

“GATHER THEM IN”

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Text: Matthew 8:5-13 NLT**God’s Word: Romans 10:8b-13 NLT****Matthew 8:5-13 NLT**

⁵ When Jesus returned to Capernaum, a Roman officer came and pleaded with him, ⁶ “Lord, my young servant lies in bed, paralyzed and in terrible pain.”

⁷ Jesus said, “I will come and heal him.”

⁸ But the officer said, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come into my home. Just say the word from where you are, and my servant will be healed. ⁹ I know this because I am under the authority of my superior officers, and I have authority over my soldiers. I only need to say, ‘Go,’ and they go, or ‘Come,’ and they come. And if I say to my slaves, ‘Do this,’ they do it.”

¹⁰ When Jesus heard this, he was amazed. Turning to those who were following him, he said, “I tell you the truth, I haven’t seen faith like this in all Israel! ¹¹ And I tell you this, that many Gentiles will come from all over the world—from east and west—and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the feast in the Kingdom of Heaven. ¹² But many Israelites—those for whom the Kingdom was prepared—will be thrown into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

¹³ Then Jesus said to the Roman officer, “Go back home. Because you believed, it has happened.” And the young servant was healed that same hour.

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Jesus and his little band of followers had made their way down the hill and were arriving in Capernaum discussing some of the more radical concepts that Jesus had talked about earlier that morning. What had he meant when he said this? Did he really mean it when he said that? And Jesus just smiled as he listened to them processing and debating all that he had told them about the Kingdom of God.

And then they froze, coming toward them was a group of Roman Soldiers and all too often when the occupiers came out to meet those who were occupied it could only mean trouble. You know that sinking feeling you get when you crest a hill on the highway and there is a cruiser parked in the median? Even if you weren’t speeding, and I’m assuming that none of us here would be speeding, you automatically take your foot off the gas and pray that you weren’t inadvertently speeding.

That’s not a new feeling, and I’m sure as the soldiers got closer, the guys were asking themselves if it was something they said? Something they had done? Maybe if they just ignored the soldiers they would pass by and not bother them.

But no such luck, the military men were heading right for them, obviously with a purpose of some kind that needed to be played out. But it wasn’t anything like they expected, the man in charge stepped up to them but instead of having the belligerent attitude that they were so accustomed to seeing in their occupiers the man’s face was pleading not commanding.

And as he came to Jesus, the story came out, apparently the man’s servant was extremely ill and suffering, but it’s interesting to note here that he did not come requesting that Jesus heal his servant, as a matter of fact he makes no request at all, he just tells Jesus what’s wrong. Matthew 8:6 “Lord, my young servant lies in bed,

*paralyzed and in terrible pain.*” That’s it, doesn’t offer Jesus any suggestions on what he should do. Doesn’t make any demands, or any requests, instead he just tells him what the problem is. We could probably learn a lot from that one observation.

We don’t know what he expected Jesus to do, if he expected Jesus to do anything. Maybe he was just looking for some sympathy or for some assurance that God was in control and that everything would work out. Instead, if we continue along in our story, Jesus responds by saying in Matthew 8:7, *“I will come and heal him.”*

Sounds reasonable—the man was sick and Jesus was obviously able to do something and so he offered to do what he could. Now that might not seem like a big deal to us but it was actually enormous. As we progress in the story, we discover that the man wasn’t a Jew. He was a gentile which meant that according to Jewish law there would be certain restrictions on any interactions that Jesus might have with him. Under Jewish law Jesus would have been forbidden to enter the home of a gentile.

