



The Man with Only a Word in His Pocket

“Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come. Amen.” (Revelation 1:4b)
God’s Word for our consideration was read as our Gospel for today, recorded in Luke 7:1-10.

In the name of our all-powerful Savior, Jesus, dear people of great faith.

What does faith do? A man fell off a cliff, but managed to grab a tree limb on the way down. The following conversation ensued: “Is anyone up there?” “I am here. I am the Lord. Do you believe me?” “Yes, Lord, I believe. I really believe, but I can’t hang on much longer.” “That’s all right, if you really believe you have nothing to worry about. I will save you. Just let go of the branch.” A moment of pause, then: “Is anyone else up there?” What does faith do? It clings to whatever God says. Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. Faith is willing to cling to a mere Word.

That is so against who we are by nature. Perhaps you’ve heard the phrase, “God helps those who help themselves.” Do you agree with that phrase? I suppose you could explain it correctly that in general when we follow God’s commands, he blesses our lives. That is absolutely true. Luther explains on the basis of God’s Word that God promises grace and every blessing to those who keep God’s commandments. God’s grace is undeserved. His blessing comes in the way he knows is best.

And yet, when most speak these words, “God helps those who help themselves,” they mean something entirely different. It’s the mindset that the elders of the Jews had as they came to Jesus on behalf of the Roman centurion with the sick servant who was about to die. They said, **“This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue.”** In other words, “Lord, this man has done everything right therefore you must help him.” It’s another way of saying, “God helps those who help themselves.”

Did the man “deserve” for Jesus to do anything for him? No. Do we? “Well, maybe,” we’d argue. Take this for example. What does someone who runs every day deserve? (I would say that they deserve to be sore the next day! ☺) We would say that they deserve to have God help them by allowing them to live longer because they’re helping themselves by staying healthy. What does someone that works hard at their job deserve? We would say that they deserve to have God help them by allowing them to keep it and even get a raise now and then because they helped themselves by working hard. What does someone who goes to church every Sunday deserve? We would say that they deserve a life that is free from great catastrophe, free from grave illness, and in general free from “bad things,” whatever those bad things may be because they have helped themselves by remaining faithful to God. Don’t think that we think that way sometimes? Just analyze your reaction when you hear of a runner that drops dead of a heart attack early in life or when you hear of the hard worker that loses his job or when you hear of the devout Christian that seems to be experiencing every human challenge in the same vein as Job did. Let’s face it, there is a big part of us that thinks, “That’s just not right. They didn’t deserve that. They deserved better.”

Did they? Do we? The answer is obviously “no.” We don’t deserve anything. Just because a lot of people say it does not mean that God is bound by the phrase, “God helps those who help themselves.” The truth is we are utterly incapable of helping ourselves in anything in God’s eyes apart from Christ. In fact, the only thing we “deserve” is hell. And yet our nature comes through to micromanage our success in life by trying to help God with our striving, our remedies, our treatments, our decisions, our worry, and the list could go on. We torture ourselves to think we need to do the right things before God will bless us. In short, the problem is that we don’t trust God. God does *not* need our help to help us! Remember what faith does? It clings ever so confidently to a mere Word of God even if there is no physical evidence to back it up.

You’ll notice that in our account, the Roman centurion had a wonderful grasp of this. As Jesus was approaching, the humble centurion sent friends out to Jesus to say on his behalf, **“Lord, don’t trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed.”** Did you hear that? Lord, just say the word and my servant will be healed. The centurion didn’t run out to Jesus and tell him, “Lord, I’ve got the IV started, so that should buy us a little more time. Don’t you want to be walking a little faster Lord? Do you need some water because you look thirsty? When you get there, Lord, I’ve got blankets and nurses standing by to take your orders.” He didn’t

try to micromanage. He didn't rely on his helping of himself. He just let Jesus be Jesus. He just awaited Jesus' word and that would be enough for him. That man was happy to take nothing but a word home in his pocket.

You see, he as one who had people over him and under him understood how this all worked. He went on to say, **"For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."** The centurion understood that the one with all the authority in the world need only speak the word and it will be done. There is power behind those words.

It's kind of like the power behind the writing of a check. If you received a check for a million dollars, would you believe that you had a million dollars even though the money was not physically in your hand? I suppose that depends on who wrote it. Would you believe it if I wrote you the check? Probably not and please don't cash it (I don't want the over draft charge and the "what were you thinking look" from the clerk!). Would you believe it if Bill Gates wrote you the check? Absolutely. You could put that check in your pocket knowing that you've got a million dollars because you know that Bill Gates has the money to back up the check that he just wrote. Jesus' promises work like those checks. He writes you promises in his Word and then invites you to trust that he's got the power and authority to back up the promises that he made.

Just as there was power behind the words that Jesus spoke to the centurion, so there is also something behind the words that God speaks to you. There is a power that I could never adequately describe. So I'll just have to give you some examples. Remember the creation of the world? The power of God's Word spoke all things into existence. He just spoke the word and it happened. In Joshua's day, he spoke the word and the walls of Jericho came tumbling down. In David's day, he spoke the word and every enemy fell before him. In Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's day, he spoke the word and the flames of the furnace were as cool as a frost kissed window. In Jesus' day, he spoke the word and water was changed to wine, demons were expelled, thousands were fed, the sick were healed and the dead were raised. That is power! That is the kind of power that stands behind Jesus' word to you!

At the cross, Jesus simply spoke the word, "It is finished," and it was done. At your baptism, he spoke, "You are mine," and it was done. At the Lord's Supper, he speaks, "Take and eat, take and drink, my body and blood for your forgiveness," and it is done! This is the same with every promise that Jesus makes to you! Whether it be: "Do not worry" or "Be still and know that I am God" or "No one can snatch you out of my hand" or one of the thousands of other promises he makes, he's given you his word. And that's all you need. Just as that centurion only had a word of Jesus in his pocket, so that is all you need in your pocket as well. You can cling to that word confidently.

That's the wonderful thing about God's promises – they remain rock solid no matter how timidly we stand on them. The picture that comes in my mind is that of a man crossing a river of ice on his hands and knees, spreading his weight out as best he can. He doesn't know how thick the ice is. Suddenly he hears a rumbling from around the river bend. It's a tractor pulling a hay wagon full of happy, screaming children past him, flat on his face...as if 3 feet of ice were going to crack at any second.

The beauty of that simple picture is that it is the ice that holds the man up. Faith walks out across it and whether tentatively or boldly, it is still the ice that holds him up. Silly thoughts about the ice, doesn't change the ice – not even a little bit – it doesn't become thin just because he thinks it is. Jesus' Word to you is the ice.

And it amazes him when you stand on it! Our text goes onto say, **"When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, 'I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.'"** Isn't that something, you can amaze Jesus! No matter what may be happening in your life, when you believe the promises of Jesus, you amaze him!

The statement, "God helps those who help themselves" is a poor one at best. Without any attempt at deserving it or helping Jesus out, the centurion went away with only a word of Jesus in his pocket and that's all he needed. His servant was healed. You too can trust in God's great power. Perhaps the better phrase would be, "God loves you and he loves nothing better than to help you." You have his Word on it. If you leave with nothing else today, go home with that word of promise in your pocket, just like the centurion. Amen.

"Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen." (Ephesians 3:20-21)