

Jesus' Power over Disease, Part 2

Scripture: Matthew 8:5–15

Code: 2258

INTRODUCTION & REVIEW

In the 8th chapter of Matthew our Lord expresses His authority. Having preached a monumental sermon in chapters 5 through 7, He faces the inevitable questions: "What gives You the right to speak like that? Who do You think You are? Where did You come from? What is Your authority?" Chapters 8 and 9 supply the answers to those questions. In these two chapters Jesus says in effect that He is God. He demonstrates His supernatural power in a series of incredible miracles that could be explained in no other way than that God was present. Matthew continues his presentation of the kingship of Christ by giving us the credentials of the King.

Now let me give you a little background so that you can better understand the drama of this passage:

A. Disease in the Time of Christ

1. Explained

In the time of Christ disease was rampant throughout the world. Medical science was for all intents and purposes nonexistent, so disease could not be dealt with properly. Since disease was left to run its course, there were many sick and dying people. There was a tremendous fear of disease because of the pain and suffering that accompanied it. There were few drugs that could alleviate the pain. Diseases of epidemic proportions wiped out entire cities. It was common for people to die very young.

The Bible mentions many diseases that existed at the time of Christ and in Old Testament times. Here is an idea of the variety of diseases that the Lord would have confronted:

- a. AtrophyThe term atrophy encompasses diseases like muscular dystrophy, a condition in which muscles refuse to absorb nutrients and consequently become thinner and weaker. It also includes poliomyelitis, a disease brought by a virus in the bowel that attacks the central nervous system.
- b. BlindnessBlindness was rampant at the time of Christ. It came about very commonly at the birth of one whose mother was infected with gonorrhea. Blindness also resulted from trachoma, unsanitary conditions, brilliant sunlight, intense heat, blowing sand, or war.
- c. Boils/TumorsBoils include carbuncles, abscesses, and infected glands.
- d. DeafnessDeafness could be caused by a birth defect, a wound or injury, or an infected middle or inner ear.
- e. DropsyDropsy, or edema, refers to a condition where there is a retention of body fluids.
- f. DumbnessDumbness, or mutism, is the inability to speak.
- g. DysenteryDysentery is caused by an amebae, bacteria, or worms, and affects the colon and the digestive tract.
- h. EpilepsyEpilepsy is typically manifested by petit mal (small) or grand mal (great) seizures.
- i. HemorrhagingBleeding can be caused by fibroid tumors that are often cancerous.
- j. Speech ImpedimentsThese include various types of aphasia, a complete or partial inability to speak.
- k. Indigestion/UlcersIndigestion could involve severe stomach disorders.
- l. InflammationInflammation, or swelling often come as a result of infections caused by strep and staph bacteria.
- m. PestilencePestilence could refer to any infectious disease of epidemic proportions.
- n. Skin Disease/Leprosy.
- o. Paralysis.
- p. FeverAll of those diseases existed in Jesus' time in their various forms and were for the most part unable to be alleviated. Because there was no effective way of dealing with those diseases, people became very aware of the doom that hung over their heads.

2. Eliminated

However, Jesus touched human life at the point of its greatest agony: disease. In fact, Jesus virtually wiped out sickness in Palestine during His earthly ministry. The monumental nature of His work is

beyond description. We can't fully appreciate it because we live in a society that can manage disease fairly well. Although there are some cures that are elusive, such as the cure for cancer or heart disease, we have eliminated many diseases, and even have the capacity to alleviate pain. But in Jesus' time, there was no such comfort. Consequently, as He swept through Palestine with His healing power affecting many thousands of people, His miraculous power became a staggering revelation that He was God. Repeatedly He made statements like, "...believe Me for the very works' sake" (Jn. 14:11). There was no way one could rationally deny the all-encompassing, widespread healings that He had done.

a. Matthew 12:15 -- "But when Jesus knew [about the conspiracy of the Pharisees to kill Him], He withdrew Himself from there; and great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them all." b. Matthew 14:14 -- "And Jesus went forth, and saw a great multitude, and was moved with compassion toward them, and He healed their sick." Jesus healed all who came to Him and in so doing, practically banished disease from Palestine.

