

The King Who Cleanses **Matthew 8:1-4 (Mark 1:40-45)**

Introduction

In chapter 7 of Matthew's gospel Jesus laid out in his Sermon on the Mount how we ask God for what we need; how to treat others and how to live as a true Citizen in God's Kingdom. Now in chapter 8 Jesus will heal many; including a leper (vv.1-4); a Roman officer's slave (vv.5-13) and Peter's mother-in-law (vv.14-15); and a number of people who are demonically possessed (vv. 16-17; 28-34). Matthew's Gospel declares Jesus to be King by reason of prophecy; paternity; preaching and now power. Jesus does everything by design. All that Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount he will now prove as he leaves the mountain. So far Matthew has spoken about Jesus' identity; principles; and now authority. Jesus does not simply have principles for The Kingdom—He has the power and authority to fulfill those principles.

How different from our elected officials. People on the campaign trail make promises but rarely have the power to fulfill those promises. Some promise bigger government and give us bigger government. Some promise smaller government only to bloat government expenses. Pick your promise. Domestic security. Economic stability. Government integrity. Health care.

In Jesus we can be sure of both his principles and the power to make those principles a reality. It would appear that at least one person has heard the Sermon on the Mount and all its implications. A leper. A leper who abandons his colony, breaks the rules in order to get help and makes a bee line for Jesus. When the ocean of humanity saw the leper coming they must have parted like the Red Sea. There he was; with putted decaying flesh; bright white patches and deep sores; rags wrapped around what was left of hands and feet. There have been miracles in Matthew's gospel; the miracle of Christ's birth; the miracle of angelic visits; but now we see the first miracle performed by Jesus for benefit of a human being. Yes the other gospels tell us the first miracle of Jesus was recorded at Cana at a wedding. But Matthew picks this miracle to launch the claim of Christ's power. In Isaiah 1:5-6 the prophet writes; "Why should you be stricken again? You will revolt more and more. The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faints. (6) From the sole of the foot even to the head, There is no soundness in it, But wounds and bruises and putrefying sores; They have not been closed or bound up, Or soothed with ointment."

The picture is Israel—diseased from head to foot with no hint of a cure in sight. Our passage begins with a cry from a desperate, diseased, disabled leper. And ends with a simple touch from Jesus and the command to tell no one about the miracle until he had fulfilled the command given by Moses in the Law in Leviticus 13.

The Leper's Right To Cry (vv.1-2)

Matthew 8:1-4 (NKJV) When He had come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed Him.

2And behold, a leper came and worshiped Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean."

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In the ancient society of the Jewish people lepers were forced to live apart in isolation. There were strict rules governing their interaction with “clean” people. Leviticus 13 taught that leprosy like sin begins beneath the surface of the skin. And like sin it spreads and infects the whole body. Like sin leprosy takes hold on its victim; spreads and then destroys its host. The Talmud taught that leprosy was second only to death in its list of 61 things that defile. If you had leprosy you were as good as dead because you were cut off from family and friends and society. To be healed from leprosy in many respects was like being dead—and then brought back to life.

The Bible pictures leprosy as a type of sin—and to be cleansed of this awful disease became a picture of deliverance. R.C. Trench was a well known Greek scholar who produced and edited the first edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary*. “Though the leper was not worse or guiltier than his fellow-countrymen, he was nevertheless a parable of sin—an outward visible sign of innermost spiritual corruption” (see Kent Hughes Commentary on Mark p.53).

The leper was required to identify himself or herself and cry “unclean”. Failure to identify yourself could result in death by stoning. Leprosy today is better known as Hansen’s disease (after the man who diagnosed the cure). Hansen’s disease is caused by the deadening of the nerve cells in the extremities. Dr. Paul Brand and others have discovered that the disease kills the body’s pain warning system. The disease acts as an anesthetic, bringing numbness. A person may put their hand in a burning fire, fall off a curb or wash their face with scalding water. In the third world parasites and vermin like rats may bite and chew on lepers. Dr. Brand called the disease the painless hell.

