

“Restoration Miracles”
Matthew 8:1-17
December 3, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

Matthew tends to arrange the material in his gospel by theme, and chapters 8 and 9 contain the record of some of Jesus’ miracles. Having recently preached a sermon series on the Sermon on the Mount, I am skipping that section in this present series. In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus comes down from the mountain where he has been teaching and into the valley where he performs miracles. He taught the good news of the kingdom in the Sermon on the Mount, and now he demonstrates the good news of the kingdom through these miracles. They give us a glimpse into what life in the kingdom of God is like. It is a place where people do not suffer such isolating, hopeless conditions as leprosy, where children do not lie paralyzed in beds and where old women do not become bedridden and unable to make any meaningful contribution to daily life. The kingdom of God is a place where outsiders are welcomed as insiders. Lepers, Gentiles and women, the three who are healed in this passage, were all excluded from full status in temple worship.

I love the word “restoration.” Something becomes old and worn out to the point that it can no longer function as originally intended, but then a loving restoration is undertaken to bring it back to its original glory. I recently completed a restoration of my former bicycle. There was rust on the frame, bearings that were frozen or fell apart in my hands, cables that were frayed and on the verge of breaking, and bolts that had been corroded by my prodigious and corrosive sweat. I found great joy in stripping the bike down to its frame and redoing everything, so that now my spare bike is almost as good as new. Jesus has come to restore the kingdom, to put things back to their original intended glory. Though it almost seems too good to be true, it is true. Sickness and death will be put away forever. There will be no more tears, but only everlasting joy. Hopelessness and despair will be banished, along with all fear and anxiety. These things all come like they came to the leper, the centurion and Peter’s mother-in-law—as a gift eagerly and enthusiastically given by the King.

I. A Leper Cleansed

This is the first miracle Matthew chooses to describe. I think there are a couple of reasons for that. First, leprosy straddles the line between the physical and the spiritual. Though it was clearly a physical disease, it was viewed as a spiritual malady as well. Notice that Matthew uses the word “cleansing” for the healing of this man. In the Old Testament, lepers were believed to be under a

curse (Lev. 13-14). That brings us to the second reason he includes this miracle first. He has just finished the Sermon on the Mount, after which we as readers should feel unclean. Jesus has been teaching about the true nature of the law, expanding its meaning to the heart. He has said, for example, that to have lust in your heart is to be guilty of the sin of adultery, and to have hate in your heart is to be guilty of the sin of murder. We are all spiritual lepers in need of cleansing.

Sin has the same effects in our lives as leprosy. Lepers were commanded to have disheveled hair and clothes. Similarly, sin makes us unattractive. Lepers were required to cover their lower faces when around people. Even so, sin is a spreading contagion. Lepers were to cry out “unclean, unclean” in order to keep the community from pollution by getting too close. Lepers were ostracized, forced to live outside the camp. Sin isolates us from normal community. Matthew’s application of this to us is more obvious in the original than in English, seen in the fact that emphasis is given to the word “his” in the sentence, **“And immediately his leprosy was cleansed”** (8:3). It is as if Matthew is saying to his readers, “That took care of his leprosy. What about yours?”

Jesus heals all lepers who come to him, and we are to come just as this man did. I imagine his coming to Jesus took some boldness and courage. Jesus undoubtedly had many people around him, and I can imagine the crowd parting in something of a panic as they saw a leper approaching. He walks right up to Jesus and kneels before him. The idea of that word is not so much to tell us of his body posture but indicates a heart of worship. Some translations even translate this as worship. He said to Jesus, **“Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.”** The word “Lord” indicates submission to his will. The phrase “if you will” acknowledges the sovereign will of God instead of demanding a miracle.

Let’s pause for just a minute to think about this statement, “if you will.” Many people come to God to ask for healing. It is appropriate that we do so, and the Bible itself urges us to come and ask for such. But we must remember to submit to God’s will even as we ask and not demand a miracle. My first job out of seminary was serving as an assistant pastor at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Center City Philadelphia. The senior Pastor of the church at the time was James Montgomery Boice. In the spring of 2000, Dr. Boice was diagnosed with liver cancer. He shared these words with the congregation about how they should pray for him.

Should you pray for a miracle? Well, you’re free to do that, of course. My general impression is that the God who is able to do miracles—and he certainly can—is also able to keep you from getting the problem in the first place. So although miracles do happen, they’re rare by definition. A miracle has to be an unusual thing. Above all, I would say pray for the glory of God. If you think of God

glorifying himself in history and you say, where in all of history has God most glorified himself? He did it at the cross of Jesus Christ, and it wasn't by delivering Jesus from the cross, though he could have. Jesus said, 'Don't you think I could call down from my Father ten legions of angels for my defense?' But he didn't do that. And yet that's where God is most glorified. God is in charge. When things like this come into our lives, they are not accidental. It's not as if God somehow forgot what was going on, and something bad slipped by. God is not only the one who is in charge; God is also good. Everything he does is good.

