

Looking out in prayer and ministry to military/police and their families

March 1, 2009 - Luke 7:1-10

What is it like to be a soldier or a police officer? What is it like for a soldier or peace officer's family? What unique challenges might they face? Some of you know what its like. I have not served in the armed forces nor done police work. So I needed to do some research to inform this message. I contacted some of our military and police families for insight. One directed me to a website on the good old "Interweb" as they would say on Corner Gas, to give some insight.

It reveals frustrations police officers feel in the form of a fictional answering message to a local police station.

Hello, you have reached the St. Albert Police Department Voice Mail. Pay close attention as we have to update the choices often as new and unusual circumstances arrive. Please select one of the following options:

- To whine about us not doing anything to solve a problem you created for yourself, press 1.
- To wonder whether someone has to die before we'll do something about a problem, press 2.
- To report an officer for bad manners when in reality the officer is trying to keep your neighborhood safe, press 3.
- If you would like us to raise your children, press 4.

- If you would like us to instantly restore order to a situation that took years to deteriorate, press 5.

- To provide a list of police officers you personally know so we will not take enforcement action against you, press 6.

- To sue us, tell us you'll have our badge, that you pay our salary, or proclaim our career is over, press 7.

- To hear this menu again, wrap aluminum foil around your head and turn around three times.

Hmm. What might it be like to be deployed overseas with the Armed Forces? A soldier came up with a list of some tasks necessary to prepare for deployment. I will share a few.

(1)Set up a cot in the garage. Open the garage door. Place a green sheet over the opening to the outside. Sleep in the cot. Six hours after you go to sleep, have your wife whip open the curtain, shine a flashlight in your eyes and mumble, "Sorry, wrong cot."

(2)Don't watch TV except for movies in the middle of the night. Have your family vote on which movie to watch and then show a different one.

(3)Use 18 scoops of coffee per pot and allow it to sit for five or six hours before drinking.

(4)Once a month, take every major appliance completely apart and put it back together again.

(5)Invite at least 185 people you don't really like because of their strange hygiene habits to come and visit for a couple of months. Exchange clothes with them.

(6)Demand each family member be limited to 10 minutes per week for a morale phone call. Enforce this with your teenage daughter.

(7) Make your children empty their Super Soakers in a clearing barrel you placed outside the garage before they come in.

(8) Have a fluorescent lamp installed on the bottom of your coffee table and lie under it to read books.

(9) When your 5-year-old asks for a stick of gum, have him find the exact stick and flavor he wants on the Internet and print out the web page. Type up a Form 9 and staple the web page to the back. Submit the paperwork to your spouse for processing. After two weeks, give your son the gum.

Military and police life contain some unique challenges. One family shares this experience about life on the frontier. “There are many logistics of living in a remote area. We would order food by e-mail. My wife would send a list to city, and they would send food up on the truck. This was comical at times --> would you believe that the fresh fruit would end up frozen, and the icecream would end up melted (ON THE SAME SHIPMENT).”

But what are we supposed to do with all these military and police people around? We live very close to the Edmonton Garrison of the Canadian Armed Forces. The St. Albert RCMP detachment is just up the road. Our community and church family has many military and police families. As we continue our series on “Looking out in

prayer and ministry to our community” we cannot ignore this significant segment of the population to many of us. Neither did God.

Soldiers and police officers have been around for centuries. In fact, we see them throughout the Bible. Not only do we see them. God used them to accomplish His purposes. God has placed this church community among soldiers. What might God want of us as a to minister to this sub-group? Here’s my proposal: **Since God uses soldier’s/police officers unique work situations to advance His Gospel, we must pray for and support them and their military families so they can carry out His great work.** Many times the soldiers in the Bible also kept the peace in communities. So I have included peace officers and their families in this message today.

To consider this proposal, I first want you to see some examples of how God used soldiers to advance His Gospel. Then we’ll consider challenges military and police families face today. Finally, we’ll consider how we might respond whether we’re part of a military/police family or part of the general community. Follow along on insert – begin with Luke 7.

How did God use soldier's unique work situations to advance His Gospel?

Way #1 – He used a centurion's faith to publicly testify about Jesus' authority.

Luke 7:1-10 NIV

The Faith of the Centurion

¹When Jesus had finished saying all this in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. ²There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. ³The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. ⁴When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, ⁵because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." ⁶So Jesus went with them.

He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. ⁷That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁸For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

⁹When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." ¹⁰Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

Jesus has just finished the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Luke. Now he goes back from the mountain into the city of Capernaum. Jesus used this city for a home base during his ministry

in that northern region called Galilee. Luke tells us of a centurion with a very sick servant. But what was a centurion?

