

Miraculous Compassion and Messianic Challenge  
Matthew 8:1-17

Please turn in your Bible's to Matthew chapter 8. Matthew is moving us into a new section today, we're moving back into some narrative of the events of Jesus' life. But these are very specific events, and events that are not unrelated to where we've been for the last several months. We've been in the Sermon on the Mount for a while, but just before we began studying Jesus' astounding sermon and teaching on the life of a disciple in the kingdom of God, Matthew clued us into what he was going to emphasize. Matthew 4:23 says, "*And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.*" Now look at Matthew 9:35, "*And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction.*"

This is called an **inclusio**: **it's a literary device ancient writers used to bracket off, similar material at the beginning and end of a section to group information together.** Matthew is telling us to pay attention in this section to the three main themes we find in the inclusio: **Jesus' teaching, Jesus' proclamation of the gospel, and Jesus' healing ministry.** The inclusio helps us to understand that Matthew has a purpose in his writing, what he has chosen to cover, and how he has chosen to arrange it. So what is the purpose of this particular section? From the inclusio we learn that **Jesus is Messiah in word: we looked briefly at the crowd's reaction to Jesus' teaching ministry, the crowd's marvel at Jesus' authority to teach.** The other thing Matthew wants us to understand is that **Jesus is also Messiah in work:** look at Matthew 9:33, "*And the crowds marveled, saying, 'Never was anything like this seen in Israel.'*" **The crowds marvel at Jesus' authority to heal.**

Matthew 8 and 9 are not simply filler for Matthew to get to the next major section of Jesus' teaching in chapter 10. No, they have a purpose. And their purpose is to bring more light to who this Jesus is and what His mission is. Dispersed through chapters 8 and 9, Matthew tells us about ten miracles Jesus performs as part of His ministry. The ten miracles are told to us in three sets of three miracles each, my math is not bad two miracles are typically joined into one story since one occurs while Jesus is on His way to another. The first cycle has three healing miracles (8:1-17), the second cycle three miracles of power (8:23-9:8), and the third cycle three miracles of restoration (9:18-34). So we don't miss the connection between Jesus' miracles and discipleship, the three miracle cycles are separated by narratives dealing with the cost of discipleship and following Jesus – Matthew 8:18-22 and 9:9:9-17.

Matthew's recording of these miracles stories has a purpose. And the purpose of this first cycle of miracles, healing miracles that Jesus performs, is to challenge our thinking about who Jesus is, what His purposes coming to earth are for, and how we as His followers are to respond to the humanity in need of God's grace and mercy around us. Before we look at these miracles lets define what a miracle is, and what the purpose of miracles are from a biblical point of view.

By definition, **a miracle, broadly defined, is any action in time where the normal operation of nature is suspended by the agency of a supernatural action.** Another way of saying this is a miracle is an event that cannot be normally explained through the laws of nature. Miracles are the product and the work of God who created the natural laws as well as the universe. Let me illustrate what a miracle is by stating what it is not. It is not a miracle when you make it to church on time. It is not a miracle when your (insert sport team name here) wins a game. Even birth, which is astonishing, is not a miracle since the normal operation of human procreation is not being suspended in order for birth to occur. Now I know this seems nit-picky, but when we use words inaccurately or inappropriately or out of context we empty them of their meaning and power. So again, a miracle, broadly defined is any action in time where the normal operation of nature is suspended by the agency of a supernatural action.

What are the purpose of miracles, from a biblical stand point? Let me give four. **First, miracles are an attestation of Jesus' divine character.** They tell us about who Jesus is as the second person of the trinity, the Son of God. While not fully understood, Jesus' divine character was being seen by others. John 3:1 records such an understanding, *"Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."*

**Second, miracles as a confirmation of Jesus' message and the Apostle's preaching.** Hebrews 2:1 says, *"Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will."*

**Third, Jesus' miracles are designed not to impress the crowds or wow them with his power but to persuade them towards belief that Jesus is indeed the long awaited Messiah who has come.** John 20:30 teaches, *"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."*

**Fourth, Jesus' miracles often point to His fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy as the Messiah.** In our passage we'll look at today, Matthew 8:17 summarizes the crowd's reaction to these first three miracles saying, *"This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "He took our illnesses and bore our diseases."* Quoting from Isaiah 53:5, Matthew is pointing out that the miracles of Jesus are a testimony to Jesus' fulfillment of the Old Testament and the role it speaks of for the Messiah. Remember that Jesus said He did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them (Mt. 5:17). So in the miracles we see that our attention in them is to see they point to the person and work of Jesus as the Messiah promised from the Old Testament. The miracles are to move us to faith, and are a confirmation of the kingdom of God having come that Jesus and the apostle's preached.

Look with me at Matthew 8:1 (Read)

In this first cycle of miracles, Matthew presents three healing miracles from the life of Jesus. And the temptation is to get bogged down in the specifics of the miracles themselves. But that would be to miss the purpose for Matthew having recorded them for us. While the healings are miraculous, the real point is the challenge that the healings present to followers of Jesus.

