

Joel Belz, the editor a Christian magazine that I subscribe to... once wrote:

*The sentence still jumps out at me from the middle of an editorial in The Wall Street Journal. It's been half a decade since I read it, but it was one of those electric expressions that you can't forget: "People want to be lightly governed," the writer said, "by strong governments."*

*That's what you've wanted since you were a small child. You wanted your dad to be big and strong and able to do anything you could think of—except that, when he dealt with you, it had to be with gentleness and tenderness. You wanted a policeman on the corner tough enough to handle any neighborhood bully, but who would also hoist you to his shoulders and help you find your parents when you got lost in the crowd.*

*Lots of muscle; lots of restraint. There's an innate yearning in almost all of us for that rare combination. When evil people rise up, we want a government with the clout to back them down. Yet we never want that clout turned on us.*

*In the final analysis, people want to be lightly governed by strong governments because..."*

Now I am purposely going to pause from Joel Belz' words... for just a moment. ... I like this author and I have benefited a lot from his writings. Joel Belz is an excellent Christian journalist... But here... he displays a lack of Biblical understanding... and how it contradicts the passage we will be studying this morning. ... I simply cannot agree with the conclusion that he drew from the truth he so eloquently expressed in the fore-mentioned paragraphs. In fact... I think the deduction that he makes... not only is untrue... but that it represents one of the horrible misconceptions that damages many Christians today.

So... here is Joel's conclusion.

*In the final analysis, people want to be lightly governed by strong governments because that's how God governs. The omnipotent ruler of the universe is also the one who invites us tenderly: "Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."*

Yes, it is true that God invites us tenderly to Himself... but we are about to see in today's passage that God does not govern us lightly. ... (The are completely different matters; they are not the same . . . . But oh! How we want this to be the way that God governs! "*Stay out of my life... God... until I see a need for You! Lightly govern me... like a strong policeman*" We don't want a Lord... Who we must follow. We want a powerful being Who is available to us... but Who pretty much leaves us alone (until we think that we need Him.) ... .. We are going to be confronted this morning with Joel Belz' fantasy... which so many people in the church... also accept as right.

Last week we concluded... in our study through Matthew's gospel... Jesus' famed "Sermon on the Mount." The crowds were astonished at His teaching... why...? Because He was teaching them... like One Who had authority... and not like their typical religious teacher.

Today we come to chapter 8... and we see that same authority. Before we saw Jesus' authority in His teaching. Now we will see His authority in His power over sickness... nature... demons... and death. We are being shown our King's authority.

Here is the main point of what we will be seeing today: Jesus possesses absolute authority in the world and warrants absolute allegiance.

And here is what we will study:

1. Jesus has authority over disease.
  1. He cleanses the physically unclean.
  2. He heals the ethnically outcast.
  3. He restores the culturally marginalized.
2. Jesus has authority over disciples.
  1. Jesus is worthy of unconditional trust.
  2. Jesus is worthy of undivided affection.

Chapters 8 and 9 of Matthew's Gospel actually stand as one unit. We will only have time to cover some of chapter 8 this morning... so let's call this "The Kings Authority (part 1, chapter 8).

First of all... why did Jesus perform miracles... ? ... Certainly He wanted to meet human needs. ... God is concerned about the temporal well-being of His creatures as well as their eternal happiness. ... But there was another reason for His performing these signs.

Matthew primarily wrote to a Jewish audience... and Jesus' miracles were additional credentials to prove His claim that He was the Messiah of Israel. "The Jews require a sign."

### **1 Corinthians 1:22 (ESV)**

*For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom,*

Along with His compassion and credentials, there was a third reason for miracles: The miracles were judgments – Israel was given all the proof that it needed about Jesus... with each miracle. ... So when they would eventually reject Him... God's response is completely justified. ... Like the

judgments (the 10 plagues) against Egypt in Moses' day... the miracles of the Lord acted as judgments against Israel. ... Israel and its leaders were being forced to face the facts and make a decision... about Who Jesus is.

