

# The King who cleanses untouchables

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Preacher: Chris Lowe

[ 0 : 00 ] Zach, thank you. Okay, so here's our question for this morning, big on the screen. What hope is there for us in the face of disease and despair and death?

! So, let's begin with two things. Firstly, in Matthew 8 and 9, as if you and I need reminding of this, we will come face to face with the raw and desperate reality of life in this ruined world.

We're going to meet not just this leper here, we'll meet a servant who's lying paralysed and suffering terribly. We'll meet a woman sick with fever at the point of death. We'll meet a man in the first stages of grief who is desperate to bury his father.

We'll meet disciples in a boat engulfed in a storm, fearing that they will drown. We'll meet men in the grip of demons engaged in mindless violence. We'll meet a young girl who is dead and her father distraught.

And we'll meet a woman bleeding uncontrollably for 12 years. Real people, 2,000 years ago, suffering terribly.

[ 1 : 22 ] Facing disease and disaster and disorder. Despair, decay and death. Of course, life in the first century was a touch different from now.

It was a touch different. A third of people in the first century Israel were dead by the age of six. And so, if you made it into your teens, you might live till 35 or 40 if you were lucky. There was no NHS. There was no modern technology. There was no one to take away the dead body before anyone sees. And so, these things were a touch more in your face back then. However, our life experience in God's world is no different today.

Beneath the face cream and the smiles. We know this. Don't need to rattle on about this. That disease and disorder and disaster mark our days. And despair and decay and death grip us.

I don't need to remind you of that as we walk into 2026. Tomorrow lunchtime, I'm taking the funeral of Stephen Taylor, who lived at number 32 I seen away.

[ 2 : 25 ] And he died suddenly at home aged 58 three weeks ago. And his family are distraught. Here in Matthew 8 and 9 then, laid out for us, we will see the raw and desperate reality of life in this ruined world.

But we will not just see that. Because secondly, through these chapters, we will come face to face again and again wonderfully with one man. With the one man in history who is able to help us.

And his name, of course, is Jesus. Jesus, who Matthew's Gospel is going to show us, came into this death gripped world as God's King with all authority.

He came with the authority to deal with the disease and despair and death that so mark us. He came that he might ultimately do away with everything that so ruins our lives.

Matthew chapters 1 and 2 begin with his birth narrative. We heard this in December in the run up to Christmas. He is Jesus. He's God's saving King born into the world.

[ 3 : 33 ] In Matthew 3 and 4, as a grown adult, his public ministry begins. He was baptized and tested. He began to preach, repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near. I have come.

I have come. He called his first disciples. He went throughout Galilee in the north of Israel, teaching, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing. Matthew chapters 5 to 7 is his famous Sermon on the Mount, where he taught his disciples and the listening crowds how things are and how things should be in his saving kingdom as people come to him and accept him as their King of Lords, King and Lord.

And now at the end of Matthew chapter 7, verse 28, which Zach read, see what happens. When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowd were amazed at his teaching because he taught as one who had authority and not as the teachers of the law.

And so now in chapters 8 and 9, having heard him teach with authority as God's King, the crowds and we are invited now to witness him act with authority as God's King.

Ask the question this morning, what hope is there for us in the face of disease and despair and death? And the answer will come that your and my only hope is found in him.

[ 4 : 58 ] It is only in him. So with all that in mind, that longish introduction, step into chapter 8, verses 1 to 4 and see this concretely.

First thing in these verses, the raw and desperate reality of life in this ruined world. So point one, meet the leper, unclean, decaying and dying.

Let me read from verse one. When Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him and a man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.

Of all the diseases in the first century, leprosy struck special fear into the hearts of those who had it and those around. Why? Leprosy here is some sort of chronic skin disease.

It's not surface spots or a bit of eczema, just put some cream on. It is something much, much deeper. Sores maybe that have opened and festered.

[ 6 : 07 ] Spreading disease in him, considered infectious, gnawing into him, disfiguring him, maybe. Centuries beforehand in the Bible, Miriam's skin turned leprous as white as snow.

Aaron cried out in desperation, Do not let her be like one of the dead with its flesh half eaten away. This terrifying disease, moreover, was considered virtually incurable.

Centuries beforehand, again, Naaman had leprosy. He came to the king of Israel seeking a cure.

The king tore his robes and said, Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life?

Because to heal a leper would be like giving new life to a decomposing corpse. You can't do it. So picture this man coming and kneeling before Jesus with his incurable festering disease.

There is a touch more to say though. Because you see, as a man with leprosy, it is not just that he suffers physically. Alongside that, he suffers socially and spiritually.

[ 7 : 19 ] And that is because under the Old Testament Jewish law given by God in Leviticus, his leprosy marks himself out as unclean, as ritually unclean.

He is considered to be contaminated and toxic. He is unfit, this man, to be in the presence, not just of other people, but of God himself.

And from Leviticus, here are the God-given instructions. Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, unclean, unclean.

As long as they have the disease, they remain unclean. They must live alone. They must live outside the camp. So not just physical suffering, you see.

He has to stay away from others. Cut off from God. Untouchable. Alone. You say, why?

[ 8 : 20 ] Like, it sounds awful. Why would God do that? Why would God add to this person's physical suffering by excluding them like this? Just pause and think about this for a second.

To be very, very clear, please hear this. Don't think that somehow leprosy shows this man to be morally worse in God's eyes than any healthy-skinned person or you and me.

Now, this man is not more deserving of being labelled unclean and cut off for anything he is or anything he's done. No, no, no, no. Because the Bible teaches with painful clarity that since the first man and woman turned away from God in rebellion, all of us inherit and own their contaminating sin.

Our rebelling against God's words and deeds pollute us like sewage in a river or like mould on a ceiling and make us morally unclean, unfit to be in the presence of a pure and holy God.

That's all of us. That's all of us. And that is why you and I and all people left to ourselves will decay and die under the judgment of God and be cut off from him for all eternity.

[ 9 : 40 ] This leper is no morally worse than any healthy-skinned person. Rather, he is like us. And we are very much spiritually like him, all of us.

And in fact, that is why the Old Testament laws surrounding leprosy are given as far as I understand. The Old Testament book of Leviticus is full of God-given pictures and rituals designed to teach people if and how they may come into the presence of a pure and holy God.

And the leper and how he is treated is a kind of stark God-given picture for the people.

Because the leper is a kind of can't-miss-it-in-your-face embodiment of the human condition that affects us all.

That is, in Old Testament times and today, you look at the leper and you are meant to see yourself. He is physically diseased, richly unclean, decay and death mark him.

[10:49] We are spiritually diseased by nature, morally unclean, decay and death mark us. As long as the leper has the disease, he must live alone, untouchable, outside the camp.

As long as you and I are infected by our rebellious sin, we remain unclean, untouchable, outside God's kingdom and cut off from him for good.

Firstly this morning, see ourselves by nature. Meet the leper, suffering physically, cut off spiritually, separated socially.

This morning, 11th of January, start of 2026, us who are here, I wonder how you see yourself naturally.

If you feel that you are naturally pretty, spiritually clean and morally pure in and of yourself, the Christian faith will make very, very little sense to you. You've got to know that. And to be honest, if we consider ourselves by ourselves to be fit to be in the presence of God, we really won't see much need or any need for Jesus Christ.

[12:05] And our religion, our faith will be flat, there will be nothing to it. My guess is though, and I know this, that for many of us, whether we've been Christians for decades or we're just starting to look into the Christian faith, we do know deep down, don't we, what we're like.

We're aware of the unclean thoughts and words and deeds that flow out from us. We are aware of a kind of spiritual leprosy.

Actually, many of us suspect that if other people really knew us, they wouldn't want to come near us. And many of us know that by ourselves, we are not fit to be in the presence of God.

Many of us, moreover, have come to realise that like the leper, we can't change our spots. We can't make ourselves better by ourselves.

And that is probably why many of us, as we read this, can connect with the leper here. Can you connect with him? This man who, so aware of his desperate need for help, breaks through the crowd and comes to Jesus.

[13:19] Two things for us to grab hold of this morning. Firstly, darkly, meet the leper, unclean, decaying and dying. But secondly, now gloriously in these verses, meet the king who cleanses untouchables and overturns death.

Look at this with me. Come back to the text. I love the approach of this man to Jesus. Can you imagine it? There are crowds surrounding Jesus and I guess like the sea parting, they pull back in horror as the leper makes his way forward.

You can't touch him. Don't go near him. And yet still he came, the man, verse 2, and he knelt before Jesus. He fell and worshipped him. The word is here.

Like the wise men. And he said to him, Lord. Which is right. That the long promised king comes into the world. You are meant to kneel before him and say Lord.

And he said to him, Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean. Which is such a stunning thing to say. You can do it, Lord Jesus.

[14:31] You are able. You can give life to my decomposing flesh. I know that. I believe that. But will you?

Are you willing, Lord, to reach out and down to me, even me? Am I overstating things to say?

That at this moment, the whole experience of humanity hangs on what happens next. I'm asked at the beginning, what hope is there for us in the face of disease and despair and death?

Lepers cannot heal themselves. Spiritual lepers cannot make themselves fit for the presence of God. Those who are diseased and decaying and dying are out of their depth and helpless.

There is one who can supposedly cleanse us. But will he? I'm sure I've mentioned this before. Rio de Janeiro in Brazil is a sprawling city of six million or so people.

[15:36] And it's famous for its slums, its favelas, cramped shanty towns down below. Overflowing with families and crime and parties and disease and noise and mud.

They are vibrant places. And yet they are places of suffering and fear. And I've never been to Brazil, but high above those slums on the Corcovado mountain stands the massive statue of Christ the Redeemer with his arms outstretched.

Up there in the sky is the Son of God, majestic and pure and far above that place of dirt and suffering below. And there is a story told of a poor man from the slums who climbs up the mountain to speak with the Son of God.

He wrote, I have climbed up to you, Christ, from the filthy, confined quarters down there to put before you most respectfully these matters. There are a million of us down there.

And you? Do you remain up here surrounded by divine glory? Go down there. The point of the Gospels and history is that in Matthew 1, the very first Christmas, Jesus did come down.

[16:47] He is Emmanuel, God with us. He is the only hope of the world. And now in Matthew 8, the leper, distressed and unclean, looks up at him and says, Lord, are you willing?

Are you willing now to make the final step and reach down and touch me, even me, and make me clean? You're meant to see verse 3.

It's such a short passage, every word counts. Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. I am willing, he said. Be clean.

Don't you love that? Jesus' hand, his touch, his assurance, his command. And immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy.

That's a straight up miracle. Just a touch and a word from Jesus and molecules move and bacteria flee and rotten flesh is healed and made whole immediately, there and then.

[17:53] And there's a very beautiful line in one of the Lord of the Rings books. The hands of the king are healing hands.

And thus shall the rightful king be known. What does this cleansing of the leper show us about Jesus? What does it show us? In a few chapters time, John the Baptist will hear about the deeds of Jesus and he'll send his disciples and ask Jesus, Are you the one who is to come?

Are you the one that Isaiah 35 looked to and promised or should we expect someone else? Are you God's king? Come with all God's authority to establish God's kingdom and do away with all that ruins our lives.

And in Matthew 11 verse 4, let me read, Jesus replied, listen to this, Go and report to John what you hear and what you see. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.

Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me. That is, look at what I do. See how those with leprosy are cleansed. I am he.

[19:12] I don't know what you make today, middle of January, about the person of Jesus.

Matthew 8 verses 1 to 4, meet the king, the divine son of God who came with all God's authority, wonderfully willing and able to cleanse untouchables and conquer disease and decay and death, and utterly able to restore people like the leper and you and me to God today.

In verse 4, Jesus said to the man, see that you don't tell anyone, but go and show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded as a testimony to them.

Under the Old Testament Jewish law in Leviticus, if a person had a skin condition that cleared up, they were to go to the priest, be examined, then offer a gift, a sacrifice, and they would be declared clean.

And they would be welcomed back into the camp and restored to God, not alone outside anymore, but included with their God. And Jesus says to the man, you do that so that you will be restored and welcomed back into the presence of the God who has made you clean.

And the day will come, you know, in the future when the Lord Jesus Christ who lives and reigns today, he will do away fully and finally with disease and decay and death.

[20:46] His kingdom will come in all its fullness. You can be absolutely sure of that. And before then, right now today, he offers to all who will come to him the spiritual cleansing that we so desperately need.

You and I who, on our own and by ourselves, are marked with a spiritual leprosy. Having reached out his hand and touched the man in Matthew 8, just a couple of years later, toward the end of the Gospels, Jesus reached out his hands once more on the cross.

Although Jesus was morally pure and spotless, Jesus was taken outside the camp like a banished leper and he was crucified.

And absorbing into himself the moral uncleanness of a vast number of people, he died for us in our place, bearing in himself our polluting sin and guilt.

He died and was cut off, was made a leper. So that today, as we kneel before him and call him Lord, he can touch us and say to us, be clean.

[22:08] You are now fit to be in the presence of God for all eternity. That's what the Lord Jesus Christ does for us today.

