

Matthew 8:1-17 – “Cleaning the Unclean” – Feb. 26, 2023

1. The Sermon on the Mount is over, and we now move into another narrative portion of Scripture that follows Jesus’ ministry
2. This is a good opportunity to zoom out again and look at the way Matthew has arranged and organized the information in his gospel
3. Matthew, as an ethnically Jewish Christian, has a self-conscious desire to show the unity and the harmony of Scripture
 - a. The new covenant era is not unrelated to the old covenant era
 - b. The substance of all the OT promises has come in the person of Christ
 - c. The old covenant terminates into the new covenant, in much the same way that an acorn terminates into a pine tree
 - i. There is continuity and discontinuity
 - ii. Similarity and difference
 - iii. But ultimately there is complete harmony
 - d. For Christ to show Himself as the fulfillment of the promise of the Old Testament, He walks through the same patterns Israel and God’s old covenant people
 - e. This isn’t because Jesus wants to mimic them, but because God wrote the story of the Old Testament as a symbolic picture of Christ and His ministry
 - i. The ordering here is important
 - f. The flow of the book of Matthew actually follows the pattern of the OT books as well
 - i. Genealogy – Genesis (origins, history)

- ii. Flight from Egypt / Sermon on the Mount – Exodus (law from the mountain top)
 - iii. 10 Actions (Chs. 8 & 9) – Joshua (a kind of conquest of the land by a greater Joshua)
 - iv. Increasing pressure which leads to speaking in parables – Wisdom Literature (how many Psalms and Proverbs are conundrums pointing us to the Messiah and His kingdom?)
 - v. Towards the end of the book, Jesus’ words of woe on the scribes and the Pharisees, and the doom of Jerusalem and the temple relate to the pre-exilic prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, with His resurrection reminding us of their return
- g. In sum, we see that Christ stands in as the Second Adam, as the true seed, the real Israel of God, and thus it is fitting that He retraces all these steps
 - i. Jesus recapitulates the history of Israel
 - ii. Christ relives the story and does it right this time around
- 4. We want to be good readers of the Bible, so this involves examining all the contours of the text
 - a. If you ever read the book Animal Farm, and you told your teacher it was about talking animals on Mr. Jones’ Manor Farm, she would know that you could read sentences
 - b. If you told her that it was a book about Stalin and the Russian Revolution, she would know that you could read a story

- c. We want to do both with Scripture – deal honestly with the parts, and show how they tell a complete story about the meaning of history, of the world, and everything in it
5. VV.1-4 – *“When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. 2 And behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.” 3 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.”*
- a. The first of Jesus’ ‘*Ten Actions*’ is to heal a man with leprosy
 - b. Imagine being a leper at this point in history
 - i. Leprosy was seen less like a disease and more like an uncleanness, a defect
 - ii. Lepers were unclean and they made others around them unclean
 - iii. They were frequently driven away from society and were looked down upon
 - iv. Imagine the mental and emotional injury that would come from people walking out of their way to avoid you, and of calling out ‘*unclean, unclean*’ to warn people of your coming
 - v. For a man, imagine your sense of loss and of being without purpose when you are unable to work or provide for your family

- vi. Think of the shame and the embarrassment of being so impoverished that you had provision in the law to give lesser sacrifices than mainstream society
- vii. Knowing that this is the life of a leper, imagine going through the battery of tests that Tim read about in Leviticus this morning
 - 1. Because leprosy was seen as an uncleanness rather than as a normal disease, the inspection was carried out by the priests instead of by physicians
 - 2. This also meant that there was exclusion from corporate temple worship
- c. This all paints a very difficult picture, and we can well imagine that lepers waiting on the verdict of the priest could very well be like our experience of waiting on life-changing test results from the doctor
- d. It is in this context that Jesus comes down from the mountain after preaching
 - i. He's attracted a large crowd who are following Him
 - ii. When the leper approaches Jesus, we could well imagine the human reflex – why would Jesus trouble Himself with a dirty outcast when He's the popular leader of a large group of followers?
- e. We can well understand the desperation of the leper
 - i. He is working with a good deal of faith and understanding at least partially of who Jesus is because He knows Jesus can make him clean
 - ii. While a priest could *announce* the man clean, they had no power to *make* him clean

1. There is something unique in his mind about Jesus
- f. The leper also understands the sovereignty and the power of Christ
 - i. When he says “*Lord, if you will, you can make me clean*”, he knows that Christ certainly has the sovereign right and power to cure him, but just like when we pray, the leper doesn’t know if his request is aligned with the purposes of God
 - g. Jesus shows compassion not only by healing the man, but by touching him
 - i. We may not fully understand the impact of human touch on this man
 - ii. Who knows how long he was deprived of it
 1. Even those who touched a leper became unclean (Lev. 15:7)
 2. Now the great high priest, the true Temple of God not only declares this man clean, but He makes Him clean and grants him immediate access
 3. In a very real sense, this man has been cleared by a priest and gained access to the Temple in one interaction here
 - h. The man is immediately clean and we may wonder at Jesus’ instructions for him to stay quiet about the whole thing
 - i. While pushing back the curse is most certainly part of Christ’s mission on earth, and the root of this is sin
 - i. When miracles are understood in light of validating God’s messengers, and as events which do push back the curse in the form of disease, death, demonic possession, etc. they make perfect sense

