

## FIRST THOUGHTS

Everyone wants to enjoy their quality of life. We prepare and work hard to find meaningful jobs, build decent homes, and provide for our families. We want health and strength to make the most of our lives. Unfortunately, some believe any life that lacks a certain level of quality holds less value than others. This low view of human life leads them to discount God's image within each person. The Bible makes it clear that God created life—all of it. Even after humanity's fall in Eden, God still values the lives of His highest creation. Old Testament law and New Testament teaching emphasize God's love for every person, without restriction or exception. Whether it's an unborn child and an unwed mother, someone suffering mental or physical affliction, or a victim of poverty or crime, no situation takes us beyond God's love. As you study this "Sanctity of Human Life" session, examine your attitude toward the weak and marginalized in society. Ask God to help you see others the way He sees them and to move the adults in your Bible study toward the same level of compassion and care for every person. You might think it would be quite unnecessary to ask the question, "Does God care for everyone?" Yes, absolutely, would be most people's answer. God cares for and values every person regardless of age, nationality, ethnicity, or social status. Since that is so, a corollary question must be asked: "Should followers of Jesus care about and value every person?" If the answer is yes, then what should that look like?

## UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT (Matthew 8:1-9:8)

Jesus lived out the values He taught. Through a series of miracles, He demonstrated compassion for every individual. These events also emphasized Jesus's authority as Messiah. Commentators note that they portray Jesus's power over sickness, nature, demonic spirits, and sin itself. As Jesus came down the mountain, vast crowds desperate for hope flocked to Him. Among the first to reach Him was a leper. Outcast from society, lepers were forbidden to approach healthy individuals. Society considered them worthless, or worse. Jesus demonstrated fearless compassion as He touched the man and healed him. In Capernaum, a Roman centurion pleaded for Jesus to heal his servant. This soldier's humble faith became a living object lesson for the Jewish crowd. By spoken word alone, Jesus healed the man's servant. Jesus cared for the servant and his master. He valued all equally. Arriving at Peter's house in Capernaum, Jesus found the disciple's mother-in-law sick with a fever. Once Jesus healed her, she began serving those around her. People who receive Jesus's healing naturally want to serve Him. As word of Jesus's ministry spread, many more people brought family and friends to Him. Christ's healing ministry also fulfilled messianic prophecy. As Jesus prepared to depart for the other side of the Sea of Galilee, a scribe wanted to go with Him. Jesus warned the man that following Him meant hardship. When another would-be disciple asked permission to delay going with Him, Jesus reminded him of the cost of discipleship. Jesus fell asleep in the boat. But the disciples were terrified by a severe storm that suddenly swept down over the water and threatened the ship. Awakened by the disciples, Jesus calmed the wind and waves. Then, He calmed their hearts and admonished them to have deeper faith. Jesus made this trip into Gentile regions to help a pair of demoniacs. The evil spirits in the men recognized Jesus as the Son of God. They knew His power and feared it. Expelling the demons, Jesus permitted them to enter a herd of pigs. The pigs stampeded over a cliff and fell into the sea. Instead of acknowledging Jesus's power or glorifying God for the man's deliverance, city leaders begged Jesus to leave. Returning to Capernaum, some men brought a paralytic friend to Him. Instead of immediately healing him, Jesus pronounced the man's sins were forgiven. Amidst irate onlookers, Jesus's purpose in delaying the healing was to demonstrate His authority to forgive sins—a right limited to God alone. Each of these episodes revealed Jesus's love for every person, regardless of their social standing or circumstances.

**Key Doctrine – Man** – The sacredness of human personality is evident in that God created man in His own image, and in that Christ died for man; therefore, every person of every race possesses full dignity and is worthy of respect and Christian love. (See Genesis 1:26-30; Psalm 8:3-6.)

## LEPROSY (Matt. 8:1-4)

• We should value those whom some consider to be outcasts.

(v. 1) Jesus values every person. From lepers to leaders, no one was beyond Christ's love. Following His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus **came down from the mountain**. He and His followers had invested time in quiet, focused teaching. Now, Jesus recognized a time for decisive action. Although **large crowds followed him**, He took time to meet the needs of individuals, including the outcasts or helpless. His personal attention demonstrated their worth and affirmed the sanctity of all human life.