Jon Courson adds “Lepers in Jesus’ day would begin to take on very gross appearances as their skin became hard and scaly, and as their fingers and toes disappeared. Their faces became lion-like—swollen with huge folds. Inevitably, in the middle stages of the disease, one’s nose would disappear totally. There would also be a strong odor emanating from the body of one who had leprosy. We are told a leper could be smelled from 100 feet away” (Jon Courson p. 195).

“. . .leprosy begins with pain. . .numbness follows. Soon the skin loses its original color. It gets to be thick, glossy, and scaly. . .as the sickness progresses, the thickened spots become dirty sores and ulcers due to poor blood supply. Fingers disappear, or absorbed; eyebrows and eyelashes drop out. The disease producing agent also attacks the larynx, the lepers voice acquires a grating quality. His throat becomes hoarse, and you can now not only see, feel and smell the leper, you can hear his rasping voice. And if you stay with him for some time, you can even imagine a peculiar taste in your mouth, probably due to the odor” (L.S. Huizenga-cited in MacArthur p. 7; Vol. 2).

The Jewish leaders came to believe that leprosy was a judgment from God. Much like some people believe AID’s is a direct judgment from God. The word “leprosy” means smitten or afflicted. Religious Leaders were so convinced that lepers were under the judgment of God they would write things like; “I would not so much buy an egg from a market that was on the street

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that a leper walked down”. Another Rabbi said, “When I see lepers coming, I will throw stones at them until they turn and run in the opposite direction”. The religious leaders were cruel and harsh because they believed these people were under the curse and judgment of God.

How then are Christians to treat the outcast, the AID’s victim, the person suffering from diseases related to alcohol, drug abuse, sexual sin? It is easy for some to say they are simply suffering the consequences of a life lived in rebellion or disobedience. But is their sin and our sin so different?

Our text reads “a leper came and worshiped Him (*proskyneo*—*from kyneo* “kiss”). The word can mean “to honor” or “prostrate”; do reverence or worship. Some Greek scholars note that the word was used to describe the act of prostrating oneself and kissing their feet. Persians did this in the presence of their deified king and the Greeks before a divinity or something holy (see Ardt and Gingrich p.716).

The leper did not doubt Jesus’ ability to make him clean, he doubted Jesus’ willingness to make him clean.

How about you? Do you doubt His ability or His willingness to make you clean? Have you ever prayed; “Lord—if you are willing you can heal my body, heal my marriage, heal my mind? Lord you could save my child. Lord would you—could you—rescue me from these horrible circumstance! Lord—if you are willing—you could deliver me from this enslaving addiction; or this powerful habit! What is your personal leprosy? We know He can. But we sometimes doubt he will.

Would Jesus be willing to touch me? I’m so disgusting. One leper showed up. Most stayed away. Most thought their horrible disfiguring body; their running purifying sores; the unbearable odor would gross out the Savior. So they elect not to come to the Savior. Can Jesus handle my sin? Over the years thousands of people have come to our church and hundreds to my office to describe deep and sometimes dangerous disobedience to God. Jesus is not shocked or horrified or terrified by your sin! Is He embarrassed by my sin? No. If He is willing to touch this leper He is certainly willing to touch me and you!

People usually wind up making one of two mistakes; they think; “If I can just get treatment—get my act together, then I can go to Church, read my Bible and do the Christian thing; accept Jesus and all that other stuff. As soon as I can get my life right, then I’ll let Jesus near me. As soon as I can get this leprosy under control, then I’m willing to let Jesus touch me. The truth is—you will never get it together until you let Jesus touch you.

The second mistake—is too think—“I’ve gone too far—the disease is too advanced—the damage too severe—I’m too far gone. I can’t imagine a world where Jesus would want to touch me.

The Lord’s Right To Care (v.3)

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*3Then Jesus put out His hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing; be cleansed."
Immediately his leprosy was cleansed.*

Note what Matthew writes; Jesus first extends His hand and touches the leper and then speaks. Jesus did not *need* to touch the leper to heal the leper. He wanted to—he determined to touch him—and dare I say—*delighted to touch him*. In Mark's account of this incident we read (1:41); "Then Jesus, moved with compassion, stretched out *His* hand and touched him, and said to him, "I am willing; be cleansed." Jesus was filled with 'compassion'. This is Jesus' gut reaction!

