

No One Like Jesus: Heal The World
By Jason Huff
Genesis 26:2-5; Galatians 3:25-29; Matthew 8:1-17

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Matthew 8:1-17. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy Word. "When he [Jesus] came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately he was cured of his leprosy. Then Jesus said to him, "See that you don't tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering." Jesus said to him, "I will go and heal him." The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! It will be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that very hour. When Jesus came into Peter's house, he saw Peter's mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever. He touched her hand and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on him. When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases.""

There is no one like Jesus. We've heard it, we know it, but we rarely think about it. No one is like Jesus. No one has done so much for us; no one has taught us so much; no one provides the salvation Jesus provides us. No one else could become the perfect sacrifice on the cross so that the judgment and wrath of God could pass over us. No one else could give us His own righteousness so that we could become like Him. If we are to know God, we must know Jesus, because there is no other path to the Father except through the Son.

We want to know Jesus, and so we are returning to our study of Matthew's gospel. We looked at chapters 1-7 in 2015, and we're picking up where we left off many months ago. Last year, we studied the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus showed us the law of God is impossible to fulfill on our own. In our continuing study of Matthew, we'll see how Jesus alone fulfills the Law and thus can redeem us, standing in the gap for all who trust in Him.

Matthew chapter 8 kicks off with three healing stories. The healings don't surprise us. Even people who don't know a thing about God still ask Him for healing. Somewhere deep within us, God planted the idea that we can turn to Him for restoration, at least from our medical problems. Most of the prayers in worship are prayers for physical healing, and that makes sense, since the gospels tell us many stories of Jesus healing people.

But Matthew gives us three of them in a row. Each one is *kind* of interesting to us, but we live in a fast-paced world. We'd be satisfied with Matthew's summary – "He drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah." But Matthew gives us a lot more. Is he repeating himself? Is this even the order in which the healings happened? Each healing story starts with, "When X happened, Jesus met this person." Matthew probably grouped healings together from throughout Jesus' ministry. When I was in school, if I was taught something once I'd already learned it, I'd get frustrated. Is that what Matthew's doing? Is he a bad teacher? Or is there some reason for each of these miraculous healing stories?

When *we* hear these stories, we're looking for the *facts*. We take the leper, the centurion, and Peter's mother-in-law at face value, as three typical people. We dig down a little deeper and see a little more about them – the first guy had a chronic skin disease. The second guy was a soldier. The third was probably a housewife, since that was true of most women in the era. At this level, the healings still touch us – we still understand that Jesus is kind and compassionate to all sorts of people. But we haven't gone quite deep enough yet.

We miss things that Matthew's first readers saw immediately. What did *they* see? All of these folks were outsiders in the worst possible ways, each of them uniquely offensive to Jews of the day. Jesus' healings offended people! When Matthew's first readers heard these stories, they did not first think *healing*; they thought *scandal*. They heard rule-breaking. They heard something unfathomable. We have lost the sense of outrage these events stirred in the establishment. These events were part of the reason the Jewish leaders wanted Jesus killed! We can't see why, but they could.

The first man is a leper. By Jewish law, he is unclean. He is unable to worship at the temple. Only if and when his skin disease was gone could he re-enter Jewish society. And there were many forms of leprosy, most of them incurable – some people spent all their finances trying to find a solution. One Israelite king thought a cure for leprosy was as impossible as raising the dead. Lepers were outcasts seen as cursed by God, believed to be deserving of their fate.

But Jesus doesn't treat him as an outcast at all. In fact, what's amazing is that Jesus touches the man. By the letter of the law, that should make Jesus unclean. But instead, the man with leprosy is cured!

The story tells us a great deal about Jesus because it's paired with the story of the centurion's servant. Jesus didn't need to touch the leper to cure him – he didn't have to touch the centurion's servant. But Jesus wanted to. He reached out and touched a man that no one else would touch, who everyone else had abandoned, who had likely not received a greeting, let alone a warm embrace, for years and years. Jesus not only heals the man, He gives the man something more – contact. Touch. The power of a friendly, gentle hand saying, "I care about you."

