

OpenTheo

Matthew 8:1 - 8:4



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this passage, Steve Gregg discusses the story of Jesus healing a man with leprosy in Matthew 8:1-4. Leprosy was a disease that was thought to symbolize sin in the spiritual realm, and the man's healing was seen as a sign of his restored relationship with God. Gregg notes that while healing was common in the Bible, not everyone was healed and it was often done according to God's will. The healing of the leper by Jesus was seen as a symbol of the new covenant and the new power introduced by him.

Transcript

We're turning now to the 8th chapter of Matthew. We're continuing our study through the Gospel of Matthew. We have been detained a great length of time on the previous three chapters, which are usually referred to as the Sermon on the Mount.

Because of their importance, we have taken a very long time looking at them in some detail. We now come back to the narrative, which is of course the story of Jesus and his activities. Let me encourage you, if you are one who is not very familiar with the life of Jesus, to listen, and to listen with interest, because we are studying the life of a unique person.

Now when I say unique, I don't mean unusual. I mean one of a kind. There will never be another like him, because he is the Son of God, who was sent down not only to redeem us by his death and resurrection, but also to exhibit to us what kind of a God we are serving.

Jesus once said to his disciples, if you've seen me, you've seen the Father. You want to see God? You want to know what God's like? Well, you'll see it right here. We've got the story of Jesus himself, and let me encourage you to follow along with us if you have a Bible that you can open.

Otherwise, just listen intently. This is important. In Matthew chapter 8, beginning with verse 1, Matthew writes, When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed him.

And behold, a leper came and worshiped him, saying, Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean. Then Jesus put out his hand and touched him, saying, I am willing. Be cleansed.

And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus said to him, See that you do not tell anyone, but go your way and show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded as a testimony to them. Now this is a case that we do not have very many incidents just like this in the life of Jesus.

Although curing sick people is a common phenomenon with Jesus, only on two occasions, I believe, do we read of him curing some people of this particular ailment. The man is said to be a leper. In other words, he had the disease called leprosy.

Now this is a fascinating thing, because leprosy is, well, was essentially, at least in those days, an incurable thing. At least what we call leprosy. Today there is a disease, we call it Hansen's disease, and it's equivalent with what we call leprosy.

In the biblical time, leprosy was a broader range of diseases, because any kind of incurable skin disease was likely to be diagnosed as leprosy. And this was not any fault of the people back then. They simply didn't have the biology labs and so forth to really identify what the virus or the germ was that was causing a thing.

They only had symptoms to go by. And while we might know any number of viruses that would cause skin problems that resemble leprosy, we have the means today of identifying a great number of diseases by the microorganisms that cause them. In those days, God did not expect them to make such a fine diagnosis, such a detailed diagnosis.

He just wanted them to judge by symptoms. Therefore, in Leviticus, chapters 13 and 14, there is a lengthy treatment of how to diagnose leprosy and what is to be done about it once it has been diagnosed. In Leviticus, there is actually a provision made for the man who is cured of his leprosy.

He is diagnosed as having leprosy, and at some time later he no longer has it. He has been cleansed. We would say healed, but when a leper is healed, it's called he's cleansed, he's clean.

When a leper had leprosy, he described himself as unclean. And that was because he was ceremonially unclean and people were not supposed to come near him or else they'd be defiled. But the point here is that if the law made provision for a man to re-enter society after his leprosy had been cleansed, it is probable that there was a wider range of diseases that were considered leprosy back then than what we call leprosy, because Hansen's disease, a man just doesn't get cleansed of that, certainly not by the ancient methods available to them back then.

God did not actually, in Leviticus, He did not actually prescribe a cure for leprosy,

because leprosy was in most cases considered incurable, but there were some diseases that might be mistaken for what we call leprosy, and that would render the man unclean for a while, and if he recovered from those conditions, he could re-enter society. And of course there are a few cases, very few, in the Old Testament, where a person had actual leprosy and was cured supernaturally. We read of that in the book of Numbers when Miriam and Aaron criticized Moses, and God struck Miriam with leprosy, and that was a judgment upon her, but when Moses interceded for her, I believe that we have reason to believe that God healed her.

