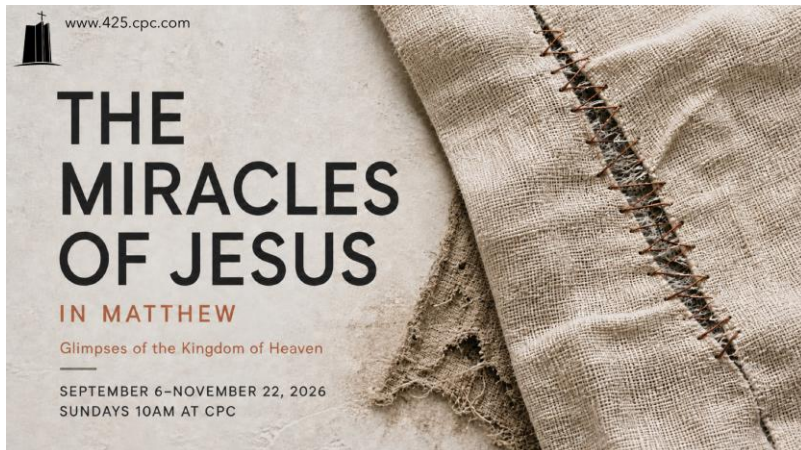




Be Clean!

Matthew 8:1-4

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**This original sermon is not A.I. generated*

We're starting a new series for the next couple months called the Miracles of Jesus in Matthew. Now, if you've never really thought too much about Jesus' miracles, they might seem to you like just a random bunch of supernatural acts of divine compassion. You might think, "Well, Jesus is God — so of course he'll do miracles!" Our God is a miracle working God, right? Maybe you've never really thought much more beyond the charisma of the miracles. You might wonder if many of these miracles are simply too good to be true!

Well, I didn't put this series together to try to dazzle you by the charismatic power of Jesus. This series goes beyond that initial display of power and into the deeper meaning. The miracles are not random acts of divine power through charismatic faith. The miracles are about the reign and rule of God coming to the earth through Jesus. The miracles are about the nature of the kingdom of heaven.

So, as we look at each miracle story, we're not just going to look at what was happening in those miraculous moments. We will peel back the layers of meaning for what the miracle means for us in the kingdom of heaven. We're looking at the miracles through the lens of the kingdom of heaven, which is how we're supposed to see them.

When we look through the lens of the kingdom of heaven, there are *three aspects* to consider. Don't worry about trying to remember this right now, I'm going to repeat it over the next two months. Three aspects-- the first is about fulfillment. Jesus' miracles are a fulfillment of the messianic hope for shalom. The OT prophecies spoke about the peace through wholeness and healing that the Messiah would bring to the world in his coming. The miracles point to Jesus as the one who is fulfilling the hope and expectation of wholeness.

The second aspect is about the kingdom's presence now. The miracles of Jesus tell us the kingdom of heaven has come through Christ and remains through the work of the Holy Spirit in believers today. In this sense, the signs and wonders of the kingdom continue on through the Holy Spirit, as part of the mission of the church until Jesus returns.

The third aspect is about the future consummation of the kingdom of heaven. That is, the final state of creation when the kingdom of heaven is fully realized in the new heaven and new earth. So, the miracles reveal the nature of the kingdom of heaven in its eternal form, as well as the nature of its king, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The three aspects are past, present, and future. Christ fulfills the hope of shalom in the OT; his first coming initiated the kingdom's presence, and we have the promise of an established future kingdom where suffering, sin, evil, and death will reign no more.

Let's look at the first healing this morning. I invite you to turn to Matt. 8:1-4. Jesus had just finished his first preaching task, the sermon on the mount, where he talked about the nature of the kingdom. When he finished teaching, the scripture says the crowds were amazed because he taught with authority, unlike their teachers of the law. The sermon on the mount demonstrated Jesus' authority in word and knowledge, and now Jesus is about to demonstrate the power of his authority through various supernatural works. These healings announce the arrival of the kingdom in power through the Messiah.

Matt. 8:1-4 (NIV)

8 When Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. ²A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."

³Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy. ⁴Then Jesus said to him, "See that you don't tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."

The New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Mt 8:1-4.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

This is not just a story about a disease being healed. This is about a man who has been living as an outcast. This leper was marked by what is called "ceremonial uncleanness" because of his skin condition. In the OT, Leviticus deals with all the ways you can become ceremonially unclean-- you don't want to know them.

In today's world, we don't have to worry about whether we are ceremonially unclean or not - thank God. Especially because all of us probably touch all kinds of unclean things every day. If you ever touched a moldy rag— well, you're unclean! I accidentally ate a rotten grape the other day, I'm unclean! Any contact with anything dead made you unclean. Touching certain bodily fluids made you unclean. Giving birth to a child made you and whoever helped unclean! And if I sat in the chair you sat while you were unclean, then I would become unclean myself. And we would all have to go through rituals and sacrifices to be made clean again.

