

## GO! Say the Word

February 5, 2012

We've been in a series for the last month or so coming out of the Gospel of Matthew. The series is called "Go." And just in a quick way of recap: We've talked about the Gospel of Matthew is a story on the go! It is a story in motion! And because this is a story on the go, the reader comes to it with an expectation to be taken somewhere along with the story. To be pushed, and moved and nudged along, ending up somewhere other than where they started.

And so we talked about how for hundreds and hundreds of years the Israelites have clung to the promise God had made to them: the promise that the coming Messiah. And the Israelites have clung to that promise for hundreds and hundreds of years, many of which were bad. And now a growing number of people are beginning to claim that this Jesus of Nazareth person is the long-awaited Messiah that you've all been looking for. A man named Matthew, a follower of Jesus from the start, has taken it upon himself to write an account of the life of Jesus' life and the things he did. And for whatever reason, whether you are just curious, or desperate, or hopeful or a sceptic – for whatever reason, you have chosen to read the book that Matthew has written.

Now, we've talked about how Matthew's gospel is grouped into several collections of stories and teachings. Kind of big sections he has put together. And so far we've covered several of them.

We started out with *Collection One* which is really the pedigree of Jesus. And we've talked about how he was a descendant of David and a descendant Abraham. And how that ties him both to the promises and covenants God gave to them but also to the Messianic lineage that the Jews were expecting. And we talked about how he was acclaimed by the magi and recognized by John the Baptist, endorsed by God Himself and victorious over Satan. And that was the pedigree of Jesus discussed in *Collection One* that we studied for the first couple weeks.

Then last week we got into *Collection Two* which was the preaching of Jesus. And we focused a lot on the passage out of the Sermon on the Mount - those four short verses that talk about Christians being the salt of the earth and the light of the world. And we looked at those things and how Jesus was really calling his followers and the people he was talking to to live a life that impacts the world and people around them in positive ways. That means calling them to live a life that change things for the better. Jesus was calling people to a life that affect the lives of people they come in contact with in a way that will draw them to the Father

Last week we talked about being salt and light and how the Sermon on the Mount is really divided into two sections. The first section which we often call the Beattitudes which start out the Sermon on the Mount are kind of general principles for living this life that Jesus is calling us to. And then the second section, which comes in Matthew 5:17 to the end of chapter 7, and these are kind of more specific, tangible examples of how that life that Jesus is calling us to live is supposed to play out. And right in the middle is that passage about being salt and light and it kind of ties them all together.

And so, we kind of left off there last week and the part we didn't get to was right at the end of the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus has finished talking. And this is what Matthew says the reaction of the people was:

*Matthew 7:28 - 29 When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, for he taught with real authority—quite unlike their teachers of religious law.*

So when Jesus has finished this first big section of teaching, and Matthew has written it all out for us, he says the people who heard him say this were amazed. And when they heard him speak they said

“This guy is not like anyone else we’ve heard speak.” And in essence what they were saying is “You know what, this guy talks like he actually knows what he’s talking about. There is a certainty and an authority about the way he speaks about these things that gives us some confidence and some excitement about the way he is talking and the things he is saying.”

That brings us to today and *Collection Three*. And at this point in Matthew’s gospel, as far as his readers are concerned, Jesus looks good on paper as it were, but they want to see him in action. And so that is where Matthew is going to take us this morning.

In the movie ‘A Knight’s Tale’ – the story of a young man named William. And William wants to be a knight and compete in the competitions and he wants to be the champion of these knight competitions. And so the first thing he does is he gets himself some papers that claim that he is a noble. Of course in the movie they’re a forgery, but we’ll overlook that for now. And so he has his paper which say he is accredited as a noble. Then he goes out and gets some knightly armor. And so he looks the part. He’s got the paper, he looks the part, but not until gets on his horse and starts charging down a lane at another man with a lance pointed at him, do we know if he is really going to become the champion of the tournament that he aspires to be.

Perhaps some of you have had the experience of interviewing someone for a job. And when you interview someone for a job, first of all you get all these applications in and you sort of weed through them. And you kind of get a short list and you look at people and you think “Well, this guy has a great resume and he has some pretty solid references. But until you meet them in person and see them at work, you don’t know if they are the potential employee you’re looking for.

Or perhaps you’ve had this experience and gone on a blind date with someone. Maybe your friends have fixed you up or maybe you’ve gone on one of those internet dating sites and got your match made that way. Your friends can tell you all about this person and how wonderful he or she is. And you can have a computer print out on how you match up on 35 out 42 areas of compatibility. And you might even have seen a picture of your potential date for that night. But until you actually go on that first date and spend time together, and you get to watch him eat his food, and you get to listen to her laugh, and you get to talk to each other and get to know each other, and get to make a bit of a connection, you don’t really know if they are going to be mister or miss right for you.