(v. 2) Matthew noted that a **man with leprosy** approached Jesus. Undoubtedly, the crowd made way for one who had to shout "unclean" as a warning to others (Lev. 13:45). The leper's actions were remarkable in several ways. First, lepers lived in isolation (Lev. 13:46; Num. 5:2-3), forbidden to come near anyone except other lepers. But this leper came up and knelt before Jesus, ignoring the crowd and the social constraints. Second, the man called Jesus Lord. Some scholars see this as an act of contrition, although the term was also a common greeting of respect in the first century. What he said to Jesus next affirmed his faith in Jesus's divine ability. In humble faith, the leper acknowledged that Jesus could **make me clean** if He was willing. He believed Jesus could make him well, although no known cure existed. Some argue biblical leprosy was different from Hansen's disease, which attacks the body and can lead to deformity and even death if left untreated. Regardless of the exact nature of the man's illness, it was serious enough that his only hope was Jesus.

(v. 3) As seen later, Jesus could heal with a word (Matt. 8:5-13; 9:6). Yet, He did something astonishing: Christ touched him. Imagine the gasps when Jesus placed His hand on the leper. Anyone who came into contact with an unclean person became unclean (Lev. 5:3). Society considered the man an outcast, but Jesus loved him. The leper's heart must have leapt as he felt Jesus's touch and heard His words: **I am willing; be made clean**. Once Jesus issued the command, the healing occurred **immediately**, demonstrating Jesus's power and compassion.

(v. 4) The man may have felt like shouting for joy. However, Jesus commanded him, **Don't tell anyone**. Jesus often told people not to talk about His healing miracles because it could hinder His ability to share the message of the kingdom. Jesus's admonition was not intended to keep the healing a secret, but to follow the law's procedure. To be declared clean, the man had to **show yourself to the priest**. Priests were tasked with diagnosing skin diseases and confirming the cure. The man also needed to offer the **gift that Moses commanded** (Lev. 13-15). Obediently following God's directions

would be a testimony to the priests and the community at large. Jesus went out of His way to touch the untouchable. He refused to let legalistic rules or customs define His ministry. As believers, we are called to model His compassion and to affirm that every human life matters. We are called to serve as conduits of His compassion to others.

#### FEVER AND DEMON-POSSESSION (Matt. 8:14-17)

#### • We should value people of all stages in life.

(v. 14) After healing the leper and a centurion's servant (vv. 5-13), Jesus visited **Peter's house**. Some scholars claim Peter's house may have become Jesus's home after he left Nazareth. Jesus's visit occurred shortly after He came to Capernaum with his new disciples (Mark 1:21). Entering the house, Jesus was told that Peter's **mother-in-law** was sick **with a fever**. Peter's father-in-law may have already died, leaving Peter to care for his mother-in-law. We are not given the specific nature of her illness, but it had her confined to her bed.

(v. 15) When Jesus **touched her hand**, the **fever left her**. As with the leper, His touch was not necessary to heal, but He knew the power of touch in expressing personal care. Unlike other healings, no words were recorded. Seeing someone in need was enough for Jesus. Seeing the Master was enough for her. Also, the timing of her healing resembled the leper's experience. It was instantaneous. She needed no more time for recovery to regain strength. With her recovery immediate and complete, **she began to serve** the gathering. Her ministry was a loving response to a loving touch. Jesus's compassion toward her prompted service to Him.

(v. 16) News about Jesus's power quickly spread. Mark's Gospel includes an account of Jesus casting out a demon earlier in the day (Mark 1:21-28). Perhaps motivated by this incident, people came **with many who were demon-possessed**. Some scholars suggest people waited until evening because sundown marked the end of the Sabbath. Of course, the sheer numbers posed no problem for Jesus. He simply **drove out the spirits with a word**. His authority was absolute, even over the spirits of darkness. It is also possible that the demonized people were brought at night because of social stigma. Family members may have waited until they could come without the harsh stares of their neighbors. In Jesus, they found someone who valued even the most tormented persons. Jesus also **healed all who were sick**. While some afflictions were associated with demons (Mark 9:25), illness and demonic possession were generally different problems. Jesus ministered to both groups because both groups matter to God.

