

Disease

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[0 : 0 0] Please turn back to Matthew 8. This is the passage we're going to be in this morning. And I'm really going to focus on the first four verses, that first story of Jesus healing the leper, as he's called in this passage. I want to start though with an illustration which I've blatantly stolen. So something from C.S. Lewis' lie in the which in the wardrobe.

Then if you know the story, you probably do. Almost everybody in the world knows the story. I'm not going to give any spoilers away just in case, but there's one thing that happens that's pretty significant in that story. If you remember, the children find themselves in this country called Narnia. And in Narnia, there is a malign influence because the country is ruled over by this white witch, this cruel ruler who oppresses all the creatures, all the different types of people. And that is symbolised in many ways by the fact that the country lies under perpetual freeze, winter. It's a symbol of no life. There's no joy, there's no springtime, there's no renewal, there's no summer. Cold, snow blankets, everything.

So everything in some senses is just freeze frozen. There's no life, there's no progress, there's no movement. And there's a great sense of oppression. And the wonderful image, and then if you remember it, but as the returning king in the book is symbolised as this great lion called Aslan, as he comes back to the country, even before he kind of makes himself known, there's occasional glimmers of this king, sightings. People start to say, have you heard? There's been sightings of the lion. But the other impact, the other effect that starts to become clear to everybody as they go around, particularly this cruel ruler, the white witch, as the story follows her on a journey that she's on, is that the snow starts to thaw. Her influence is diminished, things start to reverse. And as the snow starts to thaw, the ice melts, so we start to see shoots springing up. And eventually, there's this great kind of flow as all the ice melts, and spring comes. And this is the effect of the good king, Aslan, returning to his country and returning things to the way that they should be, a good way. He comes to do good to his subjects and to restore things. Now

I use that illustration this morning because we're thinking in the Gospels about Jesus the King coming to his kingdom, his world, which is so oppressed and so marred and spoiled so often by the effects of sin and by the rule of this world of Satan. And as he comes and as he walks the earth, and as he performs miracles, which is our subject really, particularly today, the healing miracles, he starts to reverse the impact and the power of this awful, tyrant Satan. And he comes to do good, and this is one way in which this is seen as he comes as a healing king. He doesn't come with any fanfare, he doesn't come with a crown, he comes as an ordinary looking person, but he does these great works which symbolize his power and his compassion and his goodness. So that's kind of underpinning what we see when we think about the miracles and what Jesus does. So don't think about the miracles, don't think about the healing miracles as just sort of random acts that Jesus does that are quite remarkable. Think about this bigger picture of Jesus as the king. You know we know about the kingdom of heaven. What is this idea of the kingdom? Well we see right back in the start of the Bible, you know that sense of perfection that existed in Eden, where God reigned as Lord in a good creation and his subjects initially at least lived under his dominion in harmony. They were for him and he was for them and there was that sense of peace and harmony. And we know as well that one day when Jesus comes back again, the great promise at the end of Revelation is that he will restore, he will renew all things and he will make all things good. And so Christians have that great hope, that certain hope that one day all the brokenness and the trouble and the suffering and the sense of unwell and unease that we feel will be reversed because he will make his creation new and we will live with the Lord. And at that time and in that way we will know again the perfect kingdom of heaven, fulfilled, fully. But in the Gospels and particularly in a passage like this we see for a time as the king walked the earth, a degree of that kingdom of heaven. Jesus brought in the kingdom. It will be fully brought in one day at the end of time, but he brought in the kingdom and as he walks and acts and heals, we see evidence of that. That's what Jesus is doing as he walks around amongst the people, doing these wonderful acts of compassion. And just to give you a little bit of context in Matthew's

Gospel in chapter 4, I'm going to read one verse. Chapter 4 verse 23, Matthew sort of summarizes in one verse what Jesus is all about, what he's about to start doing. So he says in chapter 4, Jesus went throughout Galilee teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness among the people. So there's a kind of minuscule of what Jesus has come to do. He's come to teach in the synagogues. He's come to preach about the kingdom and to call people into that kingdom and to see himself as the king and he's come to heal. After that, then Matthew gives us the sermon on the Mount, that wonderful expansive section on Jesus' teaching. So there we have a section on teaching as he's described. And now, at the start of chapter 8, Matthew's going to detail a whole load of different miracles. So at this point, Matthew wants us, he wants us to hear what Jesus has said and then he wants us to see what Jesus can do.

