

TEXT: "Go now; and your reward shall be equal  
to your faith."

(Matthew 8: 13)

### INTRODUCTION

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But more critical to our happiness and well-being are the estimates that we make about ourselves. "I can do this. I can't do that". "I can be this. I can't be that." "I can change this. I can't change that."

Let me turn the card face up and declare my main assertion right here at the beginning of the sermon. I believe our estimates about ourselves are usually lower than need be because we underestimate the power of God in life. Or, to put it in different words, we under-live our potential because our faith is weak.

### DEVELOPMENT

Today's Scripture Reading crowns one of the better known healing episodes in the life of Jesus. This story is told, with minor differences, in both Matthew and Luke. It happened in the town of Capernaum as Jesus began His Galilean ministry. As He entered the town, He was approached by a Centurion - a Roman, no doubt - assoldier, probably an officer in the army.

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Jesus was amazed, indeed ecstatic, at such confidence. Turning to this troubled father, He spoke reassuringly, "Go now; and your reward shall be equal to your faith."

Now there are a number of roadside rests in this Biblical narrative, places to linger and reflect on meaning. The humility of the Centurion in making this public appeal for help. Or, the delight that Jesus took in so noble a demonstration of faith. Or, the irony that an "outsider" should possess more faith than Jesus could find in Israel. However, we must resist stopping and get to the point.

This Centurion, as he estimated his son's chances - that is, as he appraised the present situation - included God! In the mod language of the sociologist, he "factored in" the power of God. His confidence was not displaced, for the boy - his son - was cured. "Go now; and your reward shall be equal to your faith".

This story was doubtless included in the Scriptures in order to awaken and enliven our faith in God. To help it achieve this worthy end, let's single out the two outstanding characteristics of this Centurion's faith. First: it was a faith that challenged God. Second: it was a faith related to a specific need. Let's take a look at both points for a few minutes.

A FAITH THAT CHALLENGED GOD

It was a faith that challenged God. There are times, of course, when faith must acquiesce, when faith must find its own Gethsemane and in submission pray: "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as Thou wilt." There are those times in life when faith must accept what is and learn from the unchangeable. But I would suspect that such times are fewer than we generally surmise.

It is easier to ponder the uses of adversity than to seek the help of God in removing adversity. Mind you, prayers of resignation are not the only prayers that belong to our faith. I believe that there are many times in our lives when God expects of us something other than mere acquiescence.

Ministers are always interested in sermon titles. That's what many preachers live on and live for. I always check the Saturday papers to see what sermon titles are there. A few Summers back in Portland, Maine (not far from where we Summer), a minister announced his sermon title as "When Life Gives You Lemons, Make Lemonade". That's the tactic of acquiescence. This is to emphasize destiny at the expense of freedom. Somehow I can't help but feel that God might say, "When life gives you lemons, fling them back and ask for a better shake".

Now this Centurion in our story didn't come to Jesus looking for some philosophy of suffering, or explanation of it all. He came to storm the power that he sensed was resident in the person of Christ. Very simply, he wanted his son cured.

I sometimes feel that our failure to put God to the test frequently masquerades as piety. In most cases, however, it is sheer unbelief. Walter Wagoner in a recent book introduces us to two terms, at least they're two terms I had never bumped in to before - "Godism" and "Christianism". He writes:

"Godism, or Christianism is best defined as the slow, usually unwitting, substitution of ideas, things and activities about God or Christ for the real faith in and service to God and Christ."

"Godism" and "Christianism" eventually take us to the place where we end up refusing to challenge anything in God's name. Either can make us perpetually compliant with what is. I believe that God's heart was warmed when Peter, shortly after the Resurrection, went to the Temple and found the paralytic lying there and said:

"Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I unto thee; in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, RISE UP AND WALK".

