



Tim Collins

<http://www.pas.Rochester.edu/~tim/study/study.html>

THE CENTURION V. YE OF LITTLE FAITH



● *Tonight:*
Healing the Centurion's
Slave;
Ye of Little Faith

❧

Mt 8:5-13; Lk 7:1-10

Opening with prayer, followed by song

Be still and know that I am God,
be still and know that I am God,
be still and know that I am God.

In thee, O Lord, I put my trust,
In thee, O Lord, I put my trust,
In thee, O Lord, I put my trust.


Jesus was not always Mr. Rogers with his disciples

- “Are you so dull?” (Mt 15:16): when the disciples fail to understand eating doesn’t make you unclean
- “Get behind me, Satan”—when Peter misunderstands Jesus’ basic plan (Mt 16:23)
- ‘He came a third time and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough!”’ (Mk 14:41)—in the garden
- “Don’t you understand this parable? Then how will you understand any parable?”—The Sower (Mk 4:13)
- When refers to them, five times, as “little faiths”



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This set of passages will bring us up against
“You faithless and perverse generation, how much
longer must I be with you?” (Mt 17:17)

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Have any of these bothered you? Which ones? What have you concluded about them?

Jesus wa

disciples

Is this a cultural thing?

Were rabbis generally a little hard on their students?

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- “Get behind
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Fun fact:

“Well, rabbis could be harsh if students didn't obey. Usually it wasn't a matter of faith but there is the story of the rabbi who, when someone reported, "Now I believe it because I've seen it," disintegrated the inquirer into a pile of dust for not believing his word beforehand. (Probably not a true story ... :-))”

–Keener

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disciples

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Were rabbis generally a little hard on their students?

Jesus was both human and the incarnation of an alien intelligence; maybe this is the implication of

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord”

(Isa 55:8)

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“One might also compare YHWH's relation to Israel in Exodus through Deuteronomy. God loved his people, but they kept provoking him with their unbelief. Jesus is patient and doesn't repudiate them, though he reproves them. They just keep not getting it. The point in the narrative is probably to help us see how far is human understanding from divine

understanding
(cf. Mark 8:33).” –Keener

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Tonight we will investigate these questions by looking specifically at these passages

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- “Get behind me, Satan”—when Peter misunderstands Jesus’ basic plan (Mt 16:23)

Repeatedly Jesus’ ministry had demonstrated his view of the purity laws, but what’s more, in this particular passage he had already given a clear, basic explanation when Peter asks for Jesus to explain it *again*

to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your nap in the garden?”

“How can you be so stupid? Then how will you understand any of these things?”

- “How often I would have gathered you together as ‘little faiths’

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This was at the very heart of Jesus’ ministry, was something the disciples (and everyone else) were slow to get, and there could be no room for misunderstanding

as “little faiths”


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He was about to be tortured and killed, and his disciples couldn’t stay awake. Perhaps some impatience is excusable.

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But what about this one? Does it feel okay for the miracle working Lord of the universe to talk this way to the disciples who left all to follow him?

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We focus first on the “little faith” passages

The term “little faiths” occurs almost exclusively in Matthew

- “Little faiths” (ὀλιγόπιστος—*oligopistos*)
 - ❖ In the SOTM, teaching about trusting God for daily bread (Mt 6:30//Lk 12:28)
 - ❖ When he first calms the storm (Mt 8:26)
 - ❖ When they think “the yeast of the Pharisees” is a reference to bread (Mt 16:8)
 - ❖ When Peter starts to sink, having started so well (Mt 14:31)
 - ❖ “O unbelieving and perverse generation”—when they can’t cast out a demon (Mt 17:17); and when they ask why they couldn’t cast out the demon, he points to their little-faithiness (Mt 17:20, using the cognate ὀλιγοπιστία, *oligopistia*)
- That Luke also uses the term for SOTM suggests this is authentic and not an addition by Matthew
- Since the term is a feature of Matthew is a great gift we can look for patterns and contrasts, asking what Matthew wants us to understand by this term

Mt 6:25-34



Don't be anxious; God cares for the birds of the field, and also for you

Mt 8:23-27



Calming the storm: they needn't be afraid

Mt 17:14-20



Casting out the demon from the boy



Mt 14:27-31

Peter looks at the waves, then starts to sink



Mt 16:5-12

The yeast of the Pharisees and the odd response of the disciples

What do these passages have in common?

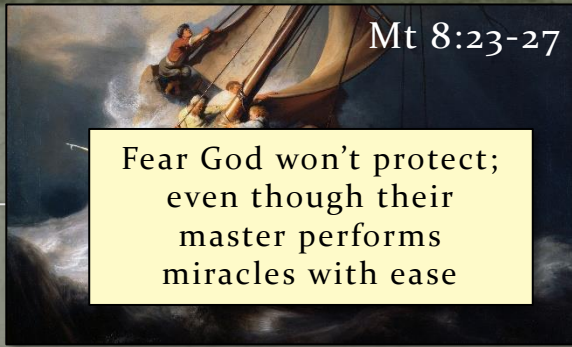
Mt 6:25-34



Fear God won't provide food, even though they see God providing for his creation all around us

Don't be anxious; God cares for the birds of the field, and also for you

Mt 8:23-27



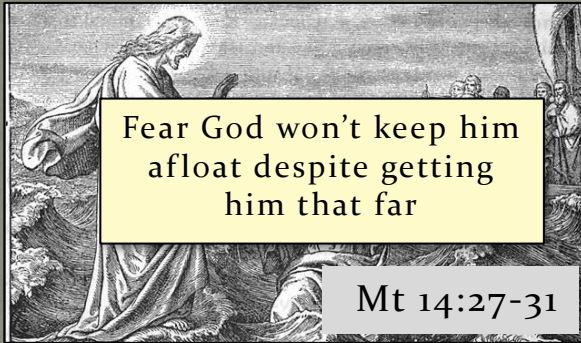
Fear God won't protect; even though their master performs miracles with ease