[6 : 25] And as we see what Jesus can do, it reinforces if you like, it gives weight to all that he says and of course, behind all that is who he is as the king, the returning king that Matthew is so keen to show people and to demonstrate from his gospel. So that's where we're at.

And we're going to look at this very short little section in Matthew chapter 8 because our specific story is this one man whose life is turned upside down as he meets with Jesus.

So we're going to focus on Matthew chapter 8 verses 1 to 4. I'm just going to go through this short passage, four verses and we're going to pull out some of the key points of the passage and see what we can learn. First thing in verse 1 is that this is a time in Jesus' life. You'll notice immediately in Matthew chapter 8 verse 1 that there's a crowd around Jesus. When he came down from the mountainside, now remember this is not long after probably Jesus has been up the mountainside teaching, the Sermon on the Mount, when he came down, large crowds followed him. Now you may know that Jesus will get to a time in his life when large crowds are baying for his life, when people reject him, when people turn away from him because they think, I don't like this teaching, I don't accept it. And things change in terms of the public ministry of Jesus, the way people listen to him. But at this point in Jesus' life, people are astonished by him. He draws the biggest crowd because at the end of the last chapter, chapter 7, at the end of the teaching on the Sermon on the Mount, it says, when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching because he taught as one who had authority. So he is somebody who has been around teaching and he's been radically challenging the expectations of the people that he's speaking to. So people follow him. And also, of course, he begins to become known as one who does these amazing miracles. So this is a busy, probably high pressure time in Jesus' ministry, very public. Second thing is Jesus is approached by a man. Now this isn't any man, any ordinary person who would maybe expect to be able to come up to Jesus as a new teacher and ask him some questions about who he is and what he's saying. Because, verse 2, a man with leprosy came up to him, knelt before him and said, Lord, if you're willing, you can make me clean. Now, that's a remarkable thing to happen. Let's just remind ourselves of what's going on here. Let's say, if this is leprosy, some people would say this is just an aggravated skin disease. Leprosy was an awful thing. It separated you from your people. In fact, it separated you from everybody, apart from other lepers. It was devastating. It was horrific.

It often ended in death. There was no known cure. You had to go and submit yourself, if you like, to the priests. You can read all about this in the book of Leviticus. Leviticus is a book that you may think is boring, but actually has a lot of very practical advice given to the Israelite community as to how to deal with things like this. Somebody like this man who got leprosy or even an aggravated skin disease, you would be contagious. You would be unclean. You'd be separated and cut off from your people, from your family. You would have to be outside the camp, as it were. You would have to walk about and shout, unclean, unclean. Don't come near me. Don't come and talk to me, because if you do, you too will become unclean. So this guy's life was horrible and must have been a pretty dire existence for him. He comes to Jesus, comes up to Jesus and he approaches Jesus, which in itself in many ways is quite amazing. Now notice something else about this. I don't know if you picked up as we read. I was reading the extended passage a few minutes ago, reading through to verse 17. Who are the people that Jesus heals initially that Matthew records? Well, obviously we've got the leper. He's the first one. Then you'll see the next passage is about a Centurion, the Roman Centurion. And the third person that is detailed by Matthew is Peter's mother-in-law. Jesus goes to her house, he finds her unwell, and he heals her. What's interesting about that is those three groups of people, a leper who is unclean, a Roman

Centurion who would have been a Gentile and a woman in this context are people who in some ways, in different ways, would not have been fully included in the worship community.

[11 : 18] They weren't Jewish men. They weren't those who were first in society. In their own context, maybe the leper, obviously he would have had a family. He would have been important to some people, although his life was terrible. The Roman was important in his context. And the woman again, these are people who, isn't it interesting that Matthew details these people being dealt with first by Jesus? It's as if he's explaining the effect of the kingdom and who Jesus has come to deal with. And he's showing it opening, widening to include even as priority these people, just as human beings, as people who Jesus the King comes to meet and come face to face with and to break through any barriers, any social barriers, any cultural barriers that existed. And Jesus meets them and he deals with them as human beings. Brilliant, wonderful truth for you to know this morning if you feel like somebody who Jesus won't want to bother with. So Jesus comes and he doesn't tell this man to go away is the point.

