

Matthew 8:1–17

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[0 : 00] Again, the scripture text is Matthew 8, 1 through 17. Please remain standing for the reading of God's word.

When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. And behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him, saying, Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.

And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, I will be clean. And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus said to him, see that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded for a proof to them.

When he had entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him, Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly.

And he said to him, I will come and heal him. But the centurion replied, Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word and my servant will be healed.

[1 : 04] For I too am a man under authority with soldiers under me. And I say to one, go. And he goes. And to another, come. And he comes. And to my servant, do this.

And he does it. When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, truly, I say to you, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith.

I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness.

In that place, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. And to this centurion, Jesus said, go, let it be done for you as you have believed.

And the servant was healed at that very moment. And when Jesus entered Peter's house, he saw his mother-in-law lying sick with a fever. He touched her hand and the fever left her.

[2 : 03] And she rose and began to serve him. That evening, they brought to him many who were oppressed by demons. And he cast out the spirits with the word and healed all who were sick.

This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah. He took our illnesses and bore our diseases. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

You may be seated. Well, good morning. Welcome to Christ Church Chicago.

I know there are a few visitors this morning. Thank you for choosing to spend your morning with us. I trust that you've been warmly received. And my hope is that you sense our desire to worship God well together.

Let's just pause and ask for God's help. Father, we need your help. To hear your word.

[3 : 06] We need your help. To live your word. And so would you be our help in these next moments, we pray. We ask these things for Jesus' sake.

Amen. It's worth getting our bearings as we return to Matthew's gospel this morning. We have been walking through Matthew's gospel.

And we took a break last week. Psalm 32. And we have... We took a short two weeks to work through chapters 5 to 7. Having recently preached through it at the end of 2020.

It was the longest preaching, teaching block in all the gospels from Jesus. And we're coming out of a significant section containing the words of Jesus.

Matthew's ministry. And we're coming out of a man of Jesus. However, he's not a man of just mere words. We know already that his ministry has been... Matthew has previewed it according to the end of chapter 4.

[4 : 13] That he would not only go throughout Galilee teaching in synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom. But he would heal every disease and every affliction.

His ministry would consist of mighty words and mighty works. He was one with words of authority.

Chapters 5 to 7. And now we will begin in chapter 8. He will demonstrate works of great authority. His works will leave people baffled.

So much so that they will ask, What sort of man is this? Jesus would be one who possessed both the words and the works of God's kingdom.

He would not only be the one that spoke words. He would not be someone who spoke words devoid of any actions to back them up. Nor would he be a miracle worker who demonstrated works but had empty words.

[5 : 14] No, within Jesus would be both words and works of life. I've titled this morning's talk, License to Heal.

License to Heal. Well, it's derived, you might know, from a concept used in espionage fiction. where special government operatives are given or permitted the use of lethal force to carry out their objective or mission.

If you're a movie buff, you'll know that these agents or these 00s, they say, 007 in particular, were granted license to take life if necessary.

Well, this morning, you and I encounter Jesus. God's agent to give life.

And in these three scenes, what you need to clearly see is that wherever Jesus goes, life ensues.

[6 : 32] Or as one writer put it, life and health just break out. License to Heal.

We'll use the paragraph breaks given in our Bibles, and we'll take our passage in the three scenes as given. We will see, firstly, a willing healer.

A willing healer. It's followed by an able healer. One who is able to heal. And finally, we will see a ready healer.

We will see this morning that Jesus is willing, able, and ready to heal. He is well prepared and eager to do so for all who come to Him.

Chapter 8, verses 1 to 4. I hope your Bibles are open. They would be helpful if they are. Jesus now descends from a top of a mountain after the Sermon on the Mount.

[7 : 32] And He's immediately met by a leper. Now, a leper is an individual with a skin condition. It pertained to various skin conditions, some which were fleeting or quickly passing and difficult to transmit, and others that resulted in open sores or wounds and even fleshly deterioration.

At best, it was temporary and passing. At worst, it was terminal and fatal. Regardless, to be a diagnosed leper would render one religiously impure.

See, the request that the leper makes is one for healing, but the language that is used is actually religious. It was not that the leper was dirty or simply needed a bath or a shower.

It was that the leper was ceremonially unclean, which had two primary implications. The first is that they were religiously defiled. And therefore, unable to participate in religious life, worship, and instruction.

Access to God was restricted, even prevented. See, Jewish religious life distinguished between the holy and the profane, the clean and the unclean.

