

Accountability

Isaiah 14:4–15, Matthew 8:5–13, Luke 7:1–10

This morning we received new members, a family who heretofore had been involved in independent churches. A few weeks ago I invited the husband, Ray, to visit presbytery. That particular meeting was intense; there were several issues that spawned considerable debate. We had a very full docket and were unable to complete our business before adjournment. On the trip home we were all tired after a long day. I mentioned to the men, “If you could sum up presbyterian government in one word, it would be *accountability*.”

I had never thought about it this way before, but it is true. In presbyterian government—that is, rule by a plurality of elders—*no one* is unaccountable. Members are accountable to the session, pastors and elders are accountable to presbytery, presbytery is accountable to the general assembly, the general assembly is accountable to the churches, the elders in the churches are accountable to their congregations. No one is *unaccountable*.

This is as it should be. Hebrews 13:17 gives a general principle, binding upon every Christian: “Obey *them* that have the rule over you, and *submit* yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account.” The word “them” is very important and crystal-clear. The text does not say, “Obey *him*.” Thank heaven it does not say, “Obey *her*!” The text says, “Obey *them* (masculine plural) that have the rule over you.” The language is intentional. “Them” refers to a church court constituted in accord with the law of Christ, the Holy Bible, composed of men of godly character with a competent knowledge of God’s word and ability to teach by both word and example—men called by Christ, known to their people and chosen by the congregation. These are the only men who are qualified to bear rule in the church. *Everyone* is accountable. The church submits to Christ, its only King and Head, and its members are to submit to one another, and particularly to those who bear rule, who constitute church courts. This is the only legitimate rule in Christ’s church.

The bottom line: accountability. In our Matthew and Luke texts today we see a centurion telling Jesus, “I also am a man *placed under authority*.” This man knew he was *accountable*, and he is commended by our Lord. Moreover, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; *one* God—are accountable to each other. What we are going to learn this morning is very important, as we shall see, and it impacts every one of us. I have three points: (1) Great compassion, (2) Great humility, (3) Great faith. First,

1. Great compassion

Our story is included in both Luke’s and Matthew’s gospels. Each account includes details passed over by the other, so we made it a point to read both accounts this morning. Matthew’s account begins with the words: “Now when

Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, pleading with Him, saying, ‘Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, dreadfully tormented.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘I will come and heal him’—our compassionate Savior!

Now some have imagined a contradiction between the two accounts. Matthew says that the centurion came to him, while Luke says that he sent elders of the Jews to ask on his behalf. But there is no contradiction, as Calvin explains: “there is no impropriety in Matthew saying that the centurion did what was done in his name and at his request.”

So here was a request—actually, an urgent plea—that Jesus would heal a valuable servant beloved of his master. Matthew has that the servant was lying down, “paralyzed, dreadfully tormented”; Luke has that he “was sick and ready to die.” It was a dire situation, a matter of life or death.

But keep in mind who it was who wanted Jesus’ attention: a *centurion*. Here was a Roman soldier—a Gentile. In another place Jesus says, “I am not sent but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” He could have said that in this case as well. He could have said, “Sorry, the centurion is a Roman, and I don’t have time”—but he didn’t. The Lord is compassionate—sympathetic, concerned. He has a special fatherly care for his children—his adopted sons and daughters, born again by his Spirit, joined to him by covenant.

We learn in Psalm 103, “As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him.” Just as a godly human father loves his children and wants the best for them, so the LORD loves his children and wants the best for them as well. If a child has a need, a loving father will drop whatever he is doing and attend to his child’s need.

I remember the time, when I was a young boy, that my dad was in the garage working on his truck. I climbed up on the truck bumper to get a better view. My dad’s truck didn’t have a license-plate holder, only the bare, unframed license plate sticking up on *top* the bumper. While my dad was absorbed in his work, I slipped and fell onto the sharp edge of the exposed license plate, resulting in a four-inch gash on my shin. I was bleeding heavily. Dad called my mom, who came running out the back door of the house with a kitchen towel, which she wrapped tightly around my shin, and held me in her lap while Dad sped to an emergency room, where a doctor stitched me up. My dad was compassionate. He didn’t say, “I’m busy; just let the boy bleed til I have more time.” No! He dropped what he was doing to attend to my need.

If human fathers are compassionate, the Bible assures us that our heavenly Father is even more compassionate. “His compassions fail not” (Lam. 3:22). Jesus is the Good Shepherd who *loves* his sheep. His goal is that each of his elect given to him by the Father before the foundation of the world be brought safely to heaven. He says, “Those that thou gavest me I have *kept*, and *none* of them is lost.”