We know that children's ability to learn and interact with others has much to do with how much they are physically held as children. Touch matters. The less we have physical interaction with others, even just a handshake, the more likely we are to become disassociated and to act in anti-social ways. This man experienced that firsthand...and Jesus reaches out His hand to change this man's life forever.

Second healing – a Jewish leper was bad enough, but the centurion moves beyond the pale. He is not only a pagan, a Roman, but he is the equivalent of a captain in today’s army. He oversaw at least a hundred soldiers; he was responsible for making sure the Jewish people stayed in line, and he would have commanded his soldiers to do whatever was necessary to make that possible. They were not known for being kind. Everything the ancient Jews saw was wrong with their world was embodied in this man. He was not only despised, they believed he could never be a part of God’s Kingdom.

And then he *is* a part of the Kingdom. He turns to Jesus for the healing of his servant. And Jesus is willing to break every taboo to go do it – He’d enter the man’s house, this scoundrel (to their way of thinking), heal his servant, help him out.

Then something extraordinary happens. The centurion stops Jesus. He knows full well that what he asks of Jesus would go against the Jewish faith as it was practiced at the time. And he knows that he – a centurion, a man of considerable stature – does not deserve Jesus’ attention or respect, let alone for Jesus to come into his house. And so he tells Jesus, “Just say the word and my servant will be healed. I know what it is to have authority and to be under authority. And you are the One with authority to do this.”

And while the divine part of Jesus knows this man completely, the human part is amazed at him. “I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith,” Jesus says. He comments about the centurion – “many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.” Then Jesus comments on some of His fellow Israelites – “But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

These are fighting words. They are more inflammatory than going to a Donald Trump rally with an “I Love Bernie Sanders” sign. Worse than burning a country’s flag. It was bad enough that Jesus would help a Gentile sinner, but to say that a Gentile would be in the Kingdom of God and some of God’s chosen people, the Jews, would be out in the cold for eternity? To the religious leaders, that was blasphemy. Unthinkable.

And it even challenges our ways of thinking. Jesus does not say, “First go resign your commission as a centurion, and then I’ll help.” He doesn’t say, “Stop oppressing my people and I’ll think about it.” He immediately agrees to help and then commends the centurion’s faith as greater than anyone’s He’s met in Israel. Does it mean the centurion isn’t a sinner? No. He needs to turn from his sins just like the rest of us. But Jesus does not expect the centurion to be clean before He works in his life. He works in his life so that the centurion can be fully cleansed in God’s sight. We put the cart in front of the horse, but God doesn’t.

Finally, there’s Peter’s mother-in-law. It might surprise us that Peter was married yet went traveling around with Jesus. Scripture tells us that women were disciples; some financially supported Jesus’ ministry. But it isn’t terribly surprising that Peter’s wife isn’t mentioned by name or that there’s no mention of their home life.

Despite how the Old Testament praised the virtuous wife in Psalm 31 or applauded faithful women like Ruth, in the first century, Jewish men prayed a prayer still regularly prayed in synagogues today, a prayer found in the book of Jewish religious writings called the Talmud: “Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, king of the universe, who hast not made me a Gentile, a slave, or a woman.” Women couldn’t testify in court, they weren’t trusted, and Jewish men rarely had dealings with any women other than their wives, mothers, and sisters.

But when Peter’s mother-in-law is sick in bed with a fever, Jesus once again breaks society’s rules. He touches her hand – again, showing compassion and willing to go against the understanding of what it meant to be unclean. He has no issue with her as a woman; He heals her as He has many others during His ministry. While the leper and the centurion show great faith in Jesus, Peter’s mother-in-law demonstrates her gratefulness in a different way – she’s the only one of the three who actively serves Him. His service to her is returned back to Him.

