

## Matthew 8:1-4

### Introduction

NOTE – The messages on the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) were delivered before we began our series through the book of Matthew.

The Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7 was an example of Jesus' teaching (*words*). Now in chapters 8-9, Matthew will give us a collection of examples of Jesus' miracles (*deeds*). And in this collection of mostly healing miracles, we're going to see the kingdom of heaven (the rule and reign of God) revealed in great power and authority. I say that these chapters are a "collection" because Matthew has collected stories of Jesus' miraculous deeds that actually happened at different times throughout His ministry, and he has put them all together in one place. In many cases, Matthew has also rearranged the order of these stories (compare with Mark and Luke). And to top it all off, Matthew has shortened Mark's version of two of these stories by thirteen verses and fourteen verses respectively (8:28-34; cf. Mark 5:1-20; 9:18-26; cf. 5:21-43). So while Matthew is historically accurate, he clearly has his own agenda. Matthew has collected these stories here in chapters 8-9 in order to highlight the *deeds* and miracles of Jesus in connection with the *words* and teaching of Jesus (chapters 5-7)! We can especially see this in the way that Matthew outlines these two chapters.

**Three miracle stories** (8:1-17)

**Interlude** – The cost of discipleship (8:18-22; cf. **the Sermon on the Mount**)

**Three miracle stories** (8:23-9:8)

**Interlude** – The call to discipleship (9:9-17; cf. **the Sermon on the Mount**)

**Three miracles stories** (9:18-34)

So with this big picture in mind, let's zoom in now on the story of Jesus' healing of the leper in Matthew 8:1-4.

### **I. Leprosy in Israel**

In the Bible, leprosy can refer to a whole variety of skin conditions (not just to our modern Hansen's disease). One commentator says: "No disease was more dreaded in the ancient world than leprosy" (Hagner), and I would add that this was especially the case in Israel. In the Old Testament, there were many things that could make you ritually "unclean" for short periods of time (like touching the carcass of a dead animal, or even touching another person who was unclean). But leprosy was unique because it was the only case where a person could remain unclean permanently. And in fact, leprosy was generally considered incurable.

- ✓ 2 Kings 5:7 (cf. Luke 4:27) – And when the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Only consider, and see how he is seeking a quarrel with me."

But to be in a permanent state of ritual uncleanness was one of the worst lots in life that any Israelite could have. To be unclean was to be cut off from God's people, because whoever touched an unclean person would then be unclean himself for seven days, after which he would have to offer a sacrifice for his cleansing. And so we read in Leviticus:

- ✓ Leviticus 13:45-46 – The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip [all signs of mourning] and cry out, “Unclean, unclean.” He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.
- ✓ Luke 17:12 – And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance.
- ✓ 2 Kings 7:3 – Now there were four men who were lepers at the entrance to the gate.

Not only was a leper isolated from the community, he was also cut off from the presence of God in the temple. And so leprosy was sometimes a direct judgment from God upon sin.

- ✓ Numbers 12:5-6, 8-12, 14 – And the LORD... called Aaron and Miriam, and they both came forward. And he said... “Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?” And the anger of the LORD was kindled against them, and he departed... When the cloud removed from over the tent, behold, Miriam was leprous, like snow. And Aaron turned toward Miriam, and behold, she was leprous. And Aaron said to Moses, “Oh, my lord, do not punish us because we have done foolishly and have sinned. Let her not be as one dead, whose flesh is half eaten away when he comes out of his mother's womb.” ... The LORD said to Moses... “Let her be shut outside the camp seven days, and after that she may be brought in again.”

Miriam was insisting that she be recognized as on the same spiritual level of authority with Moses as one through whom God spoke. And God responded by striking Miriam with leprosy so that she was cut off from all access to God's presence.

- ✓ 2 Chronicles 26:19-20 – Now [Uzziah] had a censer in his hand to burn incense, and when he became angry with the priests, leprosy broke out on his forehead in the presence of the priests in the house of the LORD, by the altar of incense. And Azariah the chief priest and all the priests looked at him, and behold, he was leprous in his forehead! And they rushed him out quickly, and he himself hurried to go out, because the LORD had struck him.

Uzziah was claiming for himself the priestly right to enter the temple. And God responded by striking him with leprosy so that he could no longer enter even the outer court of the temple.

In ancient Israel, the leper was regarded with horror and fear and aversion – even paranoia. As one commentator says, “Lepers were considered the living dead — ‘dead men walking’ — and the healing of a leper was thought to be the equivalent of a resurrection from the dead” (Bruner). It was often assumed (and often wrongly) that the leper was under the judgment and curse of God. Not only was the leper avoided, he was also spurned and despised. So just imagine if *you* were a leper!

