

The Healing of a Leper
Matthew 8:1-4
Gerry Andersen
Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School

Matthew 8 begins a new section of Matthew's Gospel that focuses on the miracles of Jesus Christ. These miracles served to validate the authority of Jesus (cf. Matthew 8:9; 9:6-8), similar to His lineage, His fulfillment of prophecies, His baptism, His temptation and His teaching did in the earlier chapters. We also can identify a structural construction that transitions the reader to this next section of the narrative account by the words "*when Jesus had finished*" in Matthew 7:28 (cf. Matthew 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1).

Jesus' miracles had large crowds that followed Him "*from Galilee and the Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan*" (Matthew 4:25). The general description of miracles will turn to a focus on specific miracles, organized in three groups, each followed by an interaction with Jesus that showed His authority:

- Miracles of healing (8:1-17)
 - Jesus' authority over His disciples (8:18-22)
- Miracles of power (8:23-9:8)
 - Jesus' authority over His opponents (9:9-17)
- Miracles of restoration (9:19-34)

In all, there are ten miracles recorded in these two chapters, with the healing of the hemorrhaging woman (9:20-22) embedded within the story of the healing of the synagogue official's daughter (9:18-26). These ten miracles have led some to conclude that Matthew is making a comparison with the ten plagues of Egypt. However, this is quite unclear since Matthew makes no such allusion and the plagues were destructive judgment, not merciful blessings.

It must be recognized that the order of these miracles in Matthew's Gospel is thematic, not chronological. This is Matthew's style as he builds the narrative of Jesus' words and works to present Christ as the Messiah of Israel. Based upon the other synoptic Gospels (Mark and Luke), some of these miracles very likely occurred prior to the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 8:2-4; 8:14-17; 9:2-13) and some well after (Matthew 8:18-22). Matthew arranged these miracles topically in an order to further his focus on the life of Christ.

The introduction to the miracle (8:1)

Matthew 5-7 is known as the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 8:1 (and Matthew 5:1). It is intriguing to note how often mountains are mentioned by Matthew in his account of Christ's life (4:8; 14:23; 15:29; 17:1, 9, 20; 21:21; 24:3, 16; 26:30; 28:16). As was true with Moses, mountains are involved in significant moments in God's revelation.

The large crowds had followed Him from the first miracles that Matthew recorded in Matthew 4:23-25. These people were "*from Galilee and the Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan*" (Matthew 4:25). This was a very large geographical area, showing the popularity that the miracles brought to Jesus. They saw the early miracles and listened to His teaching.

Matthew 8:1 transitions the readers from the teaching of Jesus to the miracles of Jesus. Both build the case for the authority of Jesus. The teaching of Jesus amazed the multitudes as Jesus taught as one having authority, unlike their scribes (Matthew 7:29). Likewise, the miracles of Jesus would amaze the multitudes as one with authority (Matthew 9:8).

The request by the leper (8:2)

Matthew 8:2 opens with the phrase "and behold" (ESV, Greek KAI IDOU), which the author used at times to start new material in this Gospel. This separates 8:2 from the preceding verse, detaching this miracle from Christ's descent from the mountain. The first of the series of miracles involves the cleansing of a leper.

Leprosy today is a slow-growing bacterial infection that affects the skin, nervous system, eyes and nose. It is curable today, but if left untreated may lead to crippling in the hands and feet, blindness, and even paralysis. It was clearly a feared disease in the first century and was considered to be highly communicable.

The exact nature of leprosy in the Bible is uncertain. Many consider it to also include a number of various skin diseases, including Hansen's disease (as leprosy is known in modern times). Of course, it is impossible to diagnose a bacterial infection from 2,000 years ago when nothing was known of bacteria. But undoubtedly, the people of Jesus' day understood the threat posed by those who were considered to be lepers and the Law imposed strict measures to protect the society from this disease.

“As for the leper who has the infection, his clothes shall be torn, and the hair of his head shall be uncovered, and he shall cover his mustache and cry, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ He shall remain unclean all the days during which he has the infection; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.”

(Leviticus 13:45-46). For the leper to enter the town, he would have to inform all that he was coming.

Therefore, the people of Israel would have withdrawn from those with leprosy on both the basis of the Law and on the basis of their personal health. Beyond this, the physical effects of leprosy would make one look repulsive. Lepers were isolated from society and from worship in the temple. They were considered to be cursed by God.

