

## *The Healing Authority of Christ*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on October 21, 2018.

*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. 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 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 the 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, 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 a 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' (Matthew 8:1-17).*

The Gospel of Matthew walks the reader through the ministry of Jesus Christ. From His royal lineage to the miraculous birth, from the flight to Egypt to His childhood in Nazareth, the subject of the historical narrative is Jesus. The prophet John the Baptist is introduced but for the sole purpose of introducing us to the man Jesus and the commencement of His earthly ministry. We witness Jesus' Jordan baptism and His wilderness temptation. We hear the words of His preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17), establishing the theme of His ministry. We watch as He calls the unlikeliest of disciples, a set of brothers, fishermen.

Jesus begins to be followed by great crowds as He preaches and heals diseases and afflictions among the people. And then, Matthew's narrative pauses, and we hear Jesus preach, a wide-ranging sermon on a mount, describing life for those who follow the King of heavenly kingdom at hand. At the conclusion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Matthew reveals the response of the original audience: "the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes" (Matt. 7:28-29). Such a response should not surprise us, given Matthew's narrative to this point. Indeed, we have heard the audible words of God the Father from heaven, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17).

The Son of God has authority, handed to Him by His Father and revealed to those of His own choosing (Matt. 11:27), an authority revealed first in his teaching. Similarly, just as the Sermon

on the Mount reveals the teaching authority of Jesus, so also His healing miracles reveal His healing authority. In our passage today we see three examples of the healing authority of Jesus. Through the historical accounts of a healed leper, a humble leader, and a helpful loved one, we see our healing Lord.

### **A Healed Leper**

Having concluded His sermon and descending from the mount, Jesus is abruptly confronted by an outcast of Jewish civil society, a leper. The word translated “leprosy” covers a broad spectrum of skin diseases, all requiring separation. According to Old Covenant law, “The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp” (Lev. 13:45-46). He could not hide his disease; he could not quietly assimilate into society. He lived a shamed and lonely life away from assembled worship and communion with God’s people. There is no doubt of this leper’s disease, nor his desperation. Falling on his knees before the descending Jesus, the leper pleads, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean” (Matt. 8:2).

Let us consider this leper’s words and Jesus’ response carefully. The leper addresses Jesus as “Lord,” acknowledging Jesus’ authority. He confesses that it is within Jesus’ power to heal and His sovereign choice to act: “if you will, you can.” He kneels before Jesus poor in spirit, believing that if Jesus will, He can heal him, rendering him ceremonially clean. Jesus’ response is unthinkable to His Jewish audience. Stretching out His hand, He touches the leper, rendering Himself ceremonially unclean. In this sense, the clean became unclean to make the unclean clean. Defiled by the human touch yet sovereignly willing and able, Jesus says simply, “I will; be clean” (Matt. 8:3). And immediately the leper was cleansed of his disease.

Jesus follows this miraculous healing with two commands: Say nothing and obey the Mosaic Law. The second command is easier to understand than the first. The Law contained specific purification rites to be followed at the conclusion of a skin disease. The Law given to Israel was to be obeyed by this child of Israel. And by virtue of compliance he would enjoy the benefits of assembled worship and communion with the clean.

The first command, to say nothing, reveals the purpose of Jesus’ healing authority. This is hard for us to understand because we often consider the extraordinary result of this miracle to be an end in itself. The leper was healed. His life is transformed. This mercy ministry is good. That’s it. But, that’s not just it. The miracles of Jesus have purpose, and it is not to entertain or lead us to fixate on the miraculous. The purpose of the miracles of Jesus are to validate the all-important message of Jesus: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” If this leper becomes a promoter for the miraculous it will hinder the ultimate mission of Jesus. Fanfare is not the objective; conversion of the heart is. In this healed leper, the healing authority of Jesus is revealed, validating the authority of His kingdom gospel. Proceeding from the mount, Jesus enters Capernaum and again is approached, not by a healed leper but by a humble leader.