[8 : 49] And for those who were unclean, God was no longer accessible within the confines and the regulations of the religious establishment. The leper was religiously defiled.

But a second implication was this. The leper was socially marginalized and outcasted. According to Leviticus chapters 13 and 14, the leprous person was to wear torn clothes.

They were to let the hair on their head hang loose. And whenever they approached an individual or a group, they were to declare or scream, unclean, unclean.

As they approached others. Of the leper, the Bible writes, he shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease.

He is unclean. He shall live alone. He should dwell outside the camp. Quarantined, of which we are all familiar.

[9 : 58] Ill-dressed, disheveled, shunned, and isolated. Unwanted and undesired. They were in those days the walking dead.

Josephus, the Jewish historian, writes, interpreting Leviticus, Moses banished the leprous completely from the city, associating with no one and in no way differing from a corpse.

To be a leper was to be the walking dead. Spiritually distant and socially dead. Leprosy sat atop the worst of religious uncleanness.

If there were a hierarchy of being unclean, leprosy was the top. One writer says, how do we know this? Because it required the greatest and most extensive acts of purification.

And here it is. In bold faith, the leper approaches Jesus. And here he doesn't question Jesus' ability. [11:19] But rather his willingness. For the leper, it wasn't a matter of whether or not Jesus could heal. Jesus could heal. The question is, would he heal?

Was he willing? And it was a statement of great faith. If you will, you can make me clean. This response is so simple.

Yet immensely profound for you and I, the reader. You and me, the reader. Jesus touches the leper, which is noteworthy. Because there's this ritual defilement factor.

For when someone who is clean touches one who is unclean, they actually move from pure to impure, order to disorder, healthy to sick.

You and I observe this all the time in our world. Contaminants and impurities destroy the clean. It was the same in Jewish society.

[12:14] Imagine with me. Let's say I invited you over for a meal. And there, you see, I pull out of my kitchen.

What you perceive is expired or expired food. Moldy, little fungus-y. It's spinach, raw spinach that is wilted.

It's oozing. And then you watch me take that wilted spinach. And then I take this whole batch of freshly picked, clean spinach.

And there I mix it all together. And I serve it up. Would you eat it? No. Or let's say I took an expired jug of milk.

And there you see it. It's a little green. And right when I pop off the lid, it smells sour and foul. And I'm like, oh, don't worry about it. I get a fresh gallon.

[13:26] I just picked it up. I give you some of the old stuff. And give you top it off with the new stuff. I'm like, don't worry about it. Would you drink it? No.

Because you know the principle. Nothing unclean makes... If you take something that is contaminated and even a pure substance and mix them together, it doesn't become pure.

It's contaminated. It's contaminated. And here you see the principle at work. But it doesn't work. But it doesn't work the way you and I think it works.

For the leper to touch a person would be to contaminate them. But yet not so with Jesus. And here, the deliberate touch from Jesus is a blatant, flagrant violation of the law.

But a demonstration of let me show you something you've never seen. Let me show you what it looks like for a new kingdom, a new reality, new life to pour in.

[14:46] It is to say that what once governed your world is being overthrown. Better put, what once inflicted pain for the leper is now being pardoned.

See, what makes you socially and spiritually an outcast has now been removed. The leper is instructed to say nothing more. Rather, he's instructed to go fulfill the obligations and the duties of the Old Testament law.

And he's to approach the priest and to be restored back to the community. I can't help but imagine. It must have been a pretty rare occasion because there are Old Testament texts that demonstrate that leprosy was incurable.

And you imagine the leper comes to the priest that day and says, hey, I no longer have my leprosy.

And I can imagine the priest, I don't know if this has happened before. Let me, what were, I got to pull up Leviticus 14 again. What actually, what's the processes of this?

[16:05] How were you healed? He may have asked. And the leper would have simply responded. I was touched by Jesus. Well, here the law is upheld.

Perhaps better put, the law is fulfilled. Jesus was not here to dispel the law, but fulfill it. The law would actually require atonement.

And a new king or a willing healer had arrived. To provide it. The healing comes, we will find, at a great cost. And Matthew will tell us that at the end of, in verse 17.

But we're not quite there yet. But it is, we need to know, this is the opening miracle in the book of Matthew. From the hands of Jesus. From the hands of Jesus. It's carefully chosen to communicate something.

And it's here to communicate this. That anyone despairing in life. That anyone who is outcast.

