

"It's Not Race, But Faith that Matters Most"

This week I thought about another song familiar to children:

*Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world.
Red and yellow, Black and white, they are precious in His sight.
Jesus loves the little children of the world.*

There is a newer version that changed the lyrics slightly to this, *Ev'ry color, ev'ry race, all are cover'd by His grace.*" I like both versions. The song came to mind because of the issue of race in **Matthew 8**. This weekend, we return to the life of Jesus as part of *The Story of God and the Struggles of Life*. **Matthew 8:1** tells us that after *The Sermon on the Mount* Jesus came down from the mount and at that time met this Roman centurion. This is a man Jewish people in Jesus' day would have thought of as from another race. And yet in **verse 10**, Jesus says, *Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith.* The point of the story that what matters with God is not race but *it is* faith. It is not the people from whom you come but the Savior in whom you believe.

From the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus emphasized that...

I. THE BLESSINGS JESUS BRINGS ARE FOR ALL WHO BELIEVE, RACE AND ETHNICITY DOESN'T ENTER INTO IT.

A. Grace is not based on race.

One of the things we believe in as a church is approaching the Bible in a way that we allow it to speak to us and confront the issues in our hearts and culture. This story does that. Jesus doesn't use the so often triggering words we hear in the context of race today. But he deals with race at a foundational level. It is interesting some people seem almost blind to the way Jesus addresses racial issues but this is actually the fourth in a series of incidents in the life of Jesus that speaks to this issue. As we look at these four incidents, we also get a review and reminder of some of the major milestones in his life up to this point.

1. The first incident occurs early in his ministry when he tells a man named Nicodemus he must be born again. The public ministry of Jesus began with his baptism in the River Jordan. Remember if we turn this worship area into a map of Israel. The pulpit area represents the south near Jerusalem and the sound booth the northern area near

the sea of Galilee and the towns of Cana, Capernaum, and Nazareth. After his baptism near Jerusalem Jesus is tempted in the wilderness. After that he walks the eighty or so miles north to Galilee. There he turns water into wine at a wedding in Cana.

The Passover feast comes, and Jesus returns to Jerusalem. This begins what are called “The Cana Cycles” as he journeys north to Galilee for most of his ministry but returns to Jerusalem for Passover. In Jerusalem, he chases the greedy money changers out of the temple. Then, soon after that this man, Nicodemus meets with Jesus. **John 3:3** says, Jesus told him, *unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.* This is noteworthy. Nicodemus would have been considered by the Jews to be a man with a pure racial and religious pedigree, but Jesus said he needed a new birth. Part of the context for this was the preaching of John the Baptist. In **Matthew 3:9**, John said, *Do not presume to say to yourselves, We have Abraham as our father, for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.* Jesus, like John, says God is forming a new race. Later, Peter puts it this way: **1 Peter 2:9** *But you (all who belong to Jesus through new birth and saving faith) are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.* God’s grace is creating a new people for his own possession. That’s the first incident and the foundation.

2. The second incident takes place when Jesus defies the racial boundaries and bigotry of his day to reach out to a Samaritan woman. After the interview with Nicodemus, Jesus left Judea to go back to Galilee. Samaria was a hostile area between Judea and Galilee. It was inhabited by a despised people. Jesus goes right into it and through it, and there he meets the woman at the well. She was surprised Jesus even spoke with her because, as **John 4** tells us, the Jews had *no dealings* with the Samaritans. There was deep racial bigotry and animosity between Jews and Samaritans, but Jesus will not condone it or conform to it. He spoke to her and told her God wanted *her* and her worship. He offered her the grace that could quench the deeper thirst of her unsatisfied heart. She believed in Jesus. She told her people, and many of them believed also. Jesus said the fields are ripe for harvest. He was gathering a new race – the spiritually reborn.

