

Matthew 8:1-22

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[0:00] Well, let me pray again, and then we will get into our passage for this morning. Father, we thank you that you've revealed your plan and your character to us in the form of Jesus Christ, your Son.

And so God, as we look at this passage here in Matthew, would we be amazed by who you are? Would we be dying to learn more? And would your word affect humility in us so that we can faithfully follow your Son?

As our Lord and our Savior. Amen. Well, one of the absolutely wonderful things about Jesus is that he is a king who rules a kingdom. And not so long ago in this gospel, Matthew has recorded that Jesus said in perhaps the greatest sermon ever preached, the Sermon on the Mount, that blessed are those who are poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

When he says poor in spirit, he doesn't necessarily mean the materially poor. He doesn't mean those who need more. He means those who are spiritually bankrupt.

Those who would identify themselves as, well, not very good people. Morally insufficient people. Spiritually underwhelming types of people.

[1:23] If God treated us as our sins deserve, then these would be the sorts of people coming to him with nothing. Not many good works. Not a huge amount of deep Bible knowledge.

Maybe taking a shameful or sorrowful approach to God. Well, it's precisely these people that Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven belongs to. In this morning's passage, we have heard of a few people who were poor in spirit, but indeed rich in faith.

They were likely poor in their Bible knowledge, yet they acknowledged the most important thing. They perhaps were ashamed of themselves, but they knew that in the depth of shame and brokenness, there was only one place for them to turn.

So we're going to move through this passage under three structural headings. And I've actually styled these headings as essentially our three main exhortations from this morning's passage. So our first point, let's acknowledge we need Jesus because we're unclean and unwell. Second point, let's have serious faith in Jesus because he has all authority.

[2:38] And my third point, let's commit to serving Jesus forever because his kingdom is indeed forever. So firstly, let's acknowledge we need Jesus because we are unclean and unwell.

Let's think about this man with leprosy in verse 1 to 4. One of the things that has struck me the most about preparing this sermon is just to be reminded of how horrific it is to have leprosy.

My younger brother and I have a mild dermatological condition in our hands. It causes the skin in our hands to dry out and crack up. And in colder weather, when it gets particularly bad, it will maybe start to bleed through the dry cracks.

But really what I have to live with is an evening shadow of what it must have been like to have the skin disease then called leprosy, as described to us in Leviticus chapter 13.

You know, the skin disease being described here actually goes deeper than the skin. It changes the color of your hair. It spreads around your whole body. Raw flesh starts to appear as the disease spreads deeper and further.

[3:58] And you know, the Old Testament makes very clear just how terrible it is, socially speaking, to have leprosy. If you have leprosy, you're to wear torn clothes.

You can't cut your hair. You're to live alone outside the camp. And you're to cry out, unclean, unclean, so that everyone knows to stay away from you.

You know, to varying degrees, we all know what it's like to feel sick. Lying in bed for a few days. Maybe staying a few nights in the hospital. Allow me to say this.

Maybe you're at a stage of life where you're just really starting to feel your health descending. And perhaps quite quickly, quicker than you maybe thought. Well, brothers and sisters, let's think about this man for a moment.

I know the passage doesn't tell us these things explicitly, but I think we can safely assume them. He must look a mess. His hair hasn't been cut in months.

[4:59] His skin is likely showing raw wounds, making him more susceptible to become even more sick. Therefore, his clothes are probably dirty.

Probably torn up. You know, you can kind of see his armpit and his chest through the torn rags that he's wearing. He's not had a conversation with his former community for weeks.

And he's been out on his own shouting, unclean, unclean, whenever he sees people walking towards him. I reckon this man knows better than most of us will ever know that he is indeed totally helpless.

Nobody wants to be around him. He is ostracized. His state is a physical illustration of the spiritual effect of Satan's power in the world.

It's lonely suffering. We've met characters like him before, haven't we? Job. Satan was allowed to strike him with loathsome boils all over his skin.

[6:04] And then Job sat and scraped himself with bits of broken pottery as he sat alone in ashes. This man only takes up four verses in our passage.

But he is not for glossing over. Do you see how this man literally embodies? It shows the effect of the great curse over all of mankind. Deuteronomy 28.

Disease of the skin is a curse for not obeying the words that God has spoken. Because we and our first parents have sinned and have welcomed all kinds of disorder and suffering into this world.

Do you see how this man literally embodies this curse? He is poor in physical health.

He looks terrible. Nobody wants to be around him or else they may become like him. I have no doubt that this man was filled with shame because of the ostracization he experienced because of his leprosy.

[7:09] I expect most of us in this room will never feel the prolonged pain, poverty, loneliness that this outcast leper must have felt.

