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Jesus' Power over Disease

(Matthew 8:1-15)

1

And when He had come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed Him. And behold, a leper came to Him, and bowed down to Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean." And He stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing; be cleansed." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus said to him, "See that you tell no one; but go, show yourself to the priest, and present the offering that Moses commanded, for a testimony to them."

And when He had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, entreating Him, and saying, "Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering great pain." And He said to him, "I will come and heal him." But the centurion answered and said, "Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof, but just 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 this one, 'Go!' and he goes, and to another, 'Come!' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this!' and he does it." Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled, and said to those who were following, "Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel. And I say to you, that many shall come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." And

Jesus said to the centurion, “Go your way; let it be done to you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed that very hour.

And when Jesus had come to Peter’s home, He saw his mother-in-law lying sick in bed with a fever. And He touched her hand, and the fever left her; and she arose, and waited on Him. (8:1-15)

Matthew 8 begins where chapter 4 leaves off, with the Sermon on the Mount as a sort of parenthesis in between. At the end of chapter 4, Jesus was “going about in all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people. And the news about Him went out into all Syria; and they brought to Him all who were ill, taken with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics; and He healed them. And great multitudes followed Him from Galilee and Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan” (vv. 23-25). Jesus then “went up on the mountain” (5:1), where He preached His great sermon, and then came down from the mountain, still followed by “great multitudes” (8:1).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus turned the religious beliefs and practices of popular Judaism, especially those of the scribes and Pharisees, topsy-turvy. He had told them, in effect, that their teaching was wrong, their living was wrong, and their attitude was wrong. Virtually everything they believed in, stood for, and hoped in was unbiblical and ungodly. The Lord overturned their entire religious system and exposed them as religious hypocrites and spiritual phonies.

Unlike other Jewish teachers of that day, Jesus did not quote the Talmud, the Midrash, the Mishnah, or other rabbis. He recognized no written authority but the Old Testament Scripture and even put His own words on a par with Scripture. “The result was,” Matthew explains, “that when Jesus had finished these words [the Sermon on the Mount], the multitudes were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one with authority, and not as their scribes” (Matt. 7:28-29).

In establishing Jesus’ messiahship, Matthew demonstrated His legal qualification through His genealogy, His prophetic qualification through the fulfillment of prophecy by His birth and infancy, His divine qualification by the Father’s own attestation at His baptism, His spiritual qualification by His perfect resistance to Satan’s temptations, and His theological qualification through the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount.

In chapters 8 and 9 Matthew dramatically sets forth still another qualification: Jesus’ divine power. Through the miracles of these two chapters, Matthew shows beyond doubt that Jesus is, in fact, the very Son of God, because only God could perform such supernatural feats. In an astounding display of power, Jesus cleansed a leper, healed two paralytics, cooled a fever, calmed a storm at sea, cast out demons, raised a girl from the dead, gave sight to two blind men, restored speech to a man made dumb by demons, and healed every other kind of disease and sickness.

These two chapters are particularly critical to understanding the life and ministry of Christ. In this section Matthew records a series of nine miracles performed

by the Lord, each one selected out of the thousands He performed during His three-year ministry. The nine miracles of Matthew 8-9 are presented in three groups of three miracles each. In each group Matthew recounts the miracles and then reports the Jews' response.

Jesus' miracles were the supreme proof of His divinity and the irrefutable credentials of His messiahship. Matthew's purpose in recording the miracles, like Jesus' purpose in performing them, was to confirm His deity and His claim to be the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of the world. In many ways this section is the heart of Matthew's message.

When Jesus first called His twelve disciples, He charged them not to go to Gentiles or Samaritans but "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 'And as you go, preach, saying "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons; freely you received, freely give"' (10:5-8).

Tragically, however—and inexplicably from a human point of view—many of the Jews who saw Jesus' miracles concluded that He performed them by demonic rather than by divine power (Matt. 12:24). As more and more Jews rejected Him, Jesus turned His attention to the establishment of the Gentile church. He also began to speak more in parables, which the unbelieving Jews could not understand because of their spiritually hardened hearts (13:11-13).

It should be noted that the apostle John also recorded the miracles in his gospel as proof signs of Jesus' divinity and messiahship. When the Jewish leaders criticized Jesus for healing on the Sabbath, accused Him of blasphemy, and then sought to kill Him for claiming to be equal to God, "Jesus therefore answered and was saying to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing; and greater works than these will He show Him, that you may marvel. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes'" (John 5:16-21). A short while later He further explained, "The works which the Father has given Me to accomplish, the very works that I do, bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me" (v. 36).

Still later Jesus said to His Jewish listeners, "I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father's name, these bear witness of Me. . . . I and the Father are one" (John 10:25, 30). When "the Jews took up stones again to stone Him," Jesus said, "I showed you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you stoning Me? . . . If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father" (vv. 31-32, 37-38).

