

Follow Him! Marginalized No More

Matthew 8:1-17

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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."

When he 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.

14 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" (Matt 8:1-17)

The first four chapters of Matthew set the stage for the entire book, identifying Jesus as the Messiah. Chapters 5-7 recorded the most profound sermon that Jesus ever taught, calling people away from veneer religion – to "Get Real." Today we begin a study of chapters 8-10 which will carry us through the end of the year. Next week we'll take two-week break as we turn the spotlight of the ministry on the important subject of missions. I'll be preaching my annual missionary biographical message on the life of Hudson Taylor. We'll pick our study of Matthew 8 again on October 25.

A New Focus: What does it mean to follow Jesus?

Remember that Matthew's big picture aim is to present Jesus as the Jewish Messiah who was sent to bring the kingdom of God to the world. Matthew presents a selective history of Jesus' life in order to declare a particular message. If you compare Matthew with Mark (particularly Mark 1-3) you will see that Matthew orders many of the events differently. He does this because he is not writing a biography; he is capturing the message of who Jesus is by his life and his teaching. Matthew is communicating truth about Jesus through the story of his life.

Our last section (Matthew 5-7) ended with this phrase: "And when Jesus had finished these sayings..." (7:28), and this section will end the same way: "when Jesus had finished instructing his disciples..." (11:1). Matthew 8-10 has its own unique message. What is it?

I think we get a hint at the theme in 8:1 – "When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him." The crowds were astonished by his teaching because he was teaching with authority (7:28-29). Therefore, he had a lot of interested people. And what Matthew does in chapters 8-10 is show us the authority of Jesus so that people will know what following him looks like.

Matthew 8-10 could be divided up into two sections. Chapters 8-9 record ten miracles (leper, centurion servant, Peter's mother-in-law, storm, demon possession, paralytic, girl who died, woman with an discharge of blood, blind men, mute man), and chapter 10 is Jesus' instructions to his disciples regarding what following him will cost – "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt 10:39).

So this section of Matthew is all about following Jesus. Why should you follow Him? What kind of authority does he really have? And what does following him look like?

The Healing Grace of Jesus

When you first read our text you might think that it is just a record of three healings that Jesus performed. But there is so much more. To understand our text, you need to keep two thoughts in mind:

1. Healings are a platform to tell us about Jesus. Jesus didn't heal people just to heal them. He healed people to communicate who he is and what he is all about. The last verse (8:17) in our section shows this very clearly. It says, "This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: He took our illnesses and bore our diseases." He is quoting Isaiah 53:4, one of the great Old Testament texts about the coming Messiah:

53 Who has believed what they heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? 2 For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. 3 He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. 4 Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. 5 But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isa 53:1-6)

It is the Messiah who will bear the griefs and the sorrows of the people. He will liberate them for the ravaging consequences of sin, including illness and disease. The Messiah will bring true shalom or peace.

Matthew shows us how Jesus' healings are linked to prophesy, and that his aim is to carry the burdens of the people. Healing diseases is to demonstrate that he is God and that he sets people free.

2. His healings were focused on the marginalized. A leper, a centurion, and a woman were the first people who Matthew recorded that he healed. That is not by accident. A leper was an outcast, a centurion was an enemy, and a woman was a second-class citizen. Jesus' culture was filled social, ethical, and ceremonial boundaries. Even worship in the temple was characterized by this. There were the various courtyards located in proximity to the temple. The closest courtyard was for Jewish men, then Jewish women, then Gentiles or those who were ceremonially unclean. Everything in Jewish life was conditioned by one's social or ethnic status.

Matthew shows us that Jesus has come to minister to those in need. He has come to bring about spiritual and physical healing. He heals people – marginalized people – to demonstrate that he is bringing a foretaste of the kingdom to earth.

A Message from Three Marginalized People

A leper, a centurion, and a woman. Matthew wants us to see something about Jesus in each healing. He wants to show us what Jesus is like; to show us what the gospel is like.

A Leper: Jesus made it personal

The first person who encounters Jesus is a leper. Verse 2 tells us that he came to Jesus and knelt before him. Leprosy in the Bible refers to any number of physical conditions associated

with the skin. It was a feared condition medically and socially. Leprous people were considered unclean and their life included the following:

- To cover their lower face when people came near and cry out “unclean, unclean”
- To wear disheveled hair and clothes
- To keep oneself at least six feet away from a Rabbi
- To live outside all walled cities and especially all sacred areas
- To be viewed as dead men walking¹

So it is no wonder that Matthew adds the word “behold” in verse 2 when he records that a leper came near Jesus and knelt at his feet. This was breaking every social, ceremonial, and medical rule in the book. Most lepers stood at a distance like the ten lepers in Luke 17:12. So this man’s actions were shocking and dangerous.

But this leper is full of faith. Notice what he says in verse 2: “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.” He acknowledges the power of Jesus and pleads for a willingness to do something about his condition. This leper probably knew too well the reality that many people have the power to help, but they choose not to. This leper knows that Jesus can heal him; he appeals to the compassion of Jesus.

What Jesus does next is shocking! The text says, “Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him...” You can almost hear the gasp of the crowd. You don’t touch lepers. You avoid them, banish them, and pray that you’ll never be like them. They are cursed by God.

Jesus touches the man and says, “I will; be clean.” Instantly his leprosy is healed, and Jesus instructs him to quietly follow the Old Testament law but to keep this miracle to himself. Jesus is not looking to attract any more attention.

The most remarkable thing here is that Jesus doesn’t **need** to touch him. All he has to do is command healing and it will be done. Jesus **chooses** to touch him! Think about how long it had been since the man had been physically touched! This man was healed by the personal touch of Jesus.