Originally, a centurion was a Roman officer who commanded a hundred soldiers – a century of men. Ancient Jewish Historian Josephus speaks of a graduation of officers: the Decurion who commanded 10 men and the chiliarch and hegemon above the centurion. So it seems the centurion was like an army captain.

Another ancient writer, Polybius lists the qualifications looked for in centurions: “They must not be so much “seekers after danger as men who can command, steady in action, and reliable; they ought not to be over anxious to rush into the fight; but when hard pressed they must be ready to hold their ground and die at their posts.” So to qualify for a centurion position, you needed to have fortitude and integrity.

The centurion in Luke 7 highly valued a servant or slave. Since the Romans were known for cruelty to “non-Romans” and their economy depended on slave labor, this charitable attitude might be unexpected. But even more striking is verse 3. The centurion hears about Jesus’ arrival and his ability to heal. So the centurion sees an

opportunity to help his servant. But he doesn't send other servants to contact Jesus. He doesn't send soldiers. He sends Jewish elders!

The Jews viewed the Romans as unclean Gentile conquerors. They wouldn't even go into Roman houses for fear of defilement. Yet Jewish elders go to Jesus to appeal for this centurion!

We find out why in verses 4 and 5. This centurion loved the Jewish nation. How could he do that as a loyal officer to Rome? It seems he feared God. He recognized the true God in the faith of these conquered Jews. Not only did he recognize the true God. He facilitated worship of Him. He built the synagogue in Capernaum. We don't know if he paid for it and hired laborers. Or maybe he had soldiers do some of the work. But he had built a very good reputation with the citizens in the post assigned to him. He's a soldier doing his job.

Verses 6-10 reveal how God used him. Jesus agrees to come and heal the centurion's servant. But just before Jesus gets to the house, the centurion sends more friends. They deliver his message: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I do not even consider myself worthy to

come to you. But say the word and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority with soldiers under me."

Notice he addresses Jesus as "Lord." That title was usually reserved for the Emperor. Then he displays his humility. He states he doesn't deserve to have Jesus come visit him. He views Jesus as His superior. Then he expresses great faith in Jesus' power. "But say the word and my servant will be healed."

Then the soldier speaks about authority. The centurion knows how authority works in his chain of command. Orders are passed along the line. The one giving the order should not need to be present to have the order carried out. If an order came from the emperor, he should not have to come to Palestine to ensure it happens. In the same way, the centurion, recognizing Jesus' authority, believes Jesus can simply say the word to heal. He doesn't think Jesus has to be present for the healing. Yet because of Jesus authority, the centurion believes the healing will occur.

Jesus marvels at this faith. In fact, there are only 2 times in Scripture where we're told Jesus was amazed or marveled; here and at the unbelief of some cities that had seen many miracles. So Jesus

turns to the crowd following. “I have not found such great faith even in Israel.” What just happened? God used this centurion to declare the Lordship, power and authority of Christ. God used this well respected foreigner to proclaim to this community that God had come among them. The healing of the servant almost becomes a side issue. For in verse 10 we see the servant is healed. But God uses the faith and words of this soldier to proclaim His Gospel to that crowd.

How else did God use soldiers to advance His Gospel?

Way #2 – He used the centurion supervising Jesus’ crucifixion to publicly proclaim Jesus’ innocence and deity. This centurion becomes an amateur theologian recognizing the sinless sacrifice and divinity of Christ.

Luke 23:44-48 NIV

Jesus' Death

⁴⁴*It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, ⁴⁵for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last.*

⁴⁷*The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man." ⁴⁸When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away.*

A centurion and group of soldiers drew execution detail that day. A centurion took a detachment to ensure the deaths of three condemned criminals. He likely witnessed many crucifixions. He saw many die; some nobly; some rebelliously. But there is something different about this one. He sees Jesus take his last breath. He reflects on all he has seen. Then he cannot help himself. He must make this confession – “Surely this was a righteous man.” Surely this man was innocent.

The Gospels of Matthew and Mark also preserve this incident for us. Mark states “And when the centurion, who stood facing him saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” The Greek could be translated “A son of God.” A Roman would not see the Son of God as the Old Testament Messiah nor the eternal son of the Trinity. He may have had that Greek idea of a human being favored by the gods or he may have seen Jesus as God. Nevertheless, one commentator argues the confession of the centurion stands as the goal and climax of Mark’s Gospel, filled with the content of the Christian message. Mark 1:1 states “The beginning of the

Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” The centurion pronounces “surely the man was the Son of God.

