

Introduction:

- A. *Illus.*: In Act I of Shakespeare's play, *King Lear*, the Earl of Kent approaches King Lear and asks for permission to follow and serve him. **The audience will learn that he is loyalty personified.** King Lear is taken aback, and asks him what he really wants.

“Service,” the Earl replies.

“Whom wouldst thou serve?” asks Lear.

“You.”

“Dost thou know me, fellow?”

“No, sir, but you have that in your countenance which I fain would call Master.”

“What's that?” asks the King.

“Authority,” replies the Earl.

- B. The Gospel of Matthew creates a similar scenario, though it unfolds more slowly. Jesus' great Sermon on the Mount is recorded in Matt. 5-7. The account ends, “*And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.*” Jesus interpreted the Scriptures for them as though their lives depended on it. So Jesus demonstrates his divine authority in his *teaching*.

Moving forward in Matt. 8-9, the emphasis is on Jesus' authority in his *acts*. Today we'll look at **Matt 8:1-17**, which captures three of Jesus' miracles. Matthew has grouped these three together so as to help us see Jesus' authority.

- C. Matthew is persuading us that the first reason we would follow Jesus is his authority. We don't think of this quality very often but remember, Jesus came as the **King** of the Jews. These stories underscore Jesus' authority for us.

Matt 8:1-4...

I. JESUS HAS THE AUTHORITY TO CLEANSE OUR LEPROSY

- A. The Greek word used here for leprosy was used for various skin diseases, and not all skin diseases bore the stigma we see in the Bible. **Lev. 13** gives very specific instructions to priests as to how to determine if a person actually had leprosy. One manifestation was what we call today Hansen's Disease, and it is utterly dreadful. It horribly disfigures people. Fingers and toes can fall off. Nerves grow dead so they send no pain signals. One doctor who traveled the world studying this disease said, *"There is one fact that makes leprosy different from all other diseases, and that is the social stigma connected with it... This mark of infamy or disgrace... sets its victims apart from all other people."*ⁱ

That certainly jibes with stories of lepers in the Bible. It was a death sentence. Part of the stigma was the fear of contagion. Lepers were completely quarantined—for life. If someone had the disease this is what **Lev. 13:45-46** required: *"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.' 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."* Try to imagine that. Not only is your flesh deteriorating but you are cut off from others. No one to touch you... ever. No one for company unless it might be another leper. And worse still, it was commonly assumed that leprosy was the curse of God, so the person might feel they couldn't even turn to God. It was as if their skin was sin itself.

- B. So for this leper to even approach Jesus was out of bounds. He wanted to be clean from all of it and he believed Jesus could do it if only he was willing.
- C. What Jesus did was very significant: “Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man.” How long had it been since someone had *touched* him? But if Jesus touched him wouldn't Jesus become unclean before God? Instead of the leper defiling Jesus, Jesus *immediately* cleansed the leper. He had the authority to *touch* the man and to *cleanse* him.
- D. Don't miss what happens next in v.4... We know from other gospel accounts of this story that the man told everyone what Jesus had done for him, and that as a result, Jesus couldn't move freely and had to retreat to more remote places. But the part that is particularly interesting is this business of reporting to a priest and following the law of Moses “as a testimony to them.”

Understand that people didn't recover from leprosy, and apart from the story of Naaman, a foreigner, there is no account of any Jew ever being healed of it. I read where the rabbis said that healing a leper was as difficult as raising the dead. Neither *ever* happened.

Jesus told him to “offer the gift Moses commanded.” That's detailed in **Lev. 14**. V.3 begins, “*If they have been healed of their leprosy...*” and what follows is as complicated a process as I remember seeing in the OT. To begin with the priest got two birds. He killed one over a pot of water, draining the blood into the water. Then he dipped the other bird in that bloody water and released the blood-washed bird. He also dipped a piece of cedar, a scarlet cord, and a branch of hyssop, bundled together, into the bloody water. With that he sprinkled the cleansed person seven times. And that's just the beginning!

Next the person shaved all the hair off their body, bathed, and washed their clothes. Eight days later the healed person bought three lambs as well as a specific amount of fine flour and oil. The priest offered these lambs and the flour with oil to the Lord as sin, guilt and fellowship offerings. Blood and oil from these sacrifices was then applied to the healed leper's right earlobe, right thumb, and right big toe. After all this, they were declared clean before God, welcomed to worship, and to rejoin the people of God.

Imagine this man showing up at the temple and telling the priests on duty that Jesus had cleansed him of his leprosy and he was there to follow Moses' law. To our knowledge, no one had ever needed that law. Can't you just imagine the priests' bewildered faces. *"We didn't spend much time on that in seminary!"*

What was the "testimony to them"? To show the priests that Jesus Christ had the God-given authority to do for the leprous body and heart what no one else could do. He was the healer the Law was waiting for.

These sacrifices secured and dramatized what God was doing for the heart of the leper. **Michael Green** writes, *"Never has there been a condition that so illustrated the spiritual condition of humankind. For sin is a terrible disease that separates us from our fellows and from God; it spreads, and it is fatal. No wonder the man with leprosy had to cry, 'Unclean!' to warn bystanders to keep their distance."* **This cleansing isn't just about this one leper.** It is a demonstration of Jesus' authority to cleanse our leprous hearts. Remember that bird dipped in the bloody water and then set free. The lambs sacrificed for sin and guilt. The bread baked to celebrate fellowship with God.

