

*And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority and not as their scribes.*

They marveled. This teacher was different. He wasn't a copycat or imitator. He was the real deal, one who embodied what he taught. The kingdom—and the King—are here.

And *that* concludes the Sermon on the Mount.

**Questions:**

- Where is the greatest gap between what you believe in your head and how you live in your daily life? Spend a few moments inviting Jesus to close that gap.
- On what foundation have you built your life? How fit is your foundation to weather the storms?

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## The Transforming Power of God's Kingdom

### Chapters 8-10

When Jesus wrapped his teaching on the mountainside, those who heard were astounded because he spoke with such great authority. Matthew now leads us down the mountain to witness nine stories of dramatic healing to show us just what kind of authority Jesus has. Woven through these stories of healing are two moments where Jesus calls people to follow him. It's as if Matthew is breaking the fourth wall, looking at you, and extending the same invitation: are you ready to experience the healing

power of the Gospel? Then you, you follow Him too.

This reading has challenged us to remember that Christianity is not an ideology, a set of ideas, or a way of thinking about the world. It's a response to a living, breathing, teaching, healing, dying, rising, returning King. Stepping into his kingdom and living inside of it feels very different than curating a nice set of ethics by which we can agree to live. It's like the difference between looking at a painting and stepping inside of one. The latter requires total surrender and a deep sense of hope that something incredible can happen if we would only get off the throne and allow Jesus to take his rightful place.

As you read these stories, may you be pressed up against the two most important questions you will ever answer: Who is this man, and what does he want with me?

## Matthew 8

Read verses 1 -17. Today, we watch Jesus encounter three people very much on the outside of the religious "in-group," a leper, a Roman military officer, and a woman. How interesting that the first three healings happen as a reminder of who the kingdom is open to: everyone.

### Cleansing the Leper

In Jesus' day, Leprosy made someone "unclean." Not just physically, but ritually as well. A person suffering from Leprosy (or any skin disease) would not have been allowed into the Temple and therefore was prohibited from entering the presence of God.

Here's a man who likely hasn't been touched by another human since showing his earliest symptoms (and we thought loneliness and the absence of touch was a problem during COVID). He draws near to Jesus and kneels at his feet: *"Lord, if you will, you can make me clean."*

*If you will* is like, if you want; if it pleases you. And *you can* comes from the Greek root *dynamai*, which is where we get the word dynamite. It's about power. He's saying, "If you want to, you have the power to make me clean." It's a valid question: why would a Jewish teacher like Jesus want anything to do with him since he's contaminated and sick?

Jesus's next move probably made jaws drop: he reaches out and touches the man, saying, "I do want to. Be clean." Human contact, divine healing.

Who could you reach out to "touch" today that needs healing?

Then Jesus tells the guy, “Don’t tell anyone, but go to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, which would have welcomed him back into Temple worship, or the presence of God.” Why the command for secrecy, and the ritual concern?

Jesus is concerned with this man’s full restoration and renewal, not just his physical healing. We can assume the man’s appearance among the priests would spark some murmurs of a gifted healer up north in Galilee, which could (and will) bring on trouble.

### **Faith of a Centurion**

Next, Jesus is approached by a Roman military officer who would have 100 troops at his command (hence the name centurion). The man has a servant who is suffering terribly. When Jesus offers to come and heal him, the officer astounds Jesus with his trust:

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 does it.

By calling Jesus, “Lord,” he is submitting to Jesus as one over him. It’s a title of submission and reverence. And he recognizes Jesus’s power is so great, all he has to do is speak at a distance, and the servant will be healed.

Jesus does it because of the man’s faith. It’s a sign that Jesus has power over what makes us suffer. With a word, he can crush that which seeks to destroy us. But what does Jesus mean when he says: 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. Kind of intense, huh?

Ponder this: Our response to Jesus matters. *Believing* him matters. It’s not whether we *identify* as Christians that counts, it’s that we identify *him* as Lord and follow him in faith.

Jesus shocked his hearers by announcing three facts about the kingdom:

1. Not all the insiders would participate in it.
2. Many of the outsiders would.
3. Belonging in the kingdom depends on faith in Jesus, not on identity, ancestry, or belonging to a particular community.

We can easily feel convicted about who we spend time with, who we are drawn to. Do we only hang out with people we would already consider *inside* the kingdom? Or do we move toward the margins,

where Jesus so obviously seems to linger? Perhaps if we spend more time there, we'll find Jesus there too.