One thing is certain: Jesus did not perform miracles to "get a crowd." He usually avoided the crowd. Time after time... Jesus instructed those whom He had healed not to talk too much. We will see Him do it in today's passage.

### **Matthew 8:1-4**

Jesus has authority over disease.

Leprosy was one of the most horrible physical diseases to infest any community. From the earliest days of the Mosaic law, guidelines were established by which the community could protect itself from the spread of the disease. Because of its characteristics—open sores and rotting flesh—the disease became a metaphor for humanity's spiritual condition. The guidelines concerning lepers (found in Leviticus chapters 13 and 14) continued to be stringently enforced in Jesus' day.

They had to remove themselves from society and could not come within a certain distance from anyone who didn't have it. If someone began to approach them, or if they began to approach someone else, they were to yell out, "*Unclean, unclean!*"— even to touch a leper would be to make yourself unclean.

The disease began in a small way but spread unavoidably, bringing rottenness to everything it touched. Victims were outcasts, the horribly condemned of the world. One such man now came to Jesus.

What could Jesus do for a leper? The man was held in the grip of a terrible, loathsome disease that alienated him from all men, forced him outside the camp, and took away all hope of ever being able to draw near to the altars of God. The scribes and Pharisees had nothing to offer him. The priests and Levites could do nothing for him. Neither could the rabbis and rulers.

But consider what the leprous man knew. ... "*Jesus is able to heal...*" The leper didn't question Jesus' ability or power. He knew that Jesus was *able* to heal. ... The issue becomes what the leper doesn't know: Is Jesus willing to heal? (Will Jesus *choose* to heal him?)

We must understand the distinction between Jesus' sovereign power and Jesus' sovereign will. ... Both of them are extremely important... especially when it comes to praying for healing in our lives. ... For example... if you have cancer or any other sickness or disease... you shouldn't doubt Jesus' sovereign power. ... He is absolutely able to heal you... no question about it. ... He has authority over disease.

The question then becomes... "Is Jesus *willing* to heal?" In other words... is it His will for you to be made well? ... That's a different question altogether. ... In this instance in Matthew 8... the answer is "yes"... Jesus is willing. ... However... in the case of Paul's struggle with "a thorn in the flesh" (2Cor 12:7)... the Lord was not willing to heal in that instance. ...He

told Paul (according to 2 Cor 12:9) the reason He refused to heal him... was so that Paul would know the strength and sufficiency of Christ.

In such situations... we too have to trust both the power and the wisdom of God. The One who is *able* to heal also knows *when* to heal. ... The Lord knows what will bring Him the most glory and what will bring us the most good.

### **Matthew 8:3**

Have you stopped to realize the beauty of Jesus' response? To touch a leper... is to take his uncleanness upon yourself. According to the law... Jesus was then defiled (unclean.)

Did Jesus have to touch the man... in order to heal him...? No. That is made clear in the next set of verses we are about to read. In the healing that follows this one... Jesus just spoke a word. ... But here... He touches... in order to heal. Jesus could have spoken a word... and been just as effective. ... The leprosy would be gone. But Jesus touched him. Don't miss the point: Jesus identifies with the uncleanness of the leper in order to make the leper clean.

Let's try to envision what must have been going on in the psyche of this man. ... I do not know this man's background, but I imagine that one day he noticed a breaking out on his hand. Perhaps he had been out plowing, came in, showed his wife, and she put some ointment on it. The next morning it was just as red as it could be, and he went out and plowed again. This went on for about a week, and his wife started getting uneasy. She suggested he visit the priest. He went to the priest who isolated him for

fourteen days. At the end of this period of time the disease had spread. The priest told him he had leprosy.

The man asked the priest if he could go and tell his wife and children and say good-bye. The priest said, "*I'm sorry, you cannot tell them good-bye. You cannot put your arm around your wife again or hold your children in your arms anymore. When anyone comes near you, you must cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.'*"

He saw his children grow up from a distance. They would leave food in a certain place, and he would come and get it after they withdrew. He could not touch them. In fact, he had been able to touch no one, and no one had been able to touch him. Then one day he came to Jesus and said, "*Lord, if You will, You can make me clean.*"

And what did the Lord Jesus do? ... He touched him. ... I'm sure that the touch of Jesus was one of the most wonderful things that ever had happened to the man. It not only cleansed his leprosy, but it brought him back into the family of mankind and into the family of God. "Immediately his leprosy was cleansed."