He is totally hopeless. And so when we see the leprous man moving toward Jesus, we see something really quite amazing.

Because there wasn't a cure for leprosy. The man knows of no other way to be healed than to approach Jesus and kneel before him. And he is quite bold, isn't he? Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.

He's not seeing Jesus as some sort of last chance. He actually sees Jesus as the one and only solution. It's not that he's trying his luck. He knows, of course, that Jesus does have the power to heal him.

But he knows that Jesus doesn't have to. He knows that Jesus doesn't have to. If you are willing, you can make me clean. Nobody could be more aware of their uncleanness than this man.

[8:13] His ritual impurity was felt and seen by him every moment of the day. Are we willing to see ourselves in him? We're unclean too, aren't we?

We're morally impure. And naturally, at times, we do get unwell. Even the most physically fit amongst us catch viruses and break limbs. Are we trusting in purely human methods to cover up our uncleanness that exists because of the curse over the world?

Or have we mastered the skill of making people think that we are good people, even though we know ourselves that we are moral wretches? Do we only trust human methods for our cures and healing?

Or do we acknowledge that it is God's common grace that stands behind all good health and restoration? At some point, some of us will maybe become so unwell that we may feel similar to this man.

And allow me to say this. One of the remarkable things about illness, if we are Christians, is that it often reminds us of how much we need the Lord. None of us can escape getting a cold or feeling sick.

[9:24] And I know this is quite frank, but it is worth thinking about. You know, for some of us, there's actually very little we can do to prevent ourselves from getting cancer or dementia.

We've seen that clearly in the month of May in Ireland. Those two young marathon running brothers, soberly aware of the fact they will get dementia in their middle age. I was following the news recently about Keira McGeehan, Irish athlete.

And I know she might probably die before her 40th birthday because of her recent cancer diagnosis. But friends, Jesus is willing to make us clean.

In his eternal kingdom, he is willing to make us well. This man, he had experienced such great suffering, then experienced some dramatic supernatural healing.

Jesus touched the man. And in his willingness, he cleansed the man of his leprosy. He was cleansed immediately. Well, that means that he was cleansed instantly.

[10 : 26] And it also means that there was no other medium through which Jesus appropriated the cleansing. It was through Jesus alone. His ritual purity transferred itself onto this man, undoing the effect the curse of sin had on him.

And you know, it's very easy for some of us to hear this and be like, yep, we know Jesus can heal someone with his touch. But Jesus is doing something super unusual here. You know, an Old Testament priest can't heal leprosy.

He doesn't have the power to do that. And back then, they didn't have the wonderful medical care of doctors that we have now. There was no local GP who could prescribe him some medicines. If you were touching this man, you were basically saying that you were happy enough to probably get leprosy yourself and join in with the lepers in their mourning.

But Jesus does something that no other man can do. He doesn't get leprosy, but his touch heals the man. This is supernatural.

This is divine activity. This is a totally new solution to ritual impurity that is being demonstrated and one that hasn't been seen before.

[11 : 42] Jesus instructs the man to show himself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded. What was the gift that Moses commanded? You know, in Leviticus 14, to pronounce a leper as cleansed from his disease, you have to take two birds, some cedar wood, some scarlet yarn, some hyssop.

One bird would be sacrificed in an earthen vessel with water. Then you would take the live bird and the wood, the scarlet yarn and the hyssop. You would dip them in the blood of the dead bird and then the priest would sprinkle that blood seven times on the man who had been leprous.

The other bird goes free and the leper is pronounced clean. Now, there's other sacrifices following that, but that is the first one. Now, friends, as Christians, we must see that there is, at the very least, some serious significance to such a sacrifice as this one.

One bird is killed and another one goes free. One bird is dipped in the blood of another. One bird takes with it scarlet yarn, perhaps symbolizing blood-stained garments.

And hyssop is a plant commonly known for its cleansing and purifying powers. Folks, Jesus did not transfer his cleanness to this man without taking something from him.

[13 : 02] Verse 17 of our passage today alludes to Isaiah 53. He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases. Nobody is given a clean sheet from leprosy without a sacrifice of blood.

So Jesus Christ on the wooden cross is the sacrifice that will cleanse his people from all the infirmity and disease that we experience in this life.

We're not promised full health in this life, but only because of Jesus' common grace is any unwell person ever made well. Hebrews chapter 8 speaks of how the Old Testament sacrifices were a copy and a shadow of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross.

So they come first, but they're a copy and shadow of the one that comes later. We are meant to interpret Leviticus through Jesus Christ. He is like the bird that dies so the other bird can go free after being dipped in its blood.