Matthew wants us to see the personal grace extended to a marginalized man.

A Centurion: Jesus took costly action

The second person to encounter Jesus is a Roman Centurion. He was a military leader of approximately 100 soldiers, and he must have been assigned to the city of Capernaum. Keep in mind that Rome is the occupying force in the land of Israel. Most Jews longed for the day

¹ Fredrick Bruner, The Christbook – Matthew 1-12, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 373.

when the nation of Israel would be set free from the tyranny of Rome and the oppression caused by the Roman soldiers. To a Jew, this man represented the wicked domination of a pagan nation.

Verse 5 indicates that when Jesus entered the city of Capernaum, that this man appealed to Jesus on behalf of his servant. "Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly." He merely tells Jesus the problem. Notice that there is no specific request.

Jesus answers him quickly, "I will come and heal him." Jesus, once again, shows himself to be quite radical. A Roman Centurion is a Gentile. To offer to go to his house is not a safe suggestion. And that is one reason why the Centurion responds with this faith-filled statement:

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" (Matt 8:8-9)

The Roman soldier knew the power of a command given from one in authority. Therefore, he simply asks for Jesus to speak the word. Jesus' response is telling: he is amazed. But Jesus doesn't stop there. He will heal the servant but not before he makes a very bold comment. Jesus was willing to do something costly but now he says something that must have got him in some hot water. He says, in effect, that the Centurion's faith is greater than what he has seen in Israel. Get this! A gentile, Roman soldier has greater faith than the sons of Israel.

And if that wasn't enough Jesus goes further and says, in verses 10-11, that there is coming a day in the future when people will "come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." He is talking about a future kingdom that will include honorable, Jesus-trusting, faith-filled Gentiles like this centurion. However, according to verse 12, the "sons of the kingdom" will not share a place at the table. The people who think that they are in the kingdom aren't. Jesus says that they are "thrown into outer darkness...in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (v 12).

In other words Jesus is commending this faith-filled centurion, even offering to come over to his house. At the same time he is assaulting the spiritually self-assured.

Matthew wants us to see that Jesus is willing to take costly steps and say costly things to reach a man who others don't think is worthy of the kingdom. Matthew wants us to see the costly nature of grace in the life of Jesus.

A Woman: Jesus acts with unsolicited kindness

The final healing is Peter's mother-in-law. Verses 14 and 15 tell us that upon entering Peter's house, Jesus saw that she was sick with a fever and that he touched her hand causing the fever to leave her. She was instantly healed; no recovery or recuperation time. She immediately got up and began to serve Jesus.

The leper came and knelt at Jesus' feet, the centurion made a faith-filled request, but this healing is different. Jesus acts with mercy and compassion on this woman without her even asking for his help. Perhaps she was too sick or maybe she was unconscious. Regardless, it is clear from Matthew's account that he acted independently of any overt request. He healed her with unsolicited kindness.

The result of these three healings was an outpouring of need from the surrounding area. Verse 16 says "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" (Matt 8:16-17).

This is the ministry of Jesus: powerfully healing those who are desperately in need of help. He ministers to the marginalized of his culture. He touches the leper, commends a centurion, and is lavishly kind to a sick, old woman. Jesus aims to bring people back from the brink, to give hope to people who would otherwise have none.

Lessons from the Margins

Let me draw our study to close with a few observations or implications of Matthew's presentation of Jesus' miracles:

1. The gospel is good news to the marginalized. Central to the beauty of the gospel is the way in which Jesus reaches out to those who are considered a far off. The greatest marginalizing force in the universe is our sin; it makes us the enemies of God. But receiving the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus makes us adopted sons and daughters of the King.

"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— 12 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. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility..." (Eph 2:11-15).

2. Jesus takes away our shame by making us new. Shame is a powerful, hurtful word. And some of you live in it every day. Your past haunts you. Regrets taunt you. You wish you could undo the past, but you cannot. Jesus was a magnet for shame-filled people because his

mission was to destroy the basis of shame. Shame began in the Garden of Eden when sin entered the world. And Jesus conquers shame not by changing the past but by declaring a new identity over you. Do you know what it is?

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death” (Rom 8:1-3).

3. The gospel is validated by care and love. I have been captivated by the fact that Jesus healed people not just preached to them. Now I don't want to diminish the message of Jesus at all. His message is the basis of his ministry. However, it seems to me that message-only ministry is not real ministry and maybe not even fully the gospel ministry. People who understand the truth of the gospel will see the marginalized through a different lens. Love for others is not only the fulfillment of the Law; it validates that we've got the gospel right.

What would you think of Jesus if he just gave the leper a new curriculum, a word of encouragement or some axiom to live by when it is his leprosy that is right in front of him.

14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? 17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead (James 2:14-17)

4. Find the marginalized! The final lesson from this story is that we are called to minister to the marginalized. Jesus was constantly ministering to the religious crowd, and he was continually reaching out to the hurting, the despised, the outcast, and those whom had no hope.

College Park must always be a place that looks for ministry to marginalized people. We need to do that on Sundays. We need to do that in our city. And we need to do it around the world. Next week we'll begin focusing the entire ministry on the subject of global missions, and it is imperative that we continue to find creative ways to meet the needs of the marginalized unreached peoples of the world. Unreached people are unreached for a reason, and we need to be a part of the story of reaching them.

A leper, a centurion, and a woman all show us that the gospel is meant to make shame-filled, ostracized, embarrassed and rejected people marginalized no more! Jesus aims to take those who are far off and bring them near.

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