[17:10] Anyone socially dead. And filled with shame incurred by some leprous disease. Anyone who is spiritually distant.

Anyone who is desperate. Jesus is willing to cleanse and receive. The leper was one who suffered in a world of sin.

As far as we know, it wasn't a result of a sin that he had committed. Rather, he fell victim to a sin-filled world. His body, his physical body, was violated.

His spatial boundaries were invaded. He was certainly guilt and shame ridden. And I know that's the case for some of us.

Spatial boundaries invaded. Our physical bodies violated. Damaged is the accusation of the devil.

[18 : 20] Worthless is the taunt of the wicked one. Unwanted is what your shame screams. And though you're among a whole group of people, you feel cut off.

But you need to do this. Go and see Jesus. He will by no means cast you away.

He will by no means shun you, regardless of how disgusting you feel about yourself. He wants you more than you want yourself. He is tender-hearted and a compassionate Jesus.

A willing Jesus. Able to heal and receive the outcast into his kingdom. Jesus is the willing healer.

He's a willing healer. He is also an able healer. Verses 5-13. Proceeding from the leper, Jesus enters Capernaum and is met by a social outsider.

[19 : 34] A centurion. A Roman officer. Gentile by birth. Outside the promises and the blessings and the goodness upon the nation of Israel.

And here he approaches Jesus on behalf of another. A loved one. Matthew notes, it is a suffering servant. In a commendable act of intercession, the centurion appeals to Jesus for his servant to be healed.

To this, Jesus demonstrates again his willingness to heal. I will come and heal him. And surprisingly, the centurion stops and halts.

Halts Jesus and expresses his unworthiness. It's an unworthiness that may have been rooted in him being a Gentile, possibly speaking with a Jew, and certainly not able to receive someone in his home.

But it's greater than that. The interaction conveys this sense of, Jesus, I actually, I don't want to inconvenience you. It's this little petty request that I have.

[20 : 46] I'm a foreign occupant. I wield the power of the Roman Empire. And I'm coming to ask you a favor for actually, not myself, but my servant.

One with little status or significance. And here it is. In a moment. In his ask, the centurion concedes all his earthly power.

The one who he knew had all the power. The one who had a little bit of earthly authority bows to the one who has all authority.

And an earthly centurion is certainly able to command men to go and to come and follow his orders. Now the centurion declares by faith that heaven's son is able to do the same, but not with people, rather with sickness and suffering.

His logic relies on the military chain of command. Superior officers exercise authority over those in whom they have command. Subordinates are commanded and they are obedient.

[22 : 04] It's the logic found in the rank and file system we see in the military. But the authority is specifically found in the spoken word.

I don't know if you caught that. The oral command. What is spoken by a centurion is followed by a subordinates.

He understood what was spoken by the son of God would be followed. What was spoken, what is spoken is achieved.

What is uttered is accomplished. What comes forth in speech is effective in action. The faith of the centurion rests on the spoken word of Jesus. Only just say the word.

You don't even have to make a step toward my home. You don't even have to turn to my home, toward my home. Just say the word.

[23 : 06] It would be reaffirmed in verse 16 that he would cast out spirits with a word. The centurion believed that a spoken word was all that was needed to heal the bedridden servant and to spare them from suffering.

He believed that Jesus had the power to heal from a distance. Remote healing, we may say. He could do his work without any spatial constraints.

Jesus had touched the leper to cleanse the leper. Jesus could tell sickness to leave and the suffering would be healed. The absurdity of the scene is there, isn't it?

Imagine if I showed up to my doctor's office. Doctor, what's wrong with you today? Oh, nothing. But my daughter. My daughter's lying in bed, unable to move, screaming in agony, bedridden, stricken, make her well.

Well, you need to bring her in. No, I can't bring her in. We have to run the tests. We have to monitor the symptoms.

[24 : 33] We have to diagnose her condition before we can treat her, even find out if it's a treatable illness. The ask would be absurd.

It's audacious, outlandish. Which doctor do you know that could heal remotely? Well, there's one here.

But what's the illness? Doesn't matter. whether it be stage one or stage four, it doesn't matter. Whether it be a fever, which we'll see in verse 14, or fatal, it doesn't matter. The centurion had resolved in his mind that before him stood an able healer.

Able he was because, according to verse 13, the servant is immediately healed. healed. The centurion's faith is commended and, according to Jesus, unrivaled up to that point in his ministry.