Dear saint of God, Jesus is compassionate! No matter what your need, he cares! He invites you to call on him. He will answer you and show you mighty things that you never thought of.

The Luke text records that the centurion's servants "begged earnestly." The word translated "begged" is actually the verb form of the noun sometimes transliterated as *Paraclete* (παράκλητος), *one called alongside to help*, a name for the Holy Spirit. The centurion's servants were begging Jesus to come alongside to help them. They were at their wit's end. Humanly speaking, there was nothing else they could do. Their master's servant was dying. They needed Jesus' help.

Are you having difficulties with school, work, relationships, family members, finances? You don't have to go to great lengths to get the Savior's attention. He knows what you need before you ask him.

Secondly, we see

2. Great humility

We don't generally pair the word "great" with "humility." Humility is the recognition that we are *not* great, that *Christ* is great, and deserves to be recognized as great. Yet humility is a virtue. Peter urges us to "be clothed with *humility*. . . . *Humble* yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time."¹ We must always guard, lest we have an overly high opinion of ourselves. The general tendency is for us to think that we are better than others. Jesus taught that "every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."² Oh, how we ought to pay close attention to the Savior's words!

The best way to deal with pride is on to reflect on the cross: "When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died, my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride. Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, save in the death of Christ my God: all the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to his blood." Amen! "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."

In our Old Testament text Lucifer (*light bearer, brilliant star*) says, "I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High." Here is the very opposite of great humility. Lucifer was not waiting for God to promote him. He asserted exalted status for himself: "I will be like the Most High."

The centurion in our story had heard of Jesus. Apparently he had great respect and admiration for the Jews, and for the biblical religion. This incident took place early in Jesus' ministry, before the Jews rejected him and cried out before Pilate: "His blood be on us and on our children." This centurion at his own expense had built a synagogue for the Jews. I have stood in front of the second-century

¹ 1 Pet. 5:5-6

² Luke 18:11-14

synagogue in Capernaum that was built on the site of the earlier synagogue that had been financed by this unnamed centurion. There are the footers of some ancient apartments nearby, one of which likely was the residence of the apostle Peter's mother-in-law, whom Jesus would shortly heal of a high fever.

Here is a centurion—a Roman, a Gentile—yet a man who had become a God-fearer, a worshipper of the true God. He practiced the religion of the Old Testament except for circumcision, much like another centurion, Cornelius, in Caesarea in Acts 10, described as “a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always.”

So when the centurion in our story in Capernaum had a crisis—when his trusted servant was near death—he sent “elders of the *Jews*” to take his appeal to Jesus. This was highly unusual, for devout Jews would not ordinarily be on familiar terms with Romans, but because of this man's faith in the God of Israel, it was appropriate.

Judaism itself fundamentally changed after it formally rejected Christ and called for his crucifixion. Jesus “came unto his own, and his own received him not.” Jesus would later state that “he who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him” (John 5:23). “He who does not honor the Son” is a description of Christ-rejecting Jews. Since they do not honor the Son, they, according to Christ's own testimony, do not honor the Father either. Christ-rejecting Jews do not worship the true God but a god of their own imagination. Though they do not bow down to physical images, they are idolators. A lot of Christians don't recognize that. They assume that the God of Christianity and the God of Judaism are the same God. They are not!

God does not have *two* chosen peoples, Jews and Christians. He has *one* people, his elect according to the election of grace, given to him by the Father in eternity past, the people that he came to save. Old Testament saints were saved by *grace*, through *faith* in the Christ who was to come. New Testament saints are saved by *grace*, through *faith* in the Christ who *has* come. There is only one way of salvation: through faith in Jesus Christ.

No one has ever been saved by his own good works. Paul made that crystal clear: “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith *apart from* the deeds of the law” (Rom. 3:28). Salvation is “not of works lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:9).

Because of the influence of dispensationalism, millions of evangelical Christians erroneously believe that the *Jews* are the chosen people, and will be saved because they are the lineal descendants of Abraham. No one is *ever* saved on the basis of human parentage! Without faith in Christ the Son of God there is no salvation. Our third point is

3. Great faith

We read in the Matthew account that “when Jesus heard it, He marveled, and said to those who followed, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!’”

Luke has: “when Jesus heard these things, He marveled at him, and turned around and said to the crowd that followed Him, ‘I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!’”

