

SERIES: The Ministry of the Market Place

SERMON: **The Centurions: Does God Approve of Military Careers?**

SCRIPTURE: Acts 10, Matt 8

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Introduction: Today we come to the last message in our three-month series on *The Ministry of the Market Place*. I want to thank George Fooshee and Phil Thengvall for their excellent messages while I was in Israel. Next Sunday, Lord willing, we will begin a new series on the life of Christ. We will start, as is appropriate for Advent, with the nativity of Jesus, and then we will continue after the Christmas season by studying the life of our Savior from the book of Matthew.

I remember back in 1967 when my wife and I were attending First Baptist Church in Dallas, Dr. W. A. Criswell announced one Sunday that he was going to preach for the rest of his ministry life on the Life of Christ. He just felt that there is no more important topic for Christians to consider. Criswell was at the time about my age, and he didn't know it then, but he would continue to preach for another 35 years! (Don't worry, I'm not going to follow in his steps!) As I understand, he didn't keep that commitment to preach on nothing but the life of Christ, but nevertheless, I thought his reasoning made sense: If Jesus is our Savior, and if Jesus is our example, and if our goal is to become like Him, then surely we ought to know *above everything else* who He is, what He did, and what He taught.

It is my intention for us to spend a great deal of time—probably in three-month increments over the next several years—studying the awesome life of Jesus Christ. Of course, we have four Gospels from which we could do this, and they are each quite distinct. I am going to use Matthew as our home base, but we will borrow from the other Gospels from time to time as well.

My sermon title for today is, “The Centurions: Does God Approve of Military Careers.” There are quite a number of centurions mentioned in the NT, but I want to focus our attention on just two of them. The first is Cornelius, one of the principal characters in the drama that is recorded in Acts 10 and 11. The other is an unnamed centurion mentioned in Matthew 8.

These two soldiers are presented in an extremely positive light in the NT. Let's begin with the Centurion named Cornelius in Acts 10.

Cornelius, a Roman Centurion, demonstrates remarkable interest in the things of God. (Acts 10:1-8)

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At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!"

Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked.

The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the

sea."

When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

His character. As a centurion Cornelius was a non-commissioned officer in charge of 100 men in an Italian cohort, usually consisting of 600 men. Caesarea was the Roman capital of Palestine and Pilate's principal residence, so it is not surprising to find many soldiers stationed there. This Gentile officer is devout, God-fearing, honest, generous, and sincere, but apparently he is not a saved man. There is no better Scriptural example than Cornelius to show us that it is possible to be religious, even devout, and yet spiritually lost at the same time. Neither his alms nor his prayers had availed to bring him salvation, and were it not for the fact that God in His grace reached out to Cornelius to bring him the Gospel message, he would not have become a Christian. But then no one becomes a believer without a special work of God's grace.

I find in Cornelius a fulfillment of Christ's promise in John 7:17: "If any man is willing to do His will, he shall know the truth." That, friends, is the answer to the old bugaboo question, "But what about the heathen who have never heard?" If a person in the darkest area of the darkest continent is willing to do God's will, then I believe God will show him the truth so that he can be saved, *even* if it takes a miracle to do it. The miracle for Cornelius comes first in the form of a vision.

His response to God's revelation. An angel speaks to Cornelius, commending him for his prayers and his generosity, and tells him to send for a man named Peter who lives two days away. One might profitably ask why the angel himself doesn't tell Cornelius about Jesus. The answer is that God has not given the ministry of the Gospel to angels! They have never experienced salvation and therefore are not equipped to witness about it to others. Only we who have known the joy of having sins forgiven are able adequately to share that joy with others. How sad that we are so often reticent to do so!

Though Peter is 30-40 miles away at Joppa, Cornelius immediately dispatches two of his servants and a guard on this important mission. The Holy Spirit, according to verses 19 and 20, is leading in all of this; meanwhile, not surprisingly He is also working at the other end of the line.

Peter, a Jewish Apostle, demonstrates remarkable chutzpah in the face of God's commands. (Acts 10:9-22)

Isn't it exciting that when God leads one person to seek help He prepares someone else to give help. When He leads one person to witness, He prepares another person's heart to receive the witness. Let's look, then, at how God works on Peter to provide a witness to Cornelius.

His character. Peter is, of course, the leader of the Apostles, a man of boundless energy and great commitment to God. He is also seen here in Acts 10 as a man of prayer. That he

prayed morning and evening may be assumed, for those were normal times of prayer, but in addition he is found here praying at noon. Prayer three times a day is never commanded in the Scriptures, but Peter follows the example of pious men before him, like Daniel. He goes up to the flat roof to pray, probably because this would give him privacy and prevent distractions.

