

# Jesus' Love for a Leper

## Matthew 8:1-4


*King of Kings! (Gospel of Matthew Series)*

Prepared by: Matthew S. Black

Sunday, January 12, 2014, 10:30am at Living Hope Church of Roselle, Illinois

“There is no worse screen to block out the Spirit than confidence in our own intelligence.”

- JOHN CALVIN (REFORMATION PASTOR AND THEOLOGIAN)

 Open your Bible to **Matthew 8:1-4**. We are continuing in a series through the Sermon on the Mount entitled: “King of kings.” This morning we are looking a message entitled: “Jesus Carries Our Sorrows.”

### Authority

In Matthew chapters 8-10, Jesus begins to demonstrate His authority. Today we are going to see how He has authority over sickness. In future studies we will see His authority over sin, over Satan, and finally the authority to grant salvation.

### Heaven Has Come to Earth

What we are going to see today in the weeks to come is that Jesus is in some way bringing heaven to earth. In the Kingdom to come, there will be no disease, no demons, no death, no rebellion. I'm looking forward to that day. In these chapters, we are going to see that where ever the Lord Jesus Christ goes, **sickness** is healed, **sin** is forgiven, and **Satan** is cast out.

### Isaiah 61, John the Baptist, Power over Disease

When we look at the Old Testament, we see that one of the main evidence that the Messiah had come was that he had power over disease. Remember there was a time when John the Baptist arrived in prison and began to doubt whether Jesus was the Christ. I mean if Christ is all powerful, why am I in prison? Jesus answered him with the healing prophecy of Isaiah 61.

When Matthew 11:2–6, “Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples 3 and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” 4 And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. 6 And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

### Fulfillment of Isaiah 53

Indeed, Matthew tells us in **Matthew 8:17**, “This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: “He took our illnesses and bore our diseases” (cf. Isaiah 53:4).

The Messiah is the one who will usher in the New Heaven and Earth in which we read in **Revelation 21:4**, “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no

more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

### **Sorrow for the Christian, Just a Temporary Condition**

Some of you are in great physical or emotional pain today. I'm hear to tell you that if you know Jesus, that's just a temporary condition. When Jesus removes sin from us, either at our death or at His second coming, then He will remove all our illnesses and diseases. What ever sorrow you have will be taken away. God will wipe away all tears from your eyes.

We are introduced to three people that introduce us to Jesus compassion and power to heal:

### **Outline**

In the next couple weeks we are going to see how Jesus brings the outcasts near in three pictures of his power...

- The **Outcast**: Jesus heals the leper (8:1-4).
- The **Ostracized**: Jesus heals the Gentile's servant (8:5-13).
- The **Outsider**: Jesus heals the woman (8:14-17).

### **Forbidden in the Temple**

Why are these three people significant? Because none of these people would have been allowed in the temple. The lepers were forbidden. The Gentiles could be on the outer plaza, but never near the sacrifices. Same with the women. There was a special court for them, closer than the Gentiles, but they were forbidden to enter to where the sacrifices were offered. Only the men of Israel had that privilege.

### **Jesus Brings the Temple to the Outcasts**

So in this chapter we meet a leper, a Gentile's servant, and a woman. All forbidden in the inner Temple area. So Jesus brings the Temple to them. He is the Holy of holies. He is the Shekinah Glory veiled in human flesh. They can't go to worship, so He brings the worship to them!

If you are here today and you are an outcast, and you feel unworthy and unclean, then Jesus is ready to meet you. There is no depth of sin that He cannot rescue you from. You may feel defiled and guilty. You may feel unclean or deceitful. Jesus is here today to cleanse you!

Let's look today at the outcast, a leper.

## **I. The Outcast: Jesus heals the leper (8:1-4).**

### **Lepers in Israel**

**Matthew 8:1–2a**, “When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. 2 And behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him...”