To His troubled disciples, who even late in His ministry could not comprehend His relationship to the Father, Jesus had to explain again, "Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. Believe Me that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me; otherwise believe on account of the works themselves" (John 14:10-11; 15:24).

In his stated purpose for writing this gospel, John says, “Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (20:30-31).

The first three miracles reported in detail by Matthew (cf. 4:23-24) all involve the healing of physical affliction. In New Testament times disease was rampant and medical science as we know it did not exist. If a person survived a serious disease, it was usually because the malady had run its course. Whether or not it was fatal, most disease caused great pain and suffering, for which there was little remedy. Sufferers were often left scarred, deformed, lame, or otherwise debilitated for the rest of their lives. Plagues would sometimes wipe out entire villages, cities, or even regions. The list of diseases was long, and life expectancy was short.

Many diseases are mentioned in Scripture. We read of various forms of paralysis and atrophy, which would encompass such things as muscular dystrophy and poliomyelitis. The Bible frequently speaks of blindness, which was rampant because it could be caused by countless forms of disease, infection, and injury. Deafness was almost as common and had almost as many causes. We are told of boils, infected glands, various forms of edema, dysentery, mutism and other speech disorders, epilepsy, intestinal disorders, and many unidentified diseases.

When Jesus healed, He did so with a word or a touch, without gimmicks, formulas, or fanfare. He healed instantaneously, with no drawn out period of waiting or of gradual restoration. He healed totally, not partially, no matter how serious the disease or deformity. He healed everyone who came to Him and even some who never saw Him. He healed organic as well as functional afflictions. Most dramatically and powerfully of all, He even raised the dead.

It is small wonder, therefore, that Jesus' healing miracles brought such immediate and widespread attention. For people who seldom had means to alleviate even the symptoms of disease, the prospect of complete cure was almost too astounding to be believed. Even the rumor of such a thing would bring a multitude of the curious and hopeful. For those of us who live in a society where basic good health is accepted largely as a matter of course, it is difficult to appreciate the impact Jesus' healing ministry had in Palestine. Jesus instructed the disciples not to take any money, because people would have paid them all they had for health, and that could easily have corrupted the disciples' motives and objectives (see 10:8-9). For a brief period of time, disease and other physical afflictions were virtually eliminated as Jesus went through the land healing thousands upon thousands (see Matt. 4:23-24; 8:16-17; 9:35; 14:14; 15:30; 19:2; 21:14; etc.). As Jesus Himself said on several occasions, His miraculous works alone should have been more than enough reason to believe in Him (John 10:38; 14:11). Such things had never happened before in the history of the world and could only have a divine cause. That is what made the rejection of the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and others so self-condemnatory. No one could deny that Jesus performed the miracles, and only the most hard-hearted resistance to the truth could make a person reject His divinity in the face of such overpowering evidence. Those who would not believe in Jesus were indicted by every miracle He performed.

In the first three miracles of Matthew 8, the Lord healed a leper, a paralytic, and a woman with a fever. Beside the fact that each of them involved healing, these three miracles have four other common characteristics. First of all, in each of them Jesus dealt with the lowest level of human need, the physical. Although even earthly life involves much more than the physical, the physical part has its importance, and Jesus was lovingly sympathetic to those with physical needs. He thereby revealed the compassion of God toward those who suffer in this life.

Second, in each of the first three miracles, Jesus responded to direct appeals, either by the afflicted person himself or by a friend or relative. In the first case the leper himself asked Jesus to make him clean (8:2); in the second the centurion asked in behalf of his servant (v. 6); and in the third (v. 14), several unnamed friends or relatives asked on behalf of Peter's mother-in-law; as we learn from the parallel account in Luke 4:38.

Third, in each of the first three miracles, Jesus acted by His own will. Though He was sympathetic to the needs of those who were afflicted and was moved by the appeals for help, He nevertheless acted sovereignly by His own volition (vv. 3,13,15).

Fourth, in all three miracles Jesus ministered to the needs of someone who, especially in the eyes of the proud Jewish leaders, was on the lowest plane of human existence. The first person He helped was a leper, the second was a Gentile soldier and his slave, and the third was a woman. We learn from John that Jesus first revealed His messiahship to a despised Samaritan adulteress in Sychar (John 4:25-26), and we learn from Matthew that these three miracles of His early ministry served the humblest members of society. Our Lord showed special compassion toward those for whom society had special disdain.