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Fear God won't keep him afloat despite getting him that far

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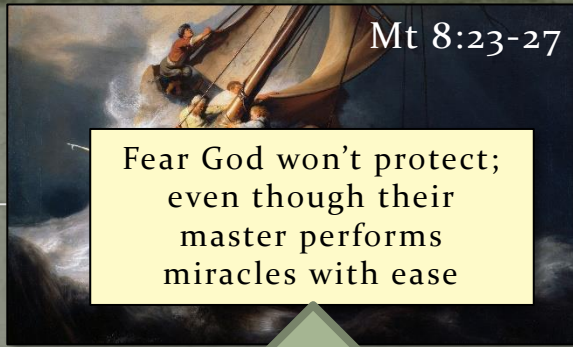
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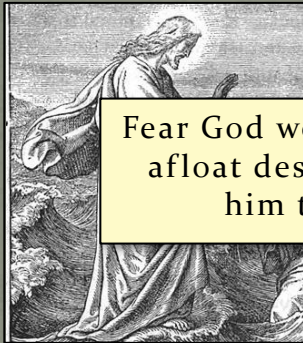


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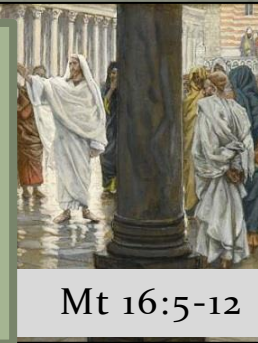
Calming the storm: they were afraid

Don't be anxious; God cares for the birds of the field, and also for you



Fear God won't keep you afloat despite your faith in him

Mt 8:26: "Why are you timid [δειλός, *deilos*; timid, cowardly, afraid]?" Could be the drill sergeant but also could be more compassionate; could be "your faith sucks" but also could be "it's okay to trust"



Mt 16:5-12

The yeast of the Pharisees and the odd response of the disciples

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What do these passages have in common?

Mt 16:5 When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. 6 Jesus said to them, “Watch out, and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” 7 They said to one another, “It is because we have brought no bread.” 8 And becoming aware of it, Jesus said, “You of little faith, why are you talking about having no bread? 9 Do you still not perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? 10 Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? 11 How could you fail to perceive that I was not speaking about bread? Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees!” 12 Then they understood that he had not told them to beware of the yeast of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.



The yeast of the Pharisees
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Why does Jesus criticize the
disciples' faith here, and not
their intelligence?

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Mt 16:5-12

The yeast of the Pharisees and the odd response of the disciples

The disciples were actually anxious about dinner!

Mt 17:14: When they came to the crowd, a man came to him, knelt before him, 15 and said, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; he often falls into the fire and often into the water. 16 And I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him.” 17 Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him here to me.” 18 And Jesus rebuked the demon,[a] and it[b] came out of him, and the boy was cured instantly. 19 Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” 20 He said to them, “Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a[c] mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.”



Mt 17:14-20

Casting out the demon
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Mark's version helps us understand this as a reaction to the arguing of the teachers of the law

Mark 9:14 When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. 15 As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. 16 “What are you arguing with them about?” he asked. 17 A man in the crowd answered, “Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. 18 Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.” 19 “You unbelieving generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.” 20 So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth...



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“...this story follows the mountaintop transfiguration in all three Synoptic accounts, probably because the writers intended an analogy between this incident and the incident in Exodus 32 in which Moses returns from his mountaintop encounter with God to find faithlessness on the part of Israel.” (Hurtado, *Mark*, 147)



Mark's version helps us understand this as a reaction to the arguing of the teachers of the law

Mk 9:21 Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered. 22 "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." 23 "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes." 24 Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" 25 When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." 26 The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." 27 But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up. 28 After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" 29 He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer."



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Mt 17:14-20

Casting out the demon from the boy

Let's assume that in this passage the disciples are again having trouble trusting God, leading to a “little faith” label

What might they be afraid of?
What could be making them timid or anxious?

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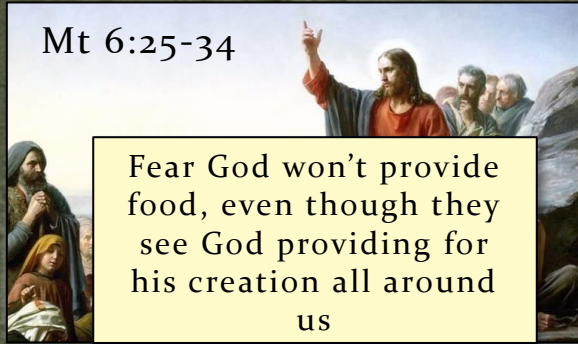


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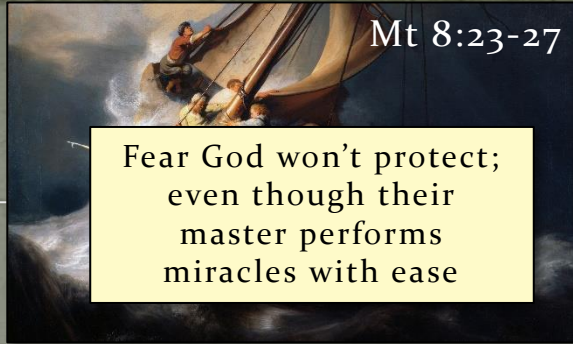
The pattern of the other passages suggests **anxiety**, or **fear** God wouldn't provide; could be fear of the demon itself? Or that Jesus' hadn't given them the authority? Or like Peter on the waves, they were distracted by the commotion and conflict?

