

The Bearing of Sickness

Well good morning, everybody. If we haven't had the chance to meet, my name is Kent and I'm one of the pastors here—so glad you're here with us this morning. If you have a bible, take it out and turn with me to the book of **Matthew, chapter 8**. This morning we are resuming our teaching series *through* the book of Matthew.

If you are newer to our church, **last August**, we kicked off a series where we're walking, passage-by-passage, through the gospel of Matthew beginning to end. We honestly don't know *how many* years it'll take yet—probably somewhere between three and *fifteen*?? I'm kidding, I think. But we're doing it in *installments*, a few chapters at a time, over the course of several years. So obviously that is a big undertaking—it's the first ever *multiple-year* series that we've attempted as a church. But we figure if **one thing is worth** spending multiple years learning about, it's the life and ministry of Jesus. That feels like an excellent thing to spend a lot of time focusing on. But if you weren't around for the *previous* installment of Matthew, feel free to go back and **catch up** online this week—all those teachings are there. I'm not going to catch you up on all of it today.

But this week, we're moving to the **next section** of the book, chapters 8-10. And in *these* chapters, the focus of the book *shifts* to talking about the wide variety of **people Jesus interacts with**. In these three chapters, Jesus comes across all kinds of people, including his disciples, *potential* disciples, sick people, demon-possessed people, hyper-religious people, and so on. But **in each of these interactions, we get a glimpse into the heart of Jesus, and what the kingdom of God is all about**. So that's what we'll be looking at as we go along.

Now *today* specifically, what we read about are three different stories of Jesus interacting with people suffering from various types of **disease and illness**. So let's dive into the first story and see what we can learn from it all. Pick it up with me in Matthew 8, v. 1:

[1] *"When he (that's Jesus) came down from the mountain (where he gave the sermon on the mount), great crowds followed him. [2] And behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." [3] And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. [4] And Jesus said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a proof to them."*

So a man with leprosy approaches Jesus and asks for healing. **Leprosy back then** was not the precise condition we think of today; it was kind of a catch-all term they used for *any* type of deteriorating skin disease. So this guy was likely in some sort of constant, chronic pain from the condition, and because of the nature of the disease, he would have likely been disfigured in some noticeable way, which no doubt earned him **regular glances and stares** from anyone who saw him.

But on top of all that, **one of the the worst parts** of leprosy wasn't actually the **physical condition itself—it was the social isolation** that came with it. Because people believed leprosy was wildly contagious, if you had leprosy you were legally required to yell out the word “unclean!” whenever you went in public, so that people got as far away from you as they possibly could. It was forbidden to *touch* a person with leprosy, or to touch anything *they* had touched, or else *you* became ritually unclean as a result. So in addition to a debilitating disease that was causing your flesh to literally waste away, in addition to being stared at because people thought you looked different, you were also seen as *unsafe* to anyone you encountered. So **you can begin to imagine the stigma and the shame and the loneliness** that this man was experiencing.

But here in the story, he approaches Jesus **asking for healing and receives it**. Jesus reaches out and **touches the man**, and he is healed. Now this is interesting to me: **there's no reason for us to think that Jesus had to touch this man in order to heal him**. Right? We have plenty of other stories where Jesus heals people without touching them at all, or even from a great distance away—in fact, we're about to read one of *those* stories *next*. So Jesus did not have to *touch* him in order to heal him. In fact, it might have been better in some ways for him *not* to, because remember—if you touch an unclean person, *you become unclean*. But Jesus, despite all of that, chooses to reach out and touch the man as he heals him.

So just **put yourself in that situation for a second**. You've been isolated from your community, family and friends for likely *years* of your life as you suffer from a terrible illness. You can't remember the last time you had a hug or handshake or even a hand on your shoulder. In fact, you probably can't remember the last time someone even *brushed up against you* in a crowd because when you go out in public, everyone scatters away from you as best they can.

And in this moment, **Jesus does what no one else will**: he embraces the man. And **when he does that, he actually becomes ritually unclean, but the man becomes clean**.

The stigma and shame is transferred to *Jesus*, and *Jesus' healing* is transferred to *him*. More on all of that towards the end of today. But Jesus tells him to go show himself to the priest, so that he can be officially readmitted to the communal life of his people. That's the first story of healing. Now let's take a look at the next one, picking it back up in v. 5:

[5] When he Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion (in other words, a Roman soldier) came forward to Jesus, appealing to him, [6] "Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly." [7] And he (Jesus) said to him, "I will come and heal him." [8] But the centurion replied, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed (from a distance). [9] For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me (in other words, "I understand how this works..."). And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

[10] When Jesus heard this from the man, he marveled and said to those who followed him, "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. [11] I tell you, many will come from east and west (from all over: every nation and people group, every ethnicity—Jewish and non-Jewish) and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, [12] while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Translation: "some of you who think they are automatically a part of the kingdom because of their ethnicity or their family or their heritage, might just find themselves on the outside of the kingdom instead.") [13] And to the centurion Jesus said, "Go; let it be done for you as you have believed." And the servant was healed at that very moment.

