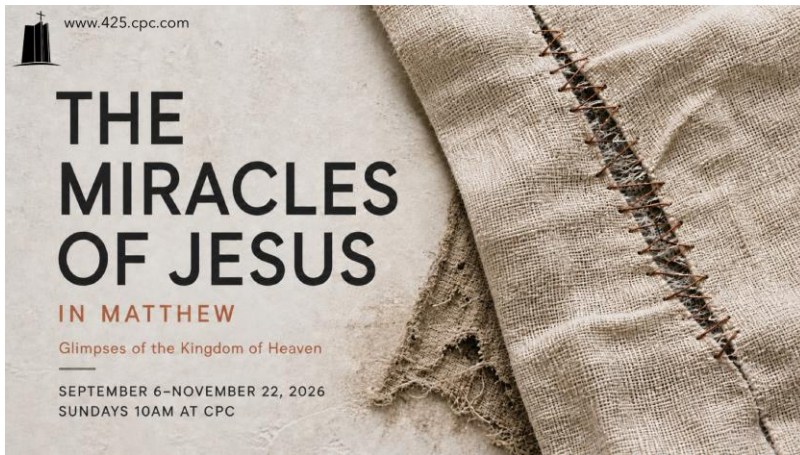




Never Too Far
Matthew 8:5-13
By Pastor Paul Hudson
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**This original sermon is not A.I. generated*

We're in a new series called the Miracles of Jesus in Matthew. I think the church tends to overlook the powerful meaning behind Jesus' miracles. We may not admit it, but a lot of us might view Jesus' miracles as merely demonstrations of divine power on random, lucky people. If we're honest, many of us might think the miracles are just out of reach because of our lack of faith.

Well, I put this series together not to try to prod you into believing for your miracle today. This series is about uncovering what these miracle stories ultimately mean for us in the kingdom of heaven. Each of the different types of miracle stories represent different aspects of the reign and rule of God coming to earth through Jesus. Each miracle reveals the nature of the kingdom of heaven and its King.

As I mentioned last week, there are three aspects to consider. The first is about Old Testament fulfillment. The miracles are a fulfillment of the prophetic hope for peace and wholeness that the Messiah would bring in his coming. So, the miracles point to Jesus as the Jewish Messiah who fulfills the expectation of peace and wholeness. The miracles essentially scream out, "Hey, this is the world's Messiah we've been expecting!"

The second aspect is about the kingdom's presence now. The miracles tell us the kingdom of heaven has come through Christ and remains through the work of the Holy Spirit in believers today. In this sense, the signs and wonders of the kingdom continue on through the Holy Spirit, as part of the mission of the church until Jesus returns.

The third aspect is about the future consummation of the kingdom of heaven. That is, the final state of creation when the kingdom is fully realized in the new heaven and new earth. The miracles point to that final state where suffering, death, and decay are no more. So, the miracles reveal the nature of the kingdom of heaven in its eternal form, as well as the nature of its King, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Today's miracle is from Matthew 8:5-13. This is a story about a Roman Centurion-- a Gentile man of authority-- whose beloved servant was stuck in bed paralyzed. This miracle is for people who feel paralyzed and far away from the Lord's presence. The story also challenges any thought that Christianity is a white man's religion, or that acceptance by God is based on a person's heritage, social standing, or even moral worthiness.

Let's open to Matt. 8:5-13.

⁵ When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. ⁶ "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly."

⁷ Jesus said to him, “Shall I come and heal him?”

⁸ The centurion replied, “Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹ 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.”

¹⁰ When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, “Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. ¹¹ I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. ¹² But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

¹³ Then Jesus said to the centurion, “Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would.” And his servant was healed at that moment.

The New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Mt 8:5–13.

The Word of God for the people of God.

The Centurion's Need, Humility, and Love (Matthew 8:5–7)

The Centurion came to Jesus out of deep concern for a loved one, his servant. Let's talk about the servant for a second. The Scripture doesn't tell us much about him. We don't know how he became paralyzed. We don't even know if the servant is a believer or ever became a believer. In fact, the focus of the story is not even on the servant at all, the servant and his healing is a by-product of the story. This miracle is really about the centurion and Jesus.

The centurion came with a desperate need on behalf of another person. His beloved servant is suffering with a terrible paralysis. In a sense, the centurion is paralyzed too, he is at a loss for what he should do. He came to Jesus with a burden too heavy to bear— a paralyzing burden— but it was not about himself. He was pleading for his servant.

