

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

When I was a kid, I used to love reading the Guinness Book of World Records. (And honestly, even today, if I saw it sitting in a waiting room, it would without question be the first thing I would pick and read.) I was intrigued and amazed at the people I found in the pages of that book. Most pushups in an hour: 3,416. Longest time balancing on one foot: 3 days 4 hours and 40 minutes. Longest distance traveled jumping on a pogo stick: 23 miles. Longest time someone held their breath underwater: 18 minutes 32 seconds. And who has the world record for holding the most individual world records? Why, it's a man named Ashrita Furman of Queens, New York, who has broken 288 records in his lifetime and currently hold 117 records. World's fastest mile with a milk jug on his head. Fastest mile in a potato sack. He has the record for hula hooping with the world's biggest hula-hoop.

Looking at these records, time and again I find myself thinking: "This is amazing." Now here's something to think about... when Jesus looks at us human beings, what does Jesus see as amazing? Do you suppose Jesus is amazed at how long a person can juggle underwater? You know, I don't think he is. Well then what is Jesus amazed at?

I did a search for the word "amazed" in the New Testament. The word is used more than 30 times in the Gospels. In *almost* every case, the word was used by other people about Jesus. They were amazed at Jesus' teaching. They were amazed at his miracles. They were amazed at his wisdom. But there were only two times I could find where Jesus as amazed at people. One time Jesus was amazed (astonished) at the unbelief of the people of Nazareth. So in the heavenly book of world records, the rejection of the people in Jesus' home town has an entry. Not exactly what you'd want to be noted for.

But there was one single time when Jesus was amazed in a positive way. Jesus was amazed at the faith of the centurion that we heard about in our Gospel lesson for today. Of all the things we human beings can do and accomplish, what catches Jesus' attention... what truly astonishes him... is when there is a faith like the faith of this centurion.

So here's what we want to think about today: Is your faith amazing like that of the centurion? Do you have a world-record, jaw-dropping kind of faith? Do you have a faith that would amaze even Jesus?

Well, we'd all *like* to have that kind of faith, wouldn't we? What are the characteristics of such a faith? Can we have it? How can we have it? Let's see if we can find the answer in the portion of God's Word before us today.

Our text begins, "**When Jesus had finished saying all this in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum.**" When he finished saying all of what? Look at the verses before our text and we see Jesus had concluded his famous Sermon on the Mount. After preaching, he went back to Capernaum. Although Jesus' home town was Nazareth, Capernaum served as his home base when he was in Galilee. Several of his disciples were from that town.

**“There a centurion’s servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant.”**

Now let’s not miss several important details about this man.

1) **Roman, but a convert to Judaism.** The people of Israel were an oppressed people. They lived under the thumb of the Roman government. The man who is asking for help is a Roman centurion. He is not an Israelite, but a Gentile. From all the information we gain here, though, this Roman man *was* a Jew by faith. He had given up the worship of many gods as the Romans taught and had come to believe that the one God of the Jews was the only true God.

2) **He was a centurion.** That means, he was a commander over 100 soldiers. So he was a man of some wealth and influence in Capernaum. That could have made him a tyrant. But he used his wealth and influence to help people. He had a synagogue built for the people so they would have a place to gather, study the Bible and worship God. So he was obviously a man who lived his new faith. He was open in his belief and support of the Jewish religion which he had made his own. We also see him living his faith in his compassion for his servant. He treats his slave like a human being... which was certainly exceptional in those days.

3) **He heard of Jesus** is the final important detail. We don’t know how he heard about Jesus... through others or in person. But he clearly knew enough to believe Jesus had the power and authority to help in this situation.

4) But he doesn’t go himself to ask Jesus. **He sent the Jewish elders.** Why did he send them? Was he a busy, important man who couldn’t be bothered to track down Jesus? No, from the context we know the truth was just the opposite. When Jesus actually was on his way to his house, he says, **“Lord, don’t trouble yourself, for 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.”** The man had sent the Jewish elders to Jesus out of reverence for Jesus and because of the beliefs and traditions of Judaism. Gentiles were unclean. They were not of the chosen nation. They could become followers of Judaism, but even in worship, they were kept further from the temple in an outer courtyard. So whatever this man’s importance in the Roman system, he humbly recognized his true position before Jesus. He was very humble. He recognized Jesus might have a trouble conscience about entering a Gentile’s home. And he knew he was unworthy of any help that Jesus might offer.

APPL: And here’s the first important point we want to take from this reading. What makes for a truly amazing faith? A faith that God considers amazing absolutely positively must be a faith that recognizes first and foremost that I am unworthy. A great faith is humble.