In this brief scene we get a foretaste of what Jesus will do... ultimately on the cross... with the uncleanness in the lives of every one of us. ... All of us stand before Christ dirty and stained with the shame of sin. ... We have things in our lives... either past or present... that make us feel untouchable — sins we've struggled with... or sins others have committed against us. ... In and of ourselves... we are unclean before a holy God. ... But on the cross... Jesus identifies with our uncleanness... taking the shame and filth

of our sin upon Himself... in order to make us clean. Praise God for such a compassionate Savior!

### Matthew 8:4

This seems like a strange restriction. Yet in at least five of the thirty some miracles of Christ, He gave a command to be silent about the miracle. This has puzzled many Bible students for it seems so contrary to the spirit of the great commission. But there were some good reasons for this restriction here.

We read in verse one that great crowds were starting to follow Jesus. This was a threat to the Romans... who were very edgy about anything that could look like an insurrection against their rule. ... This restriction would have provided protection. This protection was for Christ. It was to protect His ministry from undo attention that would hinder the fulfilling of it.

In the Gospel of Mark we read about this same healing. In Mark's account... we learn that the man did not obey Christ - he told everybody what the Lord had done! ... (Christ tells us to **tell** everybody, *and we keep quiet!*) ... But according to Mark 1:45... he did not comply with Christ's command... and it had an undesirable effect. The disobedience of the healed leper caused such a stir that Christ could no longer minister in that city. Christ had a plan to fulfill... undo attention could hinder the fulfilling of the plan... so Jesus said... "Go straight to the Priest (as the Law required for such healing) and tell no one..."

... ..



We now read about a different kind of outcast — not a leper... but a Gentile... and the worst kind! - a Roman centurion... (and enforcer of the Gentile rule that was currently oppressing them.) As far as the majority of Jews were concerned... he might just as well have been a leper.

It would seem that everything about this man would prevent him from coming to Jesus. He was a professional soldier, and Jesus was a Man of peace. He was a Gentile, and Jesus was a Jew. But this soldier had one thing working for him: he was a man of great faith. This centurion understood that Jesus, like himself, was under authority. All Christ had to do was speak the word and the disease would obey Him the way a soldier obeyed his officer.

### **Matthew 8:5-13**

The centurion simply stated his request to Jesus. In a society in which a servant's life was considered of little value, we are a bit surprised that the centurion would even bother to intercede on behalf of his servant. The fact that he did so gives us some insight into his character. He revealed a heart that was sensitive to the plight of this servant, who was suffering terribly from some sickness that cannot be determined from the text. Although the centurion did not make any demands on Jesus, Jesus immediately offered to come and heal the servant.

### **Matthew 8:7**

This showed Jesus' willingness to cross an important cultural boundary. It seems that proper Jewish people did not enter Gentile homes. This was a strict taboo... and the Roman army officer obviously knew it.

The thought of Christ coming to his house was too much for the centurion, even though he was a man of rank in the Roman army. His esteem for Christ was so great that the centurion felt unworthy of Christ's presence. This was a most commendable attitude indeed.

The centurion believed the word of Christ was so powerful... it could heal the servant without Christ's presence. To support this plea the centurion illustrated his own authority—his word could order soldiers under him to do as he said.

### **Matthew 8:9**

This soldier... who held the power of life and death over those who were under his command... by simply speaking a word... recognized an authority in Jesus... that was similar... but even greater! He looked at Jesus and said, "We both have a power... that can make things happen with just a simple word." ... He recognized that Jesus had that kind of authority over physical illness and disease. ... The centurion only had authority over other men.