It all seems ridiculous, but the ceremonially unclean laws had to do with separating that which was considered impure from God's holiness. It used what was impure to teach about God's holiness. It was meant to teach that the world's invasive impurities were not part of God's design of perfect holiness and incorruptible purity. It was meant to make a very sharp distinction between God's purity and the decaying world that has been horribly corrupted by sin, evil, and death. This taught that impurity cannot be casually treated as though it belongs in God's presence.

The peculiar part about the ceremonially unclean laws is that you weren't necessarily committing sin by becoming unclean. Just because you came in contact with something unclean did not mean that you were personally sinning. It just meant that you had become contaminated with something impure. A ritual cleansing and blood sacrifice was then required to become clean again.

We don't follow those laws now, but we need to understand the spiritual principles behind the ceremonially clean/ unclean laws. What it comes down to for us is spiritual contamination—spiritual impurity. Aside from physical contamination, our world is completely inundated with spiritual contamination that promotes spiritual decay. The longer we're around it, the more its filth sticks to us.

We all know what happens if we don't bathe for a while right? it's the same way with spiritual filth. As it builds up over a long period of time, it invades the very fabric of the soul until it weaves itself inward and becomes a part of the person. Spiritual contamination brings an inherent shame with it. Those habits, wounds, and sins corrupt and decay the soul when left on their own without the cleansing power of Jesus.

You can see the burden of impurity in so many today. There's a deep shame for what they've done or come in contact with. There's a deep-seated weariness from what has been done to them. This spiritual contamination can overwhelm a person so much that they either blame God or claim God does not exist. Or they feel too dirty and unworthy to believe God even cares one bit about them. Well, there is good news for the dirty, excluded, contaminated, and hopeless!

The Excluded Come Near in Faith (Matthew 8:1-2)

In 8:1-2, an unclean man who should have stayed away from the crowds comes in anyway. A leper in Jesus' day lived with more than a skin condition; he lived with interruption. He was not allowed to worship. His relationships were interrupted. He could not carry on with a normal life. In fact, it was illegal for him to engage normally in society—the penalties were severe, fines, imprisonment, even beatings. The leper was to be avoided at all costs. He was pointed at, whispered about, and kept at a distance. He had to yell, "UNCLEAN!" wherever he went.

In spite of all that, the man boldly made his way to Jesus anyway. There's a tremendous courage and faith in his approach. He's not worried about his unworthiness. He doesn't try to clean himself up first. He doesn't hide his unclean condition.

My friends, sometimes we feel like we need to be worthy and all cleaned up before we can come to Christ. Or we may feel the need to hide that deep impurity within and come to church looking like we're holy and pure. This leper came to Jesus completely exposed, everybody knew exactly what he was, this was a moment where faith rose above it all.

He came to Christ with honesty, humility, and hope. "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." The word "will" here in the Greek is "θέλω" (thelo) and it means "desire." So, he's saying, "if you desire, you can make me clean." It's not a question of Jesus' power. He's not assuming anything about Jesus' mercy. Instead, he appeals to the will of Christ: "If you so desire."

Maybe he heard something from Jesus' sermon on the mount just moments before, "Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." The leper knelt before

Jesus in an act of humble worship. He said, “If you will— if you so desire — if you wish” and Jesus responded, “I will— I desire — I wish.”

The leper came with desperation. He didn't come to Christ strong and well put together. This is important because the church needs to be the place where the people who are most afraid to come to Christ are able to approach him freely and without shame. Church is the place for the broken and outcast. It's the place where people can come in desperation and say, "Lord, I don't know how to fix this, but I know you can." It's a place where people can come as they are and not be shamed.

Psalm 34:18 says, "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." Matthew 11:28 says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." Amen!

The King Touches and Cleanses Immediately (Matthew 8:3)

As the leper came in, the crowd likely backed away and kept their distance, leaving Jesus and the leper alone in the spotlight. Jesus, instead of keeping his distance, walked straight to the leper, stretched out his hand and touched him. Everyone in the crowd would have immediately thought, "Jesus just became unclean!" Up until Christ, anyone who touched something unclean became unclean themselves. This was the order of the universe that every Jew understood. They would have backed away even further from Jesus. Just a touch from an unclean person made you unclean!

Jesus reversed that expected order. Instead of the leper's impurity spreading to Jesus, Jesus' purity spread to the leper. This touch from Jesus offers incredible hope to us. Human uncleanness does not repel Jesus. His holiness invades with a touch. When we come in contact with impurities, the impurity sticks to us and becomes a danger to our whole being. When Jesus touches the impure, his purifying touch cleanses the whole being.

My friends, this is not just a healing of a leper, it is a picture of the gospel. Jesus draws near to the contaminated. He bears the burdens we cannot bear. He gives when everything has only ever been taken from us. He invites us near even when we feel we can't go near him. Jesus fulfills the cleansing law for us.

Heb. 9:13-14 says, "The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!"