Both accounts have Jesus commenting on the centurion’s “great faith.” We’ll have more to say about this in a moment. But first observe that Jesus spoke these words *to those who followed him*. In other words, his words were not addressed to the Jewish leaders who had come bringing the centurion’s request; rather, they were addressed to Jesus’s own disciples: men and women who had been following him around for some time, and who may have wondered why Jesus would stop to help a Gentile. Jesus’ concern during his earthly ministry was primarily with the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but after his resurrection and ascension he would send his church to evangelize the Gentiles. The apostle Paul in fact would become the “apostle to the Gentiles.” So Jesus’ helping the centurion’s trusted servant was a foretaste of what was to come later, in the book of Acts.

Both Matthew and Luke take note of the fact that Jesus “marveled.” Both evangelists use the same verb (θαυμάζω), which means *wonder, marvel, be surprised, even be astonished*. Calvin helpfully points out that “wonder cannot apply to God, for it arises out of what is new and unexpected: but it might exist in Christ, for he had clothed himself with our flesh, and with human affections.” His point is well taken. God is, in the words of our Confession, “a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable [unchangeable].”³ Though Scripture seems to attribute human emotions to God, such as in the phrase “God is *angry* with the wicked every day” (Ps. 7:11), we know that God does not change. He certainly cannot change for the worse, and he cannot change for the better either, for he is absolutely perfect. When humans experience anger, it comes upon us and overcomes us and even consumes us. God experiences anger differently. Strictly speaking, God cannot be astonished, for he knows all things from the beginning. He can never learn anything new. He does not react to changing situations the way we do. So Calvin’s point is well taken: “wonder cannot apply to God, for it arises out of what is new and unexpected.” However, Jesus Christ is God come in human flesh, so *as man*, Jesus could experience wonderment. In this case, hearing the centurion’s statement, “I too am a man under authority,” implying something like, *I have been given authority to command my troops and expect their obedience, and here I am, standing before the Son of God who has authority to command disease, even at a distance, to leave a man, and it will, in fact, leave.*

³ https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_02

Jesus marvels and says, “Truly I say, I have not found such great faith—and this in a Gentile.” The centurion truly had great faith in the Son of God, who never lacked ability to accomplish all his holy will.

We, too, ought to have great faith in the Son of God. He is *Almighty God*—nothing is too hard for him. He alone can forgive all our sins. He is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through him. No matter how great your sins, Jesus can save you, but you must come to him in faith. The Gospel promises that whoever believes in him shall be saved. Furthermore, no matter how great the problems you face, our Lord is able to give you grace to bear you up and bring you through triumphantly.

We have seen great compassion, great humility, great faith. Here was the centurion who stated, “I too am a man under authority,” and that statement was commended by our Lord. The centurion was accountable to those who had commissioned him, and he recognized that.

Dear congregation, today you have witnessed Ray and Corina’s vows. They professed faith in our Lord Jesus Christ as their only hope of salvation. They professed their willingness to live as disciples of Christ. They promised to submit in the Lord to the government of this church, and to heed its discipline. They promised submission to our session—the elders responsible for their spiritual care, men who have voluntarily taken on the task of shepherding the flock of God, serving as overseers, not as lords over the flock, but being examples to the flock.

The church is not a voluntary association of born again adults who have a personal relationship with Jesus. Rather, the church is the covenant people—men and women, boys and girls in covenant with God and with his people. The church is the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the church *Christ’s* will is supreme. Everything is to be done according to Christ’s command. The church never has the authority to disobey Christ.

The church is not a casual association of people who say, “We’ll stay here as long as it feels good, as long as we like it, but if anything changes, we’re outta here! We retain our own independence.”

In taking their vows this morning Ray and Corina were publicly declaring: “We are *not* independent. We are loyal subjects of King Jesus, living in covenant with our Lord and with our fellow saints in this congregation.”

Before the sermon we sang the hymn “Blest Be the Tie That Binds.” The wording is significant: “Blest be the *tie* that *binds* our hearts in Christian love.” The church is Christ’s covenant community. The members are *bound* to one another and to Christ the head. When we take the Lord’s supper it is a reminder that we are in covenant with Christ our head, and with each other as unworthy sinners saved by the grace of Christ. The covenant is indeed a *tie*—the *blessed tie*

that binds the hearts of God’s people in Christian love. “We share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear, and often for each other flows the sympathizing tear.”⁴

As John Hancock so eloquently wrote, “with a firm Reliance on the Protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.”⁵ Hancock took his cue from the church of Jesus Christ, the people of God in covenant with one another.

Every child of God should want to be a member of Christ’s visible church—to be in formal covenantal relation with God’s people. “None of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s.”⁶ None of us is unaccountable. Amen.

⁴ <https://www.trinitypsalterhymnal.org/hymns/blest-be-the-tie-that-binds/>

⁵ <https://declaration.fas.harvard.edu/resources/text>

⁶ Rom. 14:7–8