THE WRETCHED MAN: A LEPER

And when He had come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed Him. And behold, a leper came to Him, and bowed down to Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean." And He stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing; be cleansed." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus said to him, "See that you tell no one; but go, show yourself to the priest, and present the offering that Moses commanded, for a testimony to them." (8:1-4)

The **great multitudes** that **followed** Jesus **when He had come down from the mountain** did not do so because they adored Him as their Messiah. Most of the crowd, no doubt, was simply curious, never before having seen anyone perform miracles or heard anyone speak with such authority (4:23-25; 7:28-29). They were uncommitted observers, amazed by what Jesus said and did but not convicted of their need of Him as Lord and Savior.

The root word behind *lepros* (**leper**) means "scaly," which describes one of the earliest and most obvious characteristics of leprosy. There continues to be much

debate among scholars as to whether or not the disease commonly called Hansen's disease today is the same as biblical leprosy. Many biblical terms for diseases simply describe observable symptoms that could apply to several different physical afflictions. In addition to that, some diseases change over the course of years, as immunities develop and new strains of infectious microorganisms are formed.

Most medical historians believe that leprosy originated in Egypt, and the leprosy bacillus called myobacterium leprae has been found in at least one mummy that also showed the typical scaly evidence of the disease on its skin. The Old Testament scholar R. K. Harrison maintains that the symptoms described in Leviticus 13 "could presage clinical leprosy" (Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975], 2:465). It seems safe to assume, therefore, that ancient leprosy was virtually the same as contemporary Hansen's disease.

This severe form of leprosy was the most feared disease of the ancient world, and even today it cannot be totally cured, though it can be kept in check by proper medication. Although some 90 percent of people in modern times are immune to such contagion of leprosy, it was much more communicable in ancient times. Spongy, tumorlike swellings would eventually grow on the face and body, and the bacillus would become systemic and affect internal organs, while the bones would begin to deteriorate. Untreated in ancient times, it produced a weakness that made the victim vulnerable to tuberculosis or other diseases.

In order to protect His chosen people, God gave strict and specific regulations to Moses regarding leprosy, the details of which are found in Leviticus 13. A person suspected of having the disease was taken to a priest for examination. If he showed signs of having more than a superficial skin problem, he was isolated for seven days. If the symptoms became worse, the person was isolated for seven more days. If, at that time, the rash had not spread further, the person was pronounced clean. If, however, the rash had become worse, he was pronounced unclean. When leprosy was immediately evident from a person's hair turning white and his having raw, swollen flesh, he was pronounced unclean on the spot and no isolation period was involved. A less serious type of disease caused the entire skin to turn white, in which case the affected person could be considered clean. That disease was probably a form of psoriasis, eczema, vitiligo, tuberculoid leprosy, or perhaps a condition that Herodotus and the great Greek physician Hippocrates called leukoderma. When a person was found to have the serious form of leprosy, his clothes were to be torn, his head uncovered, his mouth covered (to prevent spread of the disease), and he was to cry, "Unclean! Unclean!" wherever he went to warn others to stay clear of him. Lepers were legally ostracized and forbidden to live in any community with their fellow Israelites (Num. 5:2). Among the sixty-one defilements of ancient Judaism, leprosy was second only to a dead body in seriousness. The Talmud forbade a Jew from coming closer than six feet to a leper, and if the wind was blowing, the limit was 150 feet.

Recent medical studies confirm that Hansen's disease can be passed on to others when it is inhaled through the air—a good reason for a leper to cover his mouth, as the Leviticus regulations required. People have also contracted the disease

from touching an object handled by a leper—again showing the value of the Leviticus standard, which required the burning of contaminated clothes.

In his book *Unclean! Unclean!* L. S. Huizenga describes some of the horrors of leprosy.

The disease which we today call leprosy generally begins with pain in certain areas of the body. Numbness follows. Soon the skin in such spots loses its original color. It gets to be thick, glossy, and scaly As the sickness progresses, the thickened spots become dirty sores and ulcers due to poor blood supply. The skin, especially around the eyes and ears, begins to bunch, with deep furrows between the swellings, so that the face of the afflicted individual begins to resemble that of a lion. Fingers drop off or are absorbed; toes are affected similarly. Eyebrows and eyelashes drop out. By this time one can see the person in this pitiable condition is a leper. By a touch of the finger one can also feel it. One can even smell it, for the leper emits a very unpleasant odor. Moreover, in view of the fact that the disease-producing agent frequently also attacks the larynx, the leper's voice acquires a grating quality. His throat becomes hoarse, and you can now not only see, feel, and smell the leper, but you can hear his rasping voice. And if you stay with him for some time, you can even imagine a peculiar taste in your mouth, probably due to the odor. ([Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1927], 149; cited in William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973], 388)

Although advanced leprosy is generally not painful, because of the nerve damage it is disfiguring, debilitating, and can be repulsive in the extreme, and has therefore for millennia been one of the most dreaded of diseases. One ancient rabbi said, "When I see lepers I throw stones at them lest they come near me." Another said, "I would not so much as eat an egg that was purchased on a street where a leper had walked."