Remember the wisdom that was there in the bull-pen of the Mets in the Summer of 1973 as they surged to the pennant. "Ya gotta believe". Isn't it interesting that when unsophisticated types get hold of the Gospel, or when the

Gospel gets hold of them, they come boldly to expect some big things of God! So many of us are tempted to qualify our confidence and our expectations in the power of God to produce change. We need to talk more than we do about transformation and healing and the large differences that God's spirit can make.

We must live around some mountains, true. But there are other mountains that we must bid begone. "Go now; and your reward shall be equal to your faith."

A FAITH RELATED TO A SPECIFIC NEED

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The Bible teems with illustrations of this sort of thing. It's as though God were saying, "Don't talk of faith - show me!"

Some of you who are not at home with the various terms of the Scriptures likely do not know what we mean when we speak about "putting the fleece on the rock". This is a reference that comes from the Book of Judges out of that hectic period in which a man by the name of Gideon was summoned by God to lead the Israelites in battle against their foes. Notice this. Gideon says,

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So I come to this question: what is there in your life that you have believed God for lately? Be specific.

SPECIFIC NEED

Some of us are handicapped by strong feelings of inadequacy. I challenge you to think positively and to believe God for the furnishing of what you lack.

Some of us are suffering from a needless loss of health. I challenge you to believe God for healing.

Some of us are eaten alive by an active hatred for some other human being.  
I challenge you to believe God for cleansing.

Some of us are captive to base desires and unworthy affections. I challenge you to believe God for your transformation.

Some of us are locked up in a cell of inconsolable grief. I challenge you to believe God for a calm and joyful heart.

Some of us are afraid of the world, afraid of other people, afraid of persons different from ourselves, afraid, too, of ourselves. I challenge you to believe God for courage.

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CLOSING A gadget of recent years now on the market is the little pocket calculator. As numbers play an increasingly important role in our lives such devices are growing in use and popularity.

But the heart also makes its calculations. Man is an incurable estimator. What are my limits? Where are my boundaries?? What can I yet be? God has more to give us than we are willing to believe.

To underestimate God is to sell short our potential as human beings. What you believe is what you get. "Go now and your reward shall be equal to your faith".

PRAYER Remind us once again, O God, that with You all things are possible. We believe. Help thou our unbelief. Conscious we are of our spiritual weakness. Help us in these quiet moments of worship to renew our hold on those energies we need if we are to drive out the devils of our world, and the devils in our lives. Ground us in those things we really believe so that when Jesus lifts us up, we shall be able to stand firmly on our feet.

In His name and spirit, we pray.  
Amen.

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PASTORAL PRAYER: APRIL 24, 1960

GRACIOUS GUARDIAN OF OUR SOULS.....once again we would turn aside from the world of noise and confusion to the world of quietness and peace.....to that world that we cannot see with our eyes and touch with our hands, to a world that is nevertheless true and real.

AND HELP US SO TO WORSHIP THEE in this hour that we may come to experience that measure of peace that passes all human understanding, so that we may come to feel the warmth of thy presence nourishing our lives - comforting us and speaking soft words of reassurance.

HELP US SO TO WORSHIP THEE in this hour that our thoughts may become more pure, our aspirations more in keeping with thy will, and our faith more triumphant and vital.

BRING EACH OF US closer to that love that is at the heart of all life.....that love that will never let us down... that love that will never let us go.....so that we may learn how best to live...  
how best to serve...  
how best to overcome our fears...  
how best to set to one side our temptations...

WE THANK THEE OUR FATHER -

For health and home...  
For the deep joys of human love and parenthood...  
For happiness and laughter...  
For help in moments of trouble...  
For patience with us when we have fallen short...

BLESS our friends and our loved ones who stand in need of thy help. Bless those too whom we do not know who are facing experiences the likes of which we have never known.

BLESS thy messengers in the dark corners of the earth.  
in the crowded cities of the world.  
in the sordid sections of life.

DEFEND and help us in all times of stress and strain. And assist us in growing to be more like thy son in whose name all of our prayers and private petitions have been spoken.

AMEN.