
The Authority of Jesus over Disease

Matthew 8:1-17

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We have lived through a season where we have about as much talk about disease as anybody wants to have in a lifetime.

The Bible talks a lot about diseases. They are a product of the curse. Many are used as metaphors. The most common disease used as a metaphor in the Bible is leprosy. Most of you only know this disease from the Bible. It is not common in our country.

Jesus came with both words and deeds. He spoke. He did miracles. Both were the outflow of who He is as God and as the Messiah. His miracles usually ones of healing. We must remember that their day was very different from ours. We are used to fairly advanced medicines. Most illnesses and diseases that we have hospital stays and go home from would have killed the people of Jesus' day. We live in fear sometimes of COVID. In Jesus' day, most any serious disease caused enormous suffering and almost certain, early death.

It is in this context that Matthew writes. He is showing us the power and authority of King Jesus. But the question is still central, "Are you true follower of this King?" The narrative now shifts to begin to indict the casual, carnal fake follower.

The Crowd of Seekers (v.1)

We move from the mountain setting, down the road toward what has become Jesus' hometown. This verse and the last verse are parallel with each other, both describing great crowds.

¹ When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him.

The Setting

Jesus has been on the side of the mountain. He had His disciples near. He had a large crowd seated and standing around Him going down the hillside. He has been teaching what it means to be a true follower, a true disciple. The new King has been giving what the Kingdom of heaven will be like. His teaching has been eloquent, pithy, powerful and controversial.

The Response

The great crowd who heard his teaching and were astonished. They don't just leave and go home. A large number of them have followed Jesus as well as being joined by others, seeking the miracles Jesus is doing. In this word, "Followed...", Matthew is doing a play on words. Are they true followers? Are they true disciples?

True disciples are not like the crowds who follow Jesus in the moment.

An Outcast Sinner (v.2-4)

As Jesus, the disciples are moving along the road, they are met with a difficult situation.

² And behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." ³ And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. 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."

The Terrible Condition (v.2)

A leper came out to meet him. Leprosy is a loathsome, dangerous, debilitating disease. It was thought of as being very contagious. Leprosy sentenced sufferers to a living death. It cut them off from their community and made them live alone. The Mosaic Law commanded, 'He remains unclean. He must live alone; he must live outside the camp.' The disease gradually spread. The ability to feel through the dying nerves stopped. Gradually, more and more parts of the body became open sores, disfigured, or fell off. The certain outcome was death. Until COVID, never was there a disease that so separated victims from their fellows. This condition vividly illustrated the dreadful spiritual condition of all people. Sin is a terrible disease that separates us from one another and from God; it spreads, and it is fatal. No wonder the man with leprosy had to cry, 'Unclean!' to warn bystanders to keep their distance. This disease alone among all others is said in the Mosaic Law to be 'cleansed'. Sadly, leprosy sufferers did not get healed. At that time, there was no known cure.

On the mission station I grew up on in the Congo, we had a leper colony. We had a missionary nurse from England who cared for them. A doctor came from the medical station 100 miles away once a month to deal with the really bad cases and to cleanse wounds. The lepers lived in their huts alone, separated from the village and their family. The disease is a terrible one. The putrefaction smelled terrible. They often had open sores along with the decay of the flesh and dying skin. But they were cared for as best as Miss Anne could. For me, to read our text this morning is full of vivid memories. I have pictures...

So, leprosy was not only a most feared disease, it occupied a special place in the Mosaic Law. There were special provisions for leprosy. So the mention of the leper in this story invokes, for the well instructed Jew, many covenantal and legal implications. This man was unclean. This man was to be socially distanced. In public, this man was to be garbed in all white from head to toe to signify his contagion. We may not know leprosy but this sounds suspiciously like what we have endured in this pandemic season.

The Humble Faith (v.2)

This outcast leper comes to Jesus. This is an act of courageous faith. He had to come, shouting "Unclean..." He had to see the crowd part in fear and loathing. Maybe some had compassionate eyes. This desperate, dying man sought out the only one who could make him whole.

This humbled leper bowed to Jesus. He knelt before Jesus. He probably was the socially acceptable distance away. There was a wide circle of open space. Everyone could see. Everyone could hear. There was no coming quietly.