It doesn't specifically say so, but it appears that God healed Miriam of the leprosy through that intercession of Moses. Likewise, we have Naaman the Syrian, who was a leper from Syria, and he came to Elisha the prophet, and by following Elisha's instructions of dipping seven times in the river Jordan, that man was cured of his leprosy. These are miraculous cases, and we don't know whether there are other cases like them in the Old Testament or in Old Testament times, but the law at least made provision that if a person had been diagnosed as having leprosy, and then later did not have the symptoms, he could be diagnosed as clean or not having leprosy anymore, and he could then re-enter ordinary society, which he had been prevented from doing during the period of his sickness.

Now, leprosy was not only a disease among the Jews, it was a disease with spiritual significance. The very fact that Miriam was smitten with leprosy as a judgment for her sin may point this direction, but what's really interesting is that leprosy was a ceremonially unclean disease. Now, if you had a cold or the flu, it might be wise to quarantine you so that you don't make other people sick, but back then, most people certainly didn't know that colds and flus were spread by invisible little microorganisms, and therefore, they didn't know about infectious disease, but lepers were told to be isolated.

We would call it quarantined today. God does not explain why. Of course, we might see that as a hygienic rule.

The Jews saw it, as I think God intended for them to, as a ritual thing. Certain conditions that people would come into would make them ritually unclean, which means they were not permitted to have contact with society during the period of their ritual uncleanness, and they were not allowed to come to the tabernacle or the temple. In this, an unclean state was sort of like a picture of sin.

Now, a person could be unclean without being guilty of any sin, and God did not hold it against a person that he had leprosy, necessarily. I mean, there are other conditions that could cause a person to be ceremonially unclean. A woman during her menstrual period would be unclean.

A man who had a wet dream would be unclean, according to the Scripture. There's a lot

of things that are beyond a person's control and therefore are not sin, but are conditions that might come upon a person which would render him unclean under the law, and all that meant was that person, for the time of his uncleanness, could not associate regularly with society or with the temple, with the worship of God. And the reason for this was a symbolic thing.

It was not really suggesting that God was angry with these people or that there was any real interruption in a leper's relationship with God, because a leper could believe and be saved too, but that his condition was a good symbol in the physical realm of what sin is in the spiritual realm. And leprosy resembles sin in that respect, that a leper cannot cure himself, just as a sinner cannot cure himself of sin. Sin actually alienates people, both from God and from other people, destroys relationships, just like the leper was made unclean and had to avoid society and the tabernacle because of his disease.

And leprosy is a spreading disease, just as sin spreads in a person's personality. Because there are these similarities symbolically between leprosy and sin, for Jesus to cure the leper has spiritual significance as well as just being an instance of Jesus manifesting His tremendous power to cure incurable diseases. Because the curing of a leper has the symbolic value of showing that Jesus is also the one who can cleanse sin, cleanse the sinner, and make him no longer a sinner, just as the leper is no longer a leper after he has been cleansed.

So, we need to understand that the whole law regarding leprosy in the Old Testament, and of course that provides the cultural framework for this story, is that leprosy is a picture, spiritually or symbolically, of what sin does to people. And by curing leprosy, Jesus illustrates that He is the cleanser from sin as well. Now, with that as an understanding, we go back to the story.

Jesus came down from the mountain where He had preached the Sermon on the Mount, and He encounters a leper. This man came to Him and worshipped Him. This man was a believer, in other words.

How he had come to believe in Jesus, we don't know. But we know that Jesus had worked miracles and that His fame had spread abroad. And this man had concluded that although he lived in a hopeless state and was incurable, in nature and in the ingenuity of man, there was nothing that could ever improve his condition.

However, he had come to see that Jesus had power from God, and he believed that Jesus was from God. Which seems to be indicated by the fact that he came and worshipped Him. Jesus, by the way, allowed Himself to be worshipped by men.

No godly person in the New Testament ever allowed Himself to be worshipped by men. And the reason for that, of course, is because the Jews believed it was idolatry to worship any other than Jehovah God. And yet Jesus allowed Himself to be worshipped on this

occasion and many others, by those who came seeking His aid, and He did not rebuke them.

And this is in contrast to both godly men and angels who will not allow themselves to be worshipped. When Peter came to the house of Cornelius in Acts 10, Cornelius fell down before Peter and worshipped him. And Peter rebuked him and said, get up, I'm just a man, don't worship me.

