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# BLACK HATS & WHITE HATS

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*Luke 7:1-10*



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Early westerns may not have had the Computer Graphics and special effects that we see in movies now days but they had one feature that I sometimes wish we still used. In the old Westerns we never had any trouble telling the good guys from the bad. It was simple. Good guys wore white hats. Big, 10-gallon Stetsons. Bad guys wore black.

This good verses bad classification may seem simplistic, but when you consider the stereotypes that humans have tossed around over the years, it's not much sillier than the beliefs many communities held about themselves and others from the dawn of history. We can go all the way back to the Spartans verses the Athenians; Rome verses Carthage; the English verses the French; the Communists verses the Capitalists, the list goes on...

Distrust of the other isn't new. I heard a story about a little church. After the first World War, some foolish trustee bought a German made piano. Apparently there was much horror and disgust expressed, but the contract was too hard to get around and so the piano stayed.

Some of you remember WWII and the resistance to accepting Jewish refugees, and even more prejudice against both the Japanese and Germans. In the 60's it was the Vietnamese, today it's anyone in a turban and it's always been true for the LGBTQ community.

Religion is no different. We like to see people like us as the ones in the white hats. Everybody else is in 50 shades of gray or even black hats. Christianity verses Islam, Catholics verses Protestants, progressive verses conservative, and, as Tom Lehrer would say in his old song, National Brotherhood Week, "everybody hates the Jews!"

A casual reading of the New Testament, as well as some extra-biblical Roman histories of the time give us some earlier examples. We get the impression that the really bad guys were the romans like Pompey and Pilate, putting down Jewish rebellions left and right with mass crucifixions and crushing taxes on the conquered people.

Next on the list of bad hats came the Jewish hierarchy. Think of corruption in the temple that got Jesus fired up enough to turn the tables of the money changers and sacrifice sellers. Or the Pharisees praying out loud in public or inserting themselves into the places of honor at feasts and dinners. Think of the priests who walked by on the other side rather than help the wounded man. It's easy to tell who's a black hat just by their position – or is it?

All societies have their own systems in place so we know who's in and who's out.

But in today's passage we see Jesus apparently ignoring the barriers of the social order. It reads like a parable but this is supposedly a report of an actual event. One expects the Roman centurion to be the 'black hat' – the oppressor – the conqueror, but instead he's a thoughtful, community-minded, and caring master. The Jewish leaders – who are always trying to catch Jesus in some religious and legalistic faux pas – sneaking around, plotting and scheming -- opposing Jesus at every turn. Here, they come to intercede on the centurion's behalf. It doesn't make sense!

Let's have a closer look at our centurion.

### **The centurion is a petitioner.**

Just who is the centurion beseeching for – the translator thought 'begging' was too strong and 'asking' wasn't strong enough – but who is the centurion petitioning for? In Luke's version, the Centurion gets the Jewish leaders to intercede on his behalf, and Luke uses the Greek, *doulos*, meaning 'servant.'

In Matthew's version, he speaks directly to Jesus himself, saying, "Lord, my servant (*pais*) is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress." But here the author uses the Greek word *pais*.

Luke uses *doulos*, meaning slave or servant while Matthew uses *pais*. Scholars don't agree on an exact translation of this word, *pais*. It kind of means 'boy' or child. Speculations include that this boy is his son, his servant, or his young lover.

Roman soldiers were not allowed to marry, though common law wives were not uncommon. It doesn't seem likely that the centurion would admit to such a breach of military conduct in public. Same sex relationships were also not uncommon in Roman society, and soldiers were allowed to bring along a favorite servant as valet and companion. The attitude of the Jewish faith toward homosexuality could explain the centurion's hesitancy to have Jesus come to his house.

But there is no definitive evidence that this was or was not the kind of relationship in place here. And if it were, it makes the role of the Jewish elders difficult to explain. So, while the precise nature of the relationship is unclear,

what is clear is that the centurion has a deep concern and affection for this young man.

Whatever their relationship, this story's focus is on the centurion's relationship with Jesus, anyway.

The centurion asserts his confidence in Jesus to command healing, based on his own experience of taking and giving commands. When he speaks, those beneath him do what he says. He has great faith that the same is true of Jesus.

