

The Compassion of Christ

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[0 : 0 0] All right, we are jumping back into Matthew's Gospel, which we will be in up until Advent, which is the four weeks leading up to Christmas. And during those few months, we're going to look at chapters 8 to 11.

Tonight, just the first 17 verses of chapter 8. Let me give you a little bit of context of chapter 8. Matthew is a very clear writer.

He seems to have had a very tidy mind. Let me give you an example. Back in chapter 4, verse 23, Matthew summarizes what Jesus is doing.

And here's what he says. He goes, And he went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. Teaching and healing.

Here's what Jesus is going to be about. He's going to be about teaching. He's going to be about healing. So that's right at the end of chapter 4. And then what happens immediately after chapter 4?

[1 : 0 2] We get two chapters of teaching. The Sermon on the Mount. And what happens immediately after that? We get a couple of chapters on healings. Jesus is a flurry of healings.

A couple of chapters on teaching. A couple of chapters on healing. And Matthew encourages us to hold these two things together because they explain one another. So that's the context. Let's get into the verses.

I'll start with this. If you read this passage unthoughtfully, you might conclude that it is about faith.

And that if you just believe enough, miracles will happen. But the relationship between faith and miracles presented here is quite mixed. The centurion had great faith.

The servants, on the other hand, will have got no idea about this sort of paralyzed servant. The leper's faith was uncertain. We know nothing about the faith of Peter's mother-in-law.

[2 : 1 0] And the demon-possessed probably had no faith. So our conclusion can only be this. The relationship between faith and miracles is a complex one.

It's not a linear relationship. And that's fine. Because our attention in the passage is not drawn to the miracles so much as it's drawn to the miracle maker.

It's not so much about the people's faith, but rather about this amazing Jesus. And three things in particular about Jesus the passage highlights.

Firstly, the compassion of Christ. Secondly, the authority of Christ. And lastly, the kingdom that he rules over. So that's where we're headed for the next ten minutes.

The compassion of Christ, the authority of Christ, and the kingdom he rules over. Firstly, the compassion of Christ. So our reading here that Isaac read so well has three short healings.

- [3 : 18] And the first thing that you'll note about these healings is they're all the wrong people. If Jesus is trying to impress, if Jesus is trying to establish a secular kingdom, he's healing the wrong people.
- There's no kings or princesses. There's no important political leaders here, is there? There's no one. There's no one. It's a leper, a centurion, and a woman. I'll get to the woman shortly.
- The leper. Lepers couldn't go to the temple. They couldn't even live in the city. They lived outside of the city in these colonies with other lepers.
- They had to yell out unclean three times.
- Unclean! Unclean! Unclean! They would yell that out so people could avoid them. They were the lowest rung of society.
- [4 : 29] On the lowest rung of society, they were the archetypal untouchable. Now the centurion. He was a Gentile. So that's a problem for Jewish people back in the days.
- But not only was he a Gentile, he was a member of the occupying force. He was the equivalent of a Nazi captain in the Netherlands in World War II.
- So proper Jewish people wouldn't even go into the house of a Gentile. It would make them ritualistically unclean. But Jesus is willing to go into his house.
- So we have the leper, the centurion, and next the woman, the mother-in-law of Peter, who's sick. Even a healthy Jewish woman could only participate in religious life so far.
- In the temple, there was a wall. Couldn't go past it. There was a point where only men could go in. So we have these three stories of healings.
- [5 : 30] And they're all the wrong people. If Jesus is trying to impress us. Three outsiders. One is racially excluded. One is physically excluded.
- One is sexually excluded from worship in the temple. And yet they're the ones that Jesus heals first. What's Matthew trying to tell us? He's trying to tell us about the great compassion of Jesus.
- Jesus is more willing to heal than we know. And especially those on the outside. He loves to help those who the world sees as unworthy or unclean or unequal.
- And you're going to have a great opportunity to hear more about that in a couple of weeks. Julia Bayless is going to put on something like a lunar's exchange before the evening service to talk about her work down in Jacob's well in a couple of weeks.
- But I love these stories. One of the reasons I love them so much is that... I mean this leper would have looked horrendous. And yet there is... There is nothing that repulses Jesus.
- [6 : 41] And that is wonderful news. That's really good news. Now there's no lepers here. But you might feel like you're a bit banished.
- I've walked into church with people. I remember walking into church with a guy and I heard him say just quietly to somebody beside him, I don't belong here. I shouldn't be here.
- This is not true. I mean think about this leper story. Why is it such good news to us? This man would have repulsed people. He was a horror. A horror to society.
- He had to cover his face whenever he went out into public. He says to Jesus, Lord, if you will, you can make me clean. Do you see what he's saying? He knows Jesus can heal him.
- He knows Jesus can physically heal him. He's just not sure if he will. And why wouldn't he be sure? Because all he knows is rejection. All he knows is exclusion.