We have no evidence before this in Matthew... that Jesus had ever performed a miracle (from a distance... by just speaking a word.) ... So this man... this Gentile centurion... wasn't leaning on prior information. ... He simply and humbly had absolute trust in the authority of Jesus... in a way that no one else among the Jewish people... (including the disciples)... had displayed up to this point.

That is why we see in verses 11-12 that Jesus goes on to talk about how the "sons of the kingdom"— a reference to Jewish men and women who

assumed they had a biological right to be part of the people of God — would be cast out of God's presence into hell for eternity because of their lack of faith.

Jesus' words about Gentiles being a part of the kingdom would have been shocking to Matthew's Jewish readers, essentially saying to them that their Jewishness guaranteed them nothing in eternity. The only thing that mattered was whether or not they had faith. This same truth applies to every human being alive today. Your eternal destiny is dependent on humble trust in the authority of Jesus to save you from your sins and to rule over you as the Lord of your life. And all who trust in Him like this, regardless of ethnicity or background, will be welcomed by the King at His table forever.

This interchange between Jesus and the Roman centurion is something that we need to remember. It is invaluable to our daily walk with our Lord. We receive his grace and mercy when we likewise acknowledge that we are the unworthy recipients of his blessings, begging him to speak only the word that would make us whole.

### **Matthew 8:14-17**

After healing a leper and a Gentile... Jesus now heals a... (gasp!) woman... Peter's mother-in-law. ... Women did not very often play an important role in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish society. ... So... again... in His extravagant grace... Jesus radically defies the traditions and practices of His day. ... ..

Why did Matthew select—from the many stories about healing evidently available to him—these three stories about a leper, a Gentile, and a woman? It is very likely that the selection was made to show Jesus as a friend to those who were powerless in Jewish society.

The leper was ceremonially impure and would thus have been an outcast from all Jewish social and religious functions. The Roman officer would have had military power over the Jews, ... whose land his empire occupied... but due to his ethnicity... he would have had no religious clout whatsoever in Judaism. ... Peter's mother-in-law would have no ceremonial or ethnic handicaps... but her sex would preclude her from many privileges available only to males.

Nevertheless... it is these people... who for various reasons were at the margins of society... whose healing stories Matthew tells. ... Matthew does not feature stories about the social elite of his day but stories about those who lacked status.

The change in Peter's mother-in-law... led to miracles in the lives of many people. ... "*Many*" were brought to Christ to be exorcised or healed. Great was the proof that Christ had the power of God in Him. It was not a few miracles here and there, but a multitude. Unbelief has no excuse. The evidence is overwhelming. Verse 16 says that He "*Healed all that were sick.*" No disease or demon was too much for Christ. He had power over all of them.

### **Matthew 8:17**

Once again Matthew emphasizes that the ministry of Christ fulfilled Old Testament prophecies. This particular incident was a fulfillment of Isaiah 53:4. Matthew wrote with the Jew especially in mind, and the reference to the fulfillment of prophecy would especially relate to them.

But let's be clear about something... The Bible nowhere says that because you have been saved from your sins, you will not get cancer or some other illness. Instead, the Bible says that Jesus has overcome the root of all suffering—sin itself—and that He has paid the price to conquer sin so that you don't need to be afraid of cancer or tumors or Alzheimer's or anything else. Regardless of what happens in this decaying world, there is a day coming when death, mourning, crying, and pain will be no more (Rev 21:4). As we wait for that day, we don't run *from* suffering; we rejoice *in* suffering. Paul, the same apostle who wrote so much about the reality of suffering in the lives of Christians, also wrote about the joy that we can experience in the midst of suffering.

### **Matthew 8:18**

It will be a shock to many church promotional ideas that a crowd does not always help the cause of Christ. Christ left the multitudes because His popularity was not for the message but for the miracles, which was to them very entertaining—genuine healing miracles and the exorcising of demons was indeed special. They were not interested in spiritual and eternal matters but chiefly in physical and temporal matters.

We see so much of this in American Evangelical churches today. Church growth principles are effective at bringing crowds of people. A lot of those

who come want to see a good show. But are these churches producing strong and dedicated followers of Christ...?