Have you ever witnessed another person's suffering and it became your suffering? Arthur H. Stainback wrote: "The value of compassion cannot be over-emphasized. Anyone can criticize. It takes a true believer to be compassionate. No greater burden can be borne by an individual than to know no one cares or understands."

Shouldn't we tell the truth? Yes. But honesty without compassion is brutality.

The reaction of Jesus goes beyond—pity or sympathy or even empathy. This is not just mind for mind; heart for heart but gut for gut. It is that feeling like a mother or father who sees their child suffering some unimaginable sickness and wishes it was their sickness instead of their child's sickness.

Jesus does not simply understand your broken condition. He cares. You have a Savior who has borne your iniquities and carried your diseases. You have a Savior who has experienced his flesh cut; his hands and feet lacerated by heavy iron nails and cried real tears. You have a Savior who has compassion even for the misguided consequences of sad and sinful choices made in the past. Jesus knows what pain feels like. Jesus knows that sin isolates. Jesus knows the devastation that sin brings. **And Jesus will bear the full brunt of our sin on Calvary's Cross.** The willingness of Jesus is not restricted to well wishes for people in trouble. Jesus will die.

Jesus will cleanse the man. Jesus never refused a single person who came to him for healing and restoration! Jesus never looked at a single person and said; "you are too far gone—you can't be reached." Even Judas—who would betray Jesus—receives chance after chance—to turn from sin and selfish ambition. Jesus never said; "I don't have time for you." What about the time Jesus went to Tyre and Sidon and met a woman of Canaan who cried to the Lord; "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed" (Matt.15:22). Jesus ignored her; and then said "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs" (v.26). The woman replied; "True, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from the master's table." You remember what happened? Jesus said, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire." And her daughter was healed from that very hour" (v.28).

Why would Jesus help the leper and refuse me? James wrote; "You have not because you ask not, because you ask amiss, that you may consume it on your lusts" (4:3). The Greeks had a saying, that when the gods wanted to punish someone they would answer all their prayers.

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Sometimes what we pray is selfish or wrong. We may not be able to see the consequences of our choices. Sometimes God loves us enough to say ‘no’!

In the end Jesus does the man. Filled with sores, flesh disfigured, face swollen. Jesus touches him, not simply because He can—because He must. “Since this man was full of leprosy, we can reasonably assume that he had not been touched by a soft healthy hand in years” (Kent Hughes p. 58). Can you imagine? If he had a wife free of the disease; no touch, no embrace, no kiss goodnight. No touch at all.

I read the story of a lonely man, who had no family or friends. He was not a Christian and did not belong to any church. In describing his loneliness he said that he had his hair cut once a week, just to have someone touch him with no misunderstanding (see Kent Hughes p. 58).

One Bible teacher suggests that Jesus does not simply touch him—but takes him in his firm strong grip—the kind of grip that speaks of assurance. The kind of firm grip you need when your whole body dangles over a cliff (I know what that means). It is hard to imagine the joy in that leper’s heart at that moment! The onlookers must have been horrified, some terrified, as they imagined that Jesus was now exposed possibly infected with the disease! **Touching a leper was forbidden. Gripping a leper was an invitation to judgment.** The disease being the worst punishment of all! Even the disciples must have cringed in horror! Why did Jesus do this? Because he loved the man. Because he cared about the man. But I think there is more. God the Son—becomes a man—takes on human flesh—to touch human beings. Jesus is not some mythical figure or fabricated hero or ascended Master. He is a real man. Jesus becomes a man so he can take on sin—become sin—for us—that we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

You can never really effect other people’s lives unless you are willing to touch them. In chapter 8 Jesus will heal another leper; a Gentile’s servant and a woman. Jesus first touches those who at least by the standards of the proud Jewish leaders; are the lowest in society; the outcast; the rejects! Are you willing to touch the person with AIDS? What about EBOLA? Does the Bible forbid protected responsible touch? Are you willing to offer them your hand? Your love? Your Savior? Are you willing to offer them compassion and hope or judgment and death? Sometimes involvement and touch will speak volumes! Bible verses are important. Good theology is good theology. But compassion and touch are risky.