B. Disbelief in the Miracles of Christ

Never in the history of the world did so many healings take place. Only a divine explanation was possible. That is what makes the Pharisees' unbelief so utterly incredible. It shows the depth of the sin in their hearts: they would not believe Christ in spite of such humanly inexplicable evidence. For that reason, Matthew indirectly indicts them as he points out the credentials of Jesus as Messiah by recording three of the healings He performed. In the last chapter, we examined...

I. THE WRETCHED MAN (vv. 1-4)

Jesus reached to the very lowest levels of society, an indirect condemnation of the pride of the Pharisees, who never would have stooped beneath their pious dignity. He showed that the extent of His Kingdom went beyond the high and the mighty by reaching out to people that nobody else would touch. His Kingdom was not what most expected; it was not for the super pious, but for the desperate and the hurting. So Christ touched a man with leprosy and healed him.

That brings us to the next healing in Matthew 8 involving...

II. THE RESPECTED MAN (vv. 5-13)

In this passage, we find a man who was considered an outcast by the Jewish people because he was a Gentile. Worse than that, he was a Roman soldier, a member of the occupying army that had invaded their precious land. Although he was despised as much as a leper, the Lord healed his servant. By so doing, He reinforced the fact that His Kingdom included the outcast and the Gentile. Its parameters were far broader than the Pharisees had assumed.

A. The Place (v. 5a)

"And when Jesus was entered into Capernaum..."

Some commentators think that all three of the miracles recorded in chapter eight happened the same day after Jesus had finished the Sermon on the Mount, came down from the mountain, and entered Capernaum, a town on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. Ironically, although it is one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen, the ancient town doesn't exist anymore because Jesus pronounced a curse on it. Jesus resided there while ministering in Galilee, staying perhaps at the house of Peter.

B. The Person (v. 5b)

"...there came unto Him a centurion, beseeching Him"

Matthew records the basic conversation of the centurion and Jesus, but the comparative passage in Luke 7 elucidates some of the details. Luke tells us that the centurion didn't actually go to Jesus himself, but sent some Jewish elders with his message because he felt unworthy to have Christ in his home.

1. A Centurion

Every time a centurion appears in the New Testament, he is seen in a very positive light. It's as if the Lord purposely picked out some of the most hated people in Palestine to illustrate the extent of His grace in reaching beyond Israel to establish His Kingdom. The redemption of such individuals is a slap in the face to Jewish exclusivism, which had no room for a Gentile, especially a Roman soldier.

2. A Samaritan

If it was bad to be a Gentile from a Jewish perspective, it was worse to be a Roman soldier. The Roman occupying army was trained in the communities of Palestine, enlisting non-Jewish people from the areas it was occupying. The centurion in Matthew 8 would have been a soldier over the troops of Antipas, and it is likely that he was a Samaritan. The worst kind of Gentile in Jewish eyes was a Samaritan, because Samaritans were descendants of Jews who had intermarried with Gentiles, thereby forfeiting their Jewish heritage.

So, here was the worst kind of Gentile: a Samaritan; and the worst kind of Samaritan: a member of the occupying forces of Rome. Any Pharisee would say, "Why would anyone ever do a favor for somebody like that?" That is precisely the point Jesus wanted to make. The Pharisees had an incorrect view on the parameters of the Kingdom. They believed that it was confined to them, having an "us-four-no-more-shut-the-door" mentality. Consequently, when Jesus threw the door to the Kingdom wide open, that was more than they could accept, and their hatred of Him grew until they finally killed Him.