### **Peter's mother-in-law and many more**

Matthew rounds out the trio by telling us how Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law. It's one of those rare personal details we get about Peter: he was married! (Which just tickles the imagination! Where was his wife through all of this?!)

Jesus heals her fever, she rises and begins to serve him. It's her natural response of gratitude.

More and more and more people come to be healed by Jesus. And when Matthew writes, "This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "He took our illnesses and bore our diseases," he is once more saying, "This is the one we've been waiting for."

All this raises the question: If Jesus can heal with a word, why doesn't/didn't he heal \_\_\_\_\_?

Here's the best answer: We don't know.

It's not very satisfying. I believe he heals. I believe *believing* Jesus can heal, if he wants to, which makes the disappointment of not experiencing healing so much deeper.

### **Questions:**

- What does it mean to you that Jesus heals the leper, the Roman soldier, and a woman?
- What would it sound like for you to pray with the kind of faith demonstrated by the centurion?
- Have you ever been disappointed by a prayer for healing that went unanswered? What did you do with your disappointment?
- Imagine you're seated on a park bench next to Jesus. What questions would you ask him about today's reading?

Read verses 18-22. As Jesus moves about his work, a scribe (who was a religious scholar) approaches him and says, “Teacher, I will follow you *wherever you go*.”

Jesus replies, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” In other words: Buddy, you’re not ready to go where I’m going.

Another disciple (again, a well-intentioned religious man), says, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” This would have been understandable, since there were laws about timing on how and how quickly to care for the dead. To him, Jesus replies, “Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead.” In other words: Buddy, follow me *first*. What I’m doing is so urgent, so important, that everything else comes second.

It would seem that following Jesus requires more than a verbal commitment or even our good intentions. But before we write off these two guys as windbags, it’s important for us to reflect:

How often do we say, “Lord, we will follow you,” only later to qualify it with, “But we don’t want to give *that* much money away,” or “But we don’t want to befriend *that* person or move into *that* neighborhood or give up *that* habit...?”

#### **Questions:**

- With what tone of voice do you hear Jesus replying to these men?
- How have you qualified your allegiance to Jesus? Are there ways you’re overpromising and underdelivering?
- What would it look like for you to follow Jesus more earnestly?

Read verses 23 & 24, and allow your imagination to paint the picture. Read the stories slowly, maybe a few times.

#### **Jesus Calms a Storm**

Place yourself on the boat, in the middle of the storm. What would it have felt like? Sounded like? What would you be thinking?

First-century Jews were not sea-faring folk. The sea held great power and mystery, a place of darkness and evil. The water was something God tamed, both at Creation and at the Exodus. Matthew's audience would hear about this and remember the story of Jonah, the prophet who ran from God's command to preach in Ninevah, a pagan city. Jonah boarded a ship in the opposite direction, fell asleep in the middle of the storm, and when he was awakened by his shipmates, they threw him overboard to calm the storm because of his disobedience to God. (See [Jonah 1:1-18](#)) In this story, however, Jesus doesn't have to call on anyone or jump into the sea; he speaks to the waves, and they are still.

*What sort of man is this, that even the winds and sea obey him?*

### **Two Men with Demons**

Upon still waters, Jesus reaches the other side of the lake, to the country of the Gadarenes. We're told two men, possessed by demons and so fierce that no one would pass near them, approached Jesus. Imagine these men. (Check out the story as Luke records it in [Luke 8:26-39](#).)

*"What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?"*

Consider these points:

- ❖ Jesus isn't afraid of someone who everyone else avoids and is terrified by. In fact, he draws near.
- ❖ The demons inside the men recognize Jesus' authority and basically beg for mercy.
- ❖ We don't talk much about demon possession in the West. We have more sophisticated ways of understanding this behavior. I don't know what the line is between neuroscience, mental health, and dark, spiritual forces, but I do believe it's much blurrier than we are comfortable believing.

Jesus drives the demons into a herd of pigs. To the Jews, pigs were unclean, so this herd belonged to Gentile farmers. It would be quite a financial hit for anyone to lose this kind of livestock. When the townspeople arrive and see Jesus (and the formerly possessed men who are now in their right minds), they beg him to leave.

Why do you think *this* was their response?

Do you wonder if Jesus were here today if he would disrupt our comfort so much that we too would beg him to leave? Maybe not. Either way, it's becoming clear in Matthew's gospel that a neutral

response to Jesus is not really an option. People either drop everything and follow him or beg him to leave (and later, try to kill him).

**Questions:**

- What sort of man is this, that even the winds and sea obey him?
- How are you making sense of these stories about healing so far?
- Why do you think the townspeople begged Jesus to leave?