His initial response to God's revelation. He, too, experiences a vision. He sees something like a great sheet lowered to the earth full of animals, birds and reptiles, many of which are unclean according to Jewish dietary law. The Lord speaks to him and says, "Arise, kill and eat!" But Peter answers, "No way, Lord."

I have said that Peter, an Apostle, demonstrates remarkable chutzpah. Chutzpah is a word you may not be familiar with, but you *are* familiar with the concept. It's Hebrew for audacity or brashness. Webster's uses terms like supreme self-confidence, nerve, gall, arrogance, and temerity as synonyms. One rather humorous example of chutzpah was offered as follows: "A boy is on trial for murdering his parents, and he begs for leniency from the judge because he is an orphan." That, friends, takes nerve; that's chutzpah. Now think with me for a moment about the gall of Peter's response. Anyone who says "Lord" cannot also logically say, "No way!" If Jesus is truly Lord, then He must be obeyed!

The vision is repeated three times, perhaps because Peter is too dull to get it the first time. But eventually the message gets through loud and clear that when God has cleansed something, no one has the right to call it unclean or unholy. But while the ostensible subject is food, the Lord is thinking about something more profound than that. He has in mind not the foods Peter should eat but the people he should love.

Let me back up and try to communicate what is happening here theologically. In OT Judaism certain animals were considered unclean and were forbidden both for health reasons *and* to teach God's people that they should not assimilate with the cultures around them; their lifestyle should be different. Certain people were likewise considered unclean and the Israelites were forbidden to assimilate with them. Unfortunately, the Jews interpreted God's teaching on separation to mean that they were the only ones who could be saved. That was never the message God gave them. In fact, the whole message of the OT is that God has called out a people for Himself so that they would tell the nations about Him.

Now as we come to the NT we discover that God has changed the rules (He can do that, you know, because He made them in the first place). God has decided to quit treating His people like children and deal with them as adults. When Jesus Christ died on the Cross, all the distinctions of the Mosaic Law regarding diet were abolished. At the same time the OT rules regarding separation from non-Jews were likewise abolished. Jewish apartheid was no longer required; in fact, it was no longer even permissible. Instead God's people were urged to break down the wall of separation between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female. That is the principal message contained in the vision of the sheet.¹

His ultimate response to God's revelation. (23-33) Peter receives the Spirit's chiding

and invites Cornelius' representatives in and gives them lodging. Don't overlook how difficult this must have been on Peter's part. As a life-long Jew, he is suddenly being asked to adopt a whole new philosophy of life in regard to what he will eat and whom he will associate with. He had never had a Gentile in his guest room before. If his neighbors learn about it there is sure to be a special meeting of the subdivision trustees demanding that the covenants be enforced. Peter may be a little slow sometimes, but his courage here is remarkable.

On the next day he heads for Cornelius' house in Caesarea. There he finds that Cornelius has gathered his relatives and close friends. For Cornelius this is a chance of a lifetime, and he wants everyone dear to him to hear the message God is bringing. As Peter enters, Cornelius meets him, falls at his feet in reverence. It is remarkable that a member of the subjugating military garrison should fall at the feet of one of the subject people and venerate him! But after all, Cornelius believes Peter to be a representative of the almighty God, so his response is natural. Peter, of course, refuses to accept the homage of this man, saying, "Stand up! I am only a man myself!" This is most interesting in view of the Roman Catholic claim that Peter was the first Pope. His alleged successors seem not to be bothered by similar behavior.

It is now time for Cornelius to recount the vision he experienced simultaneously with Peter's. He does so and concludes by expressing the eagerness with which he and all his friends and relatives are awaiting the message Peter has to share from the Lord. Believe me, this is a preacher's paradise if there ever was one. A prepared preacher and a prepared congregation make a wonderful team!

The amazing results. We don't have time this morning to analyze, or even read, the message that Peter brought to Cornelius and his family and friends, but it is a powerful witness concerning the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He concludes by calling them to faith, saying that "everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (verse 43). The result is wholesale trust in Christ on the part of Cornelius and his whole entourage. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit comes on all who hear the message. This astonishes the Jewish believers who came with Peter, for they could hardly believe that Gentiles could receive the Holy Spirit! But God is doing a new thing. Furthermore, Peter orders that Cornelius and his friends be baptized with water, demonstrating that they are full participants in the life of the church.

