

A MIRACLE CURE!

Text: Matthew 8:1-4

Readings: Lev 13:1-8, 40-46; 14:1-11; Matt 4:18-25; 9:35

Theme: Jesus' miraculous healing of the man with leprosy shows his compassion and power as Messiah.

Purpose: To highlight the compassion and power of Jesus as the Messiah so we may believe in him.

Introduction to the reading and text:

Read: Matthew 4:18-25.....; re-read verse 23.... This verse is an introduction to the next five chapters. He closes these 5 chapters with the same description, indicating that he has come to the end of this section of the teaching and miracles of Jesus: 9:35....

Matthew wrote his gospel following more of a topical arrangement rather than chronological, more according to subjects than according to time.

In chapters 5-7, known as the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew records the teaching of Jesus about the law of the kingdom. At the end of that we read that “the crowds were amazed at his teaching” (7:28-29).

In chapters 8 and 9 Matthew gathers together nine miracles, which are arranged in three groups of three; each miracle has its own unique angle and lesson but each one points to Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God.

Read text: Matthew 8:1-4

When you spend some time in hospital waiting rooms and in the hospital wards you see many sad and sorry situations. Some patients have lost limbs through an accident or have broken multiple bones in a car crash; others have terrible diseases that affect their skin or cancers that are spreading through their body.

In our western countries we can be very thankful for the medical and surgical facilities available to us and for the doctors and surgeons and nurses who take care of us when we are sick.

Doctors have been around for a long time. A Greek doctor named Hippocrates is known as the father of medicine. He changed the course of Greek medicine with his belief that disease was not caused by the gods or spirits but was the result of natural physical actions. He lived in the 5th century BC – 2500 years ago – and gave his name to the Hippocratic Oath, a statement of the medical ethics of a doctor.

Luke, who wrote the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, lived about the time of Jesus and was also a doctor. These men tried their best to help people who were sick and in pain; they used the knowledge and the medicines that were available to them at that time. But medicine and surgery in the ancient world was very limited when we compare it to what we have available to us today. Very little could be done for people who had major accidents or who suffered from a disease. Most had to live with severe pain or disability and many died relatively young.

This is the setting in which Jesus did his miracles and conducted his ministry.

In Matthew 4:23 we read about his preaching and teaching and healing in Galilee. From there his fame spread to Syria in the north, the Decapolis in the east and Jerusalem and Judea in the south. Large crowds from all over Israel followed him to hear him (4:25).

J.C. Ryle comments that the greatest sermon ever preached is followed by great proofs that the preacher was the Son of God. These verses describe the first of nine miracles that Matthew has gathered here. This miracle shows the compassion and power of Jesus as the Messiah.

We'll consider the request of this man and the response of Jesus.

1. THE REQUEST OF THIS MAN

a. His disease: "A man with leprosy came..."

Leprosy is a terrible disease that begins with pain and is followed by numbness. The affected skin thickens and then develops into sores and ulcers due to poor blood supply. Fingers and toes drop off and the leper begins to smell with a very unpleasant odour and his voice becomes hoarse and raspy.

The book of Leviticus contains extensive regulations about the diagnosis and treatment of skin diseases (chp 13). If a person was confirmed as having a permanent disease they had to live alone outside the camp or the city. They had to wear torn clothes, leave their hair untidy and cover the lower part of their face. If other people approached they had to call out, "unclean, unclean!"

By the time of Jesus the teachers of the law had added many additional laws to those God had given. The scribes listed 61 contacts that could defile a person and make them unclean; contact with a dead body was first on the list and contact with a leper was second. They regarded the disease as being highly contagious so lepers were excluded from Jerusalem and all walled cities. They were not allowed to come closer than 2 metres to other people and if the wind was blowing towards others they had to stay 50 metres away.

All this meant that a leper was virtually banished from normal human society. No disease excluded a person from others like this one; a leper was virtually regarded as a dead man or woman. The disease was regarded as incurable and healings were rare.

So here was a man with leprosy.

b. His faith

i. "A man with leprosy *came* and knelt before him...."

This was unusual because lepers were supposed to keep their distance from other people. He certainly would not have approached a scribe or a Pharisee because he knew that they would either run away from him or they would throw stones at him to drive him away from them!

But he felt he could approach Jesus; here was a man who cared for others, who was compassionate and who welcomed people and accepted them as they were.

Are you like that? Christians are supposed to be like Jesus in all they do. Do people know you as a person who is approachable and compassionate? Do you make people feel welcome? Do you accept others, even those who are very different? The Lord Jesus gives us a model to follow, a pattern to imitate.

ii. The leper approached Jesus with *reverence*. He came "and knelt before him and said, Lord..." (vs 2a). The Greek word translated as 'knelt' means to worship. Luke tells us that he fell on his face before Jesus. He addressed Jesus as "Lord". Matthew only uses this term of address for people who believed in Jesus.

iii. He also approached Jesus with *faith*: "Lord, *if you are willing...*" he said.

The qualification "if" did not mean that he doubted the power of Jesus but rather his willingness. He believed that Jesus was *able* to make him clean but he did not know if Jesus was *willing* to do so. He recognised that Jesus had to decide to do this and that he could not demand this.