An up-to-date look at modern leprosy reveals more of its character. Dr. Paul Brand, world-renowned expert on the treatment of Hansen's disease, has provided much help in understanding the unique nature of this affliction.

Hansen's disease (HD) is cruel, but not at all the way other diseases are. It primarily acts as an anesthetic, numbing the pain cells of hands, feet, nose, ears, and eyes. Not so bad, really, one might think. Most diseases are feared *because* of their pain—what makes a painless disease so horrible?

Hansen's disease's numbing quality is precisely the reason such fabled destruction and decay of tissue occurs. For thousands of years people thought HD caused the ulcers on hands and feet and face which eventually led to rotting flesh and loss of limbs. Mainly through Dr. Brand's research, it has been established that in 99 percent of the cases, HD only numbs the extremities. The destruction follows solely because the warning system of pain is gone.

How does the decay happen? In villages of Africa and Asia, a per-

son with HD has been known to reach directly into a charcoal fire to retrieve a dropped potato. Nothing in his body told him not to. Patients at Brand's hospital in India would work all day gripping a shovel with a protruding nail, or extinguish a burning wick with their bare hands, or walk on splintered glass. Watching them, Brand began formulating his radical theory that HD was chiefly anesthetic, and only indirectly a destroyer.

On one occasion, he tried to open the door of a little storeroom, but a rusty padlock would not yield. A patient—an undersized, malnourished ten-year-old—approached him smiling.

“Let me try, sahib, doctor,” he offered and reached for the key. With a quick jerk of his hand he turned the key in the lock.

Brand was dumbfounded. How could this weak youngster out-exert him? His eyes caught a telltale clue. Was that a drop of blood on the floor?

Upon examining the boy's fingers, Brand discovered the act of turning the key had gashed a finger open to the bone; skin, fat, and joint were all exposed. Yet the boy was completely unaware of it! To him, the sensation of cutting his finger to the bone was no different from picking up a stone or turning a coin in his pocket.

The daily routines of life ground away at the HD patient's hands and feet, but no warning system alerted him. If an ankle turned, tearing tendon and muscle, he would adjust and walk crooked. If a rat chewed off a finger in the night, he would not discover it missing until the next morning. . . .

. . . Stanley Stein (author of *Alone No Longer*) went blind because of another cruel quirk of HD. Each morning he would wash his face with a hot washcloth. But neither his hand nor his face was sensitive enough to temperature to warn him that he was using scalding water. Gradually he destroyed his eyes with his daily washing. (Philip Yancey, *Where Are You God When It Hurts?* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977], 32-34)

Leprosy is a graphic illustration of sin. Like leprosy, sin infects the whole person, and it is ugly, loathsome, corrupting, contaminating, alienating, and incurable by man. Lepers in ancient Israel were vivid object lessons of sin.

Yet a leper was the first to be healed by Jesus in this series of miracles in Matthew, and the fact that the **leper came to Him** was astounding in itself, because lepers were forbidden to come close to nonlepers.

Four things about this particular leper stand out. First of all he came to Jesus with confidence. He obviously sensed a love and tenderness in Jesus that allowed him to approach **Him** without fear of reprisal (such as being stoned) or even of reprimand. He somehow knew that Jesus was neither afraid of him nor ashamed to associate with him. He did not shout to Jesus from a distance, as he was supposed to do, but approached Him directly and without hesitation. Because he realized Jesus was not ashamed of him, he was less ashamed of himself. He thought of nothing but his great need and of Jesus' ability and willingness to meet that need.

Second, the man came to Jesus with reverence. His boldness did not come from presumption but from humble adoration. When he reached Jesus he **bowed down to Him**. *Proskuneō* (from which comes **bowed down**) literally means to

prostrate oneself and is most often translated “to worship” (see Matt. 2:2; 4:9,10; John 4:20-24; Acts 7:43; Rev 4:10; 19:10). From the reverential nature of his request, it seems that the leper addressed Jesus as **Lord** not simply in the sense of “Sir,” but as an acknowledgment of deity. He felt he was in the presence of God and that therefore Jesus could heal him of his terrible disease. It is both interesting and instructive to note that the scribes and Pharisees who were doubtlessly in the multitude that day were beautifully and richly attired, yet were inwardly corrupt, proud, and unbelieving. By contrast, the **leper** appeared loathsome and repulsive on the outside, but inwardly he was reverent and believing.