I want to make another point of application just now at this point, just to follow that. So sometimes this person or these three different people perceived as outside of the religious community in some ways, outside of God's community, the Jewish community. And sometimes in an awful way religious communities, churches can exclude people, can they? You may have felt like that yourself sometimes. You may have felt like you've been to a church. You may think back, you may be here this morning and you're trying to find out about Christianity and you find it really hard to break in as it were to a Christian community. Sometimes Christian communities exclude people for really wrong reasons. And we have to be really careful about that. We have to not do that. We have no right this morning. St. Columbus have no right to decide if people come through the door, we don't like to look at them. So that's the first maybe more obvious point. But the other point is this, don't exclude yourself.

Don't put yourself outside the camp as it were. Don't think, well, my sin is so great that Jesus won't be interested in me. Jesus won't be able to deal with me. Don't think, well, because of my background, my people aren't believers. My family aren't believers.

I could never be a believer because I'm not even as good as my family. It's not for you to say that. Don't put yourself outside the camp. These people, this man, an outcast who was outside the camp, who was unclean, approached Jesus. And Jesus came for people like that.

And to extend what we're thinking about just now, Jesus came for people who aren't just physically sick, but who are spiritually bankrupt and who are sick in their hearts. And who see that and who come to Jesus. And Jesus will not turn you away. So don't put yourself outside the camp.

[14 : 39] Let's just follow through what this man says just for a minute. Verse 3. So we've seen that Jesus is surrounded by loads of people, but we're zooming in right now on this one man who's unclean, but who still comes to Jesus. And what does he say? At the end of verse 2, Lord, if you're willing, you can make me clean. There's his request. It's kind of a request as a statement almost, isn't it? We see a couple of things here. This is a bold, but also a humble approach and request by this man. So it was bold for him to walk through the crowds, being the kind of person that he was and come up to this person who was this new great, amazing, special religious teacher. It was bold of him to do that. But he's humble. Do you see what he does? He came and he knelt before him and he said, Lord.

Now, there's a debate about the word Lord. It doesn't necessarily kind of deity at this point, but it's at least a term of great respect. He bows before Jesus and even in saying what he says to Jesus, of course, he submits himself and he recognizes the power of Jesus. So there's something for us there as well, isn't there? And the way that he comes before Jesus, he doesn't come up and flail around in front of him in anger and say, look at his state of me. My life's terrible. It's all your fault. You better do something about it or I'm not even going to listen to you. He comes and he kneels before him and he says, you're the one who can help me. So this is a bold and a humble request. I think that's a very helpful way for us to think about the way that we petition Jesus, the way that we come before Jesus and ask him for help. Come boldly. Come as those who are called children or those who he wants to call children. He wants you to receive his gospel of grace and to come before him. Come boldly. Come into the throne room of heaven because of what Jesus has accomplished, but come humbly. We don't come proudly. We don't come in our own righteousness. We don't come with our own amazingness. We don't come with our own special lives and our degrees and our finance or whatever. We come as people who are needy and we recognize his power.

A really helpful way for us to think about approaching Jesus. So it's a bold and it's a humble approach and it's a believing approach. You can make me clean. I don't say maybe.

It doesn't say is there any possibility. You can make me clean. He must have known about Jesus. He must have watched, listened to Jesus, probably heard a lot about him. And so he concludes that he will approach this person. So he doesn't decide in other words, I'm not going to approach Jesus. I'm going to hang back because I'm sure he'll not be interested.

He comes and he asks and he believes. So we are called likewise to believe and to come to Jesus. Fourth thing, having, having approached Jesus in this way, this bold and yet humble way, this believing way, we then come to the point. This amazing way that Jesus deals with this man. If you like, drink deep from this verse. Think about what this tells you about who Jesus is and what he's like. This tells us so much about what our King is like. Verse three, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. I am willing. He said, be clean.

[18:11] He was cured of his leprosy. That's astounding. Let's never get too used to reading about the miracles, the miracles that Jesus does, the miracles of healing. So here we have the King at work in power. He's been teaching. Now he's at work. He's healing. And this healing, first of all, is seen in what he says. So Jesus says, I am willing. He speaks and as he speaks, the man is healed. I'm going to read one very brief verse again because it's really important to think about the power of Jesus. As Jesus speaks, he has power because of who he is, because he is God, because he is the King of this world that he has come into. Let me read one verse from Hebrews chapter one. He's the writer of Hebrews introduces Jesus to those he's writing to and he says about him. In these last days, he's spoken to us by his son whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he made the universe.