Mt 6:25-34

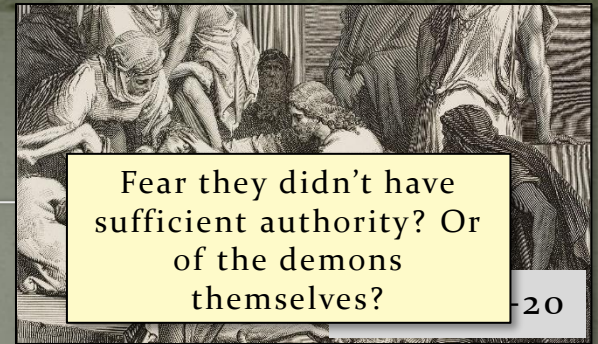


Fear God won't provide food, even though they see God providing for his creation all around us

Mt 8:23-27



Fear God won't protect; even though their master performs miracles with ease



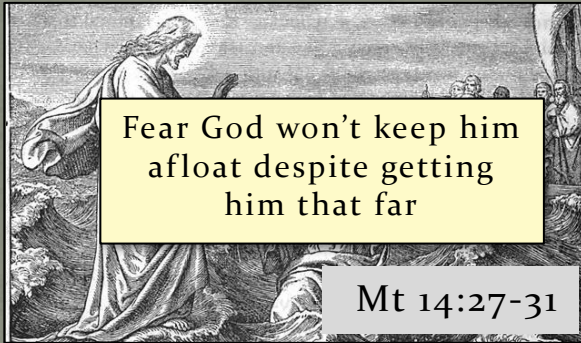
Fear they didn't have sufficient authority? Or of the demons themselves?

-20

Don't be anxious; God cares for the birds of the field, and also for you

Calming the storm: they needn't be afraid

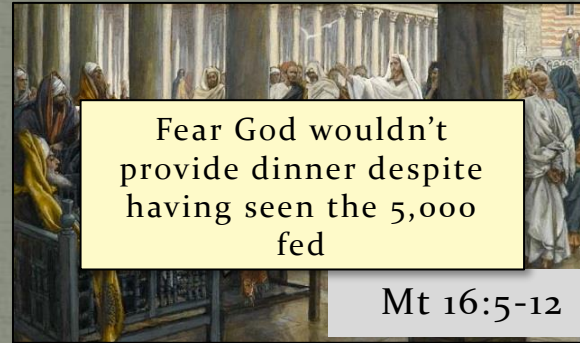
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Fear God won't keep him afloat despite getting him that far

Mt 14:27-31

Peter looks at the waves, then starts to sink



Fear God wouldn't provide dinner despite having seen the 5,000 fed

Mt 16:5-12

The yeast of the Pharisees and the odd response of

What do these passages have in common?
Anxiety based on lack of confidences that God will provide

Jesus was using a term found in rabbinic sayings

- “Anxiety about food for the coming day is a sign of little faith according to Rabbi Eliezer the Elder (c. 90):”*
 - ❖ “He who has a morsel in his basket and says: What shall I eat tomorrow? Belongs to those of *little faith*”
- “Similarly, the Israelites who, contrary to the command of Moses, kept some of the miraculous food in the wilderness for the following day, are reckoned as of *little faith*.” (BB&H)
- This was contrasted with the “people of trust”
- Keener: “True disciples can show God their love for him by *trusting his loving purposes for them* and leaving the future with him”
- BB&H: “Thus Jesus and the Rabbis used the concept of *little faith* to denote *lack of trust in God in the presence of his kindness*, which Jesus recognizes in the lilies of the field”
 - ❖ Fun quote: Rabbi Johanan (died 279) said, “Noah was of *little faith*; if the water had not reached to his ankles he would not have entered the ark”



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 - ❖ “He who has a morsel in his basket and says: What shall I eat tomorrow? Belongs to those of *little faith*.”
- “Similarly, the anxiety about the future of the miracle workers is a sign of *little faith*. (BB&H)”
 - ❖ Jesus characteristically redefines the term “little faith” in terms of his new reality: the Son of God is with them, and if they really get what that means, they won’t fear nature or hunger or poverty or demons or even that they will start strong and fail along the way
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*Bornkamm, Barth and Held, “Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew, 1963, 293; see also Keener, “Matthew”, 238

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 - ❖ “He who has a morsel in his basket and says: What shall I eat tomorrow? Belongs to those of little faith.”
- “Similarly, the anxiety about the future is a sign of little faith. Jesus characteristically redefines the term “little faith” in terms of his new reality: the Son of God is with them, and if they really get what that means, they won’t fear nature or hunger or poverty or demons or even that they will start strong and fail along the way”
- This was contrasted with the “people of great faith”
- Keener: “Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew, 1963, 293; see also Keener, “Matthew”, 238”
- BB&H: “The anxiety about the future is a sign of little faith. Test #1 of this interpretation: does it play out in Acts of the Apostles?”
- “The anxiety about the future is a sign of little faith. Fun quote: Rabbi Johanan (died 279) said, “Noah was of *little faith*; if the water had not reached to his ankles he would not have entered the ark”



Cultural background

Jesus was using a term found in rabbinic sayings

- “Anxiety about food for the coming day is a sign of little faith according to Rabbi Eliezer the Elder (c. 90):”*

- ❖ “He who has a morsel in his basket and says: What shall I eat tomorrow? Belongs to those who have little faith.”

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- “Similarly, the anxiety about the future is a sign of the lack of trust in the miracles of God, as of *little faith*.” (BB&H)

- This was contrasted with the “people of great faith”

- Keener: “Traditional Jewish teaching held that the people of Israel were chosen for a loving purpose.”

- BB&H: “The anxiety about the future is a sign of the lack of trust in the miracles of God, as of the lilies of the field”

- ❖ Fun question: How do you not read the Bible?

Test #1 of this interpretation: does it play out in Acts of the Apostles?

Test #2: Has this proven true in your life in the same way it did in Acts? (Be brutally honest; maybe you have felt let down?)