Third, the leper came to Jesus with humility. He came expectantly but not demandingly, saying, **Lord, if You are willing**. He asked to be healed only if it were the Lord's will. He did not claim to be worthy or deserving, but left himself in the Lord's hands to do as He would. The implication seems to be that the leper was quite willing to remain leprous if that were the Lord's will. Obviously he wanted to be healed, but he did not explicitly ask Jesus for healing, almost as if that were too much to presume. He simply acknowledged Jesus' ability to heal him. How far that humble spirit is from the demands of many Christians today who make claims on God's healing, blessing, and favor as if those were their inherent rights. This man claimed no rights, and his first concern was not his own welfare at all, but the Lord's will and glory.

Fourth, the leper came with faith, declaring, **You can make me clean**. He literally said, “You have the power to make me clean.” That is faith at its highest—the absolute conviction that God is able, coupled with humble submission to His sovereignty in the exercise of His power. The man knew that Jesus was not obligated to heal him, but he also knew that He was perfectly capable of doing it. He had the faith of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who declared to Nebuchadnezzar, “If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up” (Dan. 3:17-18).

The leper came with confidence because he believed Jesus was compassionate, with reverence because he believed Jesus was God, with humility because he believed Jesus was sovereign, and with faith because he believed Jesus had the power to heal him.

In response to that faith, Jesus **stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, “I am willing; be cleansed.”** Jews were forbidden by the Mosaic law to touch a leper, because he was unclean (Lev. 3:3). To do so was to expose themselves to both ceremonial and physical contamination. They could not help a leper by touching him, but only harm themselves. Yet it is certain that lepers yearned for the touch of another human being. In their isolation and social stigma, they no doubt would have given anything for even brief intimate contact with someone besides other lepers.

Jesus could have healed with only a word, as He did on numerous other occasions. But He made an obvious point of touching this man. That simple act in itself was amazing, not in the sense of being sensational and spectacular—as are the supposed miracles of many modern healers—but simply in the fact that the Son of

God lovingly condescended to touch the outcast of outcasts whom no other man would even come near.

The healing was instantaneous: **immediately his leprosy was cleansed.** Jesus did not need to heal in stages, although at times He chose to do so (Mark 8:22-26; John 9:6-7). When He touched defilement, it went away. The scene on this occasion must have been startling—to see a deformed, shriveled, scaly, sore-covered, derelict suddenly stand upright, with perfect arms and legs, with his face smooth and unscarred, his hair restored, his voice normal, and his eyes bright. The marvels of modern medical science pale beside such miraculous restoration.

The first requirement of faith is obedience, and as soon as the leper was cleansed, **Jesus said to him, “See that you tell no one; but go, show yourself to the priest, and present the offering that Moses commanded, for a testimony to them.”** Before he celebrated his new lease on life, and even before he testified to others about his miraculous cleansing, the man was to fulfill the requirements of the Mosaic law by having the temple priests attest to his cure.

This process, described in Leviticus 14, involved taking two birds and killing one of them over running water. The live bird, along with cedar wood, a scarlet string, and some hyssop, was then dipped in the blood of the slain bird. The former leper was then sprinkled seven times and pronounced clean by the priest, and the live bird was set free. The cleansed person was then to wash his clothes, shave off all his hair, and bathe himself. He could then rejoin Israelite society, although he had to remain outside his tent for seven days. The final act on the eighth day was to bring the required guilt, sin, and grain offerings—according to what could be afforded—and to be anointed by the priest on various parts of the body.

Jesus may have told the man not to say anything about his healing in order not to increase the crowd’s adulation of Him simply as a miracle worker, or perhaps He wanted to discourage their looking to Him as a political deliverer. It may have been that the Lord was still in His period of humiliation and that His exaltation by the crowd at this time would have been premature in the divine plan.

All of those reasons could have been involved, but Jesus’ instruction to **go, show yourself to the priest, and present the offering that Moses commanded,** was specifically given **for a testimony to them,** that is, to the multitude and especially to the Jewish leaders. Although Jesus devastated the hypocritical, superficial, and unbiblical standards and practices of the scribes and Pharisees, He did not want the people to think He was violating the requirements of God’s law—which He had just declared He came to fulfill, not destroy (5:17). In addition to that, when the priest declared the man clean—as he would have to do because of the obvious healing—Jesus’ miracle would be officially confirmed by the Jewish establishment. It is likely also for this reason that Jesus told the man not to tell anyone else before he presented himself to the priest for examination. If word that his healing was done by Jesus reached Jerusalem ahead of the man, the priests would no doubt have been reluctant to verify the cleansing.

Sadly, the man who had shown such confident and humble faith in his joyous exuberance did not also show immediate obedience. We learn from Mark that he

became so excited that “he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news about, to such an extent that Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city, but stayed out in unpopulated areas; and they were coming to Him from everywhere” (Mark 1:45).

