

“The Miracle of Grace”

Matthew 8:1-17; 28-33

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Last week, we finished our look at the Sermon on the Mount, and I think you can summarize Jesus' teaching with the themes of the Kingdom of God and the saving work of Jesus. All through the gospel of Matthew, we're seeing the themes of surprise and authority: people are amazed at what they see in Jesus, because he speaks and acts with the authority of God.

In chapter 4, before Jesus gave his Sermon on the Mount, Matthew wrote,

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness *among the people*. (Matthew 4:23)

Then, in chapter 9, Matthew wrote,

Jesus went through *all the towns and villages*, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. (Matthew 9:35)

In between in between chapters 4 and 9 you have Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom, which is the Sermon on the Mount, and Jesus' demonstration of the Kingdom in chapters 8 and 9.

In our passage, we look at a man with leprosy, a Roman soldier, a mother-in-law, and two demon-possessed men. They are everyday people who have gotten into a mess, and who get to experience miracles of grace. These miracles show us a lot about the people who were healed, and they show even more about Jesus, who is the healer. In Matthew 8, we see him doing great things. The story shows us Jesus can make us whole, and I think it shows us that if we want to make a positive difference in the lives of others, we have to let God make a difference in us. Let's look at each one in turn: a leper, a centurion's servant, Peter's mother-in-law, and the demon-possessed men.

First, the healing of the leper shows that no one is untouchable to Jesus. (Matthew 8:1-4)

In the ancient world, leprosy was one of the most horrible diseases of all. It reduces people to a human wreck. Maybe the worst part about it was it made you an outcast. The Old Testament says about lepers,

Whoever touches the man...must wash his clothes and bathe with water, and he will be unclean till evening. (Leviticus 15:7)

The book of Leviticus has two chapters on the subject of leprosy, about how the person suffering from it was cut off, and what they needed to do to be purified. As long as you had the disease, you had let your hair and clothes be disheveled, to cover your mouth when people came near, and you had to call out “unclean, unclean” in order to keep the community from being polluted by coming into contact with them. They were excluded from the walled cities in Israel, they were excluded from Jerusalem and temple worship. Rabbis kept themselves at least six feet away from lepers. They were complete outsiders from their own people.

Just think about how close you want to get to a down-and-out, mentally ill drug addict you run into on the street. That’s a little how people felt—they wanted to keep their distance.

Now there are a few things to notice about the man.

He was bold, and he came to Jesus looking for wholeness. But he didn’t come demanding, because he knew how broken he was. He came humbly, and Matthew says he came and knelt before Jesus. He didn’t demand, he asked. It’s like he was saying, “I know I don’t matter, that I’m a nobody, but you’re somebody. I don’t have any claim on you, Jesus, but maybe in your grace and mercy you can give your power to someone like me.” The humble heart knows nothing except our need, and how good Jesus is to meet our need.

He was reverent. The word translated “knelt before” is used in the ancient world to describe worship. It’s what you do when you sense you’re in the presence of God. This man was showing he believed that Jesus was divine when he knelt in worship.

He was confident. Not in himself, he had nothing to offer, but in the ability of Jesus: “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.” He had no doubt that if the Lord wanted to, he could heal his disease. Leprosy was the one thing there was no remedy for, but he knew Jesus could do what no one else could do.

Look how Jesus responded. When the leper begged Jesus to heal him, he reached out and touched him, even though the leper was unclean. What a different message it would have given if Jesus had called out “Be healed!” from ten steps back. But Jesus got involved personally, and when someone comes into personal contact with Jesus, they don’t make Jesus dirty, he makes them person clean. Not only that, the law required that a healed leper be examined by a priest. Jesus sent the man to give his story firsthand to the priest to prove his leprosy was gone. That way, the man would be restored to his community.

Sin is also an incurable disease, and we all have it. Only Jesus’ healing touch can take away our sins and make us whole. Only his touch can restore us to God. But first, like the leper did, we have to recognize our sickness and our inability to cure ourselves, and ask for Jesus’ help.

When the leper asked for help, he said Jesus could heal him if he wants to, and Jesus responded, “I want to. Be healed!” The whole gospel is in those two sentences: Jesus *can* heal us, and he *wants to*. There’s no limit to Jesus’ power or his love. He is total help for our total need. And he shows that no one is untouchable to him.

Second, the healing of the Centurion's servant shows the authority of Jesus. (Matthew 8:5-13)

If the first person who asks for help is an outsider because of his sickness, the second person is an outsider because he's a Roman. The first person is barred from sharing in Israel's social and spiritual life. They couldn't enter Jerusalem at all. Gentiles could, but they couldn't go than the Court of the Gentiles in the temple, and a Jew was forbidden to enter a Gentile home.

In a Roman legion, there were 6000 men, and they were divided into 60 centuries of 100 men, each commanded by a centurion. They were responsible for the discipline and morale of their century, and they were the background of the army of Rome.

The Jews hated the Romans, and especially soldiers, because they occupied their country and oppressed their people. But this man didn't let anything stand between him and Jesus. This Gentile's faith put to shame the pompous piety of many of Israel's leaders. They were expecting God to work in certain ways, so they missed the coming of God in the person of Jesus.

We have to be careful about not getting entrenched in our own ways. We have to be careful not to become so set in our habits that we think God can only work in specified ways.

The Centurion gives Jesus the opportunity to demonstrate his power in a whole new way. He's used to authority—he just gives a command, and it's carried out—and he says, "You don't have to come; I'm not worthy to have you enter my home. Just speak a command, and I know it will be carried out."

