

“Authority at Work”

Introduction: At some point, you’ve got to come back from vacation! You can’t stay up in the mountains forever and you need to get back to your normal responsibilities. Our text for this morning doesn’t picture Jesus on vacation, but it does begin with him “coming down from the mountainside,” and entering into the challenges of daily life. Jesus, recall had gone up the mountain where, in the presence of a gathering crowd, he laid out his Sermon on the Mount, his description of what life lived as a citizen on the kingdom of God should look like. When he was all done, those who had been listening were amazed at his teaching. It had an air of authority about it like nothing else they had ever heard.

Now, as Jesus comes down from that mountain, Matthew wants us to observe how Jesus would wield this authority. What would it look like as Jesus displayed his authority not only in word, but also in deed? Broadly speaking, chapters 5-9 are bookended by this summary statement:

Jesus went throughout the towns and villages of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. [4:23; 9:35]

These chapters fill in the picture of what such teaching, preaching, and healing looked like. The dominant note sounded (before Matthew’s readers are then called in chapter 10 to join God’s mission), has to do with who Jesus is. In particular, the uniqueness of Jesus as seen in his unparalleled authority over illness, nature, and the spiritual realm. Let’s listen to how Matthew launches us into this section with a trio of healings, as Jesus welcomes a variety of different people into the power and kingdom of God.

I. Leper – A social outcast in Israel

A. The first person in this trio was a man suffering from leprosy. It’s likely that in antiquity, this word covered a broad range of skin diseases, as well as the horrible one which caused limbs and extremities to waste away. Some of these diseases were highly contagious, others not so, but in any case, all led to the sufferer becoming an outcast from normal society. In fact, according to the quarantine regulations found in Leviticus, all those with leprosy were required to be examined by a priest and if determined to be unclean, were required to live alone, wear torn clothing, and cry out “Unclean! Unclean!” if anyone came near (Lev. 13:45f.) At our Wednesday evening table talk, we began reflecting on the difficult condition of loneliness that many are experiencing in these days. Imagine being alone, and terribly sick at the same time! Or maybe think back to those days of covid restrictions, and the inability to be in contact with others or go into your church.

Importantly, the ultimate issue was one of ritual purity, not a medical illness or the penalty for a sinful action. Leprosy was, however, a vivid metaphor for what sin does – it separates us from God and one another – and the mortality to which it leads. Cleansing was needed, from an outside source.

B. Hearing, perhaps, that this fellow Jesus, who no doubt had developed a reputation of being a powerful teacher, was in the vicinity, the leper got brave and when he found Jesus, got on his knees before him. Could the power and authority of Jesus touch him? Actually, Jesus himself touched this man, a touch most dared not to offer. I am reminded of the days when Princess Diana physically touched people suffering with Aids, at a time when many were afraid to do so. Jesus reached out and touched a

man many shunned, a beautiful picture of the extent the love of God will go to bring about restoration and wholeness. After the cleansing Jesus directed the man to go back and show himself to the priest, receiving official authorization that Jesus had made it possible for him to enter back into society. Joy!

C. Jesus' admonition for the leper not to tell anyone was not to keep it a secret, nor, as is sometimes suggested, added by the Gospel writers to try and explain why there were many who did not turn to Jesus. Rather, Jesus didn't want the crowds to simply view him as a miracle worker who had only come to bring physical healing or national liberation, and so miss the presence of the kingdom and his authority as the King that his miracles would be demonstrating.

II. Centurion's Servant – an ethnic outcast

A. Jesus next brought his healing authority to an ethnic outcast, to a Gentile. If the leper had been excluded from the community by his physical condition, the centurion was excluded by his race. He was a commander of 100 soldiers that had been installed by the Romans to administer their rule. This man had a servant that he obviously thought very highly of, and who was suffering terribly. Remarkably, while many in Israel would miss recognizing Jesus for who he was, this outsider somehow came to understand that Jesus was the hoped-for Deliverer whom Israel longed for. Further, he understood a thing or two about authority and knew that Jesus need only say the word, even from a distance, and his servant could be healed. "Just say the word," he said to Jesus.

B. Jesus declared that this centurion had greater faith – pictured here as a willingness to acknowledge and submit to the authority of Jesus, in whom the authority and power of the living God is present – than anyone in Israel. While the mission to the Gentiles had not yet begun, this was advance notice that the great banquet, the party of the great multitude of the ancestors of Abraham, would include those from all over the world. Faith, not race, is the criterion for entering the family of God.

III. Peter's mother-in-law – a gender outcast

A. Jesus then extends, in this trio, the authority and power of his healing touch to Peter's mother-in-law, one whose gender caused her to be marginalized in some circles of Judaism. She was bedridden, in the throes of a severe illness, but Jesus' touch was so significant that she was able to rise and begin making him dinner, probably a welcomed sight given the hunger that had probably developed in all who had been a part of this remarkable day!

B. As his healing touch was then extended out into the neighborhood, it would also likely have affirmed for his followers that Jesus was concerned for their family and friends, their nearest and dearest, as well as those "out there." From Matthew's perspective, these healings revealed not only the universal reach of Jesus' authority, crossing the various boundaries that he did, but also further identified Jesus as the Messianic Servant anticipated by Isaiah. As Matthew summarizes (v. 17):

This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases."

This is a message that became primarily associated with Jesus' death for our sin. But Matthew looks toward the wholeness that Jesus' death would bring, that as Jesus inaugurates the kingdom of heaven he begins to "reverse the curse," to reverse the cycle of sickness and death which has entered our world through sin, as he brings about a new creation. The healings of Jesus, therefore, demonstrate the

authority of Jesus on a variety of different levels, an authority of not only word but of deed. They reveal his compassion for those who are suffering and even ostracized in some way. And they are a picture of the restoration that happens when heaven breaks into earth.

As you reflect on the text, what would it mean for you to recognize and submit to the authority of Jesus? In what area of your life is Jesus inviting you to call him Lord, and to trust that he has your good in mind?