So this officer standing in front of the cross makes this confession about Christ. He had nothing to gain. He in fact condemned himself by saying it! He had just overseen Jesus’ execution. But now the centurion declares Jesus’ innocence and divinity. And how did the Gospel writers get this information? Either the centurion became a Christian or he said it loud enough for Jesus’ followers to hear it. Either way, another soldier witness emerges who was simply doing his duty. But he turns out to play a key role in confirming the identity of Jesus. This was the Son of God who died innocently – the only kind of sacrifice that could atone for the sins of others.

How did God use a soldier to advance His Gospel?

Way #3 – He preserved Paul’s life through a centurion’s orders so the Gospel could be proclaimed in Rome. A centurion restrains his own soldiers from killing Paul. So the Gospel message can spread to the capital of the empire.

In Acts 27 a centurion named Julius of the Augustan Cohort is entrusted with several prisoners to take to Rome for trial. One of them

is the Apostle Paul. We’re told he treated Paul kindly. Julius finds a cargo ship sailing for Italy and puts Paul, other prisoners and his soldiers on board. They get to the Island of Crete. But its late fall. Paul advises the sea is too dangerous to continue the journey – wait until spring.

But the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and the owner of the ship than to what Paul said. The ship gets caught in a storm. It is so bad they decide they must begin to lighten the ship. First they throw over the tackle like extra ropes and chains. Then they throw over the cargo. For 14 days the gale rages. Finally, they give up hope. But Paul has a dream in which the Lord promises the lives of everyone on the ship but the ship will run aground. Watch how God uses the centurion here.

Acts 27:39-44 NIV

³⁹When daylight came, they did not recognize the land, but they saw a bay with a sandy beach, where they decided to run the ship aground if they could. ⁴⁰Cutting loose the anchors, they left them in the sea and at the same time untied the ropes that held the rudders. Then they hoisted the foresail to the wind and made for the beach. ⁴¹But the ship struck a sandbar and ran aground. The bow stuck fast and would not move, and the stern was broken to pieces by the pounding of the surf.

⁴²The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners to prevent any of them from swimming away and escaping. ⁴³But the centurion wanted to

spare Paul's life and kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to land.⁴⁴The rest were to get there on planks or on pieces of the ship. In this way everyone reached land in safety.

If prisoners escaped from Roman soldiers, the soldiers usually paid with their lives. So the soldiers decide to do what they were trained to do. But the centurion kept them from carrying out their plan. He instead orders everyone to swim ashore however they can. No lives were lost. Paul lives under house arrest for 2 years in Rome proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. So this centurion carries out his duty. He eventually gets Paul to Rome through many trials and turns. God uses that to bring the Gospel to the capital.

So God used these three soldiers to advance His Gospel. There are others which we don't have time for today. My proposal is **"Since God uses soldier's/police officers unique work situations to advance His Gospel, we must pray for and support military families so they can carry out His great work."** To understand how to pray for and support them, we must gain insight into the challenges they face.

What needs and challenges do military/police families face today?

I'm going to let our military and police folk speak to this with their own written word.

Challenge #1 - Constant public scrutiny. One police officer writes, we are constantly in the public eye. "It is not just the scrutiny of wearing the uniform, but also dealing with confrontation. The minute a police officer steps up to deal with something, everybody is watching. They watch to see if you lose your temper, to see if you swear at somebody - even though they are violent and may try to punch you. Then, on your time off, they watch you when you socialize with others, they watch for a double life style - does your conduct reconcile with your Christianity. There seems to be no "time alone" in a small community. While living up north, we had fences around our yard, and people would still come and knock on our door on a day off, at any time, just to speak with a police officer. At one place, there were 1100 people, and the 4 officers would imprison roughly 700 prisoners a year. Of these people, there were 7 that I could name off the top of my head that had spent time in jail for murder or manslaughter - not to mention the dozens that spent time in jail for serious assaults. Some of these would come and knock at our

door. *Another soldier writes:* The unique challenges my family faced was: - lack of daily communication and interaction with them.

- Missing the first times: the first walk, the first words, the first birthdays.
- The odd phone call via satellite phone which was limited to 10 minutes and cut off with no warning or chance to say “I love you.”
- We had to learn to start our relationship over and over again.
- My wife was mom and dad through my whole military career.

Challenge #2 - Travel – Separation from Families

One soldier writes, “Although some families have spouses whose work includes travel, there even more travel in the military. It includes serving overseas for long periods of time; even travel for training for periods of days, weeks or even months.” One police officer writes “Another reality is shift work which can be very tough on young families.”

Challenge #3 – Moves

There is the constant moving for military families (every 4 – 6 years), often with no say in where you will be moving to. Police families

especially RCMP get posted to different places and must adapt to the community.

Challenge #4 - Danger

Families of soldiers deal with the constant concern of spouse and family for the life of the member when they are in dangerous training or serving in a threatening environment (e.g. in Afghanistan).