This time, Jesus comes across a **centurion**, or an officer in the Roman military. *This man* asks Jesus to heal not *him*, but his *servant* who is back at his house and is currently paralyzed. Jesus responds with, "I will come and heal him." // Now, keep in mind that **culturally**, the **tensions were often high** between the Jewish people and the nation of Rome. This centurion was an officer in an *occupying army*. His *job*, in part, was to use *intimidation* to squash any attempts at uprisings or insurrections against the Roman empire. **So as maybe the closest parallel we have, imagine an officer in Hitler's regime approaching a Jewish man and asking the Jewish man to heal his servant.**

This is **a tad awkward**, to put it mildly. It's a rare moment of almost *forced* humility for a man who would not be very familiar with humility at all. But he operates out of what he *knows*. This centurion says he doesn't see himself as *worthy* to have Jesus come under his roof, but that he understands how *authority* works. He says, "I have people *I'm* in charge of, and when I tell them to do something, they do it. It *happens*." Which is his way of saying that **he knows Jesus can heal people at a distance, because Jesus has the authority to do it**. Then Jesus marvels at this for the incredible display of faith that it is, saying that he hasn't seen faith like that in all of Israel (which is exactly as controversial to say as you think it would be), and heals the man's servant from a distance. Once again, Jesus *heals*. Now let's look at the last story—the shortest one—in v. 14-15:

[14] And when Jesus entered Peter's house, he saw his mother-in-law lying sick with a fever. [15] He touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she rose and began to serve him.

Now you and I might read this one and think, "uh...it kind of **seems like this one isn't as bad** as the other two." *Life-altering, deteriorating skin disease. Paralysis. ...and then this lady has the sniffles? I mean if all she has is a fever, is that even something Jesus is needed for? Like maybe she just got her second COVID vaccine or something and she just needs to give it 24 hours, take some Tylenol, and she's good*. Well, most scholars say it was likely a little more serious than that; they say most likely she was suffering from *malaria*—but a fever back then was seen as a *disease*, not a *symptom*.

But Jesus and the disciples roll up to the house, and in this story, it **doesn't even say she asks** Jesus for healing—Jesus just does it. He touches her hand, and she is immediately healed, to the point that she gets up and goes right about life as usual. Jesus heals her completely. // And then Matthew sort of ties a bow on everything for us in v. 16. He says...

[16] That evening they brought to him many who were oppressed by demons, and he cast out the spirits with a word and healed all who were sick.

In other words, what we've just read are just three highlighted *instances* of **something that happened fairly regularly** in Jesus' ministry. Even that night *alone*, many people who were sick were brought to him, and he healed *all* of them. // So **three different stories**, that involve three very different people and situations. But in each of them, Jesus responds by healing the person totally and completely from whatever their illness

happens to be. So what can we glean from all of these stories? Well I think there are at least three takeaways worth highlighting. We'll spend a little bit of time on each one...

Takeaway #1: Jesus *healed* people

Before going any further, it would probably be **silly not to acknowledge** perhaps the most *obvious* takeaway from this passage, which is that Jesus *regularly healed people*. Jesus saw people with real, physical ailments and illnesses and diseases, and *did something* about those conditions. In other words, **these stories are not intended as metaphors or embellished, exaggerated stories; they are meant as literal, historical events. Healing was a frequent enough activity in Jesus' life that he became known, by many people, as a healer.** People came out to him constantly, asking him to heal them, because they had *seen* him do it or heard that he *could* do it. Jesus *healed* people.

Now, **depending on your religious background** or lack thereof, your response to that might be anything from “yeah, of course he healed people” to “yeah, I seriously doubt that happened.” Or maybe *you're* somewhere in the middle: you don't *doubt* that it *happened then*, but you view it as sort of a unique thing to Jesus and his early disciples in *their day*—not necessarily something we would still expect to happen in *our setting today*. Some people even have **what they see as biblical reasons** for believing things like this don't still happen today.

