

Matthew 8:1-4

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[0 : 00] Let's turn to the passage that we read in Matthew's Gospel in chapter 8, and we're going to be focusing our attention on the first four verses of that chapter.

We read through to verse 15 that covered three miracles that Jesus performed, and we'll note the significance of those three miracles in a moment. But our focus will be particularly on the first of those miracles, the healing of the leper that is recorded there at the beginning of the chapter.

Do you need help? Can Jesus help you? Is He willing to help you? It's good, it's honest to acknowledge when you need help.

That in itself can be a barrier we need to sometimes overcome, be it pride or foolishness. We sometimes are unwilling to acknowledge that we need help of one kind or another.

So it's a good step to at least acknowledge that we do. It's also good to believe that Jesus is able to help, that He has the power to help, that He has the capacity to help.

[1 : 19] And I imagine that of those gathered here, all of us gathered here this morning, most of us would be of the view that Jesus is able to help.

But then there's another question that we sometimes need to wrestle with, and that is whether we're persuaded, whether we're convinced that He is willing to help.

You know, why would He help me in my circumstances or in the troubles that I am going through? Why would He help me?

Yes, He is able, but is He willing? If you can relate in any way to that sentiment or to that nagging doubt, then be assured that you are in good company.

You're certainly in the company of many, countless men and women throughout history have been in that place where you are.

[2 : 21] And this morning we're going to meet one of them, the leper who approaches Jesus. Here is a man who was very much persuaded that he needed help. He's a man who it would appear was persuaded that Jesus was able to help, but he was a man who was uncertain as to whether Jesus would be willing to help.

That's the place that he was in. Now it's a particularly dramatic example. His circumstances were particularly striking.

But nonetheless, he was in that place of acknowledging a need for help, of acknowledging that Jesus had the power to help, but being uncertain as to whether he was willing to do so.

And in that regard, even if our circumstances might be different to his, maybe his situation is not so different to one that some of us have been in or are in or certainly may be in in the future.

What we have in these verses, in the first four verses of chapter 8 of Matthew's Gospel, is an encounter between two men, the leper and Jesus.

[3 : 34] And really what I want to do this morning is to look at each of these men in turn and see what we discover about them and what we can draw from those discoveries.

And we'll begin with the leper. Now we're not told much about this man. We're not even given his name. That in itself is maybe revealing in terms of how he was viewed as somebody who was almost a non-person.

His very circumstances meant that he was somebody who was avoided and shunned. And so even his name is not known to the Gospel writers.

He's simply the leper. Known known not so much for who he is, but for the condition that he suffers. So as I say, we know very little about him.

But what we do know about him, we can consider with the help of two words. It can serve as kind of headings for what we want to say or draw from the passage about him.

[4 : 38] We can notice and consider his problem, but also his plea, the plea that he directs to Jesus. And if we begin by just thinking a little bit about the problem that he was confronting.

Well, his problem is stated simply enough in the passage that he was a man with leprosy. There in verse 2 we're told, a man with leprosy came and knelt before Jesus.

This is his problem. These two words sum it up and capture his problem. He was a man with leprosy. Now the matter-of-fact way in which Matthew presents the problem of this man can maybe hide somewhat the horror of his condition.

Leprosy wasn't just an illness. It was an illness, but it wasn't just an illness. It was a sentence, a life sentence for those who suffered from it. The actual word that's employed there, as you possibly have as a footnote in your Bibles, is a word that could be used to refer to any number of different sin conditions.

And it is a generic word that, as I say, has a broad range of meanings in terms of different conditions, including but not limited to the condition that we know as leprosy.

[6 : 03] However, on this occasion, it does seem to be referring to the condition that we know as leprosy. The very fact that the language is used of being cleansed from it is language that does apply very particularly to leprosy as it was viewed at the time of the events recorded.

It was an incurable disease that brought untold suffering to those unfortunate enough to be afflicted by it.