This meek leper called Him "Lord". He acknowledged Jesus' Kingship. The leper himself may have only been using a title of respect, though if so, we would have expected, "Rabbi." But Matthew writing these words loads the word with all that we would understand. Jesus is Lord. He is the Master. He is the King. The leper, bowed and broken, exposed and dying, calls the man, this teacher, Lord.

This hopeful leper acknowledged Jesus' power. There is no question in this sentence of the ability of Jesus to heal him. He has no doubt that healing can come through the command, the words, of the King. He is bowing in submission, calling Jesus Lord, acknowledging *that the disease must obey Jesus' healing commands*.

This submissive leper recognized Jesus' sovereignty. "If you will..." He has no binding claim on the mercy of Jesus. He knows that Jesus is free to heal and free not to. This is not so much found then and almost non-existent today. Who comes to Jesus bowed, hopeful, assured of Jesus saving power but leaning by faith on the free, sovereign mercy of God?

The Healing Power (v.3)

And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean."

Jesus' steps toward the man. The crowd gasps. The disciples go rigid. Jesus reaches out and with a risky, loving touch. He touches the man. When was the last time he was touched? When was the last time a human hugged him? When was the last time compassionate eyes pushed his hood open to gaze into his face? Jesus touched him. Imagine... Jesus touched him.

Jesus' spoke powerful, healing words. There were healing words to the man's soul, "I will..." What hope sprang up. What joy flooded his soul. There were healing words to the man's body. Two simple words. One simple command. Jesus' spoke with authority to the man's disease, and he was cleansed.

Jesus' command had an immediate, transforming result. It is evident that the disease was flushed from the body. The body was healed and restored. Jesus' healings were usually complete. They were remarkable in that regard. What a sweet moment and an astounding scene.

The Surprising Command (v.4)

Verse four is a bit hard to grasp. How can he possibly say nothing to anyone? What would you do? The evidence is clear. But he is to quietly go and do

something first. If he is a submissive man, a loyal Jew, a true follower of Jesus, he will obey Jesus' command.

Go, do the ceremonial acts the former leper is required to do. Present himself to the priests as one who was healed. Bring the required offering. Be certified as not having the disease. Be a witness first to the priests who may or may not believe. After? Well, I think then he is free to run home to family and friends...

Jesus both requires the keeping of the Law and surpasses the Law even as He is fulfilling it. Christ breaks the Law twice here in touching the leper. The leper breaks the law in approaching Jesus. In fact, the Law cannot heal the leper. It has simply condemned him and cursed him. It also simply acknowledges that he has been healed and certifies him as no longer unclean. Could it be that, in the history of leprosy under the Mosaic Law, that this provision to show the priests "no leprosy" had ever been invoked or exercised? It is likely. (Green)

True disciples come to Jesus in faith confident in His power to save and hoping in His mercy.

A Gentile Sinner (v.5-13)

They are still on the road headed into Capernaum and to Peter's home. We are now at the center of the story. Matthew highlights his King and kingdom for the Gentiles theme.

⁵ When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him, ⁶ "Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly." ⁷ And he said to him, "I will come and heal him." ⁸ But the centurion replied, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹ For I too 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 servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." ¹⁰ When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. ¹¹ I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, ¹² while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." ¹³ And to the centurion Jesus said, "Go; let it be done for you as you have believed." And the servant was healed at that very moment.

The Earnest Request (v.5-7)

Capernaum had become Jesus' hometown. It was on the northern edge of the Sea of Galilee. It may have been chosen because of its strategic access to main roads throughout Israel and was the home of Peter and others of Jesus' friends.

Also living in this town was by a high ranking, Roman soldier, a centurion. He comes out to meet Jesus on the edge of town. Jesus has not been approached by two people the Jews would have been very put off by. The centurion was an officer in the Roman army in charge of a hundred men from the garrison at

Capernaum. Under normal circumstances, the garrison commanders would be respected but hated by the Jewish population. Now he approaches Jesus.

What an amazing man this is. We see the quality and character of the man. We should be surprised by this man...

He surprises us with his approach to Jesus. He is under the command of the Roman Emperor. Yet he addresses Jesus as Lord. Matthew means for us to see both the leper and Gentile as acknowledging the kingship and authority of Jesus.

He surprises us with his appeal to Jesus. He comes as a supplicant, not as a commander in charge. He asks, not demands. He appeals, not exercises his authority.