As Jesus remarked several times in various words, “Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk?’” (Matt. 9:5; cf. Mark 2:9; Luke 5:23). The Lord’s greatest purpose was to cleanse sin, not sickness, and even His physical cleansings became illustrations of the spiritual cleansing He offered. The healing of leprosy was especially powerful in that regard, because its great physical destructiveness, pervasiveness, ugliness, and incurableness represent the even greater destructiveness, pervasiveness, ugliness, and incurableness of sin. Just as leprosy destroys physical health and makes a person an outcast with other men, so sin destroys spiritual health and makes a person an outcast with God. But just as Christ can cure leprosy, He can also cure sin; and just as His cleansing from leprosy restored men to human fellowship, His cleansing from sin restores them to God’s.

Much modern evangelism and personal witness is weakened by failure to confront men with the terribleness and danger of their sin. Coming to Christ is not getting on a popular bandwagon of religious sentimentality. It is facing and confessing one’s sin and bringing it to the Lord for cleansing. True conversion takes place when, like the leper, desperate people come to Christ humbly confessing their need and reverently seeking His restoration. The truly repentant person, like this leper, comes with no pride, no self-will, no rights, and no claim to worthiness. He sees himself as a repulsive sinner who has absolutely no claim to salvation apart from the abundant grace of God. He comes believing that God can and will save him only as he places his trust in Jesus Christ.

After a person is saved from sin, Jesus’ first requirement is that he henceforth obey the Word of God. Only a lifestyle of holy living can give proper testimony to what Jesus Christ has done in saving us. It is best to say nothing of our relationship to Jesus Christ unless our living reflects something of His holiness and will. When a Christian lives obediently, then both his actions and his words testify to Christ’s goodness and power.

THE RESPECTED MAN: A GENTILE

And when He had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, entreating Him, and saying, “Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering great pain.” And He said to him, “I will come and heal him.” But the centurion answered and said, “Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof, but just 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 this one, ‘Go!’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come!’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this!’ and he does it.” Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled, and said to those who were following, “Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel. And I say to you, that many shall come from east and west,

and recline at the table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” And Jesus said to the centurion, “Go your way; let it be done to you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed that very hour. (8:5-13)

Many commentators believe that the first three miracles of Matthew 8 occurred on the same day. If so, Jesus entered **Capernaum** only a short while after healing the leper. Because Jesus pronounced a curse on it (Matt. 11:23), the ancient city no longer exists, except in the form of the ruins of a synagogue and of a few houses, including, according to tradition, that of Peter. It was a lovely town in Jesus’ day and He spent considerable time there, much of it perhaps in Peter’s home (see 8:14).

The **centurion** who **came to Him** not only was a Gentile but an officer in the Roman occupation army, a man who ordinarily would have been greatly hated by the Jews. Such soldiers were often hated still more because the Romans usually chose alien residents of a region to make up its occupation force—making those soldiers not only oppressors but traitors in the eyes of the populace.

We learn from Luke that this **centurion** actually **came to** Jesus through some Jewish intermediaries, because he felt spiritually unworthy of approaching Jesus personally and perhaps also because he thought he would be rebuffed because of his military position. He was probably in the troops of the wicked Antipas and was possibly even a Samaritan, a half-breed Jew who was traditionally hated even more than Gentiles by “pure” Jews. Yet this man was held in great esteem by the Jews of Capernaum, because, as they told Jesus, “He is worthy for You to grant this to him; for he loves our nation, and it was he who built us our synagogue” (Luke 7:2-5). Like Cornelius (Acts 10:2), this **centurion** was undoubtedly a God-fearing Gentile. It is noteworthy that each of the Roman centurions mentioned in the New Testament are spoken of favorably. And from the biblical record it seems likely that each of them became a believer in Christ.

Pais, here translated **servant**, literally means a young child. Luke calls him a slave (*doulos*), indicating he was probably born into the slave household of the centurion. In any case, the boy “was highly regarded” by the centurion, who was now afraid that his servant would die (Luke 7:2). **Lord**, he said to Jesus through his emissaries, **my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering great pain**. Whatever the disease was, it was paralyzing, painful, and fatal. Like the leper, it seems the centurion was reluctant to ask Jesus specifically for a healing, since he simply states the young man’s terrible condition—although the request is clearly implied.