Look at the end of the verse: “. . . *immediately his leprosy was cleansed*”. Luke’s Gospel says he was covered with leprosy (Luke 5:12). Kent Hughes writes; “The healing was sudden and complete. His feet—toeless, ulcerated stubs—were suddenly whole, bursting his shrunken sandals. The knobs on his hands grew fingers before his very eyes. Back came his hair, eyebrows, eyelashes. Under his hair were ears and before him a nose! His skin was supple and soft. Can you hear the thundering roar from the multitude? Can you hear the man crying not, “Unclean! Unclean!” but, “I’m clean! I’m clean!” (Gospel of Mark; Hughes p. 59).

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W.H. Griffith Thomas wrote;

“When we bring our doubts into presence of Christ, they disappear, leaving us waiting for His word of assurance, and feeling certain it will be given; and only then are we healed of our “grievous wound”(*Outline Studies in Matthew*; p.109).

The Law’s Responsibility And Command (v.4)

4And Jesus said to him, “See that you tell no one; but go your way, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.”

Wait a minute. What about the people who are already there? I don’t think Jesus is engaging in some kind of reverse psychology—telling the former leper “See that you tell no one”—in order for him to be sufficiently motivated to tell everyone. The key is found in Christ’s statement; ‘*but go your way, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.*’

The Law of Moses contained public safety and health codes. Jesus wants the healing to be more than just a healing—but a testimony—that Jesus is not a Law-Breaker. If the man showed himself to the priest in Jerusalem, they would be much more likely to believe the fact the leper was healed! After a person is saved, the first requirement is to hear and obey the Word of the Lord.

The phrase “show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded” is found in Leviticus 14. It contained the prescription for cleansing. Two birds were taken, one was killed over running water. The live bird was dipped with cedar wood, a scarlet string and some hyssop—from the blood of the slain bird. The former leper was then sprinkled seven times and pronounced healed by the priest—and the live bird was set free! This ceremony had been on the ‘books’ for 1500 years! Yet how many people do you supposed had shown up to participate in the cleansing ceremony? How about—none (see Jon Courson p.199-200).

The Lord Jesus asks the man to present himself as a ‘testimony’—in other words—the purpose of the healing was to authenticate both the Scripture and Jesus’ claims (which are one and the same!). Jesus wants to remain faithful to the Law (Calvin) but Jesus transcends the law by touching the leper (forbidden by law). “The cured leper becomes the occasion for the law to confirm Jesus’ authority as the healer who needs but to will the deed for it to be done” (D.A. Carson p. 199). Jesus points the leper back to the Word of God to confirm Christ’s identity.

Conclusion

If Jesus is willing to touch you He must be willing to change you. The leper was willing to be changed; willing to be healed. The Lord Jesus defied the law and practice of not touching lepers

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(Lev.13:45-46). Or could it be that Jesus does not defy the Law—at all—but rather fulfills the Law—because the leper is in fact healed the moment he is in Jesus' firm grasp?

Jesus acted with authority—not fearing the disease. Leprosy was horrible. It's chief consequence—insensitivity to pain—deterioration of the flesh—cut off from humanity. Sin is horrible. It numbs then destroys. Sin cuts us off from contact with God. The healing that Jesus effects in the life of the leper in effect—restores his relationship to people and God. So it is when Jesus forgives your sin. How did the leper know he could come to Jesus—and be reasonably assured he would not be rejected or stoned or reprimanded? He came with confidence because he knew Jesus was compassionate! But he also comes to Jesus in an attitude of respect and worship! The religious leaders could approach Jesus in beautiful robes! The leper—torn—worn—rags—the throw away garments of others. The leper came—in hope—worship—and humility. He came expecting—but not demanding—he came—not claiming worth—or merit. It appears that the leper faced the possibility that he would remain a leper—if that were the will of Jesus. The leper came in faith—'you can make me clean' literally you have the power to make my condition go away and stay away.