My friends, this is the beginning of great faith. The centurion had a paralyzing burden for a loved one that drove him to Jesus. The burden of love and concern for others is a mark of great faith, and it is the nature of Christ's kingdom. This simple approach by the centurion tells us that the kingdom of heaven is not about ourselves only. Faith in Christ does not teach us to prioritize our own personal needs ahead of others. A weaker faith looks into Christ out of concern for oneself. A greater faith is driven to Christ by deep concern and love for others.

When you think of the people who are famous for their faith— Mother Teresa, an example of deep faith, love, and service, especially for dying orphans and lepers; George Müller, a man of deep faith whose life was completely turned around by Christ, from being a thief to running orphanages solely on prayer for God's provision; Corrie Ten Boom who hid Jews during the holocaust and became an incredible example of Christ's forgiveness— these faith giants were driven by a broken-hearted love for others that ran far beyond the self. The nature of God's kingdom is about deep-seated love and concern for others.

I think this story is very interesting in that the centurion's focus is on his servant, but the message of the story turns its focus toward the centurion's humble faith and how Jesus responds to him. In vs. 7, Jesus asks, "Shall I come and heal him?" At this point in the story, the focus hangs in the balance. If the story was meant to teach us anything about the servant's faith or his position in the kingdom of God, then Jesus would have personally gone to the centurion's home to meet the servant.

Instead, the centurion replies, "I'm not worthy." He says, "I don't deserve to have you under my roof." This is another mark of great faith. It is the honest recognition of one's own lack of worthiness by their own merit in the presence of Christ. This is the opposite of entitlement. If anything, the centurion was one of the most entitled people in the Roman empire. Jesus knew who the centurion was. The centurion knew that Jesus knew who he was. The centurion could have seen this as an opportunity to impress Jesus by putting together a great welcome feast at his home. Instead, he saw his unworthiness in the presence of the King, and he was honest about it.

The centurion also knew that he, as a Gentile, was outside of the kingdom of God by default. That did not stop his approach. He knew where he stood as a Gentile; he was far outside of God's chosen people. Further, he knew that Roman centurions were not high on the Messiah's visitation list. Yet he came with humble trust in the mercies of Jesus on behalf of his broken servant.

Isaiah 42:3 is a prophesy of the messiah that connects to this story. It says, "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out." Jesus was sent for the broken and the humbled, irrespective of their background or where they're from.

Psalm 103:8 says, "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.... He does not treat us as our sins deserve... For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.... for he remembers that we are dust." This the nature of the kingdom's King, he embraces all who come to him in humility and trust.

Jesus' Authority Over Distance, Disease, and Timing (Matthew 8:8-9)

In vss. 8-9, the centurion said, "Just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, "Go," and he goes." This is one key to the story. The centurion recognizes the kingly authority of Jesus to command from a distance.

A commander gives the order and distance doesn't matter. A commander does not need to be near the battlefield; his authority enforces the command immediately. It's not about the commander's physical presence, it's all about the authority of his word. The centurion had this kind of authority. How much greater is Jesus' divine authority?

Christ was a King who could have assembled an insurrectionist army with a single word. In fact, the centurion was tasked with putting down insurrections, and he was probably told to keep an eye on this Jesus. However, the great faith of the centurion saw beyond the militant messiah king that the Jews were expecting. This is quite remarkable, but the centurion saw in Jesus a divine King who could heal with a single authoritative word. Not just heal with a word but heal immediately and from a distance.

This story tells us that Jesus is not just a healer endowed with divine power. He is divine himself because healing with just a word is something that nobody can do, only God.

Christ Brings Wholeness to the Unworthy, Distant, and Stuck (Matthew 8:13)

Christ's kingdom is the only kingdom where people are healed simply by the word of the King. Unlike other healers, the King does not have to touch or be physically near to heal. His word commands healing. His word goes out and accomplishes what he has spoken without any need to be physically present on location, without any need for a physical touch. His Word is powerful.

Physical healing from all manners of bodily dysfunction will be ours in the kingdom of heaven, but there's a deeper spiritual layer to think about here. That is the healing that Christ brings to those who are spiritually or emotionally paralyzed. Inside you may be numb-- you can't feel. Christ's word has the power to completely restore. Psalm 107:19-20 - this is a great psalm about Jesus— says, “Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. He sent out his word and healed them; he rescued them from the grave.”

To the emotionally paralyzed, Christ's word heals the locked-up emotions. To those paralyzed by anger, his word soothes the angry soul. To those paralyzed by penetrating sorrow, Christ's Word penetrates even to the deepest part of the soul. To those who feel distant and as far away from God as you can get: his word is able to penetrate deeper inside to find you and free you from your paralysis. I encourage you to open your heart to his word and trust his authority in your life.