**II. Verses 1-2** – When [Jesus] came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. And behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.”

“And behold” Unfortunately, the NIV has chosen not to translate the Greek “idou” (“behold”). But this word is not just a “filler” word in Greek! Matthew uses it to add vividness to the story and to emphasize that something unexpected and even astonishing is about to happen. “And *behold*, a leper came to him.” *Leper*. The very word oozes disgust. It’s repulsive and revolting. The leper is unclean, and that uncleanness is highly contagious – if not the leprosy itself! The disciples would have recoiled in fear and paranoia – and perhaps rightly so! Because this leper doesn’t stand at a distance (cf. Luke 17:12). Instead, “he came to Jesus.” William Hendriksen writes: “We can well imagine, therefore, that if the leper... should have attempted to approach the average Jew, the latter, unwilling to become ceremonially ‘unclean’ or to be seen near an individual upon whom the dreadful curse of the Almighty was thought to rest, would have rushed for shelter, meanwhile drawing the folds of his outer garment together in order not to become contaminated.” We have to understand that for the leper to come to Jesus was an incredibly bold and even humbling thing to do! For a leper to approach someone without leprosy was to *invite* further humiliation and a fresh reminder that to most people you *were* the plague.

This leper is not living in blissful denial of reality. He is not carelessly threatening others with uncleanness. Matthew tells us that he “knelt before [Jesus], saying, ‘Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.’” The leper does not come right out and ask Jesus to make him clean. Instead, he simply acknowledges that if Jesus *wants* to make him clean, He *can*. The leper knows better than to presume that anyone would *want* to heal him. He is the scum and dregs of society. And even according to God’s holy law, he is ritually unclean and *rightly* excluded from the community and from the temple of God. In addition to all of this, it may be assumed by many (and it *may* be true) that this man’s leprosy is a judgment for some sin. The leper has very good reasons for not assuming that anyone would want to heal him, and yet he is *desperate enough* to ask the question.

We see here as well that he is not so concerned about physical healing as he is about being accepted again in the community and probably also being restored to the privileges of full access to God’s presence. He asks to be cleansed, not to be healed. We could say that this leper gives all the initial evidence of true, biblical, saving faith. He humbly bows before Jesus and addresses Him as Lord. He may not fully understand who Jesus is, but one thing he does know and believe: If Jesus wills, He can make him clean. And by not asking for healing and cleansing outright, the leper acknowledges that he is not *entitled* to anything. In effect, he acknowledges his own unworthiness and sin. “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.”

**III. Verse 3** – And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I will; be clean.” And immediately his leprosy was cleansed.

“And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him.” Jesus touched many of those He healed, but clearly, this touch means more than most. Matthew emphasizes this shocking gesture by saying not just that Jesus touched him, but that Jesus *stretched out his hand* and touched him. He slows

down the action for us so that we can have time to suck in our breath as we await the moment of contact. You see, even if the leprosy is not contagious, the uncleanness *is* contagious.

- ✓ Leviticus 5:2-3, 6 (cf. 7:21) – If anyone touches an unclean thing... or if he touches human uncleanness, of whatever sort the uncleanness may be with which one becomes unclean, and it is hidden from him, when he comes to know it, and realizes his guilt... he shall bring to the LORD as his compensation for the sin that he has committed, a female from the flock, a lamb or a goat, for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin.

In the Old Testament, it was a sin against God's law to touch a leper. So did Jesus actually **break** the law by touching the leper?

“And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I will; be clean”. These four words are actually only two words in the Greek (Thelo, katharisthati). Simple and beautiful. Notice, too, that Jesus does not say, “God is willing; be clean.” He says, “I am willing, be clean.” The will of Jesus was all that was necessary for the cleansing of the leper. And so we see the rule and reign of God breaking into this world in the person of Jesus Christ. “I will; be clean. And immediately his leprosy was cleansed.” Did Jesus break the law by touching the leper? No! Jesus proved by His *touching* of the leper that He was the *fulfillment* of the law. Because when Jesus *touched* the leper, instead of becoming unclean Himself (as every other person would have), it was the leper who became clean! When God healed Naaman of his leprosy, he did not instruct Elisha to make any physical contact with the leper, for this would have been contrary to the Law and it would have rendered Elisha unclean. But *not* Jesus! He is the fulfillment of the Law. When Jesus touches the leper, *He* is not made unclean. No! The *leper* is cleansed.