[25 : 46] The faith that is commended really shames the nation and the people of Israel. And here we see a grave warning beginning in verse 11. A grave warning is pronounced against the sons of the kingdom referring to the people of Israel.

They were sons of the kingdom of Israel. And those sons of the kingdom of Israel, they would be found or warned that they could be found outside the kingdom of heaven.

There's a party going on, a feast, a banquet. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are there. And they would be present at a meal table and guests would be assembled as far as from the east and in the west. It would be a table comprised of all people from all places. Shockingly, the presumption that all those of Jewish heritage would also sit at the table was dispelled by Jesus.

Guests would not be in attendance because of heritage or ethnic lineage or status. Rather, it would be faith. See, the centurion is one of many fulfilling the expectation of the Bible that there would be an gathering of people of all sorts, of all colors, from all places.

[27 : 07] I love how early church father Christosom writes about this. This is so, so good. Fourth century, the centurion came seeking healing.

healing. He got heaven. The centurion came seeking healing for another and he got heaven. I'm past the age where many of my peers are getting married and some of you are entering into that stage, that stage of life.

Friends, acquaintances, loved ones, co-workers are sending invitations to their big day. a save-the-date card arrives in your mailbox and it's communicating this, that there is a place for you. There's a seat that is being held for you. Inside that invitation is an RSVP card and there you note your meal preference and you put it in the already stamped and addressed envelope and you drop it, you're supposed to drop it in the mail.

Well, your friend's wedding day comes and there you go attend the beautiful wedding. You watch the ceremony and after the recessional you find your way to the reception and as you walk the magnificent banquet hall looking for your name card you fail to find it.

[28 : 42] you go to the host and ask, hey, there must be some mistake. You see and the host responds, actually, you're not on this guest list at all.

But I received the save of the date. I opened the invitation. I saw the self or the self-addressed stamped envelope.

I decided in my mind what I was going to order. And the host looks at you and said, did you RSVP? well, did you accept the invitation by responding in earnest?

You see, if the grace of God will not woo you into responding, the grace of God can certainly warn you into responding. And here it is, the fact that you read about a willing and able healer is meaningless unless you respond in faith to him.

a willing healer, an able healer, and here we go, a ready healer.

[30 : 08] The final scene shows a healer that is always ready. What had certainly been a full day concludes with the entrance to the home of Peter, the disciple.

Though a follower of Jesus, what we find is Peter's loved ones aren't exempt from sickness.

Immunity from sickness or invincibility against disease was not an apostolic superpower bestowed upon the apostles or their loved ones.

There is Peter's mother-in-law sick with a fever, helpless, a helpless woman, and it would be toward her that Jesus turns to help.

It must be noted in passing, and I'll just mention this so you could explore it on your own. But what you have in Matthew's three opening miracles is this.

The three social strata that shape the barriers of Jewish religious life are all present here. You have a leper, you have a Gentile, and you have a woman.

[31 : 16] And if you're familiar with the setup of the temple or the worship system of Judaism, you might think of the temple grounds, and you might know that there are dividers.

Lepers were not allowed close to the temple. They were outside the city, outside the camp. They could not enter. The next barrier was a courtyard, a courtyard that belonged only to the Gentiles. You can only get this far if you're a Gentile, of which the centurion himself could never move beyond. And past the courtyard of the Gentiles, there you would find the courtyard that belonged to the women, of which no women could move beyond.

And what you begin to see is as if Jesus starting far out from the city, walks towards the temple, the holy of holies where God resides.

And on the way, he picks up the leper and says, come on, come on, let's go. And passing all the disease and the outcasts, he encounters a Gentile, a centurion, come on, let's go.

[32 : 40] but I can't go past that barrier. Oh, no, no. And there he picks up a woman and says, come on, let's go.

Where are we going? We're going to the holy of holies. I can't go in there. Oh, no, no, come on, let's go. From the outside, the court of the Gentiles, the court of the women, Jesus proceeds and walks. We're going to the holy place, the holy of holies, and I'm taking everyone with me. It's as if Jesus accompanies all people to meet his father and the holiest of holies.

The image is beautiful. The image is true. Well, in this third scene, what needs to be noted is that is Jesus's unsolicited mercy.

Unsolicited mercy. Jesus is more ready to cleanse and to heal than you are even willing to ask or inquire. Look at this. Sick mother-in-law.