One police officer writes, “Many times, I would deal with quite violent people, often times alone. There is danger when you arrest people that swing an axe or a shovel at your head, or armed persons that run the Alaska border and have to be taken down at gunpoint. So from a family standpoint, I suppose my wife would worry sometimes - but she never really let on (my life insurance is pretty good :)”

Challenge #5 - Battle against cynicism, callousness, sarcasm, darkness and coarseness.

A soldier writes “Because the lifestyle and culture of most in the military is pretty callous, sarcastic and generally dark (its purpose is to kill) it is easy to drift into that mindset and not walk close to the Lord.”

A police officer writes “the biggest threat (from my standpoint) as to how it can take away from my walk with Christ - it makes one

cynical. We definitely don't see as much death as the soldiers do, but we are inundated with some pretty serious assaults, family violence - people beating their own families, sexually assaulting their own children, and people with no hope of ever overcoming their addictions to alcohol and drugs. When dealing with this stuff repeatedly, I suppose it could be hard to maintain the proper perspective that God knows what he's doing (not that he's responsible, just that there's not a better way?) There is truly no justice for the victims out there. I remember preparing for a trial, and coming across Ecclesiastes 3:16 on the morning I was scheduled to give evidence. (*And I saw something else under the sun: in the place of judgment – wickedness was there, in the place of justice – wickedness was there*). I remember thinking, boy, this verse sure sums things up nicely. Many of our own officers struggle with alcohol consumption, and I suspect depression.

We have a section in HQ called ICE - integrated child exploitation - I think....Anyway, their job is to build a case against those involved in child pornography. They have to look at hundreds of images of children being abused - it's no wonder they have a mandatory

psychiatric assessment every year. These guys need prayer - they see some incredibly sick stuff.

Another police officer writes “Policing can create a cynical and biased view of the world for most police officers. We see the worst of society doing things most people only read about or see in the news and we get to see them first hand. In that way many police officers wonder, where is God in all of this?”

Those are some of the challenges facing military and police and their families.

So What?

We’ve heard some soldiers testify about the identity of Christ and the need for the Gospel. None of these soldiers had anything professionally to gain by making these confessions. In fact, the centurion at the cross was a particularly “hostile witness” yet he makes the case for Christ to be Son of God.

Maybe God is using the review of his testimony today to call you to himself to confess truly Jesus is the Son of God. “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains in him.” John 3:36

Soldiers/Police Personnel

God can use your unique working environment to advance His Gospel purposes when you least expect it. So know the Gospel and let Him speak through you when those situations arise.

“One police officer writes, I have had some unique opportunities to share Christ with people that have come through my jail doors. It is incredible that some of the natives that I'd witness to, once I started talking with them, they could recite John 3:16. They would tell me that their Grandmother taught them when they were young.

A soldier writes, “I'm encouraged by the desperate need of Christ in the lives of military members. They have a dangerous job, often live a very “worldly” life, and are very far from God. This convicts me to be the best witness I can be and to “Make the most of every opportunity”.

“A Christian Padre has less opportunity (due to military rules) to actively witness for Christ than a general member (like me) who is a Christian. This is interesting and really adds to the importance of any Christians in the military to witness.”

A police officer writes, “I have the privilege to be part of the Fellowship of Christian Officers. We are creating a support network within the EPS and other agencies in Alberta and across the country which supports those in need and helps provide accountability for those wishing to carry on their faith and for those who may be seeking direction in their lives.. Christian Police officers are coming together to further Christ's Kingdom which is an exciting thing.”

Not military or police

Prayer is a powerful thing for everyone involved in the military and police, given what we deal with on a day to day basis.

- Pray for safety in Travel for the member of the military – advice for the family when the member is away.
- Ask God to fortify families stretched by numerous moves and separations.
- Prayer for Protection for the peace officer in action and peace for their families during these times.
- Ask God to fill them with the message of hope in the battle against cynicism, callousness, sarcasm, dark viewpoint.

- Pray for Strength to maintain Christian Witness with character -
Public Scrutiny
- Pray for God's help for Witness with words
- Wisdom in difficult situations
- Support - Be aware of family needs when the member is away for a long period of time—especially when there are young kids involved.
- Be aware of those families who have wounded soldiers come home or those with survivor's guilt, or the ones with post traumatic stress disorder that silently suffer for many years.

God can use any person in any situation to advance His Gospel and bring His message of hope. God came to save people out of this present evil age – that military and police officers see much more of than we do. “Police officers are truly looked to for answers and solutions to problems. We are a terribly inadequate solution for people that just need God. Yet God can use them to present Himself. He provides a means for us to support these “front lines” folks through prayer and through ministry to their families. Let us pray for them now.