And if *that's* you and you're here today, we want you to know we're not mad at you for believing that. And you're certainly welcome to read the bible that way. And at the same time, I will say that in my opinion, **you have to work a lot harder to arrive at *that* conclusion from the Scriptures.** I would argue there are at least no *clear* places in the bible that insist that healing only happened during one particular period in church history, by a select group of people. Rather, it seems to me to be the assumption in the bible that followers of Jesus *continue* in this tradition throughout time. But that's all I'll say about that—if you'd like to argue with me more about that, you're certainly welcome to. Just send me an email—my email address is jeff@citychurchknox.com. Matter fact, send me lots of emails in a row to make sure I get it.

But I will say this: at least from what I've heard, a lot of people who believe healing doesn't still happen aren't *primarily* getting that from the Scriptures. They're getting it **from their experience.** **They don't think it still happens because they simply haven't seen it happen.** And while that's understandable, as we've mentioned before, I *would* just encourage you not to use your *experience* as the primary authority in your life. It's

wise not to do that *in general*, but I think it's especially good to remember when it comes to things like healing. **As followers of Jesus, we don't read the bible through the lenses of our experience—we let the bible *shape and inform* our experience.** So if the bible says that healing *happens*, even if that hasn't been our experience, we choose to believe what the bible says.

But then for *other* people, maybe the reason we're skeptical about healing is because we've seen things like that **get really weird** in some church contexts. And to that I'd just like to say...*of course* it can get weird. **But so can things in most any tradition throughout church history. Charismatic churches can get weird. Reformed churches can get weird. Non-reformed churches can get weird. Baptist churches. Presbyterian churches. Non-denominational churches.** You name it—if there is a church or a Christian tradition out there, it can get weird apart from the guidance of the Spirit and the Scriptures. And if you don't think *your* tradition can get weird, chances are that's because you *grew up* in *that tradition* and could be a little blind to its weaknesses.

But hear me on this: **none of that is reason to reject the good** in any of those traditions. It's a reason to be sure that we're *all* seeking the wisdom and help of the Scriptures and the Spirit, whatever tradition we're in. We don't reject things from other traditions just because they're different or uncomfortable to us. And specifically, with any tradition that includes the belief in healing, *biblically*, it might just be that they're *onto* something, even if it does make us a tad uncomfortable. So we'd probably do well to at least consider it. **Sometimes obedience to Jesus and the things he calls us to is going to make us uncomfortable. And sometimes that's a really, really good thing for us.**

But the point is that Jesus healed people. And so until we have a solid biblical reason to believe otherwise, that means we're choosing to believe at City Church that he still desires to heal in *our* day. And if that's true, that means there's at least a pretty good *chance* he wants to heal people in *this* room, today. So before we're done this morning, we're actually going to devote some time to praying for people's healing. And now that I've made some of us are very nervous and uncomfortable about *that*, let's move to the next point. Takeaway #2 is...

Takeaway #2: The People Jesus Heals

Specifically, I think we should take note of the *types* of people Jesus tends to heal. So if we wanted to, we **could have done an individual teaching on each** one of these three

passages today. Could've split 'em up. And by doing that, we probably could've gone into a lot more detail on each one and learned all sorts of things through that. But we didn't do that for a couple reasons. **One is logistical. At some point, unless we want to be in the book of Matthew for fifteen years, we're going to have to group some passages together.** But the more important reason is this: **sometimes we can glean things from looking at a collection of passages that we may miss from looking at them in isolation.** Sometimes, Matthew groups certain stories together because he sees a theme in them that he wants to highlight for us.

And that's very much true when it comes to **the three stories we just read** in Matthew 8. When you read through these three stories on their own, what you'll see is just three very different people that all happen to get healed by Jesus. But when you read them in succession, you see that Jesus has just healed a **leper, a Gentile, and a woman.** Here's why that matters: **it would've been hard to find three types of people that were more consistently excluded from the community of God in many Jewish people's minds. People with leprosy were often excluded because their ailment and uncleanness. Gentiles were excluded because they were seen as unclean—they were ethnic outsiders. And Jewish women were included, but only technically, sort of by association with their husbands or family—not in and of themselves. It was a very patriarchal society. All of these people were excluded, one way or another, from the communal life of God's people.** But here in these stories, we have Jesus interacting with each of these people *individually*, and accepting them *individually*.