The fact that the **centurion** cared so much for his **servant** set him apart from the typical Roman soldier, who could be brutally heartless. The average slave owner of that day, whether military or civilian, had no more regard for his slave than for an animal. The great Greek philosopher Aristotle said there could be no friendship and no justice toward inanimate things, not even toward a horse, an ox, or a slave, because master and slave were considered to have nothing in common. “A slave,” he said, “is a

living tool, just as a tool is an inanimate slave” (*Ethics*, 1161b). The Roman law expert Gaius wrote that it was universally accepted that the master possessed the power of life and death over his slave (*Institutes*, 1:52). Still another Roman writer, Varro, maintained that the only difference between a slave, a beast, and a cart was that the slave talked (*On Landed Estates*, 1:17.1). Cato the Elder advised those in economic difficulty to look over their livestock and hold a sale. They should sell their worn-out oxen, their blemished cattle, sheep, wool, and hides, their old wagons and tools, their old and sickly slaves, and whatever else was superfluous (*On Agriculture*, 2.7).

But the **centurion** from **Capernaum** had no such inhumane ideas. He was a seasoned and capable fighting man or he would not have been a centurion—who, as the title indicates, was responsible for a hundred men. He was a man’s man, and a soldier’s soldier. Yet he had deep compassion for his dying slave boy and felt unworthy to approach Jesus personally. Jesus knew the man’s heart and did not need to hear a direct request, either from the centurion or from the Jews who came in his behalf. He simply responded in love, saying, **I will come and heal him.**

When Jesus came near to his house, **the centurion** saw Him and sent some friends out to meet Him (Luke 7:3). In his behalf they **answered and said, “Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof.”** He felt genuinely unworthy for Jesus to go to that much trouble for him, and no doubt also did not want Him to break the Jewish tradition of not entering the house of a Gentile in order to avoid ceremonial contamination.

The centurion’s twice addressing Jesus as **Lord** indicates much more than courtesy. Jesus testified of the man that He had not seen such great faith in all of Israel (v. 10). The man here affirmed the divine lordship of Christ, believing that Jesus was indeed God and consequently had the power to heal his paralyzed servant. Because the servant was too ill to be carried out to Jesus and because he felt unworthy to have Jesus come into his house, the centurion said to Him, **Just say the word, and my servant will be healed.** From the many reports he had doubtlessly heard of Jesus’ healing power, and perhaps from having witnessed some of the healings himself, he knew that distance presented no barrier.

The centurion also understood delegation of power. **For I, too, am a man under authority, with soldiers under me,** he said. **And I say to this one, “Go!” and he goes, and to another, “Come!” and he comes, and to my slave, “Do this!” and he does it.** He recognized **authority** when he saw it, even in a realm in which he had no experience or understanding. He knew that if he had the power to make his soldiers and slaves do his bidding by simply giving them orders, Jesus’ supernatural powers could even more easily allow Him simply to **say the word** and cause the **servant [to] be healed.**

Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled, and said to those who were following, “Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel.” Although, as God, Jesus knew all men’s hearts, in His humanness He was amazed that this Gentile soldier showed more genuine **faith** in Him than He had found **with anyone in Israel.** Many Jews had believed in Jesus, but none had shown the sincerity, sensitivity, humility, love, and depth of faith of this Gentile soldier. Even

to His disciples Jesus would say a short time later, “You men of little faith” (8:26). Still later in His ministry He would say to Philip, “Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me?” (John 14:9).

This Gentile would not be alone in his belief. Jesus went on to say, **many shall come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.** Those who had less spiritual advantage and less opportunity to know God’s truth—the Gentiles **from east and west**—would show greater response to the gospel than God’s own chosen people, who considered themselves to be **the sons of the kingdom** simply by virtue of racial descent.

The gospel came through Abraham’s seed, as Matthew has already attested through Jesus’ genealogy. But the benefit of the gospel, which is salvation, is appropriated by faith, not by genealogical descent. The Jews played an integral part in God’s bringing the Messiah and His gospel, and they are yet destined to play an important role in the end times. It was integral to God’s plan of salvation that His own Son be born, live, and die as a Jew. But the fact that **Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob**—or any other Jew—will be **in the kingdom of heaven** will not be because of their Jewishness but because of their saving faith.

Jesus’ words to those Capernaum Jews was startling in the extreme. What He said utterly contradicted everything taught by their rabbis. The twenty-ninth chapter of the apocryphal book of Second Baruch pictures what Jews believed would be the great heavenly feast at which all Jews were going to sit down and eat behemoth, the elephant, and leviathan, the giant sea monster, or whale—symbolic of an unlimited amount of food. In the eyes of many Jews, one of the most significant and appealing things about the feast was that it would be totally free of Gentiles.

But at that meal, Jesus said, many Gentiles would be present and many Jews absent. The presumed **sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.** To the Jews, God had given the unique promises and privileges of His kingdom, but because they rejected the King when He came to them, they disqualified themselves from God’s blessing of light and destined themselves for **outer darkness**, where, instead of feasting throughout eternity, they would suffer forever in the horror of **weeping and gnashing of teeth.** Jewish tradition taught that sinners—a term synonymous with Gentiles in their thinking—would spend eternity in the outer darkness of gehenna. Jesus concurred with them about the destiny of condemned sinners (see also Matt. 22:13; 24:51), but He declared them totally wrong about the identity of those condemned sinners.