The son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being sustaining all things by his powerful word. In that little picture there, you get an awesome picture of the magnitude of Jesus. He's the one through whom all things were made. So it's not a problem for him to come into his creation and fix things like disease. He can do that. He can speak a word and heal anything, even the great uncleanness, even a great disease like this, possibly leprosy. So Jesus comes and his word has power. This wasn't difficult for Jesus to do. But secondly and beautifully, Jesus touches. Isn't that great? Jesus says, I'm willing, but before that he has reached out his hand and he's touched the man. Now this is a man who has very possibly not been touched with gentleness and compassion in a human way for a long time. Don't know how long he's had this, but he's been a man who's been separate. People haven't come near him. People don't care about him. They want him away from them because they might get his disease. How do you think that would feel?

Jesus touches him. It's so real and it's so caring. So he shows power in what he says and he shows compassion in the way he touches him. He reaches out and touches this outcast.

You know, we can compare it with thinking of a hugely infectious disease ourselves. You know, Ebola a couple of years ago, whenever that was, would you touch somebody with Ebola?

Would you go near them? I probably wouldn't. Now obviously Jesus is who he is, but it's important for us to see, isn't it, that Jesus being who he is, being the king doesn't stand at a distance and just dictate to people. He gets right in there amongst people and he shows his love and his care. Just ask a question just for a minute. You may be thinking as we're reading through this and thinking about this act of Jesus in healing. Of course the question might come up, well, what about healing? I don't want to spend a lot of time talking about healing and miracles and how that works today, but the question might come to you, well, Jesus hasn't healed anybody I know or he's not healing the person I'm praying for right now. Should I expect Jesus to heal me, my friend, my whoever? Just very briefly. Well, Jesus is able, isn't he? We never say that Jesus is not still able to heal. He is the king. He's the risen king and ascended to heaven. He reigns still and his power is absolute. Jesus is able to heal. Jesus has that power.

[22 : 17] But I want to say that this physical malaise, if you like, this illness that this person had and all of the illnesses and the horrible situations that people found themselves in that Jesus dealt with and all the things that we find ourselves with nowadays, these are all part of a much wider, a deeper malaise, if you like, a deeper problem because they are the effect of, they are a symptom of the sin that is at the root of the problem that we have as human beings. So the breakdown in your body that you may be feeling today, the death that you may have seen in a relative, the hurt that you still harbor, all of these things are as a result of the fall and sin that corrupts and that breaks down and that affects every single one of us. And so Jesus healing in this way is important.

It's hugely significant and obviously still today we want healing and we look for Jesus to heal. You know, this man would have gone again and got sick and he would have got old and he's dead now. Jesus didn't promise to heal him forever and to go on. The core thing that we need to be aware of, the most important thing for us to see is the root of the problem that we have, which is sin. Jesus is on his way to the cross at this point. He's healing people, demonstrating his power, validating in many ways his words and his teaching and who he is and what he says. He's on the way to the cross where he's going to deal with the ultimate problem, the great illness, the great hurt, the great pain, the separation that we face. And so the greatest need that you have today is to deal with that. That's the priority for us, absolutely, when we look at Jesus and when we ask the question, well, what can I have from Jesus? What should I ask of him? We pray for him to heal us and he may and he may not. But if we haven't dealt with that question of the separation that we face from God and the sin that exists in our hearts, then we're missing the point, then we're missing the most important question. And so that's, in many ways, the real miracle.

It's interesting, isn't it, that as this man comes to him, he says, Lord, if you're willing, you can make me clean. He asks implicitly for healing because as to be able to be clean, Jesus would have had to have healed him. But the great significance here is that this man was somebody who was separated from his community, but obviously because he was separate, he was also separate from, say, the worship community. He was outside of the camp in that sense as well. And so it was so important for him to become clean and to be somebody who could be reintegrated into his community and who could worship as well.