It's not certain how this leper was able to get near Jesus. Like HIV/ AIDS today, leprosy in ancient Israel was the most dreaded disease. Leprosy [Hanson's disease] is a contagious skin disease that not only affects the skin (its color, texture, and odor) and throat (it creates a raspy voice), but also slowly destroys nerves that sense pain in our bodies. Lepers often lost the tips of

fingers and toes and broke limbs because they couldn't feel the weight of something heavy or the heat of the fire or the cut of a knife.<sup>1</sup>

The disease of leprosy was abhorred by the Jews. Those who contracted the disease were forced to live apart, isolated from human touch and the joys of intimate human contact.<sup>2</sup> Healings of leprosy in the Old Testament were very rare (Num. 12:10-15; 2 Kings 5:9-14). Leprosy was a living death sentence. They had to warn people they were coming and shout: "Unclean!" They were going to die a slow cruel death, and live outside the camp.

### **A Leper Splitting the Crowd**

How this leper worked his way through the "large crowds" that followed Jesus (8:1) is not clear: perhaps he gave warning cries of "Unclean!" or rang a bell, and the crowd split around him until he could kneel before Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

### **Moses' Provisions: Outside the Camp**

Listen to what Moses said in **Leviticus 13:45–46**, "The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.' 46 He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp."

### **Deplorable Condition / Dynamic Faith**

This man had a deplorable condition, but a dynamic faith. **Matthew 8:1–2a**, "When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. 2 And behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him..."

His condition was so deplorable, but his faith so commendable! Look again at verses 1, 2. The leper somehow made his way through a large crowd and then jumped right into the front of the line so he might speak face-to-face with Jesus. Well, maybe not face-to-face, but face-to-foot, for notice his reverent posture.<sup>4</sup>

**Matthew 8:1–2a**, "When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. 2 And behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him..."

### **Desperate Faith: Lordship of Christ**

Then notice the first word out of his mouth, "Lord." **Verse 2b**: "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." By saying Lord, he is being more than respectable. It's something like, "Jesus, I recognize you have the power to make me clean – to heal me completely. So, will you?" (cf. Daniel 3: 17, 18). Notice the balance of the leper's faith. He has confidence in Jesus ("you can heal me") mixed with humility ("only if you will"). Now that's faith— absolute trust in Jesus and absolute poverty of spirit before him.

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<sup>1</sup> O'Donnell, Douglas Sean (2013-11-30). *Matthew: All Authority in Heaven and on Earth* (Preaching the Word) (Kindle Locations 3682-3685). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> D.A. Carson. *The Sermon on the Mount and Jesus' Confrontation with the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1987), 158-159.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>4</sup> O'Donnell, Kindle Locations 3691-3693.

## Jesus Touched the Leper

What does Jesus do? He doesn't say, "Whoa, now wait a minute . . . ah, why the kneeling? And what's with the calling me 'Lord'? And leprosy . . . umm . . . that's a tough one. I'm not a leprosy specialist." He doesn't say anything like that. In fact, he doesn't say anything at first. Although he can heal just by the power of his word (as we'll see in vs. 5– 13), he doesn't simply respond by speaking. Instead he does something remarkable. He "touched him."

**Matthew 8:3**, "Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean." He touched a leper! "And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him" (v. 3a). What compassion (cf. Mark 1: 41)! What love!<sup>5</sup>

## Jesus Transcends the Law of Moses

According to Leviticus 5: 3, Jesus becomes unclean the moment he touches this leper. Yet by means of his healing touch it's as if he transcends the Law without abolishing it. Jesus' touch doesn't make Jesus unclean; rather it cleanses the unclean.<sup>6</sup>

## How Long Had it Been?

How long was this man a leper? We don't know. How long had it been since someone had touched him? *It may have been the first human touched he had received in a very long time.* How long? One year, two years, ten years? Can you imagine no one touching you for a month—no handshake, no hug, no holding your hand, no playful rub of the head, no hand on your shoulder? "[ He] touched him." Jesus reached out his hand and touched him. This touch is the gospel!

## Something More Dangerous than Leprosy

What about you? Are you unclean today? There is something much more dangerous than leprosy today. There is something more heinous than HIV/AIDS, or cancer. It is the sin that dwells within your heart. Have you come to Jesus in faith for cleansing?