- ii. Unfortunately, many see only the excitement of miracles and not their meaning
 - iii. To gain a large following of miracle seekers would hinder Christ's mission, and that is why the man is instructed to stay quiet about it
- j. Jesus honours and fulfills the law by instructing this man to go to the priest and to give his gift, just as Moses had instructed
- k. The healing of this man paints a vivid picture of ourselves
- l. We have our own uncleanness which prevents us from approaching God
 - i. Our sin has alienated us from God, from each other, and from our proper place in creation
 - ii. It has made us poor beggars, properly feeling the weight of guilt and shame
 - iii. God would be perfectly justified in leaving us in this pitiful state, but out of mercy and compassion He has condescended and healed us with His touch
 - iv. Through Christ, God has made us clean
 - 1. He has removed our shame and granted us access back to His presence
- m. If you were the man healed of leprosy, the new life you would have received would be so wonderful that a small offering in return would seem like nothing
 - i. So it is when we send our own thanks back to God
 - 1. Tithes
 - 2. Use of time/resources

3. Sanctification

ii. When we see the radical nature of guilt and the radical nature of grace,
how can our lives not spill over with gratitude

1. Our good works are not something we do to impress God
2. Rather, they are the overflow of gratitude to God for saving us

6. VV. 5-13 – *“5 When he had entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him, 6 “Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly.” 7 And he said to him, “I will come and heal him.” 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. 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. 11 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.”*

- a. A centurion was an officer in the Roman military who was over 100 men
- b. Given the surroundings of Capernaum, it could very well be that this was the highest ranking military official in town
- c. We see another important aspect of Christ’s ministry in this exchange

- d. It is clear that the centurion knows who Christ is and is trusting in Him with a reverent faith
 - i. The centurion knows that all it will take will be a word from Jesus and his servant will be healed
 - ii. It's also worth noting that while this man is used to being in charge and giving orders, He is not at all demanding of Jesus – quite the opposite!
 - iii. He doesn't command, but takes a needy posture, and despite his high position, understands that he is not worthy of having Christ enter His house
 - 1. There are several possible factors here
 - a. One is a reverence for who Christ is
 - b. One is that the centurion recognizes that conquered people rarely love their conquerors, and so it makes sense that the Jews don't feel much love for the Romans
 - c. One may be a courtesy and the faith that the trip wouldn't be necessary since Christ does not need to be physically present to command His creation
 - d. One may also be that if this centurion was aware of the Mosaic Law Code, he knows that for a Jew to enter the house of a Gentile would have made them unclean
- e. The combined actions of calling Jesus '*Lord*', of recognizing His sovereign rule over creation, and of recognizing the supreme worth of Jesus compared to his own sin and uncleanness, despite being one of the most recognized people in

Capernaum lead Jesus to “*marvel*” and say “*Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith.*” (v.10)

- f. He goes on to say something important about His own ministry – v.11 – “*I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*”
 - i. In one statement, Jesus describes the supreme satisfaction and joy of heaven, and the misery and torment of hell
 - ii. He also clearly teaches something that we’ve already seen in this gospel – the concept of Gentile inclusion
 - iii. The centurion is commended for his faith, and it is this faith that makes him a true son of Abraham (we’ve been discussing this in Sunday school in our discussion on the covenants)
 - iv. Not all who descend genetically from Abraham are true sons, and not all true sons descend genetically from Abraham
 - 1. What grafts one in or out of the covenant family of God is faith in the true covenant head, Jesus Christ
 - 2. Jews who don’t place their faith in Christ are grafted out, and Gentiles who do place their faith in Christ are grafted in – together they make one kingdom people of God
 - v. We’ve seen this concept in Jesus’ genealogy and in His birth narrative

1. There were several unlikely Gentile women grafted into Jesus' family tree, showing that true Israel has always had room to graft people in
 2. The Magi also demonstrate remarkable faith in the promised Messiah when they make their journey, despite not descending from Israel
- vi. Jesus makes it as clear as can be here that the dividing line is faith and not ethnicity
1. This isn't a new teaching – when Paul teaches the same concept in Romans, he borrows from the prophet Hosea to make his point
 - a. *And I will have mercy on No Mercy, and I will say to Not My People, 'You are my people'; and he shall say, 'You are my God. (2:23)*
 2. In Romans 11, Paul goes on to say that the inclusion of the Gentiles into the kingdom will provoke the Jews to jealousy, and this will actually be the catalyst for them to be grafted back into the kingdom, also by faith
 - a. Gentile inclusion is good because it shows the expanding purposes of God as redemptive history moves on, and this expansion leads to further expansion as Romans 11 seems to indicate a large scale future conversion of the Jewish people