The cedar wood and the scarlet yarn in some way connect to your cross. And the hyssop shows that this blood is like a cleansing blood. As New Testament Gentile Christians, it can be very difficult to see ourselves as ritually unclean in the Jewish sacrificial system.

[14 : 21] And I totally get that. But that is the context into which this particular passage was written. So we've got to see how Jewish sacrificial law is fulfilled in the ultimate sacrifice of the cross of Christ.

Because these are the sacrifices that these folks were familiar with. I love this quote from D.A. Carson. The healings during Jesus' ministry can be understood not only as the foretaste of the

kingdom, but also as the fruit of Jesus' death.

The healings during Jesus' ministry can be understood not only as the foretaste of the kingdom, but also as the fruit of Jesus' death. You know, at this point, Jesus didn't want people to misunderstand him as a mere miracle worker.

But when that leper went to present himself to the priest, Jesus wants the priest to know, this man brings his sacrifice. But make sure you know he was healed not through some magical power of sprinkled bird blood.

This leper doesn't know it yet, but it's through the healing, renewing blood of the resurrected Jesus that he can be cleansed of all physical and ritual impurities in his life. So friends, without Jesus, all of us are unclean.

[15 : 38] If we lived in this time during Matthew's gospel, we would be more aware of that than most of us are now, that we are quite physically and spiritually messy.

We're unwell. You know, with thanks to modern medicine, most of us feel fairly well most of the time, but we ought not let that freedom and ease fool us because at some point, some of us who are well will become unwell.

All of us who are well will become unwell. Because of this curse that we have been living under since the fall, there is an eternity, but one cure for all the disease and sickness that comes from this fall.

Acknowledge that you need Jesus because without him, we remain forever unclean and unwell. I'm going to move on to our second point.

Let's have serious faith in Jesus because he has all authority. As we read on in this passage, we meet another man with a bold request. He's a Gentile centurion. He's a commander of a hundred men.

[16 : 41] And we meet another sufferer. Lord, he says, my servant lies at home paralyzed. He's suffering terribly. Now, I know very little Greek, but I know enough to be able to work out that this man is really suffering.

It's a fierce and dreadful paralysis that has struck him down. The word that is used likely alludes even to the eternal torment of hell. Like the leper, this servant is greatly suffering.

He is deeply oppressed. He is getting a foretaste of what it is like to experience eternal torment.

And so Jesus, in his unsurprising mercy, offers to heal him.

But the centurion's response is one of deep faith resulting from his characteristic humility. Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. He knew that Jesus was very great and powerful, but he also knew something even more special about Jesus' authority because as a centurion, he knew that he had the power to command his men to do things from distances and they would do it without him needing to be present or watching.

And so he knew that Jesus must have at least as much authority as he himself does as a centurion.

So Jesus, being the great and powerful king over all the earth, his work can be done everywhere.

[18 : 09] He does not need to be physically present in order for his work to be done. He just says the word and the servant will be healed. And it's pretty rare, isn't it, for someone to amaze Jesus?

But indeed what this man says amazes Jesus. So far, the strongest faith he has found in Israel is in the heart of a Gentile centurion. He's the first person to understand how great Jesus' commanding authority is over the world of sin and sickness.

Now in verses 11 and 12, Jesus is saying to all those following him, there will be many Gentiles from far and wide who will come and eat at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

But there will be many Jews, many genetic descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who will be thrown out into the darkness. He's saying that there will be those who join the 12 tribes from outside of it.

And when he speaks of the feast, well, he must be alluding to the Isaiah 25 feast for all peoples, where the covering that is cast over all peoples, that is death, will be swallowed up forever.

[19 : 22] Those who are in the kingdom of heaven at this feast will no longer experience anything leading to death, such as sickness or pain or infirmities. And he will wipe away all the tears from their eyes, for there will be no more reason to be sorrowful.

But, these are the words of Jesus that Matthew wants us to hear loudly because they are repeated by Jesus six times in his gospel account. These words are symbolic, a symbolic Jewish description of the fate of the ungodly.

What are they? Verse 12, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. You can either join the kingdom which patiently waits for its king's arrival, or you can enjoy the kingdom which serves self and presumes that God will be pleased with you even though you don't actually love God.

My friends, please allow me to be serious for a moment because I think these are serious words. Do we understand Jesus' power and authority? Do we surrender our own power to have faith in what Jesus can do?

Because that seems to be the outstanding characteristic of the Gentile centurion among his Jewish peers. Remember, his servant's suffering was fierce and terrible.

[20 : 39] It was like a foretaste of eternal torment. Do we realize that this is a physical illustration to us of what spiritual torment would be like? Are we content to stay there?