We know from these passages that Jesus is a healer, He’s kind and compassionate, and He cares for those who can’t care for themselves. But there’s one simple yet extraordinary lesson I want us to get out of tonight’s passage, one that has two sides to it. That lesson is this: *everyone is within reach of the healing touch of Jesus.*

The first side of that is for us. Because we are all on the outside; we’re not Jews; we’re not God’s ancient chosen people. None of us are perfect. We are sinners. And Jesus loves us anyway. Sometimes I think I might be preaching the same sermon too many times, but it’s something we always need to hear: *Jesus loves us.*

He crosses every boundary to reach us. There is nothing about us that is going to chase Him away. There is no disease too incurable, no status too untouchable, no sin too heinous that He will say, “I can’t.” The only people that Jesus does not reach in Scripture are the ones who specifically don’t want to be – the ones who think they have it all together already.

We are sinners, all of us. Everyone here has done things they haven’t told anyone else, things they’re guilty of, things they’re ashamed of. Everyone’s done something wrong. Some of those things might land you in prison. Some of those things, our society would laugh at and call us silly for even thinking about. But we are all guilty in the eyes of God.

And God reaches out to us anyway. That’s a relief and a joy and a burden lifted. Because I’m not a good person. I try to follow Jesus, but my trying is not that good. I’m the leper; I’m the centurion. God owes me nothing except condemnation. But yet He reaches out with healing – physical healing, emotional healing, spiritual healing. And He promises that one day, if we trust in Jesus, we will be remade and able to enter His Kingdom to be with Him.

We always have to return to the message that Jesus Christ lived and died on the cross for our sins to free us from them. Because our first thought about that deal is denial – that I don’t need my sins cleansed. Then we go through the stages of thinking that God can’t do it, then that God wouldn’t do it, then that the deal is too good to be true. But it is real, and we need to be reminded time and again because it is the fundamental truth of our faith. God saves sinners who confess their need for Him and turn away from sin – and that’s us.

If you've sinned, come back to Him. If you're brokenhearted, come back to Him. If you're frustrated, come back to Him. If you're tired, weary, and burdened by life, come back to Him. If you're angry or jealous or lustful, come back to Him. If you're a gossip or a cheater or a liar or a bigot or a racist or an everyday average person with the weight of life on your shoulders, come back to Him. His healing is here. His touch is here. His grace is here. His mercy is here. His wisdom is here. His path is here. He opens His arms to you and says, "Welcome home, my daughter. Welcome home, my son."

That brings us to the second side of our simple truth: *Jesus loves others*. Anyone who would believe in Him, He healed. Not good people, not holy people, not sinless people – ordinary people, the ones that the religious establishment had rejected. Misfits and rejects, the possessed and those possessing nothing, the prostitutes, the con artists, the fakers, the salesmen, the soldier on the wrong side of the war – Jesus approached them all and welcomed them into God's Kingdom.

This is fantastic for us because we're one of those folks too. But we have a lingering tendency to say, "What about him?" What about that crackhead? What about that guy who comes in hustling for gasoline cards? What about the gay guy – or the straight guy who sleeps around? What about the drug dealer? What about the ripoff artist posing as a car mechanic? What about the people who work for Comcast, the most hated company in America?"

Them too. The offer stands for everyone. Meet Jesus and find the One who can lead you home. You don't have to come into the gathering of the faithful with a spiritual suit and tie. You don't have to have gotten all the swear words out of your vocabulary or know the meaning of the word "theology." You just have to meet Jesus.

We'll let Him worry about getting you cleaned up. We'll teach you what He said, we'll keep the introduction going, we'll help train you in righteousness, but we cannot, we must not, stop people from entering the Kingdom of God because they're messed up. Because we're messed up! And so if we judge them ahead of time, we're in big trouble. As the prayer we pray each week reminds us, we will only be forgiven our debts as we forgive those indebted to us. So let's not just welcome people who look like us, who we think might feel the seats and give money to keep us afloat. Let's reach out to everyone, especially those who have nothing. Because they are the ones most likely to learn that Jesus has everything they need.

Friends, Jesus is our healer. But not only that, He heals the loner, the outcast, the introvert and the extrovert alike. He doesn't judge on race or tribe or sins committed in the past. All He says is, "Trust me. Let me come alongside you and place your burden of sin on me, and I will make you whole and righteous, clean to come before the Father in paradise."