Hell is a place both of darkness and of fire, a combination not found in our present world. Part of the supernatural quality of hell is that it will be a place of fire, pain, and torment that will continue for all eternity in total darkness.

Being a physical descendant of Abraham was a great privilege and advantage (Rom. 3:1-2), but in spite of what most Jews believed, it did not guarantee salvation. It is the children of Abraham’s spiritual faith, not the children of his physical body,

whom God adopts as His own children (Rom. 8:14-17; Gal. 3:7-9, 26-29; cf. Rom. 4:11, 16). Those who reject Christ, even though they are physical descendants of Abraham, will have no place **at the table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven.** By their rejection of the Son of God—especially in light of the irrefutable evidence of His miracles—they prove they are really sons of Satan (John 8:42-44). Because they are false **sons of the kingdom**, they annul the divine promise, forfeit the divine blessing, and are forever barred from the divine **kingdom.** That was the substance of Jesus' brief but sobering message to the unbelieving Jews just before He pronounced the healing of the centurion's slave.

Jesus again reaffirmed the greatness of the centurion's faith as He said to him, **"Go your way; let it be done to you as you have believed."** **And the servant was healed that very hour.** That the **servant was healed** was Jesus' affirmation that **the centurion** truly **believed**, because otherwise his servant would have remained sick and probably soon died. The servant's healing was *according to* the centurion's faith (**as you have believed**), and because the healing was complete, so had to have been the faith. And if the centurion had such great faith before the miracle, how much greater must it have been when he saw his beloved young friend get up from his deathbed and go about his work in perfect health and without pain?

Jesus did not give the principle **as you have believed** as a universal promise to all believers. The principle of healing in proportion to faith was sovereignly applied as the Lord saw fit (see also, e.g., Matt. 9:29). Paul had absolute faith in God's ability to heal him, and he personally experienced, and was often used as the instrument of, God's miraculous healing. But when he prayed three times in great earnestness for his "thorn in the flesh" to be removed, the Lord's answer to him was, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:7-9).

THE RELATIVE: A WOMAN

And when Jesus had come to Peter's home, He saw his mother-in-law lying sick in bed with a fever. And He touched her hand, and the fever left her; and she arose, and waited on Him. (8:14-15)

The first thing many male Jews did every morning was to pray, "Lord, I thank Thee that I was not born a slave, a Gentile, or a woman." In the first two miracles of Matthew 8, Jesus showed mercy and compassion not only to an outcast leper but to an outcast Gentile and his slave. Now He shows mercy and compassion to a woman. The proud, self-righteous Jewish men could not have missed Jesus' point: physical health, race, social status, or gender made no difference to Him. None of those things in itself was an advantage or disadvantage as far as His ministry and message were concerned. That the disadvantaged more often received His blessing was due to their more often being humble and aware of their need. Likewise, that the advantaged more often failed to receive His blessing was due to their more often being proud and self-satisfied.

Mark tells us that when Jesus, Peter, Andrew, James, and John arrived at

Peter's home, some of the group discovered that Peter's **mother-in-law** was ill, "and immediately they spoke to Him about her" (Mark 1:30). Luke adds the information that her fever was high and that the unidentified friends or relatives "made request of Him on her behalf" (Luke 4:38). In response to their request, Jesus then went to her room and **saw her lying sick in bed with a fever.**

We do not know the cause of the fever, but the facts that it was high and that the woman was too sick to get up suggest an extremely serious and probably life-threatening illness. The demands of everyday living did not allow most people in that day the luxury of going to bed whenever they felt bad. Physical pain and discomfort were a regular part of life, and, unless they were severe, did not normally interfere with a person's responsibilities.

Again Jesus' response and healing were immediate. **And He touched her hand, and the fever left her; and she arose, and waited on Him.** We know from both Mark and Luke that she also served the other people there (Mark 1:31; Luke 4:39), but Matthew emphasizes her special ministry to Jesus: **she waited on Him.** His healing touch had instantly removed her fever and pain, and most likely saved her life. We can be sure she served her gracious Lord with special attention and care.

Although Peter's mother-in-law obviously was a woman, she was also a Jew. It may therefore be that, after His strong words of verses 11-12, Jesus did not want to leave the impression that God had forsaken His chosen people, even though most of them had forsaken Him. That the kingdom was open to faithful Gentiles certainly did not mean it was closed to faithful Jews. As Paul makes clear in his letter to the Romans, "God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew ... There has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice. . . . For if you [Gentiles] were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more shall these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?" (Rom. 11:2, 5, 24).