The leper submitted to Jesus' sovereign will in this matter, while also believing that he had the ability to heal. He asserted, **"You can make me clean."** Jesus did precisely that. **"And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, 'I will; be clean.'"** This would likely have marked the first time this man had been touched by a non-leper in a long time. People didn't touch lepers because to do so rendered one unclean for a time, even if the one touching didn't become a leper himself. But Jesus reverses that. Instead of Jesus contracting the leper's uncleanness, the leper contracted Jesus' cleanliness. The touch of Jesus is a touch of love and of powerful cleansing. It restores us in every way.

II. A Gentile Healed

The second miracle was the healing of the servant of a Gentile soldier, a centurion. Centurions were not allowed to marry, and the word used of this servant indicates that he was closer to a son in the affections of the centurion. He is suffering from some kind of paralysis, and the centurion seeks Jesus' help. He makes a statement more than a request, simply telling Jesus **"Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly"** (8:6). I see in this something of the eagerness of Jesus to help. He doesn't wait for us to beg him for help, but offers to do so upon the mere stating of suffering. And then he does something else that tells of his eagerness—he offers to go to the home of a Gentile to heal the one suffering. Jews didn't go into Gentiles' homes because of the inevitability of being made ritually unclean. But as was the case with the healing of the leper, Jesus brings cleansing to the dirty instead of being made unclean by them.

The centurion, probably knowing the reticence of Jews to enter the homes of Gentiles, makes an offer that draws admiration from Jesus. **"Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. 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"** (8:8-9). Jesus regards this as an example of great faith. The centurion understands that just as he has been given the authority of the Roman government, so Jesus has

been given authority from God. Consequently, all that is required is for him to speak a word and it is done.

The leper taught us that faith submits to the sovereign will of Jesus, and now the centurion teaches us that faith has confidence in the authoritative word of Jesus. All it takes is a word from Jesus and it is done. A paralyzed little boy regains strength and movement at a mere word from Jesus. You might be thinking to yourself, “I sure wish Jesus would speak such a powerful word to me.” But don’t you see? He has done so. He has spoken a word of forgiveness to us, saying that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. He has spoken words of hope to us, saying that he has gone to prepare a place for us. And every command he gives is also a word of power. When Jesus says, “Do not fear,” he actually enables what he commands.

Gerhard Eberling was an expert on the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther. He once asked in one of his lectures, “Why did Luther’s Reformation, in contrast to all prior attempts at reformation, become a reformation in deed and not just in words?” His answer was this: “Luther’s Reformation became a reformation in deed and not just in words because Luther trusted only in the Word and not at all in deeds.” One of Luther’s contemporaries was a fellow reformer by the name of Andreas Karlstadt. Luther was constantly rebuking Karlstadt for attempts to bring about reformation by storming monasteries and Roman Catholic churches, destroying their icons and other items of what he regarded as their idolatrous worship. Luther, full of confidence in God’s word, insisted that good sermons and faithful preaching would be sufficient.

Many Christians today have forgotten this central truth that biblical faith is faith in Jesus rather than faith in faith. This week, I came across something written by Joel Osteen that represents this shift from faith in Jesus to faith in faith.

Maybe Alzheimer’s disease runs in your family genes, but don’t succumb to it. Instead, say every day, “My mind is alert. I have clarity of thought. I have a good memory. Every cell in my body is increasing and getting healthier.” If you’ll rise up in your authority, you can be the one to put a stop to the negative things in your family line.... Start boldly declaring, “God is restoring health unto me. I am getting better every day in every way.”

It is better to put our confidence in the powerful word of Jesus. That’s what Jesus himself says here. He remarks on the unprecedented faith of this man, saying that in all of Israel he has not found faith equal to his. Faith trusts the naked word of Jesus. We can see the love of Jesus in his affirmation of the centurion’s faith. He is trying to stir the faith of Israelites by provoking them to jealousy. He wants to do the same with us. Jesus moves a Gentile to the head of the class, the last one you might expect. And this centurion will not be the only one. Many Gentiles, Jesus says, **“will come from east and west and**

recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.” Will you be one of those? He follows that with a warning to the Jews, saying that the unbelieving **“sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”**

One of the applications of this is to pray for our children and grandchildren. The centurion came to Jesus with a need concerning his servant, and Jesus heard and responded.

III. An Old Woman Restored

Jesus healed a leper, a Gentile and now a woman. This one is Peter's mother-in-law, who lived with Peter, making it likely that she was a widow. Jesus arrives at Peter's house and sees her. Jesus sees suffering people. And he then acts to do something about it. **“He touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she rose and began to serve him”** (8:15).

We see in this once again the restoring work of Jesus. One of the trials of aging is the loss of the ability to make a contribution, to do meaningful work. Jesus returns to Peter's mother-in-law her ability to serve, and it is in serving that we find joy.

CONCLUSION:

Matthew points out how the miracles of Jesus were done in fulfillment of Isaiah 53. **“He took our illnesses and bore our diseases.”** I'm struck by those verbs “took” and “bore,” which both indicate that Jesus heals these illnesses and diseases by taking them upon himself. He does so by taking sin and bearing it himself, with the result that he makes all things new for us.

Our miracle-working Savior is not done with his miracles. The one who spoke and cleansed a leper, who said the word and healed a paralyzed boy, will speak again and raise from the dead all who have died. He will speak the word and the new heavens and earth will be created. And all who believe in him will feast with him forever.