Now the next miracle, in **vv.5-13...** There are two important things happening here. One is that Jesus has the authority heal without even being in contact with the sick person. The other is that Jesus honored the faith of this Roman centurion, even though he was not one of God's covenant people, welcomed him to God's Great Feast.

II. JESUS HAS THE AUTHORITY TO HONOR THE FAITH OF ANYONE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM

- A. It amazed Jesus how clearly the centurion grasped the issue of authority. It took a soldier to really grasp the power of authority.
- B. In **v.10**, Jesus said, *“Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.”* Here is an important insight into the nature of faith. The centurion's faith wasn't in the *outcome*; i.e., he wasn't certain that Jesus *would* heal his servant would be healed, but he was certain Jesus *could*. His command alone was enough. That was the faith that made Jesus marvel.

That should be the focus of our faith as well. Jesus told the leper, *“I am willing. Be clean!”* And with the centurion, Jesus spoke as the King he is, *“Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would.”* You can almost see Jesus' scepter!

- C. What Jesus said in **vv.11-12** would have been very upsetting for the Jews around him.... By *“the subjects of the kingdom”* Jesus meant the Jews, the blood relatives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. **Dale Bruner** made this observation: *“Hell is not a doctrine used to frighten unbelievers; it is a doctrine used to warn those who think themselves believers.”* [in Blomberg, p.143]

Perhaps just as jarring to the Jews was this picture of people from the four corners of the earth coming to God's

Great Feast—what we will come to call the Wedding Supper of the Lamb. Because Jesus Christ has the authority to invite all who believe in him, whatever their nationality, whatever their station in life, whatever they’ve been or done—if they have bowed to the authority of King Jesus.

Finally, there is kind of a collage of healings: **vv.14-17...** Here’s authority again. Matthew’s particular point here, as a summary to all these stories, is the fulfilment of **Is 53:4**.

III. JESUS HAS THE AUTHORITY TO TAKE UP OUR INFIRMITIES OF BODY AND SOUL

- A. Notice with Peter’s mother-in-law that Jesus doesn’t even need faith to act with authority. And with the demons, he merely says the word to banish them and set their prisoners free.
- B. Notice, too, that interesting detail, “*and she got up and began to wait on him.*” Literally, “*she began to serve him.*” This, of course, tells us that she prepared a meal, but the language is also suggestive of something more. Matthew seems to be making a subtle statement about Jesus’ authority. He is one to be served.
- C. **V.16** introduces us to Jesus’ authority over evil spirits. Most of us are not well-acquainted with the torment of demonized people, but it is really terrible. There is often physical and/or mental suffering, along with a horrible sense of foreboding. There are often evil voices constantly lying to the person, who has trouble discerning just what is happening to them. Demons are brassy and bossy. **They bully souls.** But when sufferers were brought to Jesus, all it took was a word to banish those spirits. I have seen the name of Jesus banish evil spirits and it is an awesome display of his authority.

D. Having told us these various stories of Jesus' authority Matthew ties all this to the prophecy of the coming Messiah in Is. 53, "*He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases.*" Here is a kind of paradox—that one who possesses all authority would choose to bear the infirmities and diseases of others. Listen to **Is. 53:4-5**:

*Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,*

[That's the part Matthew quotes]

*yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.*

[That's what those who mocked Jesus on the cross believed.]

*But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.*

Jesus paid a price to heal all those people. He didn't become infected with their leprosy, paralysis, or fever, but Matthew is telling us here that he paid a price, nonetheless, in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy.

For one thing, Jesus always *felt* the burden of people's suffering. He wasn't aloof. As a hymn says, "*His heart is touched with our grief.*" Do you remember the story when Jesus raised his friend Lazarus from the dead? John tells us, "*When Jesus saw [Mary] weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.... Jesus wept.*" Not over the loss of Lazarus but at the suffering of the mourners and at this terrible broken world where death reigns.

Beyond that, all this suffering—the diseases, death and demons—was the consequence of sin which has spread into

every nook and cranny of creation, even to the depths of our souls. Here, it is as if Jesus is taking all this suffering into himself the way someone might take over the past-due notices of the poverty-stricken. Then, when the time came, he carried them to the cross where **Jesus paid it all**, and broke the power of sin and death forever.

Now, while we wait for Jesus to return for us, we must deal with our sickness and the fierce attacks of Satan. Sometimes, it is the will of Jesus our Lord to heal us, which he can freely do since he has authority over all the effects and consequences of sin. But whether or not he does so in this life, he most certainly will do so in the next, where there will be *“no more death or mourning or crying or pain.”*

Conclusion

“Who do you wish to serve?” asks Jesus.

“You,” we reply.

“Do you know me?”

“Yes, Lord, and what we see in your teaching and healing moves us to call you Master.”

“What do you see?” asks the King.

“Authority,” we reply.

ⁱ Dr. Kellersberger, quoted in Wm Hendricksen, p.391.