The Cleansed Man Is Sent Back into Community (Matthew 8:4)

In 8:4 Jesus tells the man to go to the priest and offer what Moses commanded. This was a command that served two purposes. First, by telling him to go to the priest without delay, Jesus gave him the legal power to re-engage in community, his family, his work, and worship. The leper needed confirmation from the priest that he was cleansed. The priest alone had the legal authority to pronounce a leper clean and allow him to re-engage in society and worship. And this would come only after the cleansing ritual and blood sacrifices were completed. Jesus gave the man more than healing; he gave him his life back.

My friends, the cleansing restoration that Christ gives us is not only for our own private benefit. He purifies and restores for the sake of community; for the sake of relationship; for the sake of our own ability to live. The leper's suffering was not just a physical suffering. The leper suffered separation. The Lord's healing addressed all of that. By cleansing the leper, Jesus said, "You can return to fellowship with God and his people."

The second purpose for sending the leper to the priest was to show the temple establishment that the Messiah had come to Israel with divine authority. The religious leaders knew and understood from the scriptures that only God could cleanse the leper. This was a statement that the Messiah and his kingdom had come near, but there is a larger truth to this act. In the law, only the priest was allowed to pronounce a leper clean. Jesus said, "Be clean" to the leper, and he was cleansed immediately. Jesus is shown as the greater High Priest. Not only did he pronounce the leper as cleansed, but he personally healed him by his touch and his word.

As the greater High Priest, Jesus does not merely declare that people are clean, he makes them clean by his touch and his word. Through this cleansing touch, Jesus opens the way back to fellowship with God.

Heb. 4:14-16 says:

¹⁴Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. ¹⁶Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

The New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Heb 4:14–16.

The Cleansing of One Man Reveals the Mission of the Kingdom (Matthew 8:1-4)

Finally, this miracle is a sign of a greater mission. Matthew wants us to see more than one healing. This cleansing, as with all of the healings, is evidence of the kingdom of heaven's arrival in Jesus. The broken are being gathered back together. The unclean are being cleansed. The outcast are welcomed in. This is the nature of Jesus' ministry and the nature of the kingdom of heaven.

He receives and touches those others avoid. He brings restoration to those who have been discarded. He takes in those who have been rejected. This cleansed leper does not represent just a random, individual miracle. He represents what Christ came to do and what the nature of the kingdom of heaven is like.

My friends, the leper pictures the human condition. Sin contaminates. It contaminates not only the sinner but those who have been touched by it. Sin brings separation. It leaves people helpless and unable to restore themselves. You might know exactly what that is like. Maybe you feel you've done too much to be fully cleansed and restored today. You feel like damaged goods. The touch of the Lord cleanses you. If the Lord makes you clean, then you are clean indeed.

You might have thought, "If people really knew what I've done and gone through, they would stay far away from me." Or maybe you feel you've made too many messes to belong anywhere-- you just have a

way of mucking up everything everywhere you go, like your touch is toxic and you just make toxic messes everywhere. This passage speaks to those fears. Jesus cleanses by his grace because he is willing to make clean. He cleanses to purify and bring reconciliation. He cleanses to bring restoration. He cleanses to reclaim those who have been lost in the corruptions of impurity. His cleansing is for you right now, but it's also a promise of what is yet to come. Phil. 1:6 says, "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion."

The physical cleansing of the leper anticipates the greater cleansing accomplished through Christ's blood and applied by the Holy Spirit. Christ's holiness is contagious. His blood cleanses from all impurity. His blood cleanses us now spiritually so that we may enter into a holy and pure relationship with God. His blood will cleanse us in the future consummation of the kingdom so that we will never again be contaminated by sin, decay, and death. Amen.

Isaiah 1:18 says, "Come now, let us settle the matter... though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool."

Conclusion

The cleansing of the leper reveals the kingdom of heaven breaking into the world through Jesus Christ. It fulfills God's promise of restoration, demonstrates the King's cleansing work among his people today, and points forward to the day when all creation will be made perfectly clean and forever incorruptible.

Amen.

Let's pray.

Study Questions

Read Matthew 8:1-4

Observation

- 1) What condition marked the man as ceremonially unclean in Matthew 8?
- 2) How did the leper approach Jesus before making his request?
- 3) What did Jesus do immediately before saying, “Be clean”?
- 4) What instructions did Jesus give the cleansed man afterward?

Interpretation

- 1) Why did ceremonial uncleanness sharply distinguish God’s holiness from the corrupted world?
- 2) How did the leper know he could come to Jesus and ask to be cleansed? (Hint: Is. 1:18)
- 3) How does Jesus’ touch reverse the expected order of uncleanness? Why is that significant?
- 4) Why did Jesus send the cleansed man to the priest?

Application

- 1) Where do you feel tempted to hide impurity rather than approach Christ honestly?
- 2) How can this church become safer for broken and ashamed people?
- 3) What burden do you need Jesus to cleanse rather than trying to fix alone?
- 4) How does Christ’s promised, final cleansing give hope amid sin, decay, and death?