But in Luke's account of this same incident, Luke uses more vivid language to describe the man. He describes the man as covered with leprosy, or the actual language he uses, if we were translated in a very strict, literal sense.

He was full of leprosy. That in itself would suggest that this is a condition he had been suffering from for some time.

But of even greater significance than the physical sickness, which was bad enough in itself, was that the sentence that accompanied it. The sickness robbed a man of his health.

[7 : 23] The sentence robbed the sufferer of his family, of his home, of his occupation, of his dignity, of his future.

All of these things were torn from the sufferer of leprosy. The leper was ostracized and required to make his appearance as repugnant as possible.

And if he ever did come near to others who were not lepers, he had to cry out, unclean, unclean. We can read the regulations that apply for lepers in the book of Leviticus.

In Leviticus chapter 13, we won't look up the reference this morning, but if you're interested, you can find all the different conditions that were placed upon lepers.

And this was one of the most degrading ones. This need to cry out, declaring yourself to be unclean as a warning to those around you. The Jewish historian Josephus, who is a contemporary of Jesus, and so for that reason is often quoted, because he writes with some knowledge of the circumstances of the day in which the Gospels were being written, or the accounts were taking place that are recorded in the Gospels.

[8 : 43] He describes the banishment of lepers as in no way differing from a corpse. And rabbis are recorded as describing lepers as the living dead.

I suppose if we wanted to use kind of modern parlance, we might describe them as some kind of zombies. If you think of these horrible zombie movies and this picture of the living dead, that's the kind of way in which lepers were viewed in first century Palestine.

Other illnesses had to be healed, but leprosy had to be cleansed. Notice there the language of Jesus there in verse 3. We'll come to the miracle in a moment, but just to note the language that he used.

I am willing, be clean. Not be healed, but be clean. And that's significant. A sufferer of leprosy did not need only to be healed.

He or she needed to be cleansed. Well, I wonder if we can even begin to imagine something of this man's plight. If we can imagine something of his life story. If we can imagine the day when he discovered that he was suffering from this fearful disease.

[9 : 56] How his world must have been turned upside down at the time, at the moment of discovery. And then if we take Luke's reference to him as being full of leprosy, we can imagine that this was a condition that he had suffered for a considerable time.

And if we can just begin to try and imagine those interminable days and weeks and months, possibly years, where he had been afflicted with this condition.

We can maybe try and imagine this man's longing for family and companionship and love, but longings that were always unsatisfying.

We can maybe imagine the man's sense of profound injustice. I wonder if he ever cried out in the midst of his suffering, Why me? Why did this happen to me?

What did I do to deserve this horrible plight? But perhaps most dreadful of all would have been the utter helplessness that he was a victim of.

[11 : 02] There was, it would seem, no prospect of ever being relieved of his suffering. Now, none of us here are lepers, thank God.

But do you know something of the pain that this man endured? Do you know what it is to ask that painful and sometimes perplexing question, Why me? Why is this happening to me?

Why am I suffering in this way? Why has my life turned out the way it has? Do you know what it's like to feel helpless and hopeless in the midst of a given circumstance?

But then this man hears of a man called Jesus. And that brings us to the second part of what we want to say about the man. Not only the problem that he was suffering from or the problem that he had, but also the plea that he makes, the approach that he makes to Jesus.

And what can we say about it? What can we draw from the passage there in the first verses of Matthew chapter 8? Well, I think the first thing that we can say about his approach to Jesus is that it is marked by a certain desperation.

[12 : 22] And there's a reason why it is a desperate plea or desperate approach. And that is he was a desperate man. I wonder again, and we're in the realm of speculation, I wonder if he had confided in anybody about his intentions.

When he first heard about this man Jesus who healed the sick, I wonder if he ever said to anybody, maybe a fellow leper, he said, well, I'm going to try and approach this Jesus.

Maybe, maybe he can heal me. If he had approached a fellow leper or perhaps even a family member who at a distance had had some conversation with him, I wonder if those who were aware of his intentions, did they pity his madness?