There is an application for us here. Too often we go to God with our list of requests, expecting that he do this and that or give us all that we ask for. But everything we receive is dependent on the will of God; "If you are willing". We must always pray, "*Your will be done*".

This leper approached Jesus with faith believing that Jesus could heal him from this terrible disease. His faith in Jesus was simple but strong, elementary but solid.

Do you have this faith? Do you believe in Jesus? Faith in Jesus is very precious, and like most things that are precious, it is rare. Yet this is how you need to respond to Jesus - you need to believe in him and then live by faith, trusting him day by day.

2. THE RESPONSE OF JESUS

a. His compassion

"Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing', he said, 'be clean.'"

Dr Paul Brand is a leprosy specialist who has written a number of books. He describes the physical suffering of leprosy but also the emotional suffering - the feeling of rejection, the utter loneliness. He describes one young man he was treating for leprosy in India. In the course of the examination he laid his hand on the young man's shoulder and, through the translator, told him about the treatment that lay ahead. To his surprise the patient began to cry. His body shook with sobbing.

"Have I said something wrong", asked Dr Brand through the translator. She questioned the young man in Tamil and then replied;

"No doctor. He said he is crying because you put your hand on his shoulder. Until he came here no one had touched him for many years."

The leper Jesus touched must have felt the same way when Jesus touched him. Everyone kept their distance from him and he had to keep away from them. People were afraid they would get his dreaded disease, his ghastly infection.

Jesus could have healed him at 2 metres away or even 2 kilometres away. But Jesus reached out and touched him and healed him.

Here again is something to imitate in the life of Jesus. There are many people around us who are lonely and isolated, who feel rejected and scorned, people that need to feel your hand on their shoulder, to have your listening ear, to hear your kind words, to receive your sympathy and help. Let's imitate the compassion of Jesus.

b. But we also need to see the **power** of Jesus as Messiah.

"*I am willing*," he said. "*Be clean!*" Immediately the man was cured of his leprosy.

There are some cases of miraculous healing today, especially in missionary situations.

There are those who claim to be able to heal people and many flock to large meetings to seek such healing. But the miracles of faith healers are often debatable; they are not clear-cut or decisive but rather are dubious, partial and temporary.

But this miracle of the Lord Jesus was immediate, total and permanent. The man was cured and immediately restored to full health and strength. He did not need any medication or rehabilitation or physiotherapy!

This miracle of Jesus was a sign. It pointed to him as the Messiah, as the One God had promised in the Old Testament. The Jews expected that the Messiah would be able to do great miracles and Jesus did these to prove that he was the One God had promised.

c. But the people had to understand what sort of Messiah Jesus was; this is why Jesus gave this man **two instructions**.

i. First he gave him a strange command, "*See that you don't tell anyone.*" Why did he say that? Didn't he want everyone to know about him?

Yes, he did, but not just yet; and he didn't want everyone to see him only as a miracle worker. They had to understand the *spiritual* character of his kingdom.

The Jews had their own ideas of who the Messiah would be and what he would do. Israel was an occupied country. The Jews were ruled by the Romans and they wanted to be free of Roman oppression and tyranny, so they were looking for a Messiah who would be a political and military leader.

Jesus knew that if people only heard about his miracles they would misunderstand what he had come to do. He would be expected to lead a rebellion against the Romans. But he had not come to deliver people from oppressive governments but from the oppression of Satan and his kingdom of darkness. He had come to deal with the root of sin not merely its symptoms.

So he needed time to teach people about his kingdom, to explain who he was, to tell them what the Messiah would do. So in the meantime he did not want too much publicity.

ii. But he did tell this healed man to show himself to the priest and to follow the requirements of the law of Moses (described in Leviticus 14). He wanted the priests to have this testimony of who he was; they needed to know that he was the Messiah. The law of Moses and his miracles all pointed to who he was. He wanted the priests to come to believe in him, as this man did, and as we need to believe.

This was the purpose of the miracles - to point people to faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Later on Jesus said, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (John 6:29; cf. 17:3).

The leper believed in the One God had sent. He had a very simple faith in Jesus but he believed; "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."

There will be many people in heaven who have had a faith like this; people who put their confidence and trust in Jesus, who believed that he was and is the Son of God, the Saviour, the Messiah. You need to believe in Jesus like this. You need to trust him as the one who came to die in our place, to take our punishment, to bear our sin.

On the other hand there will be many who will not enter heaven because they did not believe in Jesus. They may have known a lot about the Bible, and attended church, and even studied theology, but despite all this they did not trust in Jesus as their Lord and Saviour.

Karl Barth was a Swiss theologian in the 20th century; he strongly opposed theological liberalism but had some peculiar views of his own. He wrote 14 volumes of *Church Dogmatics*. Someone asked him, "What is the central message of all your work?" He replied; "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

This leper knew that Jesus loved him; and this miracle is recorded in the Bible so that you might know who Jesus is, and know his love and believe in him.

Then you can sing the confident words of that children's hymn:

"Jesus loves me this I know,
For the Bible tells me so;
Little ones to him belong,
they are weak but he is strong.

Jesus loves me, he who died,
heaven's gates to open wide;
he will wash away my sin,
Let his little child come in.

Yes Jesus loves me,
Yes Jesus loves me,
Yes Jesus loves me,
The Bible tells me so!"

Amen