Or do we want to experience the wedding feast of heaven with our saviour and his worldwide church? This episode shows us that it is only through faith in what Jesus can do can we be moved from one place to another.

We might not feel like we are suffering terribly now, but really haven't some of us just got quite skilful at ignoring all the difficult parts of our lives? We all trust in material things to some degree, don't we?

Our upcoming holiday, relative peace, modern medicine, financial stability, but we know that if those things were taken away, we would likely be suffering and perhaps quite severely so.

I speak to myself as I say this, but let us not become complacent because we've been here for a while, we've gone through the motions, we've done a lot of good things in the past. Jesus is not judging these people in this passage because they are Jews.

[21 : 54] He is judging them because they are presumptuous Jews who think that their bloodline is their salvation. So guys, we can't trust in who we are and what we've done.

We've got to trust in who Jesus says he is and what he has done and what he can do. Let's have a serious faith in Jesus because he alone has authority to save and the opposite of having faith is equally serious, this place of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

I don't know about you, but one of the things that has stood out to me most in my growing Christian life is that Jesus' power is really much bigger than I thought it was. This centurion was rightly able to contrast his limited power to the great power of Jesus and I wonder do we fail to do that sometimes?

Do we forget that Jesus knows a lot more about the details of life on this earth than we thought he did? We forget that he was the one who actually created it for us to live in.

Let's have a serious faith in Jesus because he has all authority. And so lastly, let's commit to serve Jesus forever because his kingdom is forever.

[23 : 15] As we look from verse 14 to the end of our passage, we see what it means to not only be healed by and cleansed by Jesus, but what it looks like to actually follow Jesus, what it looks like to serve Jesus.

We see this in a very simple way with Peter's mother-in-law. She's healed by him and then the outcome, she begins to wait on him and to serve him. Her response to your healing is not just to say thank you, but to act thankfully.

This is perhaps a silly illustration, but if someone pulled you away from a fast-approaching car, I think most of us, even if we didn't really know that person, would want to do something for them, even if it was just a token gift or something like that, maybe a cost of voucher or a bunch of flowers. Peter's mother-in-law didn't just take her healing for granted. She was thankful to Jesus for how he had changed her life forever. And in this last section of our passage, Jesus makes clear that following him is actually even more than just expressing our thanks temporarily.

The teacher of the law saw Jesus as a teacher. Unlike the other people in this passage so far, you have addressed him as the Lord. The teacher of the law rightly sees Jesus as a good teacher and so he is, but perhaps he only wants to follow him because he wants to become a better teacher himself, not because he feels he needs to be saved by him.

[24 : 46] Jesus replies with an interesting phrase, foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.

If you're from a particular generation, I'm sure Rich Mullins is playing in your head just now. You know, we can be tempted to see the title Son of Man as a name describing Jesus' humanity and it is that, but isn't it also a name that harkens back to Daniel 7, 13-14, the Son of Man who comes with

the clouds of heaven, who is given authority, glory, and sovereign power, and dominion over an everlasting kingdom which will never be shaken.

What about Ezekiel 2, 3? Son of Man, I am sending you to the Israelites, a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me.

They and their ancestors have been in revolt against me till this very day. According to Daniel, we would expect this Son of Man to be seated on a high throne with many servants attending to him, but actually here on the earth he has no place to lay his head.

Having been earlier rejected in his hometown of Nazareth, he has less of a home than a fox in his den or a bird in her nest. Just like the Israelites rejected Ezekiel, so they rejected Jesus.

[26 : 12] Disciples of Jesus will not always experience the comfort of home. If the people in the hometown and local community are hardened to hear the word, then the word must spread beyond it.

And some of us may feel the spiritual urge to up and go to the far-flung places in our own country and beyond to share the good news which affects those of every tribe and tongue and people and nation and that is an urge which should be followed.

And then another who is keen to follow Jesus says, Lord, first let me go and bury my father. The idea being, I want to follow you now, but my father has just died.

And Jesus' response is a bit shocking, isn't it? Follow me and let the dead bury their own dead.

Now, I don't think we're to take this too literally.

I think the essence of what Jesus is saying is that following him is a more demanding role than being a chief priest or taking the Nazarite vow.

[27 : 16] Now, let me explain myself. Leviticus 21 says that a chief priest cannot be in the presence of dead bodies, even of their own father or mother because of the ritual impurities associated with deadness.

In number six, when he takes a Nazarite vow, a special vow of holy separation to the Lord, well, he must not go near a dead body, even that of his father or mother. So, Matthew 18, verse 22, let's not misinterpret.

