



Matthew 8:1–4

8 When Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. 2 A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.” 3 Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy. 4 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.”

Reflection

The Sermon on the Mount has finished. People are amazed. But it's not Jesus' teaching that has them most stunned – it's his person. Who is this man? No-one teaches with authority like this. Not the Pharisees, not the teachers of the Law, not even the prophets of old. Jesus has shown them his authority in the wisdom of his words, now he shows the huge crowds that are following him his authority by his works. And so today we turn from Jesus words to his works. Matthew 5–7 was all about Jesus' words and Matthew 8–9 is all about his works. We turn from his words,

to his works; from his message to his mission.

But as we've come to expect from Jesus his mission unfolds contrary to all expectations. In the first half of chapter 8 Matthew Jesus brings healing and restoration to people who were often marginalized by Jewish culture: to lepers, to Gentiles and to women. The Jewish Messiah brings healing to the Jewish outcasts; he brings these outcasts amongst the people of God. And in so doing he teaches us that the gospel is open to all who come to Jesus through faith.

In today's passage Jesus is approached by a leper, a man who is suffering from leprosy. When we think of leprosy today we most often think of Hansen's disease.

It's prevalent in in low, humid, tropical, or subtropical areas of the world (mostly Asia, Africa, South America, and the Pacific islands) – and it's awful. It's not highly contagious, but the horror of the illness (it can waste away human limbs and extremities such as ears and noses) leads to the isolation of people with the disease.

In Jesus' day leprosy included diseases like this but also all sorts of other skin diseases. Few were curable, many highly contagious, and so there strict conditions in Jewish law to deal with lepers. For the good of the community lepers were banished. It was illegal to even greet a leper. Lepers weren't allowed to come to synagogue, or even enter Jerusalem or any walled city. It was against the law to touch them. If you were found to have leprosy

you were immediately isolated from the community, you were required to wear torn clothes, and cover the lower part of your face, and cry out if any one came near ‘Unclean! Unclean!’

That’s a window into the life of this poor man who approaches Jesus in verse two. Imagine the vast crowds withdrawing in horror, and pity and fear, as he approaches, some of them picking up stones to throw at him. Hear him call out in shame ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ as if it wasn’t clear enough from the torn clothes that he was wearing. This man who once likely had a wife and family, close friends, who perhaps even worshipped God alongside some of them in the synagogue. Until the day he noticed the early signs, the rash, he tried to hide it, but it spread, no matter how much money,

incurable, and so for the good of his family and out of obedience to God's law, Leviticus 13 & 14, he went to live in the caves, banished, poverty stricken and outcast, never to feel the touch of a human being again, a curse on his family 'Unclean! Unclean!' Worse still, many would have associated his condition with some hidden sin. 'He's brought this on himself,' they'd say, 'his family is destitute because of his sin.' 'Unclean! Unclean!'

'Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean' he cries out in faith. 'Lord,' he knows who Jesus is. He has faith in who Jesus is.

'I am willing.' Jesus says. And he reaches out his hand to touch him. There's a collective intake of breath from the crowd. No-one touches lepers. No-one would ever

dream of touching a leper. It's against the law to touch a leper. See the shudder go through the crowd as Jesus touches this poor man. Imagine being the leper and feeling the first touch of another human being in many, many years.

'Be clean!' and immediately he's cleansed of his leprosy. Jesus speaks and he is healed. He's demonstrated his authority by his words in the Sermon on the Mount, and now he proves it by his works. Word and power. If the crowds were amazed at his words what's their reaction now as they witness his miracle?

Time's short but there's something you can't miss here. It was against the Old Testament law to touch a leper because they are unclean and by touching them

you become unclean. Both physically and ceremonially. It's like the sin that caused them to be cursed by God with leprosy becomes yours by touching them. Jesus touches this man, takes his sin upon himself, and this man is healed. This poor, poor man, cast out from society, cut off from all those who love him, rejected, despised, poor, suffering, living on the doorstep of death, scorned by all mankind – Jesus reaches out and touches him and heals him, takes his sin upon himself, and brings him back from the land of the dead to the land of the living, to the loving embrace of his family, his church and his community. This is the miracle of gospel; it's the gospel enacted. Don't miss the gospel here; as Jesus brings this leper back from horrible death to joyful life through faith in his name.

Think

Spend some time now considering the implications of this passage. What does it teach us about Jesus' attitude to the marginalised? How much of this is mercy and how much of it is gospel? Is this mercy ministry or gospel ministry? Can the two be separated? Should the two ever be separated? Or perhaps consider, who do you know with leprosy? By this I mean, who do you know who is cut-off, banished and lonely because of some major event in their past that they've never been able to recover from? How can you reach out and touch them? How can you through the power of the gospel show them the love of Christ and welcome them warmly back into the community of the living?

Pray

Then spend some time praying for the courage and opportunity to do something that makes the crowds shudder; something that might make the crowds shudder but for one lonely person something that changes their life forever. Pray that you might show them the love of Christ in the way that you reach out in love to them.