## The Leper Made Whole

**Matthew 8:3**, "And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed."

So, Jesus touches him (tenderly like a mother touches the forehead of her sick child), and then (like a foreman yelling out orders to the wrecking crew) he gives a command to that leprous body: "Be clean!" (v. 3). And what happened? The walls of sin and sickness and separation came tumbling down: "And immediately his leprosy was cleansed" (v. 4). I don't know if scales fell off his skin, if bruises and wounds were instantaneously healed, if the tips of toes and fingers grew back, or if his face, hair, and breath were suddenly fresh and clean. But whatever it looked like, it must have been something to see.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "Lohmeyer, 155, points out that a significant historical side effect of this story has been that Christianity is the only world religion that has everywhere accepted lepers" (in Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Christbook: Matthew 1– 12*, 2nd and rev. ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004], 375).

<sup>6</sup> As Carson notes, "at Jesus' touch nothing remains defiled." Carson. *Sermon*, 198.

<sup>7</sup> O'Donnell, (Kindle Locations 3715-3719). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

## **Our Greatest Danger: Ourselves**

There is a real humility when Jesus touches us. There is a cancer in our lives. Our greatest danger does not come from outside of us, but within us. Have you come to realize how desperately you need the **TOUCH** of Jesus? We were once an offense in God's nostrils. But He touched us and made us acceptable in God's sight. As Paul says in **Eph. 1:6**, "God has made us accepted in the Beloved One." We were once far off, but we are "brought near by the blood of Jesus" (**Eph. 2:13**). We are no longer unclean! We've been touched by Jesus!

As Paul says again in **Colossians 1:21-22**, "And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him."

## **Do You Have a Testimony of Conversion?**

Glory to God! You'll never forget it if you've been touched by the Son of God. It changes your whole life. Do you have a testimony of regeneration? Can you say: "Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost but now I'm found... "Was blind but now I see..." Can you say "He touched me and made me whole?"

## **Tell No One: the Humility of Christ**

**Matthew 8:3-4**, "And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. **4** And Jesus said to him, "**See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a proof to them.**"

This is peculiar! The **humility** of Christ is such that Fredrick Bruner notes, "Jesus will not storm Israel with his messianic claim"; instead he will "knock quietly at its door, leper by leper, little by little."<sup>8</sup>

There is a proper **timing** to Jesus' ministry. He doesn't want word about him getting out too soon or in a way that is misinformed about his purposes.

## **No Gimmicks**

Most of all, Jesus is not Messiah because of miracles and gimmicks. He does not want anyone to come to Him simply for healing or for food (as in the feeding of the 5000). Jesus said in **Luke 19:10**, "... the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

## **Jesus' Veiled Messiahship**

Jesus purposely veiled His messiahship throughout His ministry because He knew the motives of mankind. It is strange that He only reveals that He is the Christ to His disciples in private. Remember Peter in Mark 8, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Demons knew He was the Christ. But publically, as we will see later in the book of Matthew, Jesus speaks of His messiahship in a veiled way. To the crowds He speaks in parables. Why you may ask? The heart of man is as Jeremiah 17:9

"The heart is deceitful above all things,  
and desperately wicked; who can understand it?"

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<sup>8</sup> Fredrick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary. Volume 1: The Christbook, Matthew 1-12* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2007), 377

## Jesus Knew What Was in Man

We read about it in **John 2:23-25**, “Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. <sup>24</sup> But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people <sup>25</sup> and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.”

## God Not Calling the Priests / God Calls the Weak!

**Matthew 8:4**, “but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a proof to them.” Jesus wanted the priests to come to faith. Jesus healing ministry was a signpost for Israel to believe.

You see God wasn't calling the priests. He was calling the lepers. He was calling the weak, the forgotten, the outcasts. That's the only way you can come to Jesus. Like a nobody. Like a child. **1 Peter 5:5**, “Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

## The Greatest Requirement: Humility

God's requirement for you to bear fruit through faith is humility. Knowledge puffs up. But if you believe you are a leper in His sight, He will use you!

### *Transition*

Now we go from a leper to a Gentile.

## II. The **Ostracized**: Jesus heals the Gentile's servant (8:5-13).

The second picture is in verses 5– 13. Comprising this picture we find no less than seven surprises.

### SEVEN SURPRISES<sup>9</sup>

#### 1. From a Different Race

*First*, we see Jesus carrying the sorrows and infirmities of Gentiles. This is a surprise. Really there are seven surprises. **Matthew 8:5**, “When he had entered Capernaum, a **centurion** came forward to him, appealing to him,

The first surprise is that “a centurion” approached Jesus (v. 5). Being a centurion meant two things, both very off-putting for Jews.