Did they try and dissuade him from harboring hopes that would only be dashed? And so he would build up some kind of expectation that had no prospect of coming to fruition.

But of course, this approach was desperate, not only in the sense of coming from a desperate man, but in the sense that the very approach was an act of scandalous rebellion.

[13 : 30] This man, this leper, had no right to approach any clean man in the way that he did. We've made reference to some of the regulations that he would have been under.

And in the passage here in Matthew, the suggestion is that there were crowds following Jesus. There at the beginning of verse 1, And when he came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. A man with leprosy came.

And so certainly the picture that Matthew appears to be painting is of a large crowd of people. And in the midst of that, this leper approaches Jesus. It's possible, of course, that the approach of the leper was at a slightly different moment, possibly somewhat more private.

There's a little bit of a kind of quandary to try and work out when you see Jesus saying to the man, Don't tell anybody. You think, well, if all these people have seen it, what difference does it make if he tells people?

So maybe it was at a more private moment. We don't know. Certainly Matthew seems to suggest that there were crowds round about Jesus at the moment of this man's approach. And if that is the case, then that would have generated among the crowds a real sense of horror and outrage that this leper was so scandalous in his approach to Jesus, and indeed coming so close to them.

[14 : 50] Who is this man? Well, what is he doing? So it was a desperate approach, but it's also marked by a degree of reverence and honor. We read there in verse 2, A man with leprosy came and knelt before him, knelt before Jesus and said, Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.

He falls on his knees and addresses Jesus as Lord. The verb here translated that he knelt before Jesus is a verb that can be used and is used on occasion to describe an act of worship.

For example, when we read in Matthew's Gospel of the wise men coming to see the newborn Jesus, and we're told that they worshipped him, it's the very same word that is employed here, but translated as he knelt before Jesus.

Now, it is a word that has a broad range of meanings, and I think on this occasion it probably does indicate no more than respectful honor towards this rabbi, towards this healer, towards this man who the leper felt could possibly bring healing to his leprosy.

Indeed, his use of the word Lord is also probably to be understood as an address of respectful reverence towards this rabbi, this healer.

[16 : 19] And I don't think we have reason to believe that the leper had a greater insight into the identity of Jesus than that. So, it's a desperate approach, it's a reverent approach, but it's also, and maybe this is the most striking aspect of it, is that it is a very tentative approach.

Now, why do I describe it as tentative? Well, as I said at the very beginning, this is a man who, it would seem, did not doubt the power of Jesus to cleanse him, but he does seem to doubt Jesus' willingness to do so.

And his own words are clear enough on that matter. Let's just notice what he says, Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.

So, as I say, in these words, it's very clear. He says, you can make me clean. I am persuaded that you have the power. I am persuaded that you are able to cleanse lepers.

Now, that was a remarkable conviction that he had. That in itself is very commendable faith, that he would be persuaded that here was a man who could heal a leper.

[17 : 27] And his faith in that regard is commendable. But that's not all he says. He says, if you are willing, you can make me clean. And so, clearly, this was his struggle.

This was his, the issue that he wrestled with. Yes, this man can heal me, but is he willing to heal me? And he doesn't only just think it, but he actually states it, directs this doubt to Jesus himself.

If you are willing, you can make me clean. I wonder if we can relate to that concern, that doubt that this man had.

Perhaps you are despairing in the face of whatever circumstances life is throwing at you. Are you of the mind that, well, yes, I believe God has the power to help.

God can do anything. But is he willing to help me? Will he help me? Little me in my little world, in my own struggles and difficulties and pain.

[18 : 36] Does he care? Is he willing to come to my aid? Well, how will you find out if he is willing? Well, the only way that we'll find out is by crying out for help and see what happens with this leper.

Get on your knees and cry out to the risen and reigning Jesus. What have you got to lose? You may be doubtful. You may be unsure as to what the answer will be. Well, you lose nothing by crying out and asking for help.