He surprises us with his care for a young slave. The word here is actually one to denote a young, male slave and more often was one born in the household. The Romans generally viewed slaves as little more than animals, talking beasts. Roman writers exhorted masters not to develop friendships with them and not to treat them as true humans. Yet this man has a real care for this slave in his household.

The response of Jesus is ever one of grace, care and risk-taking. Jesus is willing to cross a cultural barrier. He is willing "to come and heal him." Jesus responds by a willingness to go the Gentiles house. This was a cultural no-no. Jews just did not enter a Gentile home and certainly not the home of a high-ranking Romans soldier. It is hard for us to grasp the impact on the disciples and the crowd. It raises the question, "Will they follow him there? Will the disciples enter the Gentile's house?"

Once again, Matthew uses the "I am willing..." language. Jesus is willing to go. He chooses to go and He has the power to accomplish what He is being asked to do. He "will heal" the boy.

~ A story like this would be an enormous encouragement to those Gentile believers (many of them, no doubt, in Matthew's own congregation) who had never seen Jesus, but who had trusted his word and felt his power in their lives. And the attitude of this pagan centurion was a great example of the proper approach to Jesus. For it spoke of simple, profound faith. That was what brought Abraham to experience the power of God. Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. ~ (Green, p 115).

The Admirable Faith (v.8-9)

What an admirable faith is on display here.

The Centurion's faith is exhibited in his humility. He is not worthy to have Jesus enter his home. This is exactly the reverse of what would be expected. But he, in all his Roman place, power and prestige acknowledges the high place Jesus holds. Given that they are headed to Peter's home, I wonder how such a

statement landed on that disciple's heart. The Centurion shows us the way of humility. Even in our need, we acknowledge the Lordship and great worth and power of Jesus, the true King.

The Centurion's faith is stated in his statement. It is an astonishing thing. He affirms that Jesus' does not have to touch or even be in near proximity. He is recognizing this is no magic, no conjuring trick. He is affirming the very recreative word of the Creator. Jesus, from right where He is can simply speak the word and the slave will be healed.

With me, admire this man's deep insight and profound understanding of Who Jesus is and what His power means. He understands what it means to under authority and to be one in authority. His illustration is not about himself as being under Jesus' authority. He has already acknowledged that. He affirms that the disease, that the very result of the curse, is subject to the power of Jesus' command. Jesus' word will be obeyed by nature. Jesus' word can reverse the curse. Jesus' word has cleansed the leper and will heal the body. My brothers and sisters, the new creation is here because the King of creation is here. Jesus speaks, and all begins to be new.

The Amazing Response (v.10-12)

Jesus is not often amazed. I refuse to be sucked into a debate about why Jesus would be amazed. Either Jesus' amazement is real, or this is a deceit on Jesus' part and a lie on Matthew's part.

What an indictment of every Jew standing around with their mouths hanging open. Jesus says this to them. I imagine loud enough for all to hear. The faith of this Gentile is greater than any Jesus has found in any Jew in Israel. Why? Because the Jews are accepting based on what He can do for them. This Centurion, like the leper, has asked Jesus to do for them because Who He is. He is Lord, sovereign, King with all power to choose to help or not, He has the power just to speak and all will obey. But this is not an outstanding Jewish scholar nor is it even a budding disciple in the early days of ministry. This is... a Gentile. Praise God... Praise God...

"¹¹I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven..." The kingdom of heaven is about Israel. It is not defined by the Mosaic Law. It is not only or even primarily for the Jews. What the Jews thought they had exclusive rights to, Jesus is throwing open the door of welcome to Gentiles as well. We, most of us included, are given an equal place at the table God prepared for all of His people from all of the people groups.

But, "...the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Not every Jew will be in the kingdom of heaven. In fact, many will not. The text's irony is that the Jews felt entitled to the ultimate eschatological blessings found in the covenants,

especially with Abraham. But it is the Gentiles who have access to those blessings, while the "entitled" have covenantal cursing rained on them.