First, he was a **Gentile**. He was not of the people of God.

Second, he was part of the **Roman military**. He was oppressing the people of God. Thus, according to Jewish thinking, he was the wrong race and wore the wrong uniform.

#### 2. Appeals to a Different Authority

**Matthew 8:6**, “**Lord**, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly.” The second surprise is that this centurion, who is under the lordship of Caesar, twice calls Jesus “Lord.” “Lord” is the first word of his request (v. 6), and “Lord” is the first word of his reply (v. 8). Even if he is speaking better than he knows (which I don't think he is based on what he asks),

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<sup>9</sup> O'Donnell, Douglas Sean (2013-11-30). (Kindle Locations 3772-3778). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

again this word “Lord” in Matthew is significant symbolically. Believers call Jesus “Lord,” while non-believers call him “teacher,” “rabbi,” etc.

### 3. Helps a Different Friend

**Matthew 8:6**, “Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly.”

The third surprise is that this centurion makes an appeal on behalf of his servant, who according to the word Matthew uses in verse 6 is a “young servant” (NLT) or “young man” (YLT), perhaps a boy who was born to one of his household slaves. You say, “What’s the big deal? What’s the surprise in that?” The big deal is that in the Greco-Roman world “the average slave owner . . . had no more regard for his slave than for an animal.” In his Ethics, Aristotle said there should be no friendship and no justice toward inanimate things, as well as a horse, ox, or slave.

So do you see the surprise? Why does this high-powered soldier’s soldier care for this slave? Let him die and buy another one. Don’t humiliate yourself by begging before this beggar, Jesus.

### 4. Has a Different Conviction

**Matthew 8:6-7**, “Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly.” 7 And he said to him, “I will come and heal him.”

The fourth surprise is that Jesus responds to this request, saying, “I will come and heal him” (v. 7). This is the “Rosa Parks” incident of the ancient world.

It is surprising that Jesus doesn’t say, “Well, let me first take a look at him and see if I can do anything for him.” “Let’s see if he’s Jewish.” “Oh just a slave?”

Rather he says, “I will come and heal him.” It is also surprising (and this surprises the centurion) that Jesus is willing to enter a Gentile’s house. Jews were prohibited from doing so. It was a cultural no-no. It would be similar to a white man sitting in the back of the bus or drinking from a “black only” drinking fountain in pre-civil rights America. Jesus was willing to cross over that line.

### 5. Has a Different Attitude

**Matthew 8:8**, “But the centurion replied, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed.”

The fifth surprise, however, is that this Gentile won’t let him. “Lord,” he says, “I am not worthy to have you come under my roof” (v. 8). Do you see the humility here? A Gentile, a military leader in the world’s greatest army, a free Roman citizen, a man who has a household of slaves (which means he has some money) thinks Jesus is so worthy that it’s unthinkable that our Lord should come over and just let himself in.

It’s like the **Queen of England** coming to town, meeting you on the street, and saying, “Oh, I’ll just stay at your house tonight.” What would you say to that? At first you would be honored. But then you’d come to your senses. And I don’t care how upscale your house might be, you would suddenly recognize what a dump it is. “Oh, she can’t stay here.” That is this man’s disposition. He is unworthy to have royalty—the Lord—into his house.

### 6. Has a Different Level of Faith

From there we come to the sixth surprise, a Gentile’s great faith!

**Matthew 8:5-13**, “But the centurion replied, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. 9 For I too am a man under

authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” 10 When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith.”

Just say a word, Jesus. I believe it will travel far enough, quickly enough, and powerfully enough to restore my servant.” “When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, ‘Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith’” (v. 10).

This sixth surprise— this man’s **faith**— is what surprises Jesus. Jesus marveled that someone who didn’t grow up like Paul, for example, learning the Torah, or even like Timothy with a Jewish mother and grandmother to teach him the Scriptures, knew enough to believe in Jesus and his word. This man expressed an “unlimited confidence in the authority of Jesus.” You see, what Jesus is highlighting to his disciples, who were then all Jews, is that not even they “had shown the sincerity, sensitivity, humility, love, and depth of faith of this Gentile soldier.”