Now, the problem that you may be facing, that any of us may be facing, it may be of different kinds. It may not be a physical condition like this man endured. We know it wasn't just physical, his problem, but it was at least at heart a physical condition that he was suffering from.

Maybe your problem, and maybe the problem of many of us, is spiritual in nature. You're conscious of your sin, and the problem of sin, and the consequences of sin.

You acknowledge your guilt, your uncleanness in that sense. You're pretty persuaded. You're pretty sure that Jesus can forgive and cleanse, but will he?

[19 : 50] We'll cry out and find out for yourself. So, we meet the leper. But then, of course, we also meet Jesus. He's the other man in this encounter.

Let's spend just a little time thinking about what we discover about Jesus. And we do so by examining how he responds to the man's plea. And we can explore, perhaps, first of all, what he feels in the face of this man, but then also what he does.

And, of course, what he does arises out of the feelings that he has towards this man. So, what does Jesus feel towards this man?

Now, in Matthew's account, we're not given any indication as to how Jesus responds emotionally, if you wish, to the plight of this man.

But if we turn to Mark's account, we are given an indication on that front. In Mark 1 and verse 41, so it's the same incident, but as recorded by Mark.

[20 : 49] So, in Mark 1 and verse 41, we read, well, let's read from verse 40, a man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, if you are willing, you can make me clean. So, exactly the same language.

And then we read, filled with compassion. Where it may be, I don't know if in the Bible that you're reading, it may mention filled with indignation or anger. And we'll comment on that in a moment.

But certainly what Mark does is speak of Jesus' emotions in the face of this man's plight and in the face of this man's approach.

Jesus is described as filled with compassion. And even if we think of that language of being filled with compassion, what strikes me is the contrast with Luke's description of the man as full of leprosy.

We made reference to that a few moments ago in Luke chapter 5 and verse 12, the man is described as covered with leprosy or full of leprosy. So, here you have this man full of leprosy, but he encounters Jesus full of compassion.

[21 : 56] And there's a beautiful symmetry there, a symmetry of grace, a man full of leprosy, but he comes into contact with Jesus who is full of compassion.

The man was full of leprosy, full of pain, full of shame, full of hurt, full of despair. But Jesus is full of compassion. And we do well to just ponder on that striking contrast for a moment.

But we also need to acknowledge that there's an issue here as to the meaning of the word, translated full of compassion. And the debate really as to whether the word that Mark uses refers to compassion or anger or indignation, I think, is the word that's sometimes used in translation.

And we find that a little bit odd because it seems that these words are so different. How could one word be translated in such different ways? But in some senses, the words, the English words, compassion and anger, aren't as different as they might appear.

They both involve intense emotion, which is the root of the word that Mark uses. He is speaking of Jesus as being overcome by intense emotion.

[23 : 15] And as I say, that could be understood as intense, heartfelt compassion or intense, heartfelt anger. Now, if it is the case that Jesus was filled with anger or indignation, what do we make of that?

Why would he be angry in the face of this man's approach? Was Jesus angry with the man for having the temerity to approach him, given that he was a leper? Well, everything would suggest that that is not the problem.

Rather, what we can say is that Jesus was angry, was indignant in the face of the disease itself. He was angered by the tangible and awful evidence of the ravages of the fall, as he knows the root cause of this man's plight and condition.

He knows that it can be traced back to this reality that this is a fallen world in which we live, and in a fallen world, there are these horrible consequences of the fall, the ravages of the fall, blighting the human condition.

And sin and its consequences anger Jesus. They anger God. We find something similar at the grave of Lazarus, where Jesus wept, and we say, well, was that a weeping that is to be explained by his compassion for those who had lost a loved one or his own loss in loving or in losing his friend Lazarus?

[24 : 41] But then Jesus knew that in a moment Lazarus would be raised from the dead. I think we can understand Jesus' reaction there as also being, at least in part, explained by his anger and indignation in the very face of death.

In this case, in the case of the leper, I don't think we need to choose between compassion and anger. Jesus was filled with both compassion and anger. And how we stand in need of a God who is both full of compassion and full of anger.