Well, that’s kind of where Matthew’s readers are as we enter chapter eight. Jesus has the credentials. Jesus has communicated his message. But does he have the credibility to back it all up? And in response to that, Matthew hits us with three sets of three miracles displaying the power of Jesus over sickness, over nature, over the spirit world and even over death itself. Jesus has talked the talk of the Messiah, so now we will see if he can walk the walk. There are many lessons we could glean from this parade of power, but a couple jump out to me and they are, all three, seen in one story in particular.

**Matthew 8:5 - 13** <sup>5</sup>When Jesus returned to Capernaum, a Roman officer came and pleaded with him, <sup>6</sup>“Lord, my young servant lies in bed, paralyzed and in terrible pain.” <sup>7</sup>Jesus said, “I will come and heal him.” <sup>8</sup>But the officer said, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come into my home. Just say the word from where you are, and my servant will be healed. <sup>9</sup>I know this because I am under the authority of my superior officers, and I have authority over my soldiers. I only need to say, ‘Go,’ and they go, or ‘Come,’ and they come. And if I say to my slaves, ‘Do this,’ they do it.” <sup>10</sup>When Jesus heard this, he was amazed. Turning to those who were following him, he said, “I tell you the truth, I haven’t seen faith like this in all Israel! <sup>11</sup>And I tell you this, that many Gentiles will come from all over the world—from east and west—and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the feast in the Kingdom of Heaven. <sup>12</sup>But many Israelites—those for whom the Kingdom was

*prepared—will be thrown into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”  
13 Then Jesus said to the Roman officer, “Go back home. Because you believed, it has happened.”  
And the young servant was healed that same hour.*

Have you ever been in the presence of a master? When you are in the presence of a master you don't say anything - You just hang on every word they say. When you are in the presence of a Master you don't make suggestions – You take notes. You would never tell Gretzky how to set up behind the net. You would never give Michelangelo sculpting suggestions if you happened to meet him one day. You would never give Kristen Stewart advice on how to be expressionless. You would never give, winner of 8 gold Olympic medals, Michael Phelps training tips. You would never give Leonardo Da Vinci pointers on how to paint. Picasso, I might have some suggestions, but Da Vinci, no.

There are some people who are SO good at what they do, that it is preposterous for a completely average person like me to presume to tell them anything about how to do what they do. When you are in the presence of these people and they are giving instructions on how to do the particular thing they are experts at, you just follow their instructions, without debate, without argument, without question. That is the sense we get when the centurion speaks with Jesus.

Some quick background on the Roman centurion. The smallest division of soldiers in the Roman army was 100 men. The leader of these 100 men was called a centurion. The men under the centurion would follow his instructions without question. The centurion would carry out the instructions and orders of his superiors without question.

For a long time people questioned the validity of this story because there was no evidence of a Roman military presence around Capernaum. However in more recent years archaeologists have excavated a Roman garrison just outside the ancient city. And so that's probably where this guy was stationed and where he came from to talk to Jesus when his servant was sick.

Now there are some odd things about this story. Luke tells us he was responsible for building the synagogue in Capernaum for the Jews. And that's not something you would normally expect a Roman officer to do. Furthermore, a Roman would never 'ask' a Jew for anything. He might tell or he might demand or he might insist, but he would never ask. The Centurion doesn't even insist that Jesus come to his house to heal his servant. In fact, he does the opposite. He insists that Jesus does not come to his house. Which shows not only great faith in Jesus' power, but also sensitivity to Jewish traditions which would have prevented a Jewish Rabbi from entering the home of a gentile. This was tradition mind you, not Biblical command, so it likely would not have stopped Jesus from doing it. But none-the-less the Roman centurion is sensitive to it. But more than that the Centurion insist he is not worthy to have Jesus even come in to his home.

The Centurion's confidence in Jesus' power is so immense that he tells Jesus “Just say the word from where you are, and my servant will be healed.” Now, we have no record, up until this point, of Jesus doing this long distance healing prior to the Centurion's request. So it's not like there was precedence for the centurion to say this. In fact, Jesus' typical M.O., in fact Jesus was well known for involving some sort of touch in many of his healings. Occasionally just a spoken word, but always face to face. So this is quite out of the ordinary.

Now, if it were you wouldn't you want to go for the sure thing? Wouldn't you want to say, “Jesus, come on over to my house and come see him and be with him and lay your hands on him and heal him. Wouldn't you say “At least come and see him in person and say something and heal him.” And

“Jesus, if it’s inappropriate for you to come into the house, at least stand at the door or look inside the window and see him. Let’s give this thing its best shot at success in healing this young man!” Now all of that would make sense, except for one thing: The Centurion knew he was dealing with the Master. There was no doubt in the Centurion’s mind that if Jesus wanted it done, it would be done, and nothing as insignificant as a few miles of separation was going to stand in the way.