And yet there was no hesitation in Jesus at all. If your servant is sick, then let’s go and take care of it. Seems simple enough. But the soldier responds by saying *“Lord, I am not worthy to have you come into my home. Just say the word from where you are, and my servant will be healed. I know this because I am under the authority of my superior officers, and I have authority over my soldiers. I only need to say, ‘Go,’ and they go, or ‘Come,’ and they come. And if I say to my slaves, ‘Do this,’ they do it.”*

Wow, gotta love that. Verse 10 tells us that *“When Jesus heard this, he was amazed.”* And his comments about the faith of the Roman soldier opens the door of the Kingdom of God to not only the Jews but also to Gentiles—that would be us. And as a bonus we read in verse 13 *“Then Jesus said to the Roman officer, ‘Go back home. Because you believed, it has happened.’ And the young servant was healed that same hour.”*

So just a little background here. The Roman Soldier is identified here as a Roman Officer but in the original language he is more accurately called a Centurion. And it was the Centurions who were the back bone of the Roman Army. The Roman army was divided into large groups called a Legion and it contained 6000 men, but each legion was made up of 60 smaller divisions which were called Centuries because they contained 100 men. And the person in charge of each century was called a centurion and they would be the equivalent of our Regimental Sergeant Major. These guys were long serving members of the army who were in charge of discipline. Greek Historian Polybius, described what a centurion should be: *“They must not be so much venturesome seekers after danger as men who can command, steady in action, and reliable; they ought not to be over-anxious to rush into the fight, but when hard pressed, they must be ready to hold their ground, and die at their posts.”*

Historians tell us that this man would have probably been part of the group that was under the command of King Herod and was probably originally from Lebanon or Syria. We really don’t know how he had heard of Jesus or had become aware of Jesus’ healing power but at some point he had.

The interesting thing here though is wrapped up in the man’s request. He isn’t here asking about his spouse or his child or even one of his men, those things would be understandable. Instead, he comes on behalf of his servant, or more accurately, his slave. Remember 2000 years ago a slave wasn’t a person, they were property and yet here was a Centurion coming to a Jewish teacher about his personal attendant.

There is so much in this story that we could look at, we could talk about the soldier’s compassion, or about his faith. We could examine the entire section of dialogue where Jesus talks about Gentiles being included in God’s Kingdom.

I saw the Centurion as a man who recognized in someone he cared about, their need for Jesus. And in seeing that, I realized that there were lessons here for each one of us, because in each of our lives there are people who need Jesus. They might be family members, they might be friends, they might be coworkers or school

friends or they might be our neighbors. But there are people out there who we cross paths with every day who need Jesus.

So what do we learn from this story?

**1) He knew what his responsibility was.** At some point the soldier realized that if his servant was going to be helped, it would be Jesus that did it. Maybe he had exhausted all other avenues, perhaps he had already been to doctors and they had been unable to help. We don't know what had transpired in the story before Jesus was approached, and really it is irrelevant, because whatever led the soldier to Jesus, and however long it took for him to get there, he ended up in the right place.

Maybe he had heard stories of the preacher from Galilee who had such incredible powers, or perhaps he had been on the edge of the crowds that had gathered around Christ and listened to his teaching. We don't know, but we do know that he was here and he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus was the answer.

And at some point we need to recognize that people who don't know Jesus, have to know Jesus. It's not just a good idea, it isn't an option that they can add to their lives to make it a little better. We have to come to the inescapable conclusion that there is a heaven to be gained and a hell to be shunned. We need to realize that Jesus is exactly who he said he was in John 14:6 when he told Thomas *"I am the way, the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me."*

And until we accept the gospel as the gospel truth we will never feel the compulsion to do as the apostle Andrew did in John 1:42-43 Andrew went to find his brother, Simon, and told him, *"We have found the Messiah"* (which means "Christ"). Then Andrew brought Simon to meet Jesus. As long as we can convince ourselves that maybe they will be alright if they are good enough and kind enough and sincere enough then we will never tell them that we have found the Messiah.

Thom Ranier in his book The Unchurched Next Door interviewed several hundred people in both the US and Canada who do not attend church, they are unchurched people. Here is part of what Rainer discovered: "Are Christians inviting non-Christians to church? The heartbreaking answer is no. Only 21 percent of active churchgoers invite anyone to church in the course of a year. But only 2 percent of church members invited an unchurched person to church." Think about it...out of a hundred active churchgoers, 21 of them will invite someone to church. But 19 of those people who were invited to church already attend church somewhere else.