And also in Revelation chapter 19, John was overwhelmed by the wonderful things the angel was showing him and bowed down to worship the angel. And the angel in Revelation 19.10 said, don't worship me, worship God, I'm a fellow servant. So neither godly men nor angels seemed to be willing to allow themselves to be worshipped.

And yet Jesus allowed Himself to be worshipped on many occasions and the reason is because He was God. And it was no violation of that commandment that you shall not bow down and worship any other than God to worship Jesus. This is an indicator that Jesus was recognized as God by this man who worshipped Him and that Jesus did not deny that because He allowed the man to worship Him.

Now the man said, Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean. Now frankly, I appreciate the fact that He said, if You are willing, You can make me clean. I've known some people to say, well, this man, obviously his faith was rather weak because he didn't know whether Jesus was willing to heal him or not.

These same people generally teach that God is always willing to heal any sickness of any person who has enough faith. In fact, these same people often will say that when you pray and you ask God to heal you, that you should never say, if it be Thy will or if it is Your will. In other words, you should not pray, God, if it is Your will, please heal me, they say.

Because they say it's always God's will to heal and by the very act of saying that, you prove that you don't really have faith. Now, I disagree entirely. For one reason, I disagree because the Bible nowhere says that it's always God's will to heal people and therefore I simply don't see that illustrated in biblical story, nor do I see it taught in biblical doctrine.

The Scripture does not teach that God heals all people of all sicknesses. Certainly there are people who are healed of every kind of sickness imaginable in the Bible, but there are people in the Bible who are not healed either. In fact, on one occasion, Paul, who was praying about an infirmity that he had, asked God three times to remove it and God said, No, my grace is sufficient for you, my strength is made perfect in your weakness.

And Paul said, Okay, then fine, I will rejoice in my infirmities, because when I'm weak in that sense, I'm strong in another sense. And so, it is the case that God actually didn't choose to heal Paul. And there are other people that God apparently didn't choose to

heal, at least not immediately, like Trophimus, whom Paul left sick in Miletus, according to 1 Timothy chapter 4. Or Timothy himself, who had frequent infirmities of the stomach, and Paul simply prescribed that the man should drink a little wine once in a while to help his stomach, rather than tell him that God intended to heal him supernaturally.

Those who believe that God always wants to heal are not, I believe, treating the Scripture quite fairly. I believe they're looking at certain Scriptures that say, or they think they say what they want them to say, and they're ignoring Scriptures that don't say it. Therefore, since the Bible does not teach that God always wants to heal, there is absolutely nothing wrong with this man saying, Lord, if you are willing, I know you are able to make me whole.

As a matter of fact, to pray in this way and say, if it is your will, has tremendous biblical precedent and teaching. It has the precedent of none other than Jesus himself. When he was in the Garden of Gethsemane praying just before his arrest and crucifixion, and he was so much under stress, we read, that his sweat was as it were great drops of blood, we are told that Jesus prayed, Father, if you are willing, please let this cup pass from me.

In other words, please don't let this thing go through this agony I'm about to face. If you are willing, please don't let it go through, let this cup pass. In other words, he's saying, if it's your will, please deliver me out of this situation.

However, he also said, not my will, but yours be done. Now, this is the right way to pray. That's the way Jesus prayed.

You tell God, you ask God for the thing that you really want, but you actually submit it to his veto power if he sees that there's a better purpose to be served by you being denied your request. And many times there can be. There certainly was a better purpose served by Jesus dying than there would have been served by him escaping death.

Likewise, there may be a better purpose served in a Christian suffering in some particular way than there would be in him not suffering in that particular way. The psalmist said in Psalm 119, it is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I might learn to keep your law. So there are benefits to be gained from suffering, and therefore when we ask God to relieve us from suffering, we are within our rights to ask.

But the Christian attitude is, you know, Father, if it's your will, this is what I desire. Otherwise, may your will be done rather than mine. That is the model prayer of Jesus himself.

And therefore, we should not have any qualms about adding that caveat to our request, if it is your will. Also in James chapter 4, we're taught specifically to speak that way. In James 4, verses 13 and following, James said, Come now you who say, Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there, and buy and sell

and make profit.

Whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.

Now, we're told that we should speak about the future in a way that leaves it contingent upon the will of God. If God wills, we'll survive. If God wills, we'll do this or that.