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in Matthew, 1963, 293;
see also Keener, “Matthew”, 238

Jesus is setting a paradigm for faith

- Like the Rabbis, he felt comfortable saying if God had delivered them from Egypt, it was perverse not to trust he would take care of them
- But now we don't just have stories of ancient Israel; we have:
 - ❖ The pattern of provision in the early church (which still saw Paul shipwrecked and imprisoned, but never because God's arm was too short! Remember Paul's attitude in Philippians: if he was in prison, God must want him to share the gospel to Caesar's household!)
 - ❖ God's provision for us and those we love



What about the exceptions: those today who sicken and die, who lose their jobs, etc.?

In Matthew the **seekers/suppliants**, *not disciples*, are commended for their faith

- Jesus, who often surprised others, is himself rarely astonished; the two times include
 - ❖ At the *lack* of faith in his home town
 - ❖ At the faith of the centurion
- Those whose faith are commended in Matthew include:
 - ❖ The *Syrophoenician woman* (from the privileged class, but has a stubborn trust Jesus can and will help her)
 - ❖ The *hemorrhaging woman*
 - ❖ The *two persistent blind men* (Mt 9:27+)
 - ❖ The *paralytic's friends*
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Note how they address Jesus:
“Lord, Son of David”, “Son of David”,
“Lord”

And Jesus' only long-distance healings are with Gentiles and with what was probably a nominal Jew in the employ of Rome (Jn 4:49-53)

Time to analyze!

Jesus Heals the Centurion's Servant

Matthew 8:5-13 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁵When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him ⁶and saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress."

⁷And he said to him, "I will come and cure him."⁸ The centurion answered, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed."⁹ For I also 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 slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it."

¹⁰When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, "Truly I tell you, in no one¹¹ in Israel have I found such faith. ¹¹I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, ¹²while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

¹³And to the centurion Jesus said, "Go; let it be done for you according to your faith." And the servant was healed in that hour.

Footnotes:

- a. [Matthew 8:10](#) Other ancient authorities read *Truly I tell you, not even*

Luke 7:1-10 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁷After Jesus¹⁰ had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. ²A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. ³When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave.

⁴When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy of having you do this for him, ⁵for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us."

⁶And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; ⁷therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. ⁸For I also am a man set 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 slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it."

⁹When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."¹⁰ When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

Footnotes:

- a. [Luke 7:1](#) *Gk./he*

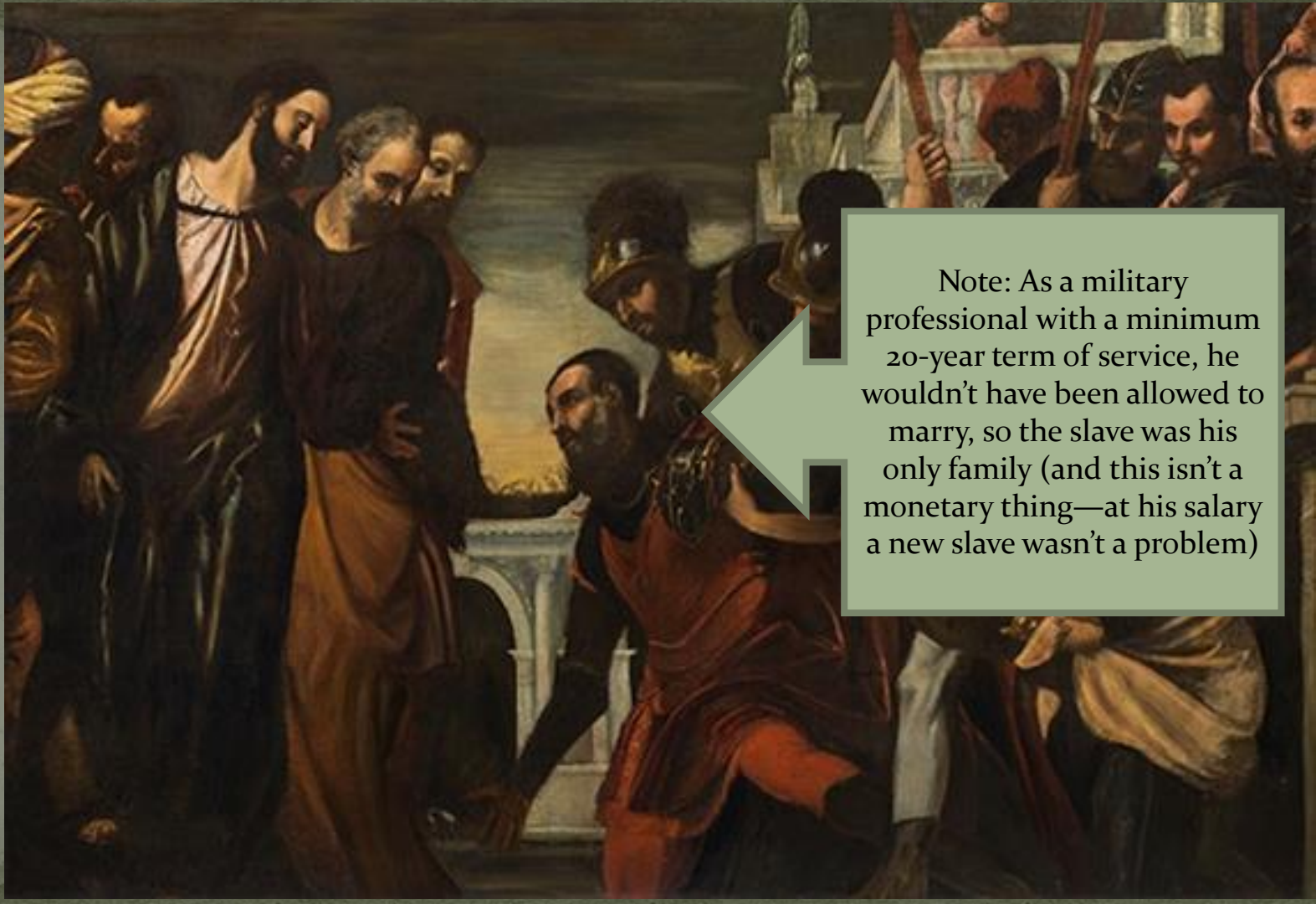
Mt 8:5-13; Lk 7:1-10



Rome occupies a unique position in history

- Rome had many strengths, including
 - ❖ Superior engineering: roads, aqueducts, buildings (concrete insulae), etc.
 - ❖ Rome carefully stole/adapted strengths of previous societies (notably the Greeks)
 - ❖ Nations conquered by Rome were treated comparatively well, not generally exiled, and typically permitted to retain their regional religions
 - ❖ Rome had a superior army, famous for their discipline
- A centurion (a commander of 80) in a Garrison town (Capernaum) would have been well acquainted with the power of Roman authority literally to change the world



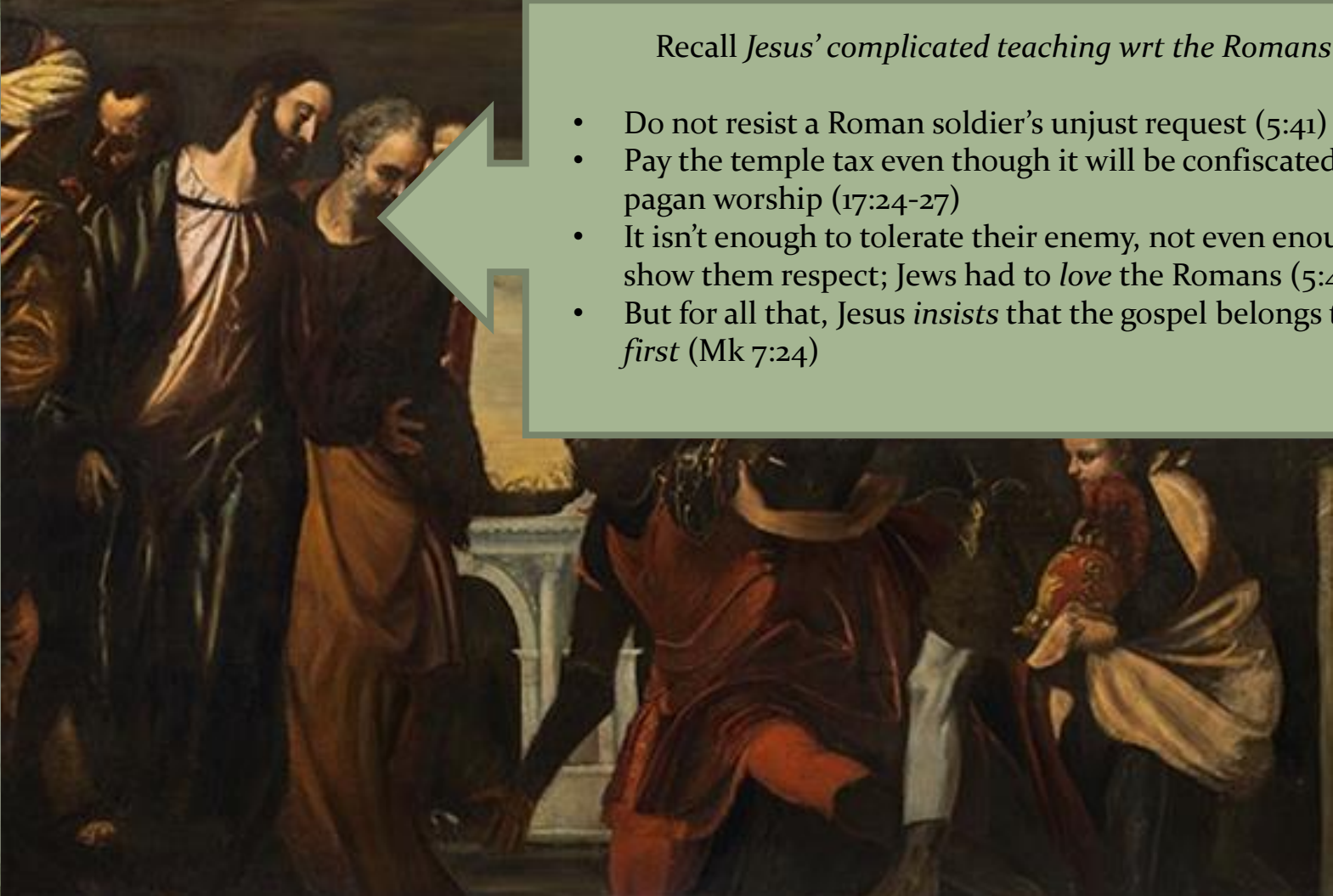


Note: As a military professional with a minimum 20-year term of service, he wouldn't have been allowed to marry, so the slave was his only family (and this isn't a monetary thing—at his salary a new slave wasn't a problem)