### **A Humble Leader**

Matthew explains that the man is not a Jew but a Roman military officer, a centurion. The centurion had apparently heard of Jesus' healing authority. His presumption, like the leper, is that if Jesus is willing he can heal the centurion's suffering, paralyzed servant. Similarly, Jesus confesses that He is not only able but also willing to heal the servant.

Let us consider this centurion's words and Jesus' response carefully. Poor in spirit, the centurion confesses his unworthiness to have the Lord Jesus cross the threshold of his home. This is not self-deprecation; the centurion simultaneously confesses his unworthiness *and* his faith in Jesus' authority to heal: "only say the word, and my servant will be healed" (Matt. 8:8). What is the basis of this statement? The centurion explains, "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" (Matt. 8:9). The centurion had rightly deduced that just as he had authority over those who served under him, so the Lord Jesus had authority over all diseases and afflictions. Witnessing this simple, reasonable faith of a Gentile, Jesus confesses these condemning words, "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith" (Matt. 8:10). Matthew reveals what would later be confirmed: "the servant was healed at that very moment."

However, Jesus uses this moment of Gentile faith and subsequent healing to reveal a startling truth to Israel. The humble leader becomes the example of what is to come, an unexpected ministry of the Jewish Messiah. Jesus says, "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" (Matt. 8:11-12). In that moment, in the presence of the children of Israel and a Gentile centurion, Jesus reveals what Paul would later explain, "not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring" (Rom. 9:6-7). The kingdom of heaven is not populated by biological lineage but by faith, like that of a healed leper, by belief, like that of a humble leader. Paul explained to the Galatians that "it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham" (Gal. 3:7), and if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal. 3:29).

The centurion came seeking the healing authority of Jesus for his servant. What he got in addition was the promise of adoption into the eternal Israel of the kingdom of heaven. Having healed a leper and the servant of a humble leader, as Jesus left the public eye, he entered his disciple's home and encountered the need to heal a helpful loved one.

### **A Helpful Loved One**

He who had healed a leper and the centurion's servant "saw [Peter's] mother-in-law lying sick with a fever" (Matt. 8:14). Like the unclean leper, Jesus touched the sick woman, "and the fever left her, and she rose and began to serve him" (Matt. 8:15). As she served the Lord, He continued to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy: "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" (Isa. 53:4), or as Matthew renders it, "He took our illnesses and bore our diseases" (Matt. 8:17). Rather than be served behind the retreat of locked doors, Jesus mercifully cast out the spirits of the demon-oppressed and healed all who were sick. Through the signs of His healing authority, Jesus revealed His identity as the Christ, the Savior of His people, and rightful King of the Kingdom.

But as we consider the healing authority of Jesus, we must be careful not to fall into the same temptation to consider His miraculous healing as an end in itself. If the ministry of Jesus was simply about healing, then His disciples should have put Him upon a chariot and raced Him from village to village, seeking the maximum healing output. No, the healing authority of Jesus reveals that He is a healing Lord. And while sickness and disease are the plagues of this world, our greatest need is eternal. A healed body may enjoy this life but apart from faith in Christ the soul will go to hell.

### **A Healing Lord**

Like ostracized lepers, apart from our healing Lord, we are dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1). Yet, just as Jesus touched the unclean leper to make him clean, “For our sake [God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). Just as Jesus regarded the simple faith of that leper, so also “by grace you have been saved through faith. And it is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8). Like that humble leader, we come to Christ not based on our bloodline but based on God’s gracious act of redemption.

In the kingdom of heaven, our only right to “recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” is by virtue of our adoption in faith. Indeed, through faith we are the sons of Abraham. Rather than oppressed, we have received the Spirit of adoption as sons” (Rom. 8:15). For our Lord’s authority transcends not only the repercussions of original sin, but He has conquered our greatest disease, sin, and its consequence, death. By virtue of our healing Lord, we rejoice, “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” (1 Cor. 15:55). Indeed, “He took our illnesses and bore our diseases” upon the cross, healing us unto everlasting life. Such is the healing authority of Christ; such is the ministry of our healing Lord!

So do we offer praise to healing Lord: “to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.” (Jude 1:25).