speak the word and my servant will be healed."

Matthew had us in mind when he recorded this story. Jesus is no longer bodily present in the world. He cannot come physically into our homes. But he has given us his word, and faith takes him at his word. Here is a sampler of his words, found in Matthew's Gospel. "If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you." Trust his word of forgiveness. "If God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Trust his promise to care for you. "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." Trust his pledge of eternal life. "Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Trust him to relieve your anxieties. "I am with you always, to the end of the age." Trust him never to leave or forsake you.

Take Jesus at his word. He will ask no questions. You need pass no tests. You need only acknowledge that you are needy, poor, ill, estranged from God. If Jesus reaches out to the servant of a foreign centurion, and an enemy at that, you can be very sure he will minister to you.

Then, like Jesus, make service, not status, your ambition. If there is any honor you'd like to achieve, let it be that you are listed not among the most powerful but among the most admired. When TIME magazine selected the most famous people of the 20th century, Adolph Hitler was fourth on the list. Famous, yes, but for what? For the destruction of Europe and the death of tens of millions of people, including six million Jews.

Others put together a list of the most admired people of the 20th century, and the list was topped by a woman, Mother Teresa, who never pulled rank and who was never comfortable with her fame. When people expressed their admiration for her she urged them instead to serve Jesus by caring for the poor, the sick and the dying. She had to be persuaded to accept the Nobel Peace Prize, and then, having accepted it, she plowed all the money into her mission of mercy. No wonder she was the most admired person in the 20th century. She made service, not status, her goal.

During this last week of the year several magazines will list the most famous, the most wealthy, the most powerful people in our nation and the world. If you and I aren't included on those lists, it doesn't matter. Rank is irrelevant to the Christ who, at his last meal with his friends, left the head of the table (the place of rank and privilege), took up a basin of water and a towel, and proceeded to wash his disciples' feet. Let the living Christ wash your feet, heal your hurts, and cleanse your sins. Then serve others as Christ has served you, and leave the score keeping with God.