**Verse 4** – And Jesus said to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a proof to them.”

In the Old Testament, if a leper was healed, this did not actually mean that he was cleansed. A leper was cleansed only after he presented himself to the priest, offered the required sacrifices, and submitted to the ritual requirements of eight days (Leviticus 14:1-20). But when Jesus healed the leper, He did not say, “be healed.” He said, “be *clean*.” **And when He said this, he completely bypassed any remaining necessity for the ceremonial cleansing at the temple. He was the fulfillment of the law.** In the same way that *Jesus* did not need to offer a sacrifice because of His contact with the leper, so also the former leper was no longer required to go to the priest in order to be clean. But Jesus knows the reality that if this man *doesn't* show himself to the priest and offer the required sacrifices for his ceremonial cleansing, he will never be accepted back into the community (Mark 1:44). And so He tells the already “cleansed leper” to make the long trip to Jerusalem and go through the ritual process of cleansing in order to provide the necessary evidence for his fellow countrymen (“for a proof to them”; cf. Acts 21:17-26), but *not* because he is still in need of any cleansing.

## **Conclusion**

So what does it mean for us when Jesus fulfills the Old Testament laws about the clean and the unclean? Well first of all, we need to understand that to be ritually or ceremonially unclean

(having touched the carcass of a dead animal, or having marital relations [Lev. 15:18], or even having leprosy) did not make someone morally or spiritually unclean. It did not *make* someone morally unclean, but it *was* a sign of moral uncleanness. It was a vivid, and very concrete reminder of the *constant* need of the people for forgiveness and a fresh, renewed, inner cleansing. One commentator says that “there is a sense in which leprosy is an archetypal fruit of the original fall of humanity” (Hagner). Leprosy was an evidence of the reality of death, which was a sign of the reality of sin, and so the leper was ceremonially unclean. His presence in the camp would cause the ritual defilement of the tabernacle which was symbolic of the holy presence of God. This is why *no* ceremonially unclean person could enter the courts of God’s house unless he first observed the necessary requirements for his cleansing.

- ✓ Leviticus 15:31 – Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, lest they die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst.

Ceremonial uncleanness symbolized, and was a constant reminder of moral and spiritual uncleanness.

- ✓ Leviticus 11:44-45 – I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with [by touching or eating] any swarming thing that crawls on the ground. For I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.

Now here especially is where we need to pay close attention. Peter quotes from these verses when he says: “As he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (1 Peter 1:15-16). But it was also Peter who was instructed by God to “kill and eat... all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air”. Peter had learned that “what God has made clean”, he was not to call “common” (Acts 10:9-16). Jesus alluded to Leviticus 11 when He said: “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). But it was also Jesus who said: “Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Mark 7:18-19) And then Mark goes on to say: “Thus [Jesus] declared all foods clean.” So Jesus (and Peter) both affirm the inner meaning and truth of Leviticus 11 and all the laws about the clean and the unclean (“You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy”). But at the same time they show that the “outer shell” of Leviticus 11 has been fulfilled in Christ and so the ceremonial laws about the clean and the unclean are no longer applicable to God’s people in the same way as before.

So how are the ceremonial laws about the clean and the unclean fulfilled in Christ? Well, it’s by faith in Christ that we are inwardly and spiritually cleansed and forgiven once and for all (contrary to the way things were in the Old Testament).

- ✓ John 13:8-10 – Peter said to [Jesus], “You shall never wash my feet.” Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.” Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” Jesus said to him, “The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean.”

Through faith in Christ, our sins have been washed away and we have been clothed in His perfect righteousness. So therefore the need for distinctions between the *ceremonially* clean and unclean has gone and vanished forever! Paul sums everything up very simply: “To the pure, all things are pure” (Titus 1:15a). The ceremonial laws assumed the moral *impurity* of God’s people. But when the final cleansing of God’s people has come in Christ, there is no longer any need for these ceremonial laws. They pointed to the need for Christ. Now that Christ has come, the pointers are no longer needed. Indeed, for the one who does not have faith in Christ, there is ultimately *no* food and no lot in life that can ever be “clean” because he doesn’t give thanks to God by faith (1 Timothy 4:4-5; Romans 14:23). Paul goes on to say in Titus, “To the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled” (Titus 1:15b; cf. Mark 7:18-23).

In Jesus’ day, many of the Jews had wrongly concluded from the Old Testament ceremonial law that they were under no obligation to love the leper. They had wrongly concluded that as those who were “clean”, they could spurn and abhor and recoil at the leper. But when Jesus stretched out his hand and touched the *leper*, saying, “be clean”, we see first of all that *Jesus loved the leper* – the very one who according to society was *the most unlovable*. Jesus came so that “*even lepers*” could be inwardly and spiritually cleansed. John Calvin wrote: “The stretching out of his hand was therefore an expression and token of infinite grace and goodness. What we [indifferently] read, and coldly pass by, cannot be duly weighed without great astonishment. The Son of God was so far from disdain to talk to a leper, that he even stretched out his hand to touch that uncleanness.”