Therefore, for a leper to approach Jesus would be quite surprising. More expected would be this leper to behave like the lepers in Luke 17:12, *“As He entered a village, ten leprous men who stood at a distance met Him.”* This type of interaction between lepers and non-lepers would be unusual.

The leper certainly had heard of Jesus' miracles of healing (Matthew 4:23-25) and perhaps witnessed them from a distance. He knelt before Jesus, taking the posture of a worshiper in Israel. Matthew includes this to impress upon his readers that Jesus was worthy to be worshiped. He came to Jesus with great faith that Jesus could heal him by making his request.

The leper also addressed Christ as “Lord,” acknowledging His authority. Indeed, the only question in his mind was not the ability of Jesus, but rather the willingness of Jesus. *“Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean”* (Matthew 8:2). The matter of faith will be on display in the following miracle with the centurion's servant, as well as throughout the Gospel.

The healing by Jesus (8:3)

Remarkably, Jesus chose to heal the leper and “stretched out His hand and touched him.” There may have been quite a long period of time since anyone had touched this person last. If there was a crowd observing this they would have been aghast at what Jesus had done. To touch a leper puts oneself at risk of contracting the disease.

By touching the leper, a normal person would have chosen to become unclean. *“Or if he touches human uncleanness, of whatever sort his uncleanness may be*

with which he becomes unclean, and it is hidden from him, and then he comes to know it, he will be guilty” (Leviticus 5:3).

Jesus did not contract leprosy by touching the man, not because leprosy does not spread quite so easily, but because He made the man clean. As Jesus touched the leper He said, *“I am willing; be cleansed.”* There was no delay in this healing since *“immediately his leprosy was cleansed.”* Jesus therefore did not become unclean according to the Law because He touched one who was immediately clean. Rather than becoming unclean, Jesus made the leper clean.

The immediacy of Christ’s healings were a hallmark of His miracles. There was no time delay in order for the source of the miracle to be abundantly clear. Jesus had authority to heal and there could be no other explanation for His miracles other than they were from God. This served to validate His ministry and His claims of authority.

Mark 1:41 describes Jesus’ attitude toward the leper that He healed. *“Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him.”* Jesus felt sympathy for the plight of this man who had lived for some time in isolation. Jesus could have chosen to heal the man without touching. But compassion moved Jesus to touch the man. Those who are ostracized from society are in need of compassion, not judgment.

The nature of leprosy is a caricature of sin. Sin destroys people spiritually, physically and relationally. This man was delivered from his spiritual separation from God by his faith in the Lord. This man was delivered from his physical destruction of his body by the grace of the Lord’s healing touch. And this man was delivered from his relational separation from others by being cleansed from his leprosy. God’s spiritual healing brings us deliverance from eternal separation from God, a new resurrected body, and peace with others in the kingdom of God.

Our Lord came to those in need and served them by reaching out to heal them. His mission was characterized by His words to the Pharisees, *“It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE,’ for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners”* (Matthew 9:12-13). As followers of Christ, we must serve the hungry rather than prefer those who are self-satiated.

The instruction of Jesus

It is intriguing that Jesus would tell this former leper who had received cleansing from Jesus that he should not tell anyone about this. Obviously, people would observe he had been cleansed but he was not to tell them the circumstances. This is the first of a series of exhortations to people that they not tell others what had happened (cf. Matthew 9:30; 12:16; 16:20; 17:9). These instructions to those healed and to His disciples have perplexed many in light of His command to go into the world to tell others about Him (Matthew 28:18-20).

We read of Jesus' concerns about the crowds that followed Him in the Gospels. For example, He goes to the other side of the Sea of Galilee in Matthew 8:18 due to the crowds. The attention of the crowds forced Him at times to adjust His ministry (Matthew 13:2) and even to send them away (Matthew 14:23).

More significantly, the attention of the crowds resulted in the religious leaders growing hostility toward Jesus. He was viewed by them as usurping their role as the spiritual leaders of the Jews. We see at various times that Pharisees oppose Jesus (9:34; 12:24; 15:12), Sadducees oppose Jesus (22:23) and the Sadducees and Pharisees together oppose Jesus (16:1). Jesus' popularity caused these leaders to view Jesus as a threat to their religion.