**The first challenge we find is a challenge to our presumptions of people.** Matthew says that as Jesus comes down the mountain and leper approaches him and asks if Jesus will make him clean. Identifying this man as a leper simply means that he is dealing with some form of significant skin disease. He is **ritually unclean, banned from participating in the worshipping community, but also banned from participation in the general society.** Yet he comes with a confident humility that Jesus can indeed cleanse him if Jesus were willing to do so. For the leper, most would simply presume that **his status as unclean was simply because of personal sin in his life.** For the most part, people would simply presume or assume that the leper was simply getting what he deserved. Our attitudes can be presumptuous with people as well can't it? But Jesus, shockingly, not only heals the man, actually the text says he cleanses him, but Jesus actually touches him. *"And Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, 'I will; be clean'"* **Jesus' touching the leper demonstrates His compassion and His purity.** Given how contagious leprosy was and how it was viewed in Jesus' day, it's likely it had been years since this person had been touched. Yet, without hesitation Jesus touches him, immediately healing him. And that speaks to Jesus' divine person and purity. To touch a leper in anyway was to invite contamination on yourself. But when the perfect and holy one touches you – contamination is healed not transferred. Some of you are needing that touch today. Jesus still heals, He beings with the heart, and will cleanse your souls today if you also would come and ask Him.

Matthew ends this story with what is often referred to as the Messianic Secret. But when Jesus instructs this newly healed man to tell no one, the “**secrecy**” is so that Jesus can effectively carry out His mission.

**The second challenge we find is a challenge to the prejudices we have of people.** A Centurion, a Roman officer of 100 men, comes to Jesus asking for help, Matthew says, appealing to Jesus for his servants healing. The first thing that’s challenging about this scene is that the Centurion, in Jewish eyes, is **ethnically unclean being a Gentile, which means that he was considered outside of God’s grace** - in other words beyond salvation. Notice how Jesus first responds to the Centurion in verse 7, “*I will come and heal him.*” This is easy for us to miss. For a Jew to enter a Gentile house was completely forbidden. Yet, Jesus sets aside common Jewish prejudices, willing to enter this unclean, unforgiveable, Gentile’s home. Verse 8, “*Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof.*” The Centurion knows what Jesus coming into his home would cost Jesus. And the Centurion, this Gentile seemingly god-less pagan, responds to Jesus in a shocking way with **respectful humility, but confident of Jesus’ authority to act with a word.** Verse 8, “*I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed.*” There is not demand here but simple faith. Faith that things this Centurion has likely been hearing about Jesus are true; that Jesus is a wholly unique person, not like any he’s heard of before; that Jesus has an authority unlike any mere man. “Jesus, I am a man of authority myself, speaking a word and knowing obedience will follow.” And in my mind’s eye, I can almost see the Lord who spoke the very universe into existence, crack a satisfying smile as He points out how the **Centurion’s faith in Jesus sets him apart from unbelieving Israel.** Verse 10, “*Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*” Many of the Jew’s of Jesus day trusted not in their God for salvation but in their heritage. They relied upon being Jews by birth, rather than the new birth of salvation. And they nurtured a prejudice against any who didn’t share their background, customs, or heritage, and in the process denied them opportunity to know the Lord of grace and mercy. But that’s not how people will be treated in the kingdom of God. Prejudice is set aside and in it’s place proclamation of the good news of Jesus is to be given to all.

**The third challenge we find is a challenge to the paradigms we hold about people.** Leaving the Centurion, Matthew tells us Jesus goes to Peter’s home, as Jesus enters, he sees Peter’s mother-in-law sick with a significant illness. Here’s where we see the challenge to our paradigms we hold about people. Obviously, Peter’s mother-in-law is a woman. Women in the ancient world were not respected. They were largely seen as second class citizens, and not worthy of the time of someone as important as Jesus. And no one asks, no one pleads, no one approaches Jesus seeking healing for Peter’s mother-in-law; Jesus simply enters the house, sees a need, and meets it. And in the process, **Jesus shows us as his disciples we need to be ready to serve whoever we encounter in need.** And we get an interesting response from Peter’s mother-in-law after she’s healed. Verse 15, “*He touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she rose and began to serve him.*” **Peter’s mother-in-law shows our response to Jesus is to serve Him.** The word used for serve in the original language, became synonymous with being a disciple and follower of Jesus. When Jesus heals, giving your life in service to Him is the response of discipleship.

We can get caught up in the wonder of Jesus’ healing miracles, but miss what Matthew’s point is in recording them. The miracles aren’t about the wow, they’re about the how. How do we challenge the presumptions we have of other people, or our prejudices of people, or the paradigms we place people in? Jesus sets aside presumptions, prejudices, and paradigms to show them and us that our greatest needs of healing in this life aren’t the physical ailments that plague us but hearts that need the healing balm of the gospel of Jesus Christ.