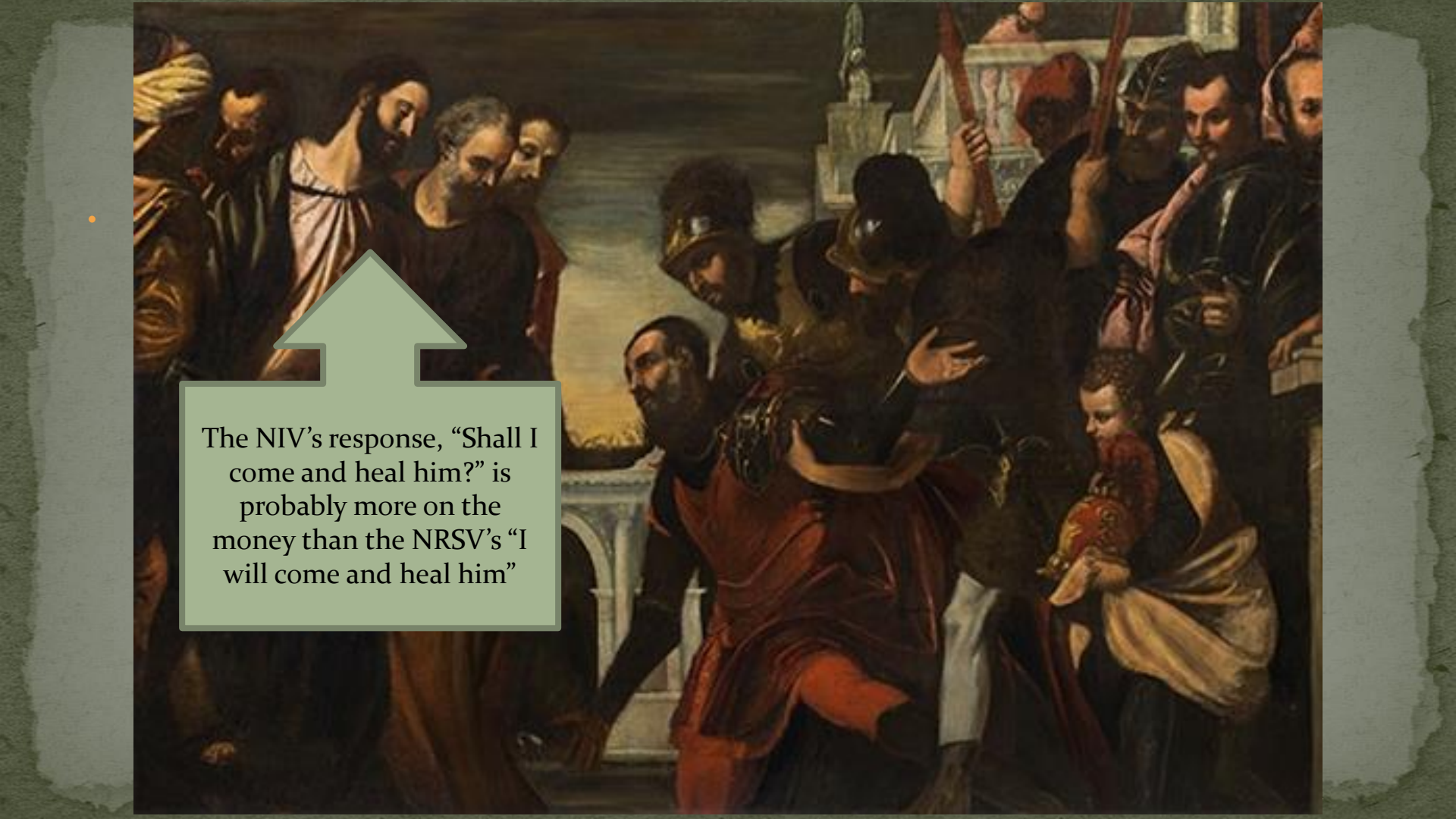
We must not underestimate the **animosity** between the Jews and Romans. When Matthew is writing (possibly the 70s) many of his Jewish readers will know of friends and family taken away in slavery by the Romans after the sack of Jerusalem.

“His readers in the vicinity of Syria or Palestine would be tempted to hate Romans passionately, especially Roman soldiers and perhaps especially their basic officers” (centurions) [Keener 265].




Recall *Jesus' complicated teaching wrt the Romans*:

- Do not resist a Roman soldier's unjust request (5:41)
- Pay the temple tax even though it will be confiscated for pagan worship (17:24-27)
- It isn't enough to tolerate their enemy, not even enough to show them respect; Jews had to *love* the Romans (5:44)
- But for all that, Jesus *insists* that the gospel belongs to Israel *first* (Mk 7:24)