3. The third incident took place when Jesus spoke at his hometown synagogue, and the people tried to murder him. After

his time with the woman at the well, Jesus continued on to minister in Galilee. This time is called his Great Galilean Ministry. He drew crowds, healed the sick, and called everyone to repent and believe the gospel. At some point, he went to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. He read from the prophet Isaiah and claimed to be the messiah. They loved it. Luke says they *all spoke well of him and marveled at his gracious words. (Luke 4:22)*. Everyone was feeling great, but Jesus knew something that wasn't right, so he burst their bubble. He told two stories, both from the Old Testament. First, from **1 Kings 17**, he told how in the days of Elijah in the time of famine, there were many widows in Israel, but Elijah was sent to the widow of Zarephath, a woman of Phoenicia, a different race. He then told a story from **2 Kings 5**. Let me pick up the reading here in **Luke 4:27**. He says, *And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.*" The point was that of all the people God could have blessed; he chose an outsider, someone not of the Jewish race someone against whom they would have been prejudiced. How do proud people respond when you prick their conscience about their prejudice? Look at **verses 28-30**. *When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. ²⁹ And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. ³⁰ But passing through their midst, he went away.* Do you see the point he is making? He is telling these Jewish people the privileges they have enjoyed as God's people have not produced humility, compassion, or a true understanding of the heart of God. He knew this would make them mad, but it was important to make the point anyway. The first time anyone tries to kill Jesus during his public ministry is because he challenges their sense of superiority.

At this point, the second year of Jesus' ministry begins. He returns to Jerusalem for another Passover. His conflict with the religious establishment escalates. He leaves and journeys north again to continue his Galilean Ministry. He chooses the twelve disciples and delivers The Sermon on the Mount. After the Sermon, here in **Matthew 8**, he comes down from the mountain, and his healing and preaching ministry continues. This leads to the fourth incident addressing race.

4. The fourth incident takes place when a Roman centurion displays great faith in Jesus. Think about this; the Roman army was not only the army but the police force of an occupying enemy in Israel. Look what happens, **verse 5**, *When he had entered Capernaum, a*

centurion came forward to him, appealing to him, ⁶ Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly.” ⁷ And he said to him, “I will come and heal him.” Then the centurion says something that causes Jesus to marvel. **Verse 8**, *But the centurion replied, Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed.* ⁹ *For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, Go, and he goes, and to another, Come, and he comes, and to my servant, Do this, and he does it.”* ¹⁰ *When Jesus heard this, he marveled...!*

He marvels, but that’s not all. He turns this into an opportunity to make a point about the blessing of God. He continues in **verse 10**, *and said to those who followed him, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith.* ¹¹ *I tell you, many will come from east and west. By the east and west, he is talking about other nations and what they would have thought of as other races and people. To what do they come? They come to recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. This is a powerful image of the ultimate blessing. And then there is a warning in **verse 12**, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”* The Jewish nation had undeniably been given many blessings from God. Jesus says, if those blessings lead to presumption or prejudice, they have been misinterpreted. If they lead to hate and bigotry instead of humility and generosity, their purposes have been perverted.

What is the application? There is hope for all of us and a lesson also.

**B. If God’s grace overflows every racial boundary,
our love should look like that.**

Earlier this year, the elders of Christ Community Church and I discussed our understanding of the Biblical view of race and racism. We did not want just to be reacting to what is going on in the culture. We wanted to be followers of Jesus, not influenced by secular theories or identity politics on the one hand but not ignoring the issue of race or racism in the world either. We prayed and talked and forged a statement that reflects the Bible and our hope.

I told the elders that when we came to this passage, I would share it with you. Let me share in four parts.

1. A foundational biblical truth. *Christ Community Church is a community of people who believe God created all human beings in his*

own image. God has revealed himself in Scripture and in Jesus, as loving toward all he has made (Psalm 145:9, John 3:16).

2. An encouraging hope in the gospel. *The gracious work of the gospel includes the promise that in Jesus, all of redeemed humanity will one day be reconciled to God and each other. A great multitude that no one can number, from every nation, tribe, language, and people will one day worship Jesus in oneness and praise his glorious work of redemption and reconciliation. (Revelation 7:9-12).*

3. Some practical implications for our lives. *Until that day comes, we believe we must live and speak in a manner that reflects the heart of our God and our Savior, Jesus Christ, to a broken and hurting world (Matthew 5:16). Therefore we grieve the hurtful impact of racism under which so many have suffered throughout human history and denounce racism as an evil affront to our Creator and Savior. We aspire to treat all people with dignity and respect (Romans 13:8-10). We are committed to standing for truth and justice (Psalm 82:3,4); and we are committed to love and to forgive (Ephesians 4:32-5:2).*

4. A concluding conviction about the gospel. We believe the gospel to be the only true and sufficient hope for reconciliation with God and with all peoples (2 Corinthians 5:18-21, Ephesians 2:14-16)

The blessings Jesus brings are for all who believe, race doesn't enter into it for God and must not for us! That's is one truth and an important one from this story, but there is another one also. It is not just that Jesus rejects racism but that Jesus, affirms the importance of faith.

II. THE BLESSINGS HE BRINGS ARE FOR ALL WHO BELIEVE. FAITH IN JESUS IS WHAT MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE.