One thing as we go through this passage, he's come humbly and boldly and he's believed and Jesus has shown great power and he's shown great compassion. And then he says, this verse of the end, strange verse, maybe in many ways, Jesus then said to him, don't tell anyone. Go show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded as a testimony to them. Why does he say that? Just briefly. Some people will say, well, he says, don't tell anybody because he's not wanting too much distraction at this point. A crowd may have been worked into a kind of frenzy because they would have assumed some things about Jesus that it wasn't his time to show. Others will say that the priority here is the last part that he goes to the priest. And what's going on there? Why does Jesus say go to the priest and show yourself? We'll see what he says there. Show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded. Again, this takes us back into Leviticus and back into the ways of dealing with somebody who was to become clean again. The priests were the ones who, if you like, validated that they would receive somebody if they were clean, if they were healed, they would be the ones who would declare that person fit to be reintegrated back into the community. So Jesus is saying, go and make sure that you are received by the priest, that you're declared clean so that you can be reintegrated back into your community so that you can become whole again, so that you can go and worship again, so that you can go and be with your people. You see, Jesus is concerned so much for this, the whole of this man. And it just gives us a little sense of the purpose of Jesus saying this and how he is aware of the whole needs of this man, what he asks him to do. Go be recognized and have yourself put back into your people. But also think about how the priests would have seen this. Those in themselves, they couldn't heal this man, but here is one who can. Here is one who teaches in a way who has authority. And here is one who can heal and reverse the effects of this terrible debilitating disease. The great testimony of Jesus and who he is. We see all the things here going on that tell us about what Jesus is doing as he performs these healing miracles. Finally, briefly, what should we do with this? What should we do now? I think the big point to remember this morning, I want to go back to thinking about Jesus as the king. If you're not a believer this morning, you need to understand that about Jesus. He's not just an impressive person, but he is the king. He's the one who has power. The Bible testifies to that. It always points us to Jesus as the servant king, but a great powerful king. And it says that he will one day come back again in all power.

And the heavens and the earth will be recreated. Things will be as aware as they should be. If you're a believer, know you're king. We can get dragged down by life sometimes and distracted. We can get thrown off course because we feel fearful and our circumstances overwhelm us. Know you're king. Remember who you're king is. Remember that he is powerful and that he is compassionate. That he is the king who would reach out to somebody who's unclean and we touch them. Seek healing and seek cleansing. Seek the forgiveness that he offers and that he can offer because he's the one who dealt with sin. So this is the great king that Matthew wants us to know. Pray your kingdom come. I don't know if you sometimes come to the Lord's prayer so familiar, but sometimes it can seem so distant because we think we know it and we think it's so familiar and we know what it's talking about. What does it mean to say, Lord, your kingdom come? Well, his kingdom won't come. Jesus won't come again in triumph until all of the people that he intends to be brought into his kingdom have been. You know, you think about that. What are you praying when you pray, Lord, your kingdom come? This was a time when Jesus walked the earth and he healed and he showed great miracles.

[29 : 28] Now is a time when many are being brought into the kingdom. Maybe it doesn't feel like it right here and now, but across the world there are many being brought into the kingdom and we should pray that many of our people, our friends and our loved ones are brought into the kingdom. Now is a time of gospel opportunity. Now is a time where we can teach about why there is such great pain and hurt and disease in the world and what is the root of that? It's the sin that separates us from the God who's made us. So now is a gospel time. So let's pray your kingdom come, recognizing the implications of that, but also looking forward to the fact that Jesus has said he will come again and in that we can have peace.

You may not have peace right now because your life is all over the place and even though you're a Christian, you feel very disturbed and we have to deal with that. You know, you may have to live as Paul did, the great apostle with a thorn in the flesh. We're not promised immediate healing necessarily now. So we have to live through this time, this kingdom time when people are being brought into the kingdom, but we know that he is coming back and he will make all things new and he will bring you his children to be with himself. In fact, he will come to live amongst us. So there is hope for you and in all of this, then we don't despair because it's a certain hope he will come again and because he is the powerful one who can save those who you're witnessing to. Don't despair. Don't think he can do it.

We see the power of him to heal us leper. So we know also he is the one who is powerful to save your friends and your neighbors and those that you're talking to. So recognize who your king is. And as we do that, we have hope and we rejoice and we're able to go forward into the next week knowing this about Jesus. Amen. I'm just going to pray. Help us to trust in you Lord God our King. Thank you for Jesus. He came in such humility, but he acted and he taught with such power and grace and truth. And he is the one who went to the cross to deal with our terrible disease, our sin, our separation. Help us to lift up our hearts to you this morning and to trust in you for the first time or anew. Help us to go into this week knowing that you are our great King. In Jesus' name, amen.