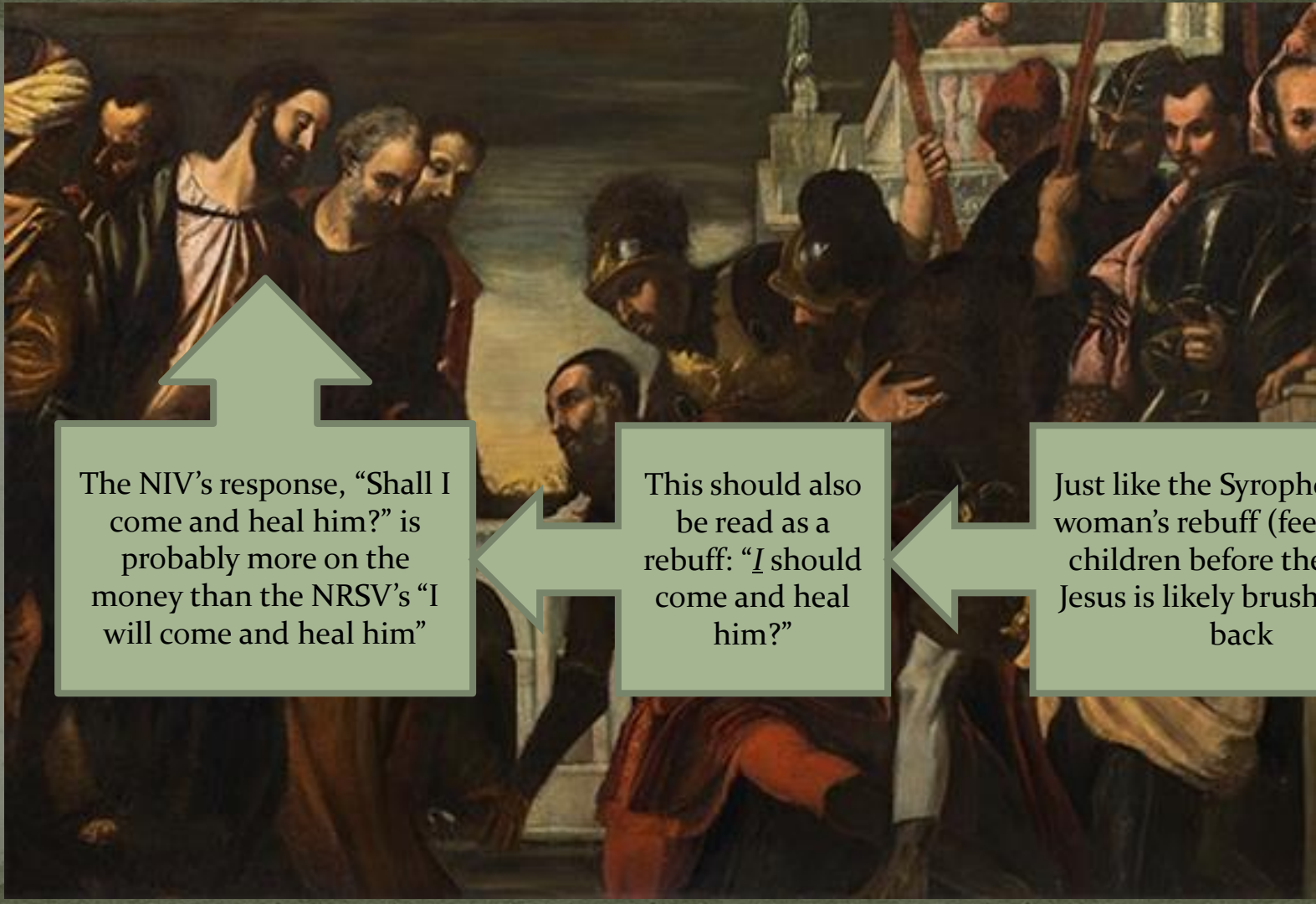


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Just like the Syrophenician woman's rebuff (feeding the children before the dogs), Jesus is likely brushing him back

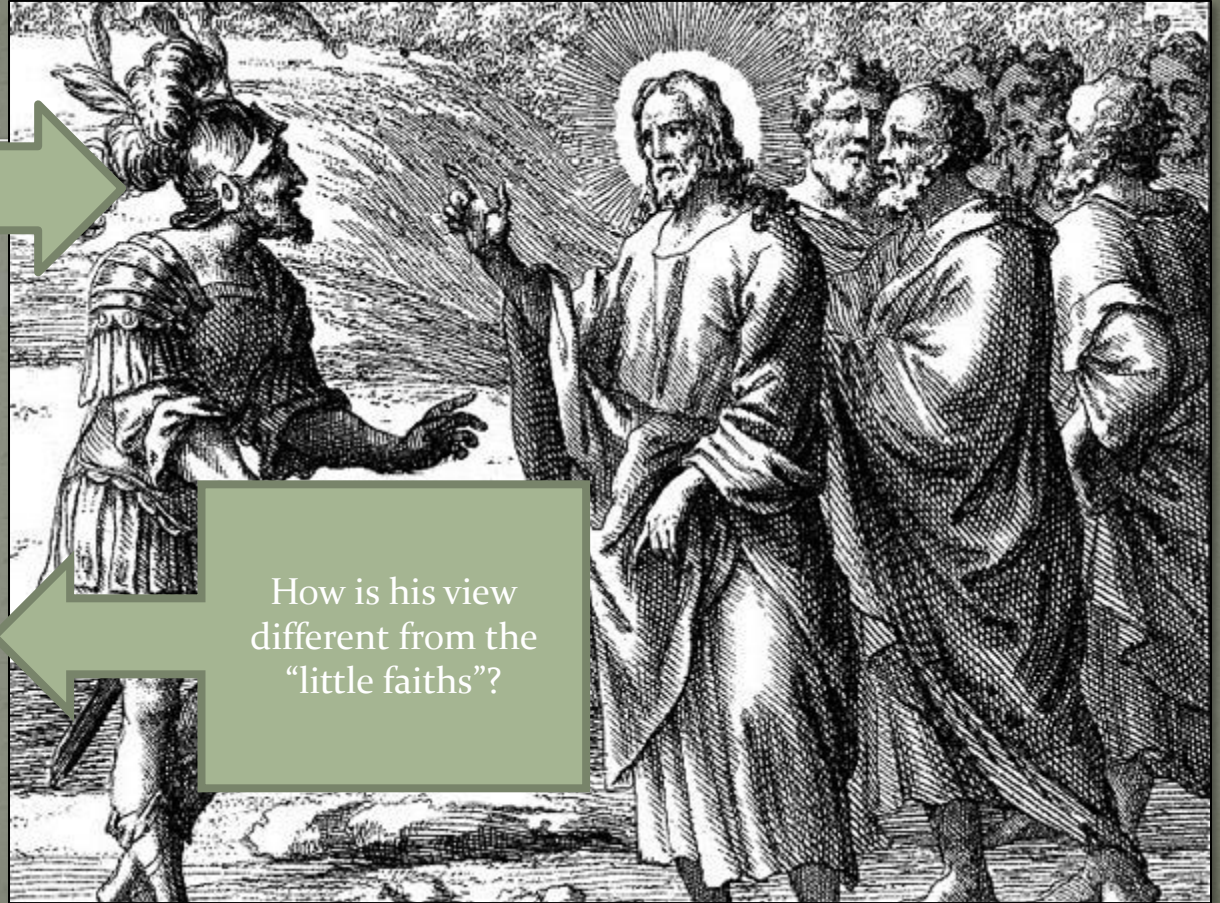
In our individualistic culture, God/Jesus are the only ones we can appeal to and intervention is the exception

The Centurion's jaw-dropping vision of reality couldn't have been more different... but how?