Jesus doesn't have to be physically present in order to change your life. The Centurion shows us that God's work in our lives is a work of grace. And he shows compassion in his concern for his servant. This compassionate faith is a key to experience God's power in your life.

Third, the healing of Peter's mother-in-law shows the availability of Jesus. (Matthew 8:14-15)

If the leper was the first outsider, and the centurion was the second, then Peter's mother-in-law was the third. What I mean is this: Jewish women were not allowed as far inside the temple as Jewish men. There was the Court of the Women, then the Holy Place, where only Jewish men could go, and then the Holy of Holies where only one Jewish male, the high priest, could enter, and he only one time a year, on the Day of Atonement. Women did not have full access to religious worship, not even in synagogues. One of the prayers a devout Jewish male would pray each day was a prayer of thanks that he had not been born a woman. But in this healing, Jesus broke down that wall of separation.

Jesus arrives at Peter's house after a long day, and he must have been exhausted. But Jesus is never too tired to help. The demands of human need never seem like a nuisance to him. Jesus isn't a person who's at his best in public and his worst in private.

He didn't need an audience. In a crowd or in a cottage, his love and power are for everyone who needs him. He's available for what the Father wants to do through him.

Fourth, the healing of the demon-possessed men shows the absolute power of Jesus.
(Matthew 8:16-17; 28-33)

Demons are fallen angels who joined Satan in his rebellion against God, and are now evil spirits under his control. They tempt people to evil, and they have great destructive power. But whenever they are confronted by Jesus, they lose their power. These demons recognize Jesus as God's son, but they don't think they have to obey him. But believing in Jesus isn't enough. James tells us in his letter that faith has to be authentic, to prove itself in what it does. He writes,

Do you still think it's enough just to believe that there is one God? Well, even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror! (James 2:19)

Faith is more than belief.

These men were unclean in three ways. They were Gentiles. They were demon possessed, and they lived in a cemetery. Jesus helped them anyway. He casts out the demons, and they enter the pigs, and then they drove the pigs into the lake. It shows their destructive goals—if they can't destroy the men, they would destroy the pigs. But Jesus isn't like that. His actions show how much value he places on every human life.

Well, that's how Jesus changed the lives of a leper, a centurion's servant, Peter's mother-in-law, and a couple demon-possessed men. Commentator Dale Bruner gives a grade to the faith of each person in the story. Now, he exaggerates a little bit in order to make a point, but I do think it's worth comparing the characters in the story. So, for the sake of making the point, I'd give the following grades to the characters of this chapter:

I'd give an A for the centurion's faith. He's heroic, a great example for us to trust the authority of Jesus.

I'd give a B for the leper's faith. I think he's a great example, too, but for the sake of comparison, he says to Jesus, "If you want to, you can heal me." He trusts Jesus' power, but isn't yet sure of his compassion.

I'd give a C for Peter's mother-in-law's faith. In her way, she's a great example, too, because she responds to God's grace by getting up and serving others. But let's face it, she's out of it at first, and doesn't even ask for Jesus' help. She gets well simply because Jesus sees her need.

I'd give an F for the demoniacs' faith. They're openly antagonistic, out to hurt and destroy. They clearly see Jesus for who he is, and they don't like it.

Now, here's what's really amazing: Jesus helps them all. The person with heroic faith, the one with solid faith, the one with neutral faith, and even the antagonistic one, the one with no faith at all, in fact, just the opposite. All of them get to experience the wholeness of God, and in each of these healings Jesus broke down the walls of separation—the wall separating Gentiles by letting in the centurion and the Gadarene men, the wall

separating women by letting in Peter's mother-in-law suffering from a high fever, the wall separating the unclean and the broken by letting in the leper. And these stories show that the issue isn't how much faith we have. It's where we direct it. Point your faith to Jesus.

Now, we can't answer why sometimes there's healing, and sometimes there isn't. But I'll tell you this: it's not that we're not worthy, because we never are.

I have a brother that is developmentally disabled, and suffers from epilepsy and seizures. When he was little, sometimes people would say, "If you had enough faith, Jeff could be healed." But that's hurtful. We tried it, and God decided to show us who he is through the illness, not through healing it, like Paul says about what he calls a thorn in his flesh. He says that the cause of the suffering isn't God, it's Satan, but God uses it. He says,

"Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, 'My grace is enough for you. My power works best in your weakness' (2 Cor. 12:8-9).

I don't know why God allows that in our lives, but I promise you this: he will heal our pain, or if he doesn't, he will use our pain to show us his grace more powerfully. And ultimately, we *will* all be healed on the day we stand in Jesus' presence.

Look how much Jesus values people. And look how he breaks down the walls that separate us from God. So here are the questions I want to leave you with:

First, how do you need healing today? Is it in body? Is it a relationship that's been broken? Is it a hurt you've carried for a long time? Maybe a painful memory you just can't get beyond? Come to Jesus in your need, and watch him answer your prayer.

Second, who are the outsiders around you, and how are you called to reach out to them with the love of Jesus?

A few years ago, I visited Cairo, and I saw people living in the City of the Dead, a cemetery that now has 100,000 people living among the tombs. I saw disfigured people there, wounded, broken people, the outcasts of society. But I also saw a group of Christians that offered love and compassion to people the world doesn't need. They gave hope and a future to people that didn't have them. They showed the love of Jesus, and they reminded me to show, not tell, because that's the only thing that's going to win people over in our postmodern culture. Because they were following the example of Jesus in bringing his healing, they became a kind of miracle in the lives of others. And there's one more thing. Many of those who ministered in Jesus' name there saw God's healing in their own lives, as they reached out to others who needed healing. May the Lord help us to be faithful in that this week so that we can see his miracles, too.