C. The Petition (vv. 6-9)

1. His Respect (v. 6)

"[He said,] Lord, my servant [Gk. pais lit. "child"] lieth at home sick of the palsy [Gk. paralutikos = "paralysis"], grievously tormented."

The centurion addressed Jesus as "Lord," recognizing His divine authority as many other centurions did as well. He petitioned Jesus on behalf of a child. Luke, using the word doulos, which means bondsman, recorded that the child was actually one of the centurion's slaves. It was rather common to have a child slave in the house. So we see that the centurion not only had respect for the Lord, but also for his boy slave, who was in tremendous pain at his home and possibly paralyzed with some disorder of the nervous system.

There is something beautiful about the centurion's petition. It shows that he cared about a servant, and that sets him apart from just about everybody else in the Roman world, because in the Roman Empire, slaves were of no consequence. If they suffered or died, few cared. For example, Aristotle said that there could be no friendship or justice toward inanimate things; indeed, not even toward a horse, an ox, or a slave, since master and slave had nothing in common. He said, "A slave is a living tool, and a tool is an inanimate slave" (Ethics, 1161b). Gaius, an expert on Roman law, said that it was universally accepted that the master possessed the power of life and death over a slave (Institutes, 1:52). It was legally acceptable to kill your slave if you didn't like him. Varro, a Roman nobleman who wrote on agriculture said, in effect, that the only difference between a slave, a beast, and a cart was that a slave could talk (On Landed Estates, 1:17.1). Cato the Elder, a Roman writer, gave advice to somebody taking over a farm. He recommended that he look over the livestock, and hold a sale. Then he told him to sell worn-out oxen, blemished cattle, blemished sheep, wool, hides, an old wagon, old tools, an old slave, a sickly slave, and whatever else is superfluous (On Agriculture; 2,7). Although the Romans viewed a slave as a thing, this centurion was different. He wasn't asking Jesus for something on his own behalf, but for his paralyzed servant. What an excellent perspective!

2. His Reputation (Lk. 7:4-5)

The centurion was able to find Jewish leaders to bring his message to Jesus. Most Jewish people would have refused to do the bidding of a centurion, but those leaders were willing to come to Jesus on his behalf. Luke 7 tells us that when the Jewish elders came to Jesus, "...they besought Him earnestly, saying that he was worthy for whom He should do this: For he loveth our nation, and he

hath built us a synagogue" (vv. 4-5). Evidently understanding something of the truth in Judaism, that God-fearing Gentile realized that he was dealing with the covenant people of the living God, and made an investment in them. I've been in Capernaum and have stood in the ruins of the synagogue there. People say that its foundation came from Christ's day and was possibly even purchased by that very centurion.

There is no doubt that those Jewish leaders knew Jesus could heal. But if they were typical of the other religious leaders in Palestine, their hardness of heart kept them from taking the recognition of His ability a step further and accepting Him as Messiah and Savior. The centurion, who had expressed his love for a slave by desiring his healing, was a humble man: he wouldn't come to Jesus himself because he didn't feel worthy. He didn't want Jesus to have to enter his house, because he knew that a Jew was forbidden to enter the house of a Gentile. Rather than violating that tradition, the centurion chose to honor it. He didn't even ask Jesus to heal his servant; he merely informed Him of the situation.

3. His Reward (v. 7)

"And Jesus saith unto him, I will come and heal him."

Jesus told the messengers sent by the centurion that He would come to the Gentile's home to heal the boy. But, according to Luke, Jesus never arrived. Realizing that Christ was coming, the centurion panicked because he didn't feel worthy to be in His presence. and didn't want Him to have to violate Jewish law by coming in his house. So he sent some friends to Jesus to deliver...

4. His Response (vv. 8-9)

a. Of Humility (v. 8a)"The centurion answered and said, Lord, I am not worthy that Thou shouldest come under my roof..."His message expressed his humility: "Lord, don't come any farther--I'm not worthy for You to enter my house. I can't allow You to come into my presence." There are some people who think they should do God a favor by becoming a Christian. The truth is that we are not even worthy to enter His presence. I love the centurion's response! That unique man had to work his way up through the ranks. He had to be tough because he had to lead a hundred men. However, even though he was a combat-oriented drill sergeant, he was clearly a gentle, humble, meek, sensitive, and loving man who even cared for a sick slave. He was a true God-fearing Gentile like Cornelius in Acts 10. His response is also evidence...b. Of Faith (vv. 8b-9)1) His Knowledge of Jesus' Ability (v. 8b)"...but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed."You say, "Where did he get that information?" He had been around and had seen what Jesus was doing. Because he knew that Jesus could heal from a distance by just speaking a word, I believe he sensed that to stand before Jesus was to be in the presence of God.2) His Knowledge of Jesus' Authority (v. 9)"For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me; and I say to this man, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it."The centurion was saying, "I understand Your authority. There might be some around here who would question it, but I know a man with authority when I see one. I've seen what You've done and I know the power of Your words." He reasoned from the lesser to the greater. He could say, "I am under authority and I can command things to happen. But You are above all authorities--how much more can You but speak a word, and cause anything to happen!" That is great faith.

D. The Praise (v. 10)

1. Jesus' Recognition (v. 10a)

"When Jesus heard it, He marveled..."

You have got to have a unique kind of faith to amaze Jesus, because He knows everything. So when the text says that Jesus marveled, you know that is quite a statement. It tells us that Jesus in His humanness was literally amazed at the faith of that Gentile. His great faith was a taste of things to come, because there have been countless other Gentiles who have had that kind of faith in Christ.

2. Jesus' Rebuke (v. 10b)

"...[Jesus] said to them that followed, Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in

Israel."

The implication is that He should have found such faith among the people of the covenant promises and inheritance. He had found a certain amount among the Jewish people but never with that much virtue. The centurion's unique response showed his love, thoughtfulness, humility, sensitivity, and absolute confidence in the power and deity of Christ. Even Christ's own disciples on occasion had to be rebuked by Jesus for their "little faith" (Mt. 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8). They weren't even too sure who He was during His earthly ministry. When Philip asked Jesus to show them the Father, Jesus replied, "Have I been such a long time with you, and yet hast thou not known Me, Philip?..." (Jn 14:9). Even after others had testified of Jesus' resurrection, Thomas wouldn't believe until He saw Christ himself. But the centurion had great faith. His example shows that some Gentiles would demonstrate greater faith than those of Israel. Isn't that true today? The church predominately is a Gentile church; Israel still rejects Jesus as her Messiah. Jesus went on to make that clear in one of His most devastating statements:

E. The Prediction (vv. 11-12)

1. The Inclusion of Gentiles in the Kingdom (v. 11)

"And I say unto you that many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven"

a. Described There is coming a great and glorious Kingdom called the millennial Kingdom and it will be followed by an eternal Kingdom. In that first Kingdom, God's wonderful promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will come to pass. God brought the covenant through them, therefore, there is an essential Jewishness in the future of God's plans for the world. Salvation comes through Abraham's seed, but we are sons of Abraham by faith, so we receive blessing because we are part of that same covenant. That is precisely what Jesus was saying in verse 11. The many who would come from the East and the West are those from the Gentile world, which is literally to the east and west of Israel. Jesus predicted that His Kingdom would be filled with Gentiles. b. Denied Most Jewish people didn't believe that, however. Such a shocking statement was contrary to their tradition. They believed that all the Gentiles would be destroyed before the Kingdom came. If you read some apocryphal literature like 2 Baruch 29, you would find that it pictures a great feast where all the Jews will sit down with the Messiah and eat behemoth and leviathan (designations of the largest land and sea animals). Never for a moment did the Jews believe that the Gentiles would be reclining with them at the Messianic banquet. But two thousand years later here we are, a church filled