[33 : 56] No requests. No verbal exchange. No conversation. No prayer. No intercession. all we see is the merciful initiative of a merciful healer, of a ready healer.

all it was, was the passing touch of her hand. His readiness is demonstrated that now at the end of the day, without any human initiative, we observe God's, the son of God's divine initiative of grace. Catch this. Even when you're not asking for help, Jesus is giving it. Even when you're not looking for help, Jesus is providing it.

You and I may be completely oblivious to his kindnesses, but such is the heart of God. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.

His mercies never come to an end. His goodness and his grace are not even contingent on you asking for it.

[35 : 07] His eagerness, his readiness to heal is present even when you don't believe you need it. And the picture is astounding.

It's evening and I picture there is a line around the block trying to get into Peter's home. Yes. At least on that night, the hospital beds in Capernaum were emptied.

At least on that night, the demonic ward was vacated. Why?

Well, there was a willing, able, and ready healer. it must have been a scene to behold. It would have been spectacular.

The blind receive their sight. The lame walk. The lepers are cleansed. The ears of the deaf are unstopped. The dead are raised up. The poor have the good news preached to them.

[36 : 18] The kingdom of God had broken in. It had invaded. It was pervading. and the life that was pouring forth from the king was flowing into all its inhabitants.

You can only imagine the joy, the gladness, and the ecstasy that rang throughout Capernaum. A willing, able, and ready healer.

Empty hospitals, vacated wards. And I'm going to conclude in this way. Hospitals are not emptied at no cost.

There is no hospital stay that you will have that is complimentary. There is no hospice care that is free.

there are no infirmaries that run without price. And Matthew leaves us with verse 17.

[37 : 31] It becomes the governing verse for all three of these scenes. And it's certainly the most arresting. Because though free for the healed, what you read about in verse 17, it would be costly for the healer.

The patient should pay the cost. Yet in this kingdom, it's somehow inverted. The patient is healed and the cost is paid by the physician.

The leper is cleansed, but the price is paid by the priest. The suffering servant is healed, but the price is paid by the sovereign king.

And this is the economics of divine grace. This is the price of grace. This is the expense of grace. you may think about all the benefits that come without cost, but Matthew shows you the ledger, and it's right there in verse 17, and you have to be aware of this, that he took our illnesses and bore diseases.

There are many, there's much ink written on this and how this applies, and there are layers to it, but I want us to get to one point. Matthew wants us to be clear that their cleansing and their healing, that our cleansing and our healing comes at a cost.

[39 : 09] Let me explain how everything happened. It is here that we begin to sense this act of substitution, that somehow that here Jesus becomes some suffering substitute.

If the verse is extracted from Isaiah 53 4, the king would become the pauper somehow. There would be an exchange, a transaction, a trade.

It would be unfair for both parties involved. My sin for my salvation? My sorrow for gladness? my sickness for eternal health?

And Isaiah would assert that this king, namely Jesus, was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief and sickness. In our place, condemned he stood, but it wasn't only for our sin, it was also for our suffering.

You see, the leper who was forced to live outside the city. Traded places with Jesus.

[40 : 24] Bible writers are very clear on this, that when Jesus was crucified, he was crucified outside the city. That somehow Jesus, upon a cross, was emblematic of being unclean and unwelcome, and he would bear the condition of the leper.

The suffering servant, he healed, he actually ultimately becomes. The service he would receive at the hands of Peter's mother-in-law would be the service he would give himself to, for he was a king that came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.

And what we begin to piece together is that though our physical infirmities are great, God's ultimate concern is not with our physical infirmities, but with our spiritual infirmity.

You can be healed from a physical infirmity, but spiritually perishing. But let me tell you the flip side. you can be healed from your spiritual infirmity, and your physical infirmities are all eternally resolved.

There is no promise in this life from physical ailments, but I can assure you they are temporary. Be assured this morning that there is a healer, a healer who is willing to cleanse you from all unrighteousness, a healer who is able to mend and to heal the broken hearted, a healer that is ready to receive all who come and call out to him, and his name is Jesus, and he is licensed to heal.

[42 : 28] all. Oh, Father, whether it be lepers, or sufferers, or fever holders, those are just but glimpses.

We all know the condition of our hearts, bent in on ourselves, rebellious, defiant, and so, Father, preeminently before physical healing, would you heal our hearts?

Would you create in us hearts that are reassembled so that we can worship and serve you?

So create in us, Lord, clean hearts who worship, serve, and adore you. Help us to this end, we pray.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.