(v. 17) Matthew connected Jesus's ministry to prophecy. **Isaiah** spoke about the Messiah who would take **our weaknesses** and carry **our diseases** (see Isa. 53:4). Some translations of Isaiah 53:4 use different terms, but the meanings are the same. Jesus, the Suffering Servant, was not aloof or distant. He actively experienced human suffering on our behalf, alleviating it for us. The phrase **might be fulfilled** indicates that Jesus's completion of Scripture was not incidental. Matthew was not making a loose connection. By fulfilling messianic prophecy, Jesus again proved that He is the Messiah sent from God. Like Jesus, we should value people in all stages and circumstances of life. From the womb to the grave, God loves each person and so should we.

#### PARALYSIS (Matt. 9:1-8)

#### • We should care for and value persons with physical handicaps.

(v. 1) Jesus cares for the few as well as the many. After ministering to multitudes, He departed for the Gentile region of the Gadarenes. There, Jesus delivered two demon-possessed men. City leaders were not amazed at Jesus's power or grateful the men were freed. They only wanted Jesus to leave. Jesus did not argue. His mission was to help the two men. That task accomplished, He **crossed over** in a boat and returned to **his own town**, meaning Capernaum.

(v. 2) Other passages suggest several days passed before the next event (see Mark 2:1-12; Luke 5:17-26). Jesus was teaching in the house when a small group of men brought a **paralytic lying on a stretcher** to Him. They broke up the roof to let the man down to Jesus because a crowd blocked the entrance (Mark 2:4; Luke 5:19). Some scholars suggest this was Peter's house. Jesus **saw their faith**. Each of them believed Jesus could heal the man, and they were not going to let this opportunity pass. They went to incredible lengths to reach Jesus. In response, Jesus urged him to **have courage**. By calling him **son**, Jesus used a term of affection. Instead of immediately healing the man, Jesus focused on his spiritual condition: **your sins are forgiven**. While he came for physical healing, Jesus saw and met a much greater need.

(vv. 3-4) Matthew noted that some **scribes** were present. When these teachers of the law heard Jesus forgiving sins, they believed He was **blaspheming**. Blasphemy involves an offense against the person, character, name, or privilege of God; and Jews considered it a serious violation of the law. In fact, it was a capital offense (Lev. 24:16). Instead of addressing Jesus directly, the teachers spoke to **themselves**. This phrase could be rendered "among themselves," but the context suggests an internal conversation. For whatever reason, they only judged Jesus in their hearts and minds, not with spoken words. **Perceiving their thoughts**, Jesus confronted them and questioned the **evil** in their **hearts**. On the surface, the scribes seemed to have a legitimate objection since only God can forgive sins. Their problem was they didn't understand the divine nature of the One who spoke.

(vv. 5-7) Jesus answered the question that was never asked out loud with a question of His own. He wanted to know if it was easier to **say your sins are forgiven or get up and walk**. Scholars see this reasoning as typical Hebrew argumentation from the easy to the difficult. Anyone could claim to forgive sins, since no one could determine externally if sins were forgiven. However, if Jesus attempted to heal the man by commanding him to stand and walk, success or failure would be immediately apparent. Jesus proved His **authority to forgive sins** by healing the man. Using the messianic title **Son of Man** (Dan. 7:13-14), He highlighted both His humanity and His deity (Matt. 24:27; 25:31). Without effort, the man **got up and went home**. Jesus had affirmed His authority over both physical and spiritual sickness.

(v. 8) The **crowds** were **awestruck**. This emotion combines elements of wonder and reverence. Unlike the scribes, they **gave glory to God** for what they had seen. However, they assumed God had bestowed this authority on Jesus simply as a man, not as the Messiah. We should value those with physical handicaps. While we can't heal like Jesus, we can help hurting people as He did. We can show compassion to all who need to see Jesus through us.