The centurion would not put limitations on Jesus' authority. He did not allow the perceived distance between him and Christ stop his approach of faith. This passage invites you to drop whatever limitations you may be placing on Jesus and to start trusting that he can fix what you cannot. Jesus responded to the centurion because of his faith and trust, not because he deserved it.

The Psalm I quoted earlier says, “he rescued them from the grave.” The resurrecting word of Jesus reaches even into the grave. If Jesus' word has such authority, then the question is not whether he has the power to help, but whether we will come to him with the same trust and humility as the centurion.

The King's Surprise: Faith, Not Status, Secures a Place at the Feast (Matthew 8:10–12)

In vs. 10-12, Jesus was amazed at the centurion's faith. He said, "I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith." The centurion, a far-off Gentile with no historical claim to God's kingdom, saw Jesus more clearly than God's own people. This message is just as relevant to us today as it was to the Jews then. Someone who seems far off can see Jesus much more clearly than many who have grown up in the church and have been near the faith their whole lives. Simply coming to church, growing up in a Christian home, or holding Christianity's values does not necessarily equal a living trust in Jesus. The Lord looks for faith not heritage.

In vs. 11-12, Jesus said, "Many will come from the east and west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside..." This is the crux of the whole story. The feast Jesus is talking about here is the wedding feast of the Lamb in Revelation. It is the future time at the second coming of Christ when all of God's people will be resurrected into the fully established kingdom of heaven. The kingdom feast

will include people from every corner of the world in all of human history on account of their faith and trust in Christ Jesus.

Isaiah 25:6-9 gives a beautiful prophetic picture of this feast hosted by the Messiah: "On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine-- the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth. The Lord has spoken. In that day, they will say, "Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the Lord, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation."" What an amazing prophecy!

Jesus makes an example of the centurion's great faith to show that those who were considered outsiders and far away from God's kingdom will be welcomed to the feast through their faith in the King. There is also a warning here. It's not about cultural background, heritage, or religious identity— the kingdom of heaven is entered into by faith in King Jesus. It is a blessing to be raised in the church, to have a Christian heritage in the family, but none of that takes the place of personally bowing the knee to Christ in humility, faith, and trust.

A Missional Response

I want to finish this sermon with a missional response to this sermon. I've been talking a lot lately about being a missional church and missional Christians. A missional Christian is someone whose heart breaks for the lost.

Here is a missional response to today's sermon:

Christianity is not a white man's religion, so, as a church, we must celebrate and embrace the diversity of the kingdom, inviting all people into the peace and wholeness of Christ's kingdom. Jesus said, "Many from the east and west will come and take their seat at the banquet..." We also teach people to recognize and trust Christ's all-encompassing authority as the centurion did.

The centurion came to Jesus on behalf of his servant, whom he loved. This is like standing in the gap for those who are distant from Christ. I said at the beginning of this message, the nature of the kingdom is deep love and concern for others. We bring our burdens in prayer to the Lord for the broken and paralyzed. We trust the Word of God can bring feeling to numbness.

No person should be considered unworthy or undeserving to come into the Lord's presence. Jesus sent his healing word into the centurion's house. The grace of Christ came to the centurion and his servant in spite of their unworthiness. This tells us that faith and trust alone invite the Lord's mercy. At the same time, we, the Lord's church, must teach and exemplify the meaning of Christ's authority in our lives. His word is as powerful as his presence.

Romans 10:12 says, "For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile-- the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Amen.

Let's pray.

Study Questions*Read Matthew 8:5-13***Observation**

- 1) What burden brought the centurion to Jesus in Capernaum?
- 2) How did the centurion describe his servant's condition?
- 3) What did the centurion ask Jesus to do instead of coming home?
- 4) What future gathering did Jesus describe for people from east and west?

Interpretation

- 1) Why does the sermon say the servant's healing is not the story's main focus?
- 2) How does the centurion's military authority illuminate Jesus' authority?
- 3) Why does Jesus praise this Gentile's faith over faith found in Israel?
- 4) What warning does Jesus give to those relying on kingdom status?

Application

- 1) Whose paralyzing burden can you bring to Jesus in prayer?
- 2) Where might entitlement keep you from approaching Christ with humility?
- 3) What limitation on Jesus' authority do you need to drop?
- 4) How can you welcome outsiders into Christ's peace and wholeness?