Let me remind you again that we are dealing here with a Roman soldier who is part of the occupation force in Palestine. He becomes one of the very first Gentile believers in the Church. Does that automatically mean that everything he does is validated? Does that automatically imply that his military job is approved by the God? No, of course not, no more than Jesus' acceptance of the woman taken in adultery implied that He approved of her career. But I do want you to note that while Jesus told that woman, "Go and sin no more," Peter does not say to Cornelius, "Go and fight no more." Nor are we told that Cornelius sought early discharge from Caesar's army. In fact, in the whole story there is not a single hint that this man's work is displeasing to the Lord.

Now I want us to consider another centurion who, though unnamed, does not go unnoticed.

An unnamed centurion astonishes Jesus with his remarkable faith.

Please turn to Matthew 8:5-13.

When Jesus had entered Capernaum (this is the little town on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee where Peter lived and which Jesus frequently visited), a centurion came to him, asking for help. "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering."

Jesus said to him, "I will go and heal him."

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. 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."

When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. 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. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! It will be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that very hour.

When I used to teach theology in Bible College I had a favorite question I would ask the incoming freshman: "When is the last time you surprised God?" They would sit there with blank stares, and then their foreheads would wrinkle as they would wrestle hard with the question. It was a trick question, of course. The point I was trying to drive home was that God is omniscient and therefore He can't be surprised. He who knows the number of hairs on our heads and the number of days assigned to our lives cannot be surprised by mere mortals, or anyone else for that matter.

But if I ask a different question, "What does it take to surprise Jesus?", the answer is found right here in this story. You see, Jesus was God, but He was also man. As the God-man, He was unique. His deity was, of course, veiled; it had to be; otherwise, mere human beings would not have been able to stand in His presence. Philippians tells us that He emptied Himself of the voluntary use of some of His divine attributes, including, I believe, omniscience.

What we find here in this story is that Jesus is not only surprised; He is astonished. Only twice in the New Testament are we told that Jesus is astonished at anyone or anything, and both times the subject is faith. At Nazareth He marveled at the *absence* of simple faith in those who should have known better. Here He marvels at the *presence* of unusual faith in an unlikely follower. One of the most common words in religious discourse is "faith," but there is a lot of fuzzy thinking about it, and few people seem to be able to define it very clearly. I found the following definition I thought was excellent: "Faith is a willingness to bet your very life on the promises

and character of God.” That describes well the faith of this centurion.

His character. Who is this centurion who stands out so clearly in respect to faith? Well, he is a military man, a Gentile, a Roman soldier safeguarding the interests of Rome in Palestine. Yet he is also a compassionate man, as seen in his treatment of his servant, who is paralyzed and in terrible suffering. (Luke adds that the servant is about to die). In the first century servants were considered personal property. They were viewed as living tools, to be bought, sold, or discarded if they didn’t produce. But the centurion sees him as a fellow human being, and the illness generates great compassion in him.

The Centurion is also a very religious man and a humble man. The Gospel of Luke, chapter 7, fills in part of the story that Matthew leaves out. He tells us that the Centurion’s emissaries plead with Jesus in his behalf saying, “This man *deserves* to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue.” Now this is an impressive resume, but it is also really bad theology. The Centurion’s friends are trying to help him, so I give them credit for good intentions, but I suspect the Centurion himself would have been mortified had he known they were arguing that he deserved to have Jesus heal his servant. He is wise enough to know that God is not obligated to heal anyone. Later this same centurion actually says to Jesus, “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.”

Nevertheless, though the emissaries’ reasoning is faulty, the facts they share about the Centurion are evidently true—he apparently does love the Jewish nation and even built their synagogue. If this seems unlikely, we should remember that a synagogue didn’t have to be an elaborate structure, though certainly some were. A synagogue was any place ten Jewish men met for worship, so it could be quite a ordinary building. Whichever this synagogue was, the Jewish people were grateful for the generosity of this Roman soldier.