We do God and the truth a grave injustice if we portray him as only compassionate. A God who weeps with those who weep but is incapable of bringing healing and restoration.

A God who stands in compassionate solidarity with the oppressed but is powerless to bring the oppressor to justice. Such a God does not meet the needs that we have.

And such a portrait of God does not do justice to what we discover about God in his word and indeed in his workings in history.

- [25 : 48] A weeping God is great for a touching homily but weeping is not enough. God is full of compassion. If you wish, he weeps with those who weep but he is also full of righteous anger.

An anger that will find expression in dealing with evil and the perpetrators of evil. Jesus dealt with evil on the cross bearing its punishment.

And when he returns, he will ultimately and definitively deal with all unrepentant perpetrators of evil. But let's get back to focusing on how Jesus feels towards the leper and he feels deep compassion.

He is full of compassion in the face of this man's plight. So what does he do? How does this compassion pan out in action? Well, if we can describe the leper's approach to Jesus as scandalous, and I think we can, then we are struggling for words to describe the response of Jesus.

It is even more scandalous. Jesus touches him. The evangelists are very at pains to explicitly make this point. Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man.

- [27 : 08] He could have limited himself to words, but he deliberately touches the leper. And of course, there's huge significance in that willingness of Jesus to touch the unclean man.

You can almost imagine the gasps of horror, the disapproving, muttering, rippling through the crowd, perhaps even among the disciples. How could Jesus do such a thing?

How could he touch this unclean man? He knows what the law says in this matter. Jesus touched him. And what Jesus did was wrong at so many levels.

At the most basic level, he was exposing himself to infection, or certainly that is how those witnessing it would have understood it. But more seriously, he was acting in direct contravention to the regulations that God has established as regards how you were to deal with lepers.

You were not to touch lepers. Now that Jesus would do this, that Jesus would touch this man, gives us a very striking clue as to his identity and consequent authority.

- [28 : 20] How could Jesus seemingly so brazenly disregard the law? In dealing with this question, listen to what Chrysostom has to say.

Chrysostom was a church father in the fourth century, the archbishop of Constantinople. And in commenting on Jesus touching this leper, he says the following, the Lord touches him that he might signify by this that he is not subject to the law, but is set over it.

You see, this is hugely significant. Jesus here, by his actions, is declaring himself to be above the law, to be one who has authority over the law.

He is one who willingly was subject to the law, but in his very person and identity, he has authority over the law. Now, that was not true of any man. Or perhaps this illustration of what's going on or an attempt to illustrate what's going on, it might help, and I think it's one that I've used in the past.

Imagine the scene. You're approaching a junction. You're driving in Aberdeen. You're approaching a junction, and you notice that there's been an accident. And the traffic lights are on red, but you see that there's a policeman who's appeared because of the accident that has taken place, and he's waving the traffic through.

- [29 : 45] So the lights are on red, but the policeman is waving the traffic through. What do you do? Do you say, oh, no, it's a red light. I've got to just stay. It's a red light, and we all know that you have to stop at a red light.

Well, of course you don't do that. If the policeman is waving folk through the red light, then you go through the red light. You see, the policeman in that circumstance embodies the law. He has authority, a delegated authority, but he has an authority to override the prohibition of going through a red light.

That is his prerogative. That is his authority. And that, perhaps in an inadequate way, illustrates what Jesus is doing. He has authority to override this law.

And so he touches the leper. But the touch speaks not only of his authority over the law, it speaks more powerfully of his love for the despised and the hopeless and the unclean.

I mentioned, I think, towards the beginning of the sermon, how, and we read through to verse 15, you have Matthew giving an account of three miracles. And these are the first accounts that Matthew records of Jesus performing miracles in his gospel.

[30 : 58] This is the first time he records miracles that Jesus performed. And I think there is a significance in the fact that the three miracles that he records relate to a man with leprosy, they relate to a Gentile, the centurion, or the healing of the centurion's servant, and they relate to a woman, Peter's mother-in-law.