3. So in the wisdom of God, the Jews rejecting the gospel of Christ ends up in an expansion of God's kingdom that is the cause of yet another expansion of God's kingdom
- g. Just as the leper knew that Christ *could* heal him, so the centurion knows that Christ *could* heal his servant
 - i. Neither one doubts the power of Christ, they are only curious if it is His intention to do so
 - ii. In both cases, Christ is willing to heal, and the centurion's servant is healed from a distance

7. The Two Healings

- a. These events are both historical realities which involve Jesus healing someone in a desperate situation
- b. Despite this common point of contact, though, many other details are quite different
- c. In the first case, the leper is low on the social scale while the centurion is high on the social scale
- d. The leper receives a personal touch while the centurion asks for a remote healing
- e. The leper asks for himself while the centurion asks for one under his care
- f. The leper is Jewish while the centurion is Roman
- g. These details all start to paint a picture of just how varied Christ's ministry is, and how wide the net of His gospel is
- h. The gospel of Christ is for rich and poor, for slave and free, for Jew and Gentile

8. VV. 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.”*”
- a. More variety is added here as Jesus heals the relative of one of His apostles
 - b. Just as the leper goes and pays his gift out of gratitude, Peter’s mother-in-law moves to serve Jesus after her healing
 - i. The overflow of gratitude and a willingness to serve is the only fitting response to Christ’s redemptive work
 - c. More were brought, and Jesus casts out demons
 - d. Matthew says this is in fulfilment of Isaiah 53:4
 - e. *Read Isaiah 53*
 - f. I’ve been hoping to stress both the historical fact of these biblical narratives and also their theological meaning
 - i. Isaiah 53 says *he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows*
 - ii. Our first thought may be to apply this to the cross and the forgiveness of sins
 - iii. While this is certainly true, there is another layer
 - iv. Matthew paraphrases Isaiah by saying “*He took our illnesses and bore our diseases*”
 - v. Illness and disease, uncleanness, and demon possession are all the result of the curse

- vi. For Christ to be in the position of the true Mediator, of the final covenant head, two things are needed
 - 1. He must perfectly fulfill every demand of these covenants
 - a. Everything that was demanded of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David must be executed perfectly by Christ so He can win all of those promised covenant blessings for His people
 - 2. He likewise must take the blow of all the covenant curses for the disobedience of the covenant breakers
 - a. Every covenant has blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience
 - b. Because Christ is mediating both sides, He must finally secure the blessings, and exhaust God's curses
- vii. This is another way of talking about the Great Exchange of the gospel
 - 1. Our sin gets imputed to Christ, and His righteousness gets imputed to us
- viii. Here we have a picture of Jesus taking personal responsibility for the hardships of others
- ix. He doesn't just take our sin upon Himself, but also the *consequences* of sin
 - 1. In a very real way, Jesus has leprosy and paralysis and cancer and heart disease and demonic possession and widowhood and abandonment and hunger put on Him

2. Speaking of Christ's role as mediator, the church father Gregory of Nazianzus has said that "*What has not been assumed has not been healed.*"
- x. The reason why Christ gets involved in these cases is because they all demonstrate His commitment to pushing back the curse
 - xi. His first coming starts in motion the process that is finalized at His second coming
 1. Revelation 21:1-4 – "*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place¹ of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people,² and God himself will be with them as their God.³ 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.*"
 - xii. The finished product dictates what the earlier steps look like
 - xiii. Jesus' miracles aren't just a circus act to draw a crowd – they are events with theological meaning

1. They are early pictures of what it is like for the light to start breaking up the darkness, and to anticipate the day when the darkness will be finally and fully conquered

9. CHARGE

- a. *The miracles of Jesus give us a taste of the age to come, when we will enjoy heaven and earth completely free of the remnants of sin. While sin opened wide the gate to a world filled with disease, uncleanness, and demonic activity, Christ has established a ministry that has His enemies retreating back into the darkness because they cannot stand the light. Christ shows us a window into the age to come – an age in which every tear is wiped dry, where crying, pain, mourning, and death will be distant memories of a bygone era. In His first coming, Christ starts the long war of subduing His enemies, pushing them and their works of darkness back through the same gate they entered. At His second coming, He will lock this gate forever. Those who have resisted Him will be thrown into the outer darkness where the weeping and gnashing of teeth will continue forever; but those who receive His healing work by faith remain forever to enjoy table fellowship with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This week, as we consider the significance of Christ taking not only sin onto Himself, but also all its consequences, let's be sure that our response is one of thanksgiving like the leper, of being under authority like the centurion, and of service like Peter's mother-in-law.*

10. BENEDICTION

- a. Hebrews 13:20, 21 – *“Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal*

covenant, 21 equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us² that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”