### **Matthew 8:19-20**

This man came to Jesus in seeming over-eagerness, saying, "Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go!" ... Two things stand out about what this man says to Jesus. **1.** It was full of pride. This was not a request to be a disciple but a promise of a great performance. It sounded like a wonderful promise, but the obvious pride in it comes out in the informing of the man of his ignorance about the cost. **2.** It was full of presumption. The scribe presumed he knew the cost and could pay it. But he did not know the cost. And Jesus showed him what He did not know... but presumed was true. In essence... Jesus informs him how ignorant he was. ... He tells the man that following Him will not even guarantee a roof over the man's head. In other words, "*If you follow Me, I'm all you've got.*" This potential disciple needs to learn that **Jesus is worthy of unconditional trust**, even if it means giving up earthly security and comforts. We too must know this if we want to follow Jesus.

The scribe is like many who volunteer for Christian service. They get emotionally excited and are ignorant of the cost. ... Following Christ may mean losing everything in this world. ... It isn't at all the way false preachers like Joel Olsteen and the other prosperity gospel preachers declare. They all make Jesus a means to an end. You come to Jesus to get health, wealth, or anything else you want; just fill in the blank.

But the whole testimony of Scripture is that you don't come to Jesus to get stuff. ... You come to Jesus to get Jesus. ... In fact... you might even lose everything in this world. But Jesus is enough!

### **Matthew 8:21**

In the previous example... the potential disciple needed to learn that Jesus is worthy of **unconditional trust**. ... In this example... the potential disciple needed to learn that Jesus is worthy of **undivided affection**.

This man said to Jesus, "First let me go bury my father." Commentators disagree over what is actually being requested here. Does the man just want to give his father (who is deceased) a proper funeral... or does he want to wait until his father... (who is alive)... dies... and he gets his inheritance... before he agrees to follow Jesus?

Regardless of the precise meaning of the request... Jesus' response is direct: "Follow Me, and let the dead bury their own dead." More important than honoring your father or receiving an inheritance is following Jesus. The Savior wants undivided affection.

Recognizing Jesus' sovereign authority in the world should lead to giving Jesus total allegiance in your life. ... His authority is not to be toyed or trifled with.

J. C. Ryle once said, "Nothing, in fact, has done more harm to Christianity than the practice of filling the ranks of Christ's army with every volunteer who is willing to make a little profession"

I might... perhaps... re-word that a little... in light of our opening illustration today. *“Nothing has done more harm to Christianity than the practice of filling the ranks with those who want to be lightly governed by a powerful God...”*

Remember... Jesus is not begging for followers in Matthew 8... He's actually turning them away because He warrants unconditional trust and undivided affection from those who follow Him. ... That was true then... and I believe that it is true today.

Our King has the power to dispel leprosy... demons... and all forms of illness. But He is not recruiting followers who want to be lightly governed. He turned these two “would-be followers” away... because that is what they wanted. The question is, "Have you been trying to follow Him with this wrong approach?"

In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, C. S. Lewis described approaching God in a similar way. At a young age, when C. S. Lewis learned that his mother was dying, he remembered that he had been taught that prayers offered in faith would be granted. When his mother eventually died, Lewis prayed for a miracle. Later, he wrote:

*I had approached God, or my idea of God, without love, without awe, even without fear. He was, in my mental picture of this miracle, to appear neither as Savior nor as Judge, but merely as a magician; and when he had done what was required of him I supposed he would simply—well, go away. It never crossed my mind that the tremendous contract which I solicited should have any consequence beyond restoring the status quo.*



Anytime we expect God to fix our problems... restore the status quo... and then go away so we can live without Him... we show that we want to be... the kind of follower that Jesus turned away. We want to be lightly governed by a strong and powerful God.

He is indeed powerful. He heals with just a word. But He wants to be our Lord... ... If he's Lord... you cannot relate to Him at all... and retain anything in your life that's a non-negotiable. ... Anything! ... any view... any conviction... any idea... any behavior... any relationship. ... He may change it... he may not change it... but as your Lord... you have to say, "In everything He must have the supremacy."