And so Matthew, very deliberately, when he wants to record for us the miracles that Jesus performs, he highlights these three people. A leper, a Gentile, and a woman.

And that's not a random thing. What Matthew is saying is that here is a man who reached out to the marginalized. Here is a man who reached out to those whose society considered to be second-class citizens.

Of course, they were wrong to think in that way, but Jesus reaches out to the marginalized, to the hopeless, to the despised, and touches them and loves them and attends to them.

But notice that this touch is accompanied by words. In the Greek, it's just two words. In order to translate it in English, it's how many?

[32 : 13] I am willing, be clean. Five words. But in Greek, it's just two words. Willing, clean. I am willing, be clean. And in this very dramatic declaration, we discover the compassion and the power of Jesus.

And of course, we're told that the man immediately recovered his health. Again, if you are able to employ your imagination, can you try and visualize what happens at that very moment that Jesus pronounces these words?

This man who was full of leprosy, this man who Luke tells us was covered with leprosy from head to toe, but in an instant he is clean. Now, this would have been visibly evident.

It would have been a visibly dramatic miracle that anybody who had seen him before and after in that very moment that Jesus pronounces these words could have been nothing other than astonished at the transformation in the man's appearance.

But there is something even more remarkable about this touch of Jesus. The compassion and power of Jesus turns conventional wisdom and religion on its head.

[33 : 28] Jesus ought to have been contaminated by the man. You see, as a clean man touching an unclean man, what happens, conventional wisdom would have dictated that they both become unclean.

So, Jesus begins clean but he touches the man while he becomes unclean and you've got two unclean men. That's what everybody would have expected to happen. But amazingly, it is the man who is cleansed by Jesus.

The leper is cleansed by Jesus' contagious purity. You see, normal rules are reversed by this touch of Jesus.

But notice also how there is a sense in which Jesus, driven by love, trades places with the man. You know, the man, because of his leprosy, was condemned to live in lonely places at the margins of society.

But as Jesus touches him and heals him, this man is brought back into the fold, into the community, into his family. He is brought from that lonely place into a place of belonging and companionship and love.

[34 : 42] But Jesus, by contrast, and as a direct result of his cleansing, is, as it were, banished to the lonely places. Matthew doesn't make reference to that, but in Mark chapter 1 and verse 45, in Mark's account of this same incident, we have this kind of revealing detail provided.

We read in verse 45 of Mark chapter 1, instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. This is the leper who has been healed. And then we read, as a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly, but stayed outside in lonely places.

You see, the leper had been in a lonely place, and he was brought into the community. He was brought back into the fold. Jesus, as a result of him healing the leper, of bringing him back, is himself, in a sense, banished to lonely places.

In a sense, there's almost a case of Jesus and the leper swapping places, and that in itself gives us a kind of hint or a clue of the wonder of the gospel.

Well, let's draw the threads together. What about you? Do you stand in need of the restoring touch of Jesus? Be assured that he is able and he is willing.

[36 : 05] Though leprosy was a physical condition, it did symbolize the effects of sin. And what Jesus did for that man's leprosy, he can do for your sin.

He is able to cleanse and forgive and restore, and he is willing to cleanse and forgive and restore. Indeed, some three years after this encounter, with the leper, Jesus would head out of another town to the ultimate lonely place at Golgotha and die in your place, in the place of sinners.

If you come to him with your plea, he will also say to you what he said to this man, I am willing. Be clean.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for your son. We thank you for Jesus. We thank you for his power and his authority.

And we thank you that he is one who can ever be described as full of compassion, and in that regard, he reflects you, the God who is full of compassion.

[37 : 20] And how we stand in need always of a God who is full of compassion. We thank you that you are such a God. And we thank you that that compassion is evidenced in all that you have done and continue to do in our favor.

Help us to be persuaded that you are the God not only who is able, but the God who is willing. And we pray these things in Jesus' name.

Amen.