

JESUS' CONTAGIOUS HOLINESS

Matthew 8:1-4

God did not entrust the writing of His Bible to unskilled, unintelligent hacks. Rather, capable and smart storytellers, guided by the Holy Spirit, composed the materials in His book. The Bible exists, therefore, as a carefully crafted story whose pieces fit together in deliberate, expertly crafted ways.

Consider, as an example, Matthew's account of Jesus healing a leper in the eighth chapter of his gospel. While it might seem like an incidental account, wedged into the text merely because Jesus did something miraculous, it instead transitions from Jesus' just-concluded Sermon on the Mount (*Matthew 5-7*) by offering a short, but powerful, illustration of the authority the people recognized in Jesus as he preached on the mountain and by connecting his authority to his character. We will therefore consider that passage in this lesson and explore its meaning for us.

“If you will...”

- Even though the presence of a leper in the crowd following Jesus would have normally surprised people in his Jewish world (lepers lived under strict rules segregating them from the common populace, *Leviticus 13-14*), Matthew already noted that many sick, diseased, and demon-oppressed individuals filled the crowds (*Matthew 4:23-25*).
- The presence of those people in the crowds following Jesus combines with the leper's willingness to approach Jesus to indicate the crowd's beliefs about Jesus – they believed the authority they heard in his teaching (*Matthew 7:28-29*) included authority over the troubles in their lives (*Matthew 4:23-25*).
- The leper's question to Jesus did not consequently address his ability to heal him but his willingness to heal him (*Matthew 8:2*); it was a question about character and Jesus' healing therefore provides insights into his identity.
 - To begin, the leper did not ask to be healed; he asked to be made “clean”¹ (*Matthew 8:2*). We need to remind ourselves about holiness under the Law of Moses to appreciate the leper's request.
 - “Holiness”, when used in reference to God, defines His otherness, His unique, special identity that separates Him from everything and everyone (*cf. Revelation 4:1-11*).
 - When used in relationship to people or things, “holiness” describes someone or something set a part for God's use and could be functional objects (i.e. the temple, the priest's clothes, the altar, etc.) or moral expectations (i.e. God's expectations for one's behavior).

¹ All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.

- Unclean things were set opposite of holiness things (*Numbers 5:1-4*) and, in *Leviticus 22:1-9*, were divided into three categories – skin diseases, corpses, and reproductive fluids – that employed cultural symbols representing death and mortality in ways that placed them opposite God’s life-giving identity.
- As an important part of the requirements Israel had to follow in order to be acceptable to Him God, His expectation that they remove unclean things from His presence sought to remind them about the barriers separating humanity from Him (*cf. Romans 7:7-13*).
- The leper’s desire to be made “clean” thus revealed both his desire to be made acceptable to God and his belief that Jesus could fulfill it.
- While the leper’s request reveals his belief in Jesus’ authority, his request also reveals his uncertainty about Jesus’ character – he did not know whether Jesus would make him clean (*Matthew 8:2*).
- Jesus responded to the leper’s question in a surprising way that offers insights into his identity – he touched him.
 - Under the Law of Moses, leprosy offered a contagious uncleanliness that required separation from the populace (*Leviticus 13:45-46*). Jesus therefore showed unexpected sympathy for the leper by touching him, highlighting the quality of his character.
 - Rather than becoming unclean himself as prescribed in the Law of Moses (*Leviticus 22:1-9*), Jesus’ contact with the leprous man made the leper clean – Jesus’ character marries to a holiness that proves more contagious, more powerful, than sin.

Applications

Matthew’s account of Jesus’ healing of the leper reminds us of a few important truths:

Jesus is willing, and able, to help us

We are not beyond Jesus’ power to help

Jesus’ help gives us confident hope