Jesus told people like this leper to not spread the news about Him to people in order to delay this opposition to His words and works. By limiting the news of His miracles from spreading, He would be able to fulfill the work that God gave Him. In particular, the teaching of His disciples would be able to extend for three years before the religious leaders enacted their plot to put Him to death.

The instruction of Jesus to *“go, show yourself to the priest and present the offering that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them”* was given for two reasons. First, it was consistent with the fulfillment of the Law of Moses regarding lepers. *“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “This shall be the law of the leper in the day of his cleansing. Now he shall be brought to the priest, and the priest shall go out to the outside of the camp. Thus the priest shall look, and if the infection of leprosy has been healed in the leper, then the priest shall give orders to take two live clean birds and cedar wood and a scarlet string and hyssop for the one who is to be cleansed”* (Leviticus 14:1-4). Thus, the Law made a plan for the healing of lepers, foreseeing cleansing of Naaman through Elisha (2 Kings 5:6-14) and this miracle by Jesus.

In addition to the upholding of the Law of Moses, the second reason for the instruction of Jesus in Matthew 8:4 was for “a *testimony to them.*” This testimony was a story from the one healed of the events of the healing. The leper was to go to the priest to testify to him regarding this miracle, and by extension, the leaders of the temple. Paradoxically, the leper was to notify the priests of this healing, but not the people of Israel.

This was done to give the temple priests the legitimate opportunity to know of this unique miracle. The cleansing of lepers was a specific messianic sign for Israel, as Jesus communicated to John the Baptist:

*“Now when John, while imprisoned, heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to Him, “Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?” Jesus answered and said to them, “Go and report to John what you hear and see: the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk, **the lepers are cleansed** and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM” (Matthew 11:2-5).*

While Jesus referenced Isaiah 35:5-6 in His words to John, Isaiah 35 did not specifically include lepers being healed. However, this is the sort of miraculous activity that the Messiah would be associated with. Therefore, the priests would be put on notice that there is a person performing miracles that should compel them to investigate.

In a real sense, this gave the religious leaders the rightful opportunity to know of Jesus and respond appropriately if they were so inclined. This miracle served as a compelling testimony to them of Jesus Christ, the King of the Jews. Every opportunity was given by our Lord to allow the people of Israel to receive Him if they were willing.

Of course, just as with the events of the birth of Jesus, His fulfillment of prophecy, His baptism and temptation, and His teaching, the leaders showed remarkably little interest in learning about Jesus. When the leper showed himself to the priest, this ought to have brought a high degree of interest from the priest. Yet there is no positive response evident. While the multitudes were in awe of Christ’s ministry, the leaders were apathetic, until the point when their position of power was threatened. In the words of John, “*He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him*” (John 1:11).

Conclusion

The ironic result of this miracle of healing is that the leper would now be able to associate freely with all people and go where he pleased for the first time in a long time. Jesus, on the other hand, would suffer limitations to His freedom of movement. Mark 1:45 highlights this dilemma that Jesus faced as the result of healing the leper.

“But he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news around, to such an extent that Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city, but stayed out in unpopulated areas; and they were coming to Him from everywhere.”

Jesus took on the burden of restricted movement due to His miracles, staying outside the towns in unpopulated areas just as the leper would have had to do. In this way, we see one more glimpse of how Jesus bore the sin of man in His mission of forgiveness.

Matthew’s organization of the miracles of chapter eight and nine begins with the leper’s healing to support his theme of the gospel of the kingdom being for all people (cf. Matthew 28:19). This social outcast is the first of many cases where people who were looked down upon would be served by Jesus.

The ministry to those shunned by the Jews would be particularly meaningful to a former tax-gatherer such as Matthew. As one hated by the Jews, Matthew would be sensitive to the other ostracized people, such as a Roman centurion (8:5-13), a demon-possessed mute (9:32-34), and a Canaanite woman (15:21-28).

If we perceive ourselves correctly, we will see that our need for deliverance is as great as any social outcast of our day. We should not look down upon others because of their social or economic status but rather feel compassion for those who are distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. As we view people as the Lord views people, we will see that the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few and will beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest (Matthew 9:36-38).