We also see that when Jesus cleansed the leper (spiritually and physically), He rendered *obsolete* any requirement for ritual, ceremonial cleansing. And so He is eliminating all of the ceremonial distinctions that the Jews had wrongly used to excuse their smug “holier-than-thou” attitudes. To the pure, all things are pure. And Jesus makes even the *lepers* pure. Jesus came not only to show that the leper who believes is no less loved by God than anyone else, but to show that in the new age of the kingdom, the leper will be no less spiritually privileged than anyone else. In bypassing the requirement of ceremonial cleansing, Jesus showed that ceremonial uncleanness was never the *main* point, because even the ceremonially and outwardly clean can be morally and inwardly depraved. In fact, we could say that we were all spiritual *lepers*. We were, *all of us*, unclean, vile, putrefied wretches (“dead men walking”) excluded from the holy presence of God. To borrow the words of Isaiah, we had all become like one who is “unclean” (a leper), and all our righteous deeds were like the uncleanness of menstrual cloths. We all faded away like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind took us away (Isaiah 64:6). And it was while we were in this horrific and despicable and abhorrent and revolting state of uncleanness that Jesus stretched out His hand and actually... *touched* us. And He *said* to us, “be clean”. And immediately we were cleansed.

In light of these things, we should be nothing less than *violent* in our refusal to show partiality. We are under *obligation* to fervently and humbly love *especially* those that our society would deem the *most unlovable* – the rejects and the outcasts. In fact, I wonder if we could almost say that we are under obligation to go out and *look* for outcasts to love as our reasonable service of worship. Why? Because Jesus loved the *leper*, and Jesus loved *us*.

## Teaching our Children

- Q.** Why was it such a terrible thing to be a leper in Israel?
- A.** There was no cure for leprosy. This meant that a leper might be “unclean” for his whole life. (SEE Lev. 13:45-46; page 2) The leper couldn’t go to the tabernacle/temple to worship. Many people thought that God “hated” lepers, so they didn’t need to love them either. People despised lepers and were afraid of them.
- Q.** What is so surprising about the fact that a leper came to Jesus?
- A.** Usually, lepers stayed away from others. They knew that people didn’t want to be around them.
- Q.** When the leper said to Jesus, “If you will, you can make me clean”, what did he show about his heart?
- A.** The leper had *faith* that Jesus could heal him, but he didn’t think that he deserved it. He was *humble*.
- Q.** What did Jesus do after the leper had spoken (and while the leper was bowing before Him)?
- A.** Jesus stretched out His hand and touched the leper.
- Q.** If someone touched a leper, what usually happened?
- A.** The person who touched the leper became unclean himself (SEE Lev. 5:2-3, 6; page 4).
- Q.** But when Jesus touched the leper, what happened?
- A.** The leper became clean!
- Q.** Did the leper need to go to the temple for his cleansing?
- A.** No! He was already clean, not just on the outside, but on the inside.
- Q.** The “outside” uncleanness of the leprosy was a picture and a reminder of what?
- A.** The uncleanness of leprosy was a picture and a reminder of the “inside” uncleanness of sin.
- Q.** But what does Jesus do for all who believe in Him? What happens “inside”?
- A.** Jesus makes us completely clean once and for all! (SEE John 13:8-10; page 5)
- Q.** Once we have been washed clean on the inside by faith in Jesus, is there any need for the rules about “outside” cleanness and uncleanness? Is the leper who believes in Jesus still “unclean”?
- A.** No and No! The old rules no longer apply. The leper who believes in Jesus is no longer unclean.
- Q.** Was it possible that someone who was “clean” on the outside (no leprosy), could be filthy on the inside?
- A.** Yes. When Jesus got rid of the outside laws , He showed that the inside was always what mattered most.
- Q.** When Jesus stretched out His hand and *touched* the leper, what did He show us?
- A.** Jesus showed that He *loved* the leper and the outcast. He loved the ones that other people said were unlovable.
- Q.** How could we say that we were also lepers?
- A.** We were lepers on the inside. We were unclean, vile, and repulsive in our sins.
- Q.** Is Jesus willing to “touch” people who are lepers on the inside and make them clean?
- A.** YES! So let’s come to Jesus like the leper did – humbly and by faith.
- Q.** If Jesus loved the leper, and if Jesus can love us, who should we be faithful to love?
- A.** We should even *look* for ways to love the outcasts – the people the world says are “unlovable”.