It is not saying that we should not attend our parents' funeral. It is saying that to follow Jesus is a more holy, more priestly and more serious thing than even the most special holy orders of the Old Testament.

Friends, be encouraged that to be a Christian in Scotland in the 2020s is a more privileged thing than to be the high priest in Jerusalem in the AD 30s. Now, isn't that amazing?

And of course, this passage also says that our role as followers of Jesus is a much more significant role than a role as fathers, mothers, daughters, sons, brothers, sisters, whatever it may be.

[28 : 27] Now, I do have to keep this short, but in a way, he's saying that our faith transcends our family. Now, I'm not saying that we should ignore our family, but may I say this?

Family is a great gift. Family is a temporary gift. The Bible does highlight the significance of family in formation and evangelism, but our biological family now is only a very mere illustration of what our spiritual family will be like for eternity.

And sadly, not everyone in our biological family will be with us for eternity. Those of us who are married, this is a temporal thing, isn't it? For this earth, we will not be married or given in marriage in eternity.

So we should certainly attend our parents' funeral, but we ought not be overly consumed with our family to the detriment of our faith. Now, remember, to follow Christ is a radical thing.

We must count the cost of it. We're either all in or we're all out. We can't be lukewarm. And I'm not saying that we all need to live like international missionaries like Martin Patterson or Will Niven, but we must understand that our home is not on this earth.

[29 : 43] Our home is to be with Christ and therefore we cannot truly rest our head in any home on this planet until we are in our eternal heavenly home.

Now, for Christians, we can't really expect to have more comfort than the bird in its nest or a fox in his den. God gives us all that we need. Lord, please may we not get too distracted by good things, even things like home and family that we ignore the amazing role we have as your servants.

Now, Matthew is really clear in verse 17 that these healings were not done just to show that Jesus was some sort of great doctor, but also that Jesus was the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 who took up our pain and bore our suffering, even our physical infirmities and diseases.

Jesus doesn't just take them away. He can take them away because he is willing to suffer them. The birds which are sacrificed and the blood which is sprinkled for the cleansing of the leper is an illustration to us of how Jesus Christ saves us.

Something has to be sacrificed to God when someone is healed. Friends, the picture is showing us that nobody can be healed without the sacrifice of Jesus, the Lamb of God.

[31:07] Like the leper, we must acknowledge that our lives on this earth are unclean and unwell. Like the centurion, we must have serious, deep faith that only Jesus has authority to heal us and save us.

And unlike these men at the end of our passage, we must commit to serving him forever because Christianity is not just a hobby on the side. It's not just a feeling. It's not just an ideology.

It is indeed our life's meaning and calling. To live for Jesus will demand our all but there's no greater thing than to be presented as holy before the Father God, healed of all our diseases, seated at the feast of heaven alongside all those he has saved throughout the history of his people.

It does require everything but there is no greater role in life than to be a follower of Jesus Christ. We believe that through him we will be saved from all the effects of the curse and so as we anticipate this great kingdom which is to come, a foretaste of which is being shown to us here in this chapter, well let us remember that the kingdom we live in is a heavenly one and not an earthly one.

And who are the blessed ones in this kingdom of heaven of which we speak? Well Jesus is clear.

It's those who are poor in spirit. If you've come to the end of this morning and think, you know, I feel awful here.

[32:39] I feel like I should be seeing myself like the leper but I just can't. I feel like I'm more like a proud Pharisee than a humble leper. I don't see Jesus as big as I should but my love of the world and its pleasure trips me up every day.

Well friends, may I encourage you that these feelings are likely definitive of someone who is poor in spirit, spiritually bankrupt. What's the main thing that connects many of the characters in this passage?

They all had nowhere else to turn. They all correctly saw Jesus as the only solution to their problem and so they turned to him in faith. They certainly weren't all perfect Christians but they all knew their need for Jesus Christ.

We never grow old of childlike faith. Jesus is the only one who takes on our sin and suffering so let's acknowledge that we need him. He is the only one who holds the cosmic power to save us from the curse of sin in eternity so let's have serious faith in what he can do not what we have done. let's commit to serve him forever and we will prepare ourselves well for the kingdom that is to come. The kingdom of heaven does not belong to the proud or the righteous.

[34:01] It belongs to the humble, the broken and the poor in spirit. Let me pray. Father, through your son you reveal your plan to humankind and so Jesus we thank you that you have stooped down to this world in order to heal and cleanse and restore.

God, we thank you that you will complete and perfect this plan in eternity where you will be installed as king of your eternal kingdom and so Jesus help us to see our need of you and please teach us how to have deeper faith in what you have done for us.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.