So Matthew begins this section of his gospel by telling story after story of people whose confidence in Jesus’ power was so absolute that nothing was beyond his ability

Just prior to the Centurion’s story Matthew records this:

*Matthew 8:2 - 3 Suddenly, a man with leprosy approached him and knelt before him. “Lord,” the man said, “if you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean.” Jesus reached out and touched him. “I am willing,” he said. “Be healed!” And instantly the leprosy disappeared.*

Leprosy was in that time, incurable, irreversible and considered to be highly contagious. But the man comes to Jesus and says “If you want to do it, it will be done.”

Later in Matthew 9 we read this:

*Matthew 9:18 As Jesus was saying this, the leader of a synagogue came and knelt before him. “My daughter has just died,” he said, “but you can bring her back to life again if you just come and lay your hand on her.”*

In Mark’s version of this story, the girl is only very sick when Jairus first talks to Jesus, but before they get to her, servants come and say, we’re very sorry, it’s too late. But Jairus continues on to the house with Jesus and with two words “Talitha kum” the girl is restored to her parents. Again, thus far in Matthew’s gospel there is no record of anything like this, yet, with astounding faith Jairus says “If you’re willing, nothing can stop you, not even death.”

In the middle of the story with Jairus and his daughter there is another story of a woman who has had uncontrollable bleeding for years and years who comes to Jesus. Mark tells us she’s tried everything under the sun to find a cure and every treatment they could come up with, but nothing has worked. Yet, when Jesus comes to town she thinks:

*Matthew 9:21 for she thought, “If I can just touch his robe, I will be healed.”*

Modern medicine has struck out, extreme measures have failed, yet with remarkable faith the woman believes, “He has such great power, even if I just get close it will be enough” – and it was!

Clearly Matthew’s message to his readers throughout this section is “If you are wondering if Jesus is legit; If you are wondering if he is powerful; If you are wondering if he is someone you can put your trust in; If he is someone you can depend on to deliver - He is.

And whatever it is you are facing today. The same truth remains: Jesus is someone you can put your trust in; Jesus is someone you can count on to deliver; Jesus is who succeeds where others fail; Jesus still responds to those who come to him in faith and say “If you are willing...”

As Paul writes to the church in Ephesus:

*Ephesians 3:16 - 21 16I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 18may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, 19and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. 20Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine,*

*according to his power that is at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*

There is a classic plot twist that many books and movies like to employ that sees someone who the audience believes is the hero eventually revealed as the villain. An example of this is in the movie Goldeneye. James Bond and his good friend Alec Travalian are on a mission together and Alec gets by some bad guys and presumably killed in an explosion that Bond creates in his dramatic escape. However, later on, about ¾ of the way through the film, it is years later it is revealed that Alec was in fact in league with the bad guys and is now the super villain that Bond must confront. That is actually the exact same plot as Buzz Lightyear of Star Command: The Adventure Begins, not to mention countless other books, movies & tv shows.

And these twists where a character is pretending to be one of the good guys, but is in fact the bad guy are fairly common and usually rather predicable. But the twists that I really like and the twists that really catch you off guard are when a character believes they are one of the good guys working for the good guys, but shockingly discovers they are in fact one of the bad guys working for the bad guys

Has that ever happened to you? Have you been sure you were on the right side of an argument, discussion or debate and then later, often in hindsight, realized you were totally on the wrong side of the issue? Have you ever been sure you were the protagonist of a situation and then down the road you look back and realize that you were in fact the antagonist? If you have, or if you can at least imagine what that would be like, you have a sense of the significance of Matthew's second message in these stories.

Matthew writes:

*Matthew 8:10 - 12 10When Jesus heard this, he was amazed. Turning to those who were following him,[most if not all of whom were Jews] he said, "I tell you the truth, I haven't seen faith like this in all Israel! 11And I tell you this, that many Gentiles will come from all over the world—from east and west—and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob [and that was the heart of the Israelite identity – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob] at the feast in the Kingdom of Heaven. 12But many Israelites—those for whom the Kingdom was prepared—will be thrown into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

I'm not sure which would be more astonishing and unheard of to Matthew's readers: Gentiles being included in the Kingdom of Heaven or Jews being excluded from it. Matthew's gospel, as we have said, is clearly written to a Jewish audience. He refers to King David more than any of the other gospels. He includes lots of Messianic prophesy. He uses Jewish terminology. And yet Matthew's gospel is punctuated with these moments like that would cause most Jews to stagger back in disbelief!