There is certainly nothing wrong and everything right about presenting our requests to God with the understanding that if our requests agree with His will, then that is what we want. But if our requests, although they do represent our will, if they are not in line with His will, then we'd prefer to be denied. Not my will, but thine be done.

That was the attitude of this leper. He said, Lord, if you're willing, you can make me clean. He said, I don't have any doubts about your power.

I don't have any doubts about the ability to heal sicknesses of every kind, including leprosy. But I don't know for sure about your will. And therefore, Jesus answered him.

And Jesus said, I am willing. Be cleansed. And he laid his hand on him and touched him.

Now, there's an interesting thing, because Jesus touched a leper. Under the law, a man was not permitted to touch a leper, because the leper was unclean. And if a man touched a leper, he would himself become unclean.

It doesn't mean he would contract leprosy, because it may well be that a man would touch a leper and not become a leper himself. Nonetheless, to touch an unclean person, like a leper, would confer the ceremonial status of uncleanness to the person who touched him. Yet, what happened here? Jesus touched a leper.

Under the law, that would have made Jesus unclean. But what happened here? The man became clean. Jesus did not become unclean by the contact.

The man became clean by the contact. This illustrates that Jesus introduced a dynamic in man's dealings with God and God's dealings with man that was not found in the law. There was a new power.

There was a new potential that Jesus introduced. In the Old Testament, because the grace of God and the Spirit of God were not the common portion of all God's people, which now, these things, the grace of God and God's Spirit, enable us to remain holy in the midst of a dirty world. But without those things, the Old Testament believers simply had to avoid contact with the unclean.

Why? Because those kinds of contacts tended to make them unclean. And this was illustrated by the fact that if you touch an unclean man, like a leper, you'd be declared

unclean, too. But here comes Jesus with something altogether new.

He comes into contact with the wicked. He comes into contact with the miserable. He comes into contact with the unclean.

And instead of Himself being infected by the status of uncleanness, by the contact, He imparts cleanness to that unclean thing. And so also in the Christian life, if we're operating through the Spirit of God, as Jesus was, and through the dynamic of the life of Christ within us, our contact with the world can be redemptive. Without those factors, our contact with the world would be utterly corrupting.

And it can still be so even as Christians. If we're not walking in the Spirit, if we're not walking in the grace of God, if we are not operating in the dynamic of Christ's life being lived through us, if we come in contact with the world, it can corrupt us. We can be tempted.

We can fall into sin in the presence of sinners. But if we're walking in the Spirit, our contact with them will be redemptive rather than being corruptive of us. And that is what is illustrated here.

That which would have corrupted a man under the law did not corrupt Jesus. Rather, it caused the man who was unclean to become clean. And that's what Jesus intends for His dynamic power and the operation of His Spirit to do in the world.

Now, after this, He told the man not to tell anyone about this until he had gone to the priest. This may not be that He didn't want anyone to learn of it. After all, Matthew told of it.

But it may be that He means don't delay. Don't go and tell everyone this story. Just go to the priest himself.

Why? As a testimony to them. In other words, this leper who had been prescribed as unclean by the priest earlier would now go back and say, look, I'm clean. And the priest would say, what? How did this happen? And he'd say, well, this guy named Jesus touched me and made me clean.

And this would be a testimony to the priest. Now, furthermore, going to the priest in this way was necessary because he was in a society under the law of Moses. And the only way that he could ever be reintroduced to ordinary society legally would be if the priest would declare him clean.

So it was necessary for him to go back to the temple and see the priest and go through the ritual of Leviticus 13 and 14 to be reintroduced to society and be able to go back in the tabernacle. But there's more to it than that. And that is that Jesus wanted him to be a testimony to the priest.

Namely, what would be the testimony? The priest represented the system of the law, of the old covenant. And yet here we have a situation where contact with a leper does not make a man unclean as the law would make it, but a new covenant, new wine, a new power is being introduced through this man, Jesus. And this is the message the priest needed to see, that the priest was a representative of an older system now defunct.

Jesus was coming with a new kingdom, a new life, a new wine. And this was seen in the fact that he could touch a leper and rather than become unclean, he makes him clean. The same is true today.

If Jesus touches you, you'll become clean. And you should become one who cleanses others by contact as well. We'll take this up again next time.