If you had only been saved to go to heaven then Jesus would have taken you to heaven at that very minute but you are to take as many people as possible with you.

**2) He knew what his responsibility wasn't.** It's interesting to note that the Centurion didn't try to tell Jesus what to do or how to fix his servant. He knew that he was powerless to affect the change that had to happen in his servant and friend.

I mean think about it, if he could have done it he would have already done it. His responsibility was to connect his servant and Jesus and he did.

As much as we would like to change those we love we can't. We can't make them behave better, we can't make them trust God, and we can't make them change their behavior. Just won't happen. Parents if you think you can make your kids behave you are wrong. They may behave to please you, they may behave to keep you quiet and off their back or they may behave because they want to behave but whatever they are doing they are doing it because they have chosen to not because "You have made them."

And so understand we can't fix people, we can only help connect them to Jesus. You understand that there is a difference between Christianizing people and seeing them become a Christian. We can help them exhibit the right principles, we can help them get rid of their sinful behavior, we can help them walk the way they ought

to walk, and that may make a difference in their life here, but it will not make an eternal difference. That difference can only be made by God and only when the person wants the difference to be made.

**3) He was willing to pay the price.** We see the Centurion strolling up to Jesus and stating his case but it probably wasn't that simple. The soldier may not have had to pay cash per se, but there was a price and the biggest one was his pride.

At some point he had to acknowledge that he couldn't fix what had to be fixed, and then he had to get his head around the fact that what he, as a Centurion with the might of the Roman Empire behind him, was unable to do, this simple teacher from Galilee would be able to do. And then he had to come to the place that he was willing to approach Jesus, and then what if Jesus did nothing? What if he was antagonistic toward Romans? What if he was unable to do anything?

We all struggle with questions like that when we want to invite someone to church. What if they say no? What if they are antagonistic toward the church? But the centurion had to get over those doubts and say "Well nothing ventured nothing gained." A friend of mine is fond of saying "If you don't ask then the answer is no." If we go back to Thom Rainer's book, The Unchurched Next Door, research tells us 82 Percent of the unchurched are at least "somewhat likely" to attend church if they are invited. Perhaps we need to pause here to allow that to sink in, maybe we need to restate it 82 Percent of the unchurched are at least "somewhat likely" to attend church if they are invited. If you don't remember anything else from this message hang on to that. 8 out of 10 of your friends and co-workers would be at least somewhat likely to attend church if you invited them.

So what is an invitation? For many of the unchurched it would simply mean being asked. For others it included the offer to meet them at the front door to show them around. But in either case it goes back to a simple premise of: invite them and they will come.

And so there is a price that has to be paid. And there are people who willing pay a price every week to make sure that we have the type of church you can invite your friends to.

- When church people park over at the bank or out on Sandusky, they don't do that so they can get their exercise, they do it so there will be better spots available for our guests.
- There are those who choose to sit closer to the front (in the splash zone), so that the more desirable seats will be available for our guests.
- There are those who volunteer in nursery and children and Junior church so that your guests will know their children are being cared for in a safe and fun environment.
- Oh by the way in our case there is a financial price that has to be paid as well. Because in order for this church to exist there are salaries that have to be paid along with light bills and heat bills and cleaning and maintenance etc. etc. etc.

And it's because there are people who give sacrificially and might I say obediently that we have a church to invite people to. And if you fit into that category then I thank you.

So where are you at today? Who is there in your life that came to mind when I was speaking about connecting people with Jesus?

In your bulletin today you will find an invitation and I would encourage you to read it, pray over it and ask God to guide you to the person you need to invite. Start praying for the person whose name is on your heart and pick a Sunday that you can invite them to church and then lunch or coffee afterwards.

God has touched our lives, our job is to bring others to him as well.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.