Gentiles entering the Kingdom? Okay, maybe I can swallow that, if they convert to Judaism. But Jew's being thrown out of the Kingdom? Preposterous! Ridiculous! Inconceivable!

At the end of Chapter 8 we find Jesus in a boat sleeping. The disciples are freaking out because there is a severe storm. And remember that several of these men were fishermen who spent their lives on the water, so if there is a storm that is making them nervous it is a significant event. They wake Jesus and with a word, okay three words, the wind quiets and the waves die down. And the

disciples are shocked and amazed. These were the men who were with Jesus all the time. They heard the things he said. They saw the things he had done, including the stories we've been talking about this morning and many others. And yet they were in disbelief.

There is this ongoing thread throughout Matthew's gospel. Those who should have had the most faith didn't. Those who the reader expected to have no faith were the shining examples.

The sobering truth that Matthew is conveying is: A title of religious is not the same as faith; The claim of spirituality is not the same as faith; God is not pleased or impressed with your name, your affiliation, your lineage or your self professed greatness; God cares more about how you live out your faith. God cares more about you actually following Christ than calling yourself Christian. God cares more about what your faith does than merely what it claims.

As James writes:

*James 2:14 - 18 14What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? 15Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 16If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? 17In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. 18But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.*

There is a third lesson highlighted in these stories that is somewhat less obvious at first read. As **unheard of as it might have been** for a Roman Centurion to **approach a Jew** and **ask for help** it was **equally odd** for a Roman Centurion to give such great **concern for a servant** in the first place. Servants and slaves were a **denari a dozen** in that culture, especially to a **Roman in occupied territory**. When servants and slave got ill, there was often **little effort put into caring for them**. More often they were **worked until they were incapable** of working any more and then **they were replaced**. **Some masters were more generous** than others, but as a **general rule**, these people were **expedient and entirely replaceable**.

The Centurion's care for this young man is rather extraordinary and is highlight by the fact that the word Matthew selects can be translated either servant or son. Luke's version uses a different word which can be translated as servant or slave. So scholars look at both of those and say "servant is the common term between the two passages so that is likely the correct translation," which is way your English Bible likely says servant. However Matthew's word selection hints at the affection the Centurion had for this young man and explains why he would go to such great lengths, including humbling himself, to seek a cure. We also discover in Luke's version of this story that the Centurion actually recruits the Jewish elders to help him make his plea to Jesus. In all of this we see great faith, but it is great faith that acts on the behalf of others.

We've already looked at the story of Jairus who pleads on behalf of his daughter, clearly not an entirely selfless venture, but none-the-less it carries this theme of faith acting on the behalf of others through this section of Matthew's gospel. Inbetween these two stories, at the start of chapter 9 we see several friends coming together to carry their friend who is a paralytic to Jesus so he can be healed. This story parallels the account in Mark 2, in which the friends go so far as tearing a hole in the roof of a house so they can lower their companion down to where Jesus was. And again we see true faith in action, working for the benefit of others.

And to me, Matthew's point here is rather hard to miss. In fact, it is a real life application of what Jesus had spoke of in the Sermon on the Mount: Being salt and light in the world; Living out God's calling in a way that positively impacts the lives of those around us; Being Christ followers in a way that changes the lives of those we come in contact with; Acting in a way that brings people to the Father.

In collection three of his gospel Matthew is putting Jesus power clearly on display for all his readers to see. However he is at the same time putting the faith of people who believed in Jesus and the inactive faith of others on display, as well. His message to his first century audience and to us today is simply: Have faith in Jesus. He is who he says he is. He can do what he says he can do. He will do what he says he will do. Faith is something that must be lived out on a daily basis not merely talked about or claimed with words and titles. The writer of Hebrews states:

*Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.*

And then he goes into this long list of 'faithful' people and identifies that faith by the actions it spawned. Finally, an active faith regularly acts on behalf of and to the benefit of other people. James declares:

*James 1:27 Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*

As I look at that list, I find it equally inspiring and daunting. I want to be that guy. The guy who's faith says "Just say the word Jesus." The guy who's faith is seen more in tangible actions than in empty words. The guy who's faith compels him to care for others. But that's not always who I am. If you feel comfortable in my shoes, then you need to read Mark 9:14-27

There is a story in Mark nine where a father comes to Jesus and says his young boy is possessed by and evil spirit that sends him into convulsions and attempts to drown him in water and attempts to throw him into the fire to be burned over and over again. And the desperate father pleads with Jesus:

*Mark 9:22b – 24 But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." "If you can'?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes." Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"*

And some days, those are my words: I do believe. I want to believe. I'm trying to believe. I would like to believe. I'm doing my best to believe. Help me believe!

Jesus calls us to live a life of faith. A life that is active. A life that draws others to God. And when faith is hard to come by, when faith is hard to hang on to, Jesus whispers, "just say the word."