And **not only that,** but these are the **first individual stories** of healing we read about in the gospel of Matthew. Doesn't it seem significant that the *first three* stories Matthew chooses to tell about Jesus healing people were stories of him healing those who were seen at the time as *outsiders*? **I think this is Matthew communicating to his audience that Jesus' kingdom is far more expansive and inclusive than many people had categories for at the time. That, after all, is what the response to the centurion is all about; Jesus says "this is what kingdom faith actually looks like. Many of you who thought you belonged to it already, aren't. And many of you who don't think you can be a part of it, are."**

So **if you're the type** that has never felt like you belonged in the religious scene, if you're experience around church is always feeling odd, excluded, like you don't belong—I think one thing this passage is telling you is that Jesus may feel just the opposite about you being a part of his kingdom. Because Jesus' **healing was about more** than just restoring

health to someone's body—it was about showing *what types of people were invited and included in his kingdom.*

Takeaway #3: The Meaning of Healing

Lastly, in these stories I think we get a glimpse at the **true, deeper meaning** of healing. At the very end of our passage, Matthew (the author) drops us a little **“editor’s note.”** Look with me down at chapter 8, v. 17:

(All of...) **This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: “He took our illnesses and bore our diseases.”**

Matthew says *all of this*—these examples of Jesus bringing healing to people that needed it—are actually **fulfillments of Old Testament prophecy.** He mentions specifically this one from Isaiah chapter 53, about a figure would come one day in the future who would “*take*” our illnesses and “*bear*” our diseases. Now, that’s interesting language—it doesn’t just say that Jesus “healed” or “removed” our illnesses—it says that he *took* them. Do you see that? Those two words in the Greek mean literally to “*receive*” and to “*carry*.”

Now the reason that’s *interesting* is because we **don’t have any record** of **Jesus actually becoming sick** with these people’s illnesses as a result of healing *them*, right? **Jesus doesn’t come down with leprosy after healing the man with leprosy, for example. He doesn’t become paralyzed after healing the centurion’s servant. He doesn’t come down with a fever after he heals Peter’s mother-in-law.** So he’s not “bearing” them in *that* way apparently. But if *that’s* not what Matthew and Isaiah mean, what *do* they mean?

Well first you need to understand that **in the biblical story, sickness, disease, and death are all seen as results or consequences of sin.** Now by that, I don’t mean at an *individual* level—I don’t mean the reason *you* are sick is because of *your* sin. I mean it at a *cosmic* level. I mean that **the reason those sickness and disease exist in the world is because sin exists in the world.** The Scriptures teach that when *sin* entered the human story, it brought sickness, disease, and death along with it. Are you with me so far?

So **when Matthew says** that Jesus “took up” and “bore” our sicknesses, he *also* doesn’t mean it at an *individual* level—he means it at a *cosmic* level. He doesn’t mean that Jesus took on *each person’s individual* illness. What he means is that Jesus took on the “sickness” of the whole *world*. We talked about this at our **Good Friday Gathering last**

week: how, on the cross, what was happening was that Jesus was experiencing the brunt *force* of sin's impact on the world. He was receiving all of the pain, the tragedy, the sickness, and the brokenness that sin had *caused*. And that *by doing that*, he actually made healing and wholeness *possible* for the world. Isaiah 53 actually says it explicitly in the very next verse of that chapter: "by his *wounds*, we are *healed*."

So **think back to the man with leprosy** in the story. When Jesus touched him, there was an *exchange* that took place: Jesus took on at least the shame and the stigma of his illness—he was now seen as "unclean"—and the man received the *healing* from Jesus—he became "clean." Jesus traded his cleanness for the man's unclean-ness. And what Matthew is saying is that what we're seeing in stories like these is a tangible representation of an even more *significant* exchange. That on the cross, Jesus *took on and bore* the cumulative weight of sin, and he transferred his healing and wholeness to us, for all those that trust in his ability to do that. "By his wounds, we are healed."

Now **seen properly**, I think all of this can give us some really **helpful guardrails** when it comes to how we approach and think about healing. **On the one hand, if we ever find ourselves focusing more on healing than we do on the liberating power of the gospel message itself, that would seem to indicate that we're missing the point.** Because the *point* of healing, according to Matthew and Isaiah, was to point to the *cross*, where Jesus didn't just die to take away sickness, but to take away the *cause* of the world's sickness: to take away *sin*. So we shouldn't ever allow the *picture to become* more important to us than the *reality*. That's *one* guardrail.