Verse 10: When Jesus heard the Conturians expression of faith, he marveled and said to those who followed him, *Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith.* The word "marveled" appears 30 times in the gospels. Twenty-eight of those times, people marvel at Jesus, The crowds, the Pharisees, the disciples, Pilate, everyone marvels about Jesus and what he does. Twice in the gospels, Jesus is said to *marvel*.

The first time is in **Mark 6:6**, where he was performing miracles in their presence, but they still didn't believe because, after all, this was the hometown boy, the carpenter, Mary's son. They said, Don't we all know his brothers and sisters? Mark says He marveled at their unbelief. Here is the only other place this word is used of Jesus. In this

case, he marvels at the faith of this man. Jesus marvels when he sees a terrible lack of faith or an impressive act of faith.

A. Faith matters.

We are likely to hear far more talk on our news feed about race and the various perspectives on race these days than we do about faith. And race is an issue with which we need to grapple. But faith matters most.

Faith is what brings you eternal life and shapes your present life.

In **Mark 9:23**, Jesus said, *all things are possible for one who believes*. All our prayers or efforts, our engagement needs to be fueled by faith.

Hebrews 11:6 says, *And without faith, it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.*"

B. Faith matters, and the kind of faith we have matters.

This centurion shows us the kind of faith Jesus longs to see in us.

1. This faith is humble. The Roman centurion doesn't presume to demand anything. **Verse 5** says, *he appeals to Jesus*. In **verse 8**, he says this, *Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof*. Pay attention to the fact that Jesus doesn't correct him as if to say, *"Don't be so hard on yourself. Sure, you are worthy."* That's important because what this teaches you is that you don't have to be worthy to get the help you need from Jesus. It isn't about your worthiness. It is about his power and his grace and compassion. **Isaiah 57:15** says it so well: *For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.*

The faith Jesus loves is humble, and yet...

2. The faith Jesus loves has total confidence in his power and authority. That's the point of the second half of **verse 8**; *Only say the word, and my servant will be healed*. This trust in Jesus causes Jesus to marvel. Jesus loves for you to trust him. He is so willing and able to help unworthy people like us when we turn to him and put our faith in him. And he has authority to just say the word and make it so. You turn to him, He says "forgiveness", and everything is forgiven. He says the word, and you have a new and eternal life and hope. He says the word, and it happens, prayers are answered, storms are weathered,

what was broken is healed, wisdom is imparted, and everything works together for good in the end. That's why the Bible will later say, *we are more than conquerors through him who loves us.*

Conclusion

The reason the Bible so often exhorts us to believe, rebukes us for our failures to believe, and holds up examples like this and praises those who have great faith is because faith matters so much.

When I was a young pastor, there was an older pastor who had a lasting impact on me. After he had been in ministry for ten years, he had grown discouraged. He resigned and went through a season of depression. But he kept seeking God, and as he did, he sometimes said, like a man dying of thirst, he began to *drink in the enormous promises of God in the Bible.* He said he began to realize that an act of faith lay at the heart of the fulfillment of his life and calling. In faith, he needed to claim the promise of the presence of Christ and the power of the gospel for himself and for those with whom he shared it.

He told how he began to meditate on the promise Jesus gave in **John 7:38**, *“Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”* The Greek of that passage is not describing a one-time act of faith but a repeated choice to keep believing, now and continuously. He used this phrase: *“the promises are the handles that we grab in our weakness in order to secure his presence.”* His story and that image stuck with me. I cannot tell you how often I have thought of that choice to reach up and take hold of the promises of God in Christ. Every since I have discovered in the face of every challenge, in reply to every emotional storm, in all of life, faith – to take hold of God’s promises by faith and take them to heart and rely on them, has been *the thing* that matters most.

Place your faith in Jesus. He lived, died, rose again for you. He is our Lord, our Savior, the healer, the answerer of prayer. We are saved by faith, not by works. Faith is the most important thing you need to put to work in your struggles, burdens, worries, your marriage, your life.

Amen

Prayer of Response

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the Savior of the world. We do believe in you, and yet we ask you to please help us overcome the persistent unbelief that so easily rises up within us in the midst of the problems of life. Give us the grace to recognize where we are worrying without praying, and striving but not trusting. Help us to let go of the stressed out and demanding spirit that tries to control what cannot be controlled, so that we can live and work in faith, and not in fear. Enable us, Lord, to put faith to work in all the issues of life. We ask in your powerful name, Amen.