**The centurion, in the first place, knows how to take orders.**

Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus, known simply as Vegetius, was a historian in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century, and he wrote a book called *The Epitome of Military Science*. In it, he described the qualities of a centurion in rather glowing terms.

A centurion is chosen for great strength and tall stature, as a man who hurls spears and javelins skillfully and strongly, has expert knowledge how to fight with the sword and rotate the shield, and has learned the whole art of armature. He is alert, sober, and agile, and more ready to do the things ordered of him than speak, keeps his soldiers in training, makes them practice their arms, and sees that they are well clothed and shod, and that the arms are burnished and bright.

From that description, what jumps out at me in relation to our story today is that he is more ready to do the things ordered of him than speak. In other words, he understands obedience to his superiors.

**The centurion also knows how to give orders.**

Josephus, first-century, Roman-Jewish historian, describes the daily duties of Roman soldiers like this:

"Nothing is done without a word of command. At daybreak the rank and file report themselves to their respective centurions, the centurions go to salute the tribunes, the tribunes with all the officers then wait on the commander-in-chief, and he gives them, according to custom, the watchword and other orders to be communicated to the lower ranks"

So the training of soldiers and centurions prepared them for a life of giving and taking orders. It's part of the oath they swore to their various Gods.

**The centurion knows to address his superiors.**

This story features a man whose world is the army, who recognizes how to address a superior officer. He addresses Jesus as "Lord," because he either thinks of Jesus as someone of lofty rank, or he wants Jesus to think he thinks that. Jesus' response to the centurion's confidence in him reveals something of Jesus' own heart/soul.

Jesus doesn't require worthiness in order to heal. The Jewish elders that the centurion sends to petition Jesus for a healing, confirm the centurion's worthiness to have Jesus intercede, but Jesus doesn't need it – or even want it. The centurion himself proclaims his own unworthiness to have Jesus come under his roof and states that this conviction is why he didn't petition Jesus directly but sent the elders. Judging by Jesus' distance healing, worthiness is not a prerequisite!

The idea of a centurion petitioning Jesus for a miracle would have come as a great surprise to the 1<sup>st</sup> century listener. But a centurion begging for help humanizes him. Once again, we see the first century worldview turned upside down, with the soldier, usually in a dominant position as conqueror and colonizer, placing himself in a subservient position.

Vegetius' glowing description of centurions that I mentioned earlier was not universally embraced. The popular perception of many centurions was that they were more brawn than brain and, more often than not, seen to be abusive of the local citizens. Bravery and group loyalty figured into their religious life. But their devotion to the Emperor and to the various spirits that protected the camp and them personally was motivated, not by a desire for salvation, but for protection in battle. And Jesus, you'll notice, doesn't criticize that.

Jesus is focused on one admirable factor in the centurion's petition: his faith - faith that what Jesus commanded would come to pass, no if's and's or but's. Orders issued. Orders obeyed. It would be interesting to delve into religious practices of the Roman soldiers and what their faith really looked like and how it worked, but for this week, it will have to suffice to point out that, in this story, faith is faith.

And one more thing: This story feels like a parable to me – it's not, but, I mean, doesn't this story sound to you like one of Jesus' famous parables? —the Good Samaritan, (Samaritans were considered an "abomination" to first century Jews, btw), the mustard seed as a metaphor for the Kingdom of God; the prayer of the devout and humble tax collector contrasted with that of the self-righteous Pharisee.

Here we have a Roman soldier, a villain that people would naturally be suspicious of, displaying a confidence in Jesus as a spiritual Commander that Jesus seems to find compelling.

This centurion may not embody every aspect of worthiness as listeners back then would have defined it. He may have worn both a black and a white hat. But he does know a thing or two about having confidence in the one giving him his orders.

As tempting as it is to focus today's message on the relationship between the Centurion and the servant, it isn't the most important lesson here. The essential part is that the centurion relied on the most important issue that faces us -- and that is faith in Jesus Christ. The centurion believed that Jesus could heal his beloved with just His word – a command that he be healed. Remarkable faith -- I wish I could have that kind of faith.

Jesus even said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."

The Bible isn't very clear on a lot of things, but it is pretty clear when it comes to faith. Ephesians 2:8 says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God..."

Amen.