But **on the other hand**, if we ever find ourselves *only* focusing on how Jesus delivers us from *sin*, and never desire things *like physical* healing for anyone, that would seem to be a problem too. Because that means we have in essence, *spiritualized* the gospel. We've relegated it to something that *only* has *spiritual, intangible* benefits, and nothing further. **But that wouldn't make any sense: for instance, imagine believing that Jesus came to heal the sin that causes broken relationships, but that he has no interest in restoring the broken relationships themselves. Imagine believing that Jesus came to do something about the sin that leads to injustice, but doesn't really care about restoring justice itself. That wouldn't make any sense.**

And similarly, **I would say it also doesn't make sense to say that Jesus came to heal the cause of sickness, but that he doesn't care about healing the sickness itself. The Jesus I read about in the Scriptures was not just interested in healing us spiritually—he is interested in eventually healing all of creation. God desires to**

heal our sin, and to heal all that sin has broken. Starting now in part, and then **completely on the day he returns**. That's what he's up to, and *I believe* that's what he *desires* to be up to in our midst.

So all my cards on the table, **here's how I hope that this teaching hits us** as a church family. If I just had to guess, more of us err towards that second tendency. I think at times we may be guilty of *spiritualizing* Jesus' desire to heal and restore. I'm not saying we don't ever *pray* for God to heal; I've heard us pray for that *regularly*. But I think at times, we do it almost as an *obligation*, not as a true *expectation*. I'll just speak for me—a lot of times, I start off praying that God would heal somebody because I know I'm supposed to, and then I spend the bulk of my time praying for other things: that he would give them strength and endurance and help them to suffer well. A lot of times, I don't know that I pray for healing *expecting* that it will actually *happen*.

But **think back to the centurion**. Jesus commends him for his faith because he has a full *understanding and expectation* that Jesus can heal. He says “you don't even have to come to my house—if you give the word from here, my servant will be healed.” **What would it look like for us to embody that kind of faith and expectation of healing? Not because God owes it to us. Not because he's obligated to. Not even because his healing or lack thereof is a sign of how much or how little he loves us. But because Matthew and Isaiah say Jesus came to “take up” and “bear” the sorrows of the world. And a part of that is him desiring to heal.**

I'd love it if many of us could **move from believing in theory** that God can heal, to a church that prays *expectantly* for him to do it. Because sometimes those are different things. What if we prayed like we expected him to do it? **And I'll just add: sometimes that's gonna look like praying more than once. God sometimes responds and heals right away, to be sure. But more often than not, when I've seen God do it, it's in response to a group of people who prayed persistently for God to heal someone. To a group of people that took Jesus' instructions elsewhere seriously to “always pray and not give up.”**

And lastly **if God ends up demonstrating** that his plan *isn't* to heal in a certain scenario, we're okay with that. We don't let that *discourage* us from knowing him and loving him or asking him in the future. Because we know that for all of us who follow Jesus, healing is coming. We know the *implications* of the cross. We know that the new heavens and the new earth are coming. **We know it's never actually a question of whether or not God will heal us—it's only a question of how soon.** Now, or in the new heavens and new

earth. But in the meantime, we understand and we believe that God desires to bring glimpses of heaven to earth, so we pray in *that* direction.

So as I mentioned earlier, we're gonna take some time to do precisely that before we leave. So **if you have stuff out**, go ahead and put it up, under your seats, wherever you can that's out of the way. Then I want every person in the room to bow their heads, close their eyes. And once everybody's done that, here's what I want to happen. If you're here and you're experiencing any type of sickness, illness, or injury...whether it's chronic pain, or nerve damage, or constant pain in your joints that comes and goes...maybe it's an illness—it's heart disease, or it's cancer, or it's Lyme disease, or it's chronic fatigue...whatever it is, if it matters to you, it matters to us and God too. Maybe it's something that you've taken medicine for, but hasn't really gotten any better. Maybe it's something that you've been to the doctors about over and over again, and they have no idea what it could be.

But if that's you—if you're in that category—I want you to just **somehow indicate that**. You can stand up, you can lift your hand or both hands, you can just open your hands face-up on your lap—however you want to do it. But just as a sign of faith and openness to the healing of God, indicate that in some outward way.

Additionally, if you're in the room and **you know someone** who needs healing. Not you, but somebody else, whether they're here in the room or not. Remember: God healed the centurion's servant from a great distance. So if you *know* somebody that needs healing, I'd love for you to indicate that on their behalf: stand up, open *your* hands, whatever.

Now with that done, I want **every person in this room that belongs to Jesus to pray**, right now, on behalf of these people. Pray and ask God to heal, restore. Ask him to resolve whatever it is fully. I know this is likely *weird* to some of us and that's okay—sometimes God asks us to do things that seem a little weird; that can be a good thing. But I want you to just take a second silently, or out loud, or however you'd like, to pray for total and complete healing on behalf of these people in the room. If you're someone *asking* for healing, feel free to pray alongside us or just sit there and receive it as a gift. I want us all to pray together, and then I'll close us out—do that now.

Pray to close.

If God heals you, we'd love to know about it...