## 7. A Different Future

**Matthew 8:11–13**, “I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, 12 while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” 13 And to the centurion Jesus said, “Go; let it be done for you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed at that very moment.”

It may be surprising to some that Jesus compares Heaven to a feast, the best banquet ever thrown (cf. Isaiah 25: 6– 9; 65: 13, 14; Revelation 19: 9).

It may be surprising to others that Jesus talks about Hell as a real place. Hell is a place of great pain and regret, a place where no one would want to be.

But *the greatest surprise* (if I can rightly call the Scripture’s predicted inclusion of the Gentiles a surprise), especially to the Jews of Jesus’ day, is who’s in and who’s out. Even the super-religious— a Jewish Pharisee, for example— is **out** if he won’t bow the knee to Jesus and call him Lord.

However, the Gentile military man working for the bad guys, due to his childlike faith, is in. The greatest surprise is that those who are in will become “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (**Revelation 7: 9**).

Paul explains this in **Ephesians 2:11-14**, “Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— <sup>12</sup>remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup>But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been **brought near by the blood of Christ.** <sup>14</sup>For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.”



### III. The **Outsider**: Jesus heals the woman (8:14-17).

#### Jesus Heals a Woman

**Matthew 8:14–17**, “And when Jesus entered Peter’s house, he saw his mother-in-law lying sick with a fever. 15 He touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she rose and began to serve him. 16 That evening they brought to him many who were oppressed by demons, and he cast out the spirits with a word and healed all who were sick. 17 This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: “He took our illnesses and bore our diseases.””

In Israel, there were three plazas outside the temple:

- The court of the Gentiles
- The court of Women
- The court of Israel

#### The Lamb of God coming to the Outsider!

If anyone trespassed, they would be put to death. So this leper and these Gentiles and this woman had never seen the inside court of the Temple. They’d never seen the Burnt offering of a Lamb. But now the Lamb of God was coming to them!

#### Why This Miracle?

What is Matthew doing here? Why tell us of this third apparently minor miracle? Is he perhaps reminding Roman Catholics that Peter, the so-called first Pope, was married? I think that’s the best way to read the fact that Peter had a mother-in-law. Jerome did as well. He conceded that all the apostles except John were married (cf. 1 Corinthians 9: 5). 14 But I doubt that Matthew had that in mind. Was it to show that no health issue (even a fever) is too small for Jesus? I don’t think so. Was it to show that when women get healed it is then their duty to stay at home and serve men, since that’s what this woman did? I highly doubt that. 15 Well then, was it to show that Jesus, on his own initiative (note: in this miracle he is not asked to help) can help and likes to help (he is eager to help) whomever and whenever he wants? Now we are getting somewhere.<sup>10</sup>

#### Bringing in the Outsider

The main reason Matthew includes this miracle is to show that Jesus has come, in the words of Psalm 147: 2, to gather “the outcasts of Israel” (a leper and a woman) and of the world (a Roman slave) to the true Israel, Jesus. You might ask, “A woman is an outsider?” In those days women were viewed as second-class citizens. In the Jewish synagogue, for example, “women were placed behind screens, to the rear, as in modern Muslim mosques.” 17 Furthermore, “in some Jewish traditions, touching a woman [or even a woman’s hand like Jesus did here] would make [you] unclean or unholy. Jewish Halakah forbade touching persons with many kinds of fever (SBK, 1: 479f.)”<sup>11</sup>

So, do you see what’s going on here? Oh, it’s so beautiful. Jesus’ first three recorded miracles in Matthew are of three groups of religious outcasts. In other words, Jesus is letting

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

outsiders in. With his death the veil of the temple will be split in two. What will happen then—the substitutionary benefits of the Suffering Servant—is foreshadowed here.<sup>12</sup>

The worship of Jerusalem disallowed these people from coming to the close to worship God. The Lord breaks down the walls of hostility.

### **Conclusion**

There is no place for racism and pride and insecurity at the Cross. The ground is level at the Cross. God resists the proud, but he gives grace – he carries the sorrow and infirmities and diseases and sins of the humble!

One day God will wipe away all tears! Christian, trust him with your sorrows, and reach out to the outcasts!

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.