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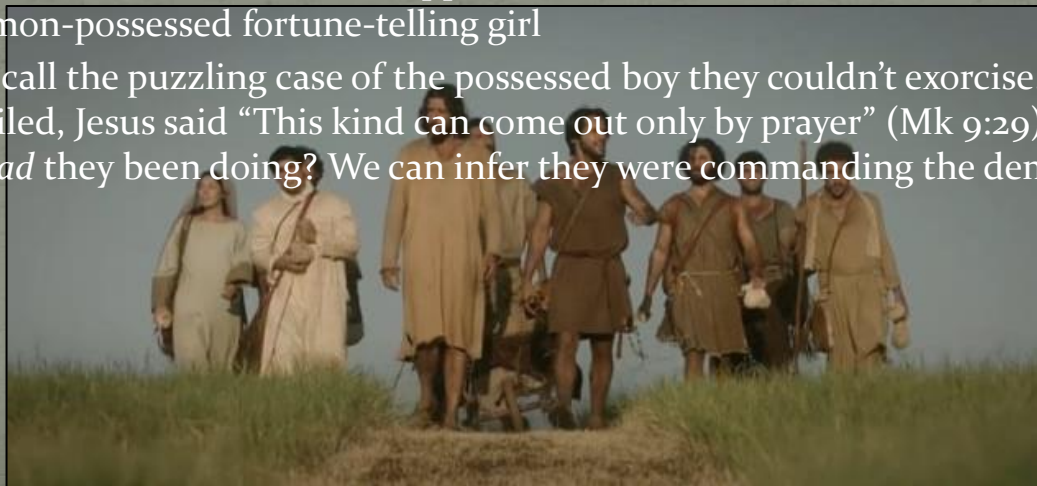
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How is his view different from the "little faiths"?

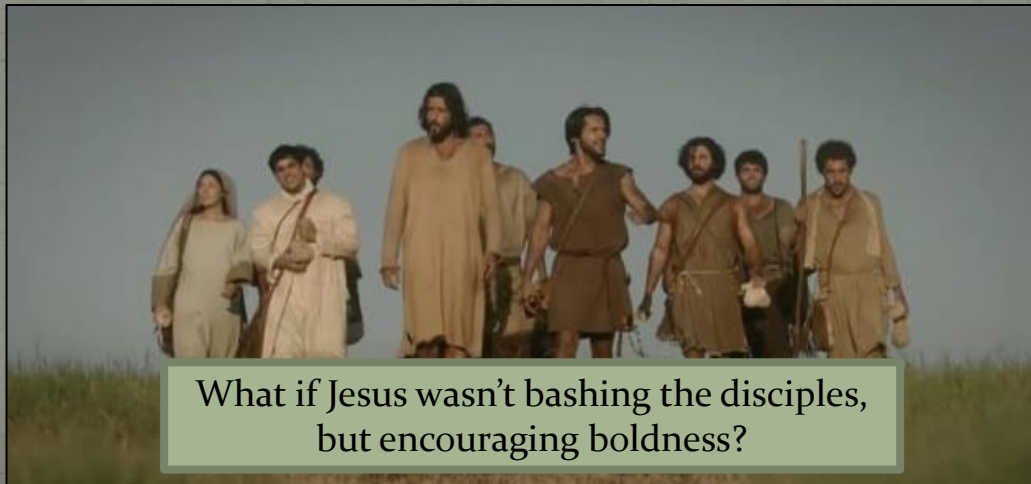
Jesus delegates authority to his disciples as well

- Jesus is all about delegating authority, including power to preach, exorcise, heal and raise the dead
 - ❖ “Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.” (Lk 9:1-2)
 - ❖ Remember that Peter healed a cripple with a command, and Paul did the same to exorcise the demon-possessed fortune-telling girl
 - ❖ Now recall the puzzling case of the possessed boy they couldn’t exorcise. When asked why they failed, Jesus said “This kind can come out only by prayer” (Mk 9:29). If not prayer, what *had* they been doing? We can infer they were commanding the demon to leave



N. T. Wright:

Contrast the prayer of this centurion with the prayers we all too often pray ourselves: “Lord,” we say (not out loud, of course, but this is what we often think), “I might perhaps like you to do this... but I know you may not want to, or it might be too difficult, or even impossible...” and we go on our way puzzled, not sure whether we’ve really asked for something or not. Of course, sometimes we ask for something and the answer is No. God reserves the right to give that answer. But this story shows that we should have no hesitation in asking. Is Jesus the Lord of the world, or isn’t he?



**What if Jesus wasn't bashing the disciples,
but encouraging boldness?**



Summer is coming soon: Requests for passages to study before we break?



Prayer!

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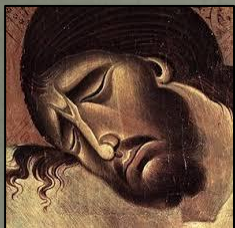


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What have we learned about who Jesus is?



- Suffering Servant of Isaiah:
 - ❖ *A bruised reed he will not break*



- Jesus and the Gentiles:
 - ❖ *Demoniac: Jesus was an exorcist*
 - ❖ *Canaanite woman: Jesus is nuanced and may push us to commit*



- Jesus and his Family:
 - ❖ *Jesus the tween: He was a normal kid but also had understanding of his mission from God*
 - ❖ *Jesus knows what he is about, and doesn't play favorites*

What have we learned about who Jesus is?



- Walking on Water:
 - ❖ *Jesus as miracle worker who wants us to trust him; he's our shepherd and comforter*



- Jesus calls his disciples:
 - ❖ *Jesus who knows things about you and your future even you don't know*
 - ❖ *Jesus, who leads us forward with questions ("come and see") and often wants us to make the next move*



- Jesus heals the trans-ceiling paralytic:

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