This is so counterintuitive to our culture and the way we naturally think, isn’t it? In fact, we see this in the story as well. **“When the Jewish elders came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, “This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue.”** Isn’t that interesting? Everything the centurion said and did shouted, “I’m not worthy!” But when the Jewish elders came to Jesus, they felt compelled to demonstrate that the centurion *was* worthy. That’s the way the world thinks, isn’t it?

Ask the world, “What is amazing faith” and you’ll probably hear self-esteem, self-worth, thinking much of yourself, *believing in yourself*, seeing yourself do great things and then doing it. *Worldly faith is all about believing in yourself*. A faith that God considers amazing, however, is a faith that begins with an honest evaluation of self, and seeing how incredibly lacking we are before God’s perfect and holy standards.

Are you the kind of parent God wants you to be? Always patient. Always understanding. Always teaching. Always building up. Are you the kind of son or daughter God would have you be? Obedient and respectful to your parents. Are you the kind of worker God would have you be? Industrious, honest, always hard working even when you’re not being watched, advancing in your knowledge, courteous of others. Are you the kind of student God would have you be? Always applying yourself and doing your very best with the gifts God has given you.

A Roman centurion who built a synagogue for the people of God, still did not consider himself worthy. And we certainly aren’t either. Nothing amazing here to catch God’s attention.

And yet, the centurion asked, didn’t he? If he was so humble and so aware of his own unworthiness, why did he even bother asking? It’s because he believed that although there was nothing in himself that deserved Jesus’ help, there was something in Jesus that would move him to help. He believed that Jesus had both the power AND the love to heal his servant.

And he was spot on in his understanding of Jesus. In fact, Jesus power and love are so great that he didn’t just heal that servant, he opens his healing hand to all the world. Disease is the least of our worries. Our biggest concern should be God’s attitude toward us unworthy, insufficient, rebellious people. Well, Jesus’ love, grace and compassion moved him to help us. He is worthy. His perfect life is recorded carefully in the Gospels for you to examine. His innocent death on the cross is recorded in all its gory detail. That was Christ who did those things *for us*. His perfect life for my sinful life. His innocent death in place of what should have been my well-deserved death. In this way he provided what was lacking. He declares us worthy. Because of his life and death for sin, he can say to an adulterous woman and a thief on a cross: “You *are* worthy.” Covered in Christ’s blood, God sees us as the parent, the child, the worker, the student... that we ought to be.

The centurion’s faith was not in vain, was it? He knew Jesus had all authority. He knew Jesus didn’t even have to come to his house to heal his servant. Drawing on his own life’s experience, he knew that when a person has authority, you say the word and it’s done. He trusted that Jesus had all authority over this illness. Jesus didn’t need to come to his house. He just needed to say the word. And he did. And his servant was healed immediately and completely.

Friends, our faith in Jesus is not in vain. Despair of self. Trust fully in him. And you will not be disappointed! This is a faith God considers amazing.

Remember Ashrita Furman, the amazing world record holder of world records whom I talked about at the beginning of the sermon? How amazing is he really? What moves a man to break the summersault record by going 12 miles without stopping?! Ashrita Furman said his reason for the records is “always to achieve spiritual

enlightenment.” He believes that through these, he will be a more open, illumined, perfect person. Enlightenment through extreme physical exertion. It’s something learned through Eastern spirituality through a guru named Sri Chinmoy. “It’s a path to happiness.” He believes that “when you have access to the divine power we all have within us, nothing is impossible.”

Well, if the Bible speaks the truth, we can say with all confidence: While we may be amazed with Ashrita’s efforts, God almighty is not. The confidence Ashrita places in himself is ill-founded. Some day his body will fail. He will be too old to break any more records. He will die and stand before God in heaven, who will not be the least amazed with Ashrita. For however good he is, he has still not been a perfect person. He has fallen short in many ways. He is not right with God.

But there is a man even more amazing than Ashrita. You won’t find him in the Guinness Book of World Records, but you will find him God’s record book... both in the Bible and in God’s book of life. It is the centurion. This man God will look at on Judgment day and be truly amazed... for Jesus, God’s Son was amazed. The centurion had a faith that was amazing. Amazing, not because of what the centurion did it. But amazing because of what his faith was planted upon.

You can plant a flag on your front lawn, and there’s nothing overly amazing about that flag. Or that same flag can be planted on the moon... and suddenly it’s an amazing flag that we still see in the media to this day. Where that flag was planted made all the difference. You can put faith in yourself and in your skills and abilities. But that’s not a faith God finds amazing. In fact it’s downright ordinary and worthless. Or, you can plant your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. His perfect life and death and resurrection mean you are forgiven, you have life, you are redeemed, you are a child of God. Faith planted in him, is something that makes God’s record books.

Despair of self, trust fully in Christ. That’s faith that will amaze even Jesus.  
Amen.