As one writer eloquently says, "The messianic heir to David's throne, to whom all authority will eventually be given, is the Suffering Servant ushering in a new creation that not only includes the Gentiles, but becomes an **indictment against unbelieving Israel**. We should not gloss over, dismiss, or ignore the judgment in this passage. While the "sons of the kingdom", the Jews, have a sense of entitlement to the covenantal blessings, Gentiles have full access to the lavish festal blessings of the new covenant." (Green, p.116)

Stott writes, "This was staggering. The Jews looked forward to the messianic banquet as their private preserve, yet here is Jesus saying that the banquet would see many Jews excluded and many of the despised pagans welcomed. The Jews had to learn the lesson, which their ancestors knew and Gentiles were beginning to discover, along with the centurion in the days of Jesus, that faith is the key to entry into the messianic banquet, and faith is the key to experiencing the power of Jesus." (Stott, p. 116)

Matthew's readers are to see themselves in the centurion, who is the One New Man, the Gentile who enjoys the new covenantal blessings of the kingdom, the recipient of the promises made to the patriarchs in Genesis 12-17. Notice how Matthew picks that language up and points us back to that text with the east and west language... all nations... over the earth. This Centurion is set over against the unbelieving Jews, those who received the promises, but rejected the Promised One, the One who brings those promises to their fulfillment.

True disciples follow Jesus in humility, recognizing His authority over their lives.

A Family Sinner (v.14-15)

Our story moves on. In a short, simple picture, we are shown the need of family member. Once again, Matthew is highlighting our need of the Lord.

¹⁴ And when Jesus entered Peter's house, he saw his mother-in-law lying sick with a fever. ¹⁵ He touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she rose and began to serve him.

The Compassionate Look

This story is very brief so I will be too. Jesus sees her plight. In all the others, the sick have taken the initiative to approach Jesus. Here, Jesus sees her, has compassion on her and takes the initiative to move toward her need.

The Healing Touch

In the other healings, Jesus has always spoken. It was His words that commanded the disease with healing effect. With just a touch, Jesus heals her. He touches her hand. The fever immediately leaves.

The Serving Response

Having been healed, she rises to serve. Be assured that Matthew is saying something to his readers, including us. What Jesus has done for us should instill in our own hearts a deep desire to serve Him.

True disciples will serve the Lord in response to His grace to them.

The Crowd of the Sick (v.16-17)

This day in Jesus' life has been a long one. What we have taken to cover over many weeks in our preaching actually appears to cover one day. It began with a sermon on the hillside. Now it comes to a conclusion in the evening light of the setting sun.

¹⁶ That evening they brought to him many who were oppressed by demons, and he cast out the spirits with a word and healed all who were sick. ¹⁷ This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "He took our illnesses and bore our diseases."

The Powerful Words

We have now the introduction of Jesus' power to cast out demons by the power of His word. Demon oppression and possession was very common in Jesus' day. By His authority as King, he had power over the spirit world and demons. They must comply to Jesus' commanding words. This theme of Jesus' powerful words and deeds over demons and disease will occupy the next few stories in the book of Matthew.

The Prophetic Scriptures

Matthew cites Isaiah 53:3-6 at the conclusion of this text and that day.

³ He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

⁴ Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.

⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.

⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Matthew states, "This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "He took our illnesses and bore our diseases." We have said that Jesus is fulfilling every text that Matthew says He does. What Jesus did in His ministry when He healed the sick fulfilled what Isaiah said. He bore our sins and iniquities. He carried our griefs and sorrows in His own experience. His death on the cross broke

the power of the old creation and its fallen curse in which demons rage and disease rules. Just because this is being misused by the Charismatics does not mean that we give it up. When we pray for God to heal someone, there is Biblical grounds for that prayer. It is not in the magic of healing powers by spiritual incantations. Supernatural healing is the inbreaking of the power of the new creation in the body of a believer. Sometimes and possibly even rarely, it happens now in this life. Ultimately, we will all be healed of all our diseases in the new creation when we receive our glorified bodies. This is a part of the death on the cross where the old creation begins its slow dying until the end. This is a part of the resurrection where the new creation comes to culmination in the final day and the New Day arrives in its full shining.

Reflect and Respond

Behold that great power of our Lord and King. Jesus heals the leper with his word. Christ touches the leper, but it is his Word that makes him clean. His Word heals the Centurion's servant. His touch alone heals Peter's mother-in-law.

How is Matthew continuing to identify the true followers of Jesus?

- True disciples are not like the crowds who follow Jesus in the moment.
- True disciples come to Jesus in faith confident in His power to save and hoping in His mercy.
- True disciples follow Jesus in humility, recognizing His authority over their lives.
- True disciples will serve the Lord in response to His grace to them.

Are you truly following Jesus?