His faith. Look at the amazing words, “You say the word and my servant will be healed.” He somehow knows Jesus is not handicapped by not being present. The power is in the person of Jesus and in the words He speaks. Nothing more is needed. And the Centurion illustrates this from his own experience, for he does not have to be present in order for his command to accomplish his will. When a captain tells an enlisted man to jump, he asks, “How high?” If that’s true of him as a military leader, how much more must it be true of Jesus? Thus Jesus’ affirmation: “I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.” The story ends with this observation: “And his servant was healed at that very hour.” Apparently Jesus had never healed anyone from a distance before. He had healed a leper by touching him. He healed large crowds of people when they were brought to Him. He healed Simon’s mother-in-law by bending over her and rebuking the fever. The paralytic’s friends were so convinced they needed to get him into Jesus’ presence that they tore a hole in the roof of the home where Jesus was teaching. He drove out an evil spirit by ordering it to “Be quiet!” All those miracles were done before the Centurion brought his servant boy, and thus he must have known of His astounding power. But there is no precedent for thinking anyone could be healed from a distance. I like what Buster Sories said about this kind of faith:

“Normal faith believes God will do what God always does.
 Great faith believes God will do what God rarely does.
 Astonishing faith believes God will do what God has never done.”

The subjects of the kingdom grieve Jesus with their remarkable lack of faith. (Matthew 8:10-12)

I only want to touch briefly on this point. Jesus compares the Centurion’s faith to the faith of the Jewish people who were God’s chosen people, who received the Ten Commandments and the Law of Moses, and to whom were sent the prophets and the apostles. He says,

“I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.” Now that’s bad enough, but then He goes on to say 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. But the subjects of the kingdom (the people to whom Jesus originally came) will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”* (Matthew 8:10-12).

What a powerful reminder that merely being in a privileged class or being exposed to truth does not guarantee a personal relationship with God!

Conclusion: Each of the Roman centurions mentioned in the NT are spoken of favorably. In fact, the Centurions of Acts 10 and Matthew 8 are among the most highly praised individuals in the entire Bible. Would that be the case if a military career were disapproved by God? I don’t think so.

I will go further. I believe God not only doesn’t disapprove of military careers; I think He actively affirms soldiers and their work among the kingdoms of mankind.ⁱⁱ The evidence is not only anecdotal, through the way these centurions are portrayed, but also theological. In Romans 13 Paul lays out a biblical philosophy of government, making it clear that all governmental authority has its roots in divine authority. (That doesn’t mean that God approves all governments or all things governments do, but they are there because He puts them there). At one point in his argument Paul says that the head of the government . . .

“ . . . is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.”

I suspect Paul is speaking here primarily of police power, but in ancient times there was no clear distinction between police and the military.

Now I am aware that a number of people in our church have Mennonite roots, and some of you may be pacifists. I respect the pacifistic viewpoint, especially the decision some pacifists make to seek alternative service to military combat. Some of the pacifistic arguments are quite compelling, particularly those that urge us to pursue peace more aggressively than we do war. However, fundamentally I believe it is a mistake to conclude that Christians should never serve in the military. It is an honorable profession, and we should be grateful to those men and women

who serve us in this way.

But what is even more clear in our Scripture texts today is that God affirms the powerful influence godly soldiers can have for *His* kingdom. When a military man or woman rejects the power trip that is so easily taken when holding a gun, when they reject the language and promiscuity so often connected with military personell, when they exhibit godly characteristics and pursue Him with all their heart, they can be used in incredibly powerful ways by God.

I guess the way I would like to conclude this series on *The Ministry of the Market Place* this morning is to bring us back to where we started. Work is a divinely established institution—one of four God set up to make our lives meaningful, purposeful, and happy—the others being marriage/family, government, and the church. Work should not be viewed as the "secular" part of our lives which must be endured so that the "sacred" might be enjoyed, for work actually preceded the Fall of Adam and Eve, and it will be a major part of our lives even in heaven. The fact is, we could not survive in any meaningful fashion (and chaos would reign) if it weren't for work; it is God-ordained, God-blessed, and God-regulated.

I like what one wise man wrote,

“If a man is called to be a streetsweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted or Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of Heaven and Earth will pause to say, “Here lived a great streetsweeper who did his job well.”ⁱⁱⁱ

May all of us do our jobs well as unto Jesus.

i. We evangelicals have a tendency to equate “liberal” with ungodliness and “conservative” with godliness, but this whole incident shows us that it is possible to be more conservative than God is. I grew up in a Bible Church atmosphere where people loved the Lord and loved sound doctrine, but we had rules and regulations by which we judged the spirituality of others that weren't found anywhere in the Bible. If someone didn't live by our rules we considered them liberal, but sometimes those we wrote off may actually have been living closer to the Scriptures than we were. Legalism, i.e. setting up rules for acceptance that God Himself has not established, is something He hates.

ii. Always remember that the soldier has no say in what wars he fights. The soldier is a person under authority. He does what he is told to do, unless what he's told to do directly contradicts what God tells him to do. Then, of course, he must obey God rather than man.

iii. Martin Luther King, Jr.