

Jesus is impressed by words: remember the reply of the Centurion when Jesus is willing to come to him and heal his servant:

*Sir, I am not worthy to have you under my roof; just give the word and my servant too will be cured. For I am under authority myself, and have soldiers under me; and I say to one man; 'Go,' and he goes; to another; 'Come here,' and he comes; to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it.' (Mt. 8:8-9)*

He too is a Gentile and commended for his faith. Through these words Jesus allows himself to be taught something new about the nature of faith. This is revelation taking place from outside the Jewish community, the chosen People of God, and it's something of this dynamic that Paul is using to argue for the authenticity of Christian faith: that is, for God's reason to be using the Church's openness to Gentiles as a way of bringing the Jews back to full faith. It's a ploy: like making one's beloved jealous by pursuing another. This can go badly wrong, of course, given the nature of human beings and, indeed, Paul's letter is also a warning to the Gentile Christians of Rome that their witness is worthless if not accompanied by love, both for one another, and for the Jewish people, Christians and non-Christians alike. The primacy of love is what both approaches to God, or one could as well say, God's approaches to us, have in common. It's there in Isaiah with the recognition that foreigners who observe the Sabbath and cling to the Covenant will be acceptable to God but with the forewarning that this includes a 'care for justice' and action with integrity. So words have consequences and qualifications. Jesus is impressed by them because they reveal, or can reveal, a person's true intent, and this, in turn, evokes a quality of kinship and compassion in himself. He is touched by what he hears and this in turn puts him in touch with his own humanity. In the woman's case, it is the humility and humour of the words that touch a chord, but also her perseverance. What the wonderful pioneering entomologist, Jean Henri Fabre, once described as 'the sole compass of the poor.' He said this in reference to his own lack of sponsors and resources to further his education and career.

*Very well, he said, I shall learn this chemistry ....By teaching it...To recover the right road, (such a man)  
if want of success have not destroyed him, .. can rely on perseverance, the sole compass of the poor. Such was my fate. I taught myself by teaching others...  
(The Life of the Fly p.289)*

I wonder if we can say this of Jesus, too. As he taught so he *was* taught, too.

*Consider the ant and be wise (Proverbs 6:6)*