[7 : 45] And he probably anticipates that Jesus will treat him like every other religious leader. Like every other person that's ever seen him. But what does Jesus do?

Verse 3, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him. That's a simple act, right? And here's the thing.

We know Jesus didn't have to do that. He heals the centurion's servant with the thought, you know, a couple of miles away. Reaching out and touching this man was like a gratuitous and completely unnecessary act.

Jesus could have healed him by looking at him with a thought. But he touched him. But he touched him. To the horror of those around him. This man probably hadn't been touched in years.

I think just thinking on the compassion of Christ here is so helpful to us. Especially when we think we don't belong.

[8 : 50] Because of sexuality. Because of sexuality. Ethnically. Physically. Perhaps you come here bearing the shame of an awful addiction.

Divorce. Or just thinking you're not as good as others. With deep insecurities. But whatever reason you're here. Whatever reason you think you don't belong. You can't participate fully in this community.

I want you to know Jesus loves you. That he came for you. That he wants you to know healing and restoration. You think, yes, Aaron, but you just don't know the stuff.

You don't know about my stuff. I've got a lot of stuff. I'll ruin. I'll ruin this place. Remember when Jesus touched the leper.

What happened? Jesus didn't catch the leper's uncleanness. The leper caught Jesus' cleanness. And that's what happens when we come to Jesus.

[10 : 00] Trusting that he is good. And he loves us. And he accepts us. Folks, Christ's compassion is for you. I love this little detail in verse 4 here as well.

There's an odd little detail. Jesus says to the leper, don't tell anyone. I don't know what that's about. I think it's probably something to do with Jesus' freedom of movement. You know, perhaps he's saying, if you tell everyone it'll be crazy, I'll have to leave the town.

I've got stuff I need to do here because everyone will crowd me or something like that. I don't know. But the next part is very interesting. He says, go tell a priest and do this sacrifice thing.

Right? He says, that's what you should do next. Now, why is that? And that's because if the healing was authenticated by a priest, by a religious leader, it was like then officially stamped as an authentic healing.

You are definitely healed from your leprosy. The man could go home to his family, to his friends. It wasn't just a physical healing. It was a complete restoration. A restoration to the whole community.

[11 : 06] That's the extent of Christ's compassion. The leper gets more than he asks for. And if that's hard for you to get your head around, if you can't believe that, if you can't believe that for you, that Jesus could do that for you, if the shame is quite deep, what you need is prayer.

You need the Holy Spirit to speak into your heart. You need a miraculous thing to happen in your heart. And so after the service, when we have a couple of folks over here who are willing to pray, would you go and talk to them?

And they will pray for you. They'd love to do that. Okay, let's keep moving and quicker now. We've talked about the compassion of Christ, and there's much more to say about that. It's such a wonderful thing to talk about.

Let's move on and talk about the second thing, the authority of Jesus that comes through. And this is a huge theme here. Chapter 7 ends with Matthew talking about Jesus preaching. And it says, like, no one preached like this guy.

He preached like one with authority, it says. And then at the end of all these healing stories, right at the end of chapter 8, it says again that people were amazed at his authority.

[12 : 13] So clearly, authority is a big issue here. So how do we see it in the passage? I love this little interaction with the centurion. He says to Jesus, look, you don't even need to come to my house to heal the servant.

Just sort of say it. I know what's going to happen. The centurion says to Jesus, I know how authority works. And he tells Jesus about his own little experience with authority.

He's a centurion, right? So a century, a hundred, he's got a hundred soldiers under him. He goes, with my hundred guys, I know whatever I say just goes. My word is law. I say it, they do.

And it's a remarkable level of understanding. He must have given a lot of thought to who Jesus was, what he'd heard about Jesus. Perhaps he had experience with Jesus, I don't know. But he's saying to Jesus, I know what authority looks like in my little sphere, and your sphere is the whole world.

You say it, and it will happen. My servant will be healed. And Jesus loved this man's understanding of authority. It delighted him.

[13 : 14] It shocked him and delighted him. I think that's just brilliant. And we see that authority played out in all the healings. We see that they're all quite different. The leper is healed with a touch and a word.

The centurion healed with just a word. The woman right at the end, just a touch, no words. There's no potions.

There's no potions. There's no Dungeons and Dragons player. There's no amulets of power. There's no water. There's no holy water. Jesus just has the authority.

He can just say it. He can just think it. He can make it happen. He can do this because he operates with the authority of God. And this is great, isn't it?

He can't accept that humanity has an inbuilt resistance to authority. Through the rise of modernity and enlightenment in the 18th century, there was this great sort of push to overturn authority, authority that existed outside of the self.

[14 : 30] The goal was we become our own moral authorities. And we've inherited this way of thinking. It's in our bones. So today, if you really wanted to offend somebody, if you wanted to say something crazy bonkers, what you'd say to them is this.

You'd say, sir, ma'am, there is an authority outside of you that is more fundamental than your own experience.

It is more real than your own experience of life. And you should submit to it. But that is, that's an awful thing to say to somebody in this current cultural climate.

But you're just talking about God, aren't you? You're just talking about the reality of God. This is why this passage and the authority parts in it. It's kind of why we love it and sort of hate it, I think. Because even within evangelical kind of circles, particularly amongst those who are pushing against that label, I think even Christians sometimes, we like to pick and choose our morality.

And of course, this makes no sense. If Christ is who he seems to be as described in the Gospels, then he gets to judge our views.

[15 : 48] He gets to judge our actions. He gets to judge our thoughts. Or we wholly reject him. We can't pick and choose. There's no middle place here.

John Stott, the old Anglican theologian preacher, pastor, he wrote this little essay on authority. And he says this, What possible right do we have to be selective about Jesus' teaching?

What possible right do we have to be selective about Jesus' teaching? The middle ground, there is none. If you think you're living in one, you're living a fragmented life.

Authority. Authority. It's a big thing for the passage. And it's a difficult one for us to get our heads around sometimes. But let's move on. A lot more to say about it. We've got to keep moving here.

All right. We've spoken about the compassion of Christ, the authority of Christ, and now, very quickly, the kingdom of Christ. One of the things about miracles of the Bible, I talked about this last week, is they're not just naked displays of power.

[16 : 54] Jesus is not just walking around blowing up mountains with laser beam eyeballs or something like that, right, to impress people. He doesn't have, they're not party tricks. They're signs.

The Bible calls them signs. They're miracles. And as well as being, obviously, incredibly beneficial to the recipient of these miracles, more than that, these miracles, these signs, point to something beyond themselves.

They're like these giant billboards trying to tell us something. And in our passage, it's like a giant billboard that says, God wants to restore all things.

These healings point to the world God wants in the future. Jesus dealt here with miserable human suffering. Dealing with this stuff is important to him.

And it tells us that God wants to deal with it all one day, completely. Even the most awful lives, even the most difficult lives can be restored.

[18 : 01] God wants to do that. That's his goal. In his book, The Great Divorce, C.S. Lewis says this. He goes, It's the answer to Sam's question at the end of The Lord of the Rings.

Is everything sad going to come untrue? Yes. Yes, it will. God has made his intention very clear in these healings.

And wonderfully, he wants to restore all things. And we will get to experience in that part of that now, even in our community at St. John's Evening Service, but in its fullness one day when Christ returns.

What else do we say about the kingdom of God here? Well, there's this very interesting line in the centurion story. After being amazed at his faith, astounded at his faith.

He's astounded because it should have been the religious leaders who got this, but they didn't. It was a soldier, the Nazi, basically, that understood him better than the local religious leaders.

[19 : 23] After being amazed at his faith, Jesus says these words in verse 10, 11, 12. He says, Right, do you see what he's saying here?

They're reclining at the table, but heaven is often portrayed in the Bible as this giant banquet that people are invited to. And the Hebrew people assumed it was going to be a Jewish banquet.

And Jesus rewrites the script here. He says people from the rest of the world, the east and the west, are going to be there as well. And then he says the hard line, the hard word.

He says those on the outside will be in, and those who assumed they would be in will be outside. Those who assumed they would be in will be outside.

Because entry into heaven, eternity with God, is not based on ancestry. It's based on faith. And I know all that gnashing of teeth business, that sounds so brutal, doesn't it?

[20 : 38] But this is primarily not there to frighten non-believers. It's primarily there. It's a warning. It's a warning to those who think they're believers, who assume salvation based on anything but Christ.

And the further clue to this is found in verse 17. Quoting from Isaiah, Jesus says, he took our illnesses and bore our diseases. The only way God, the only way to God is through Christ, through the cross.

Jesus is the great healer. He is the great teacher. But mostly, he's the great rescuer. And he went to the cross, and on himself, he took the punishment for our sin, our rejection of him.

And this is where the passage ultimately takes us, to the cross. Let me finish up here. So Jesus, Jesus. He flings the gates of the kingdom wide open and opens it up to all the wrong people, people like us.

And he is delighted to do that. It's his great delight to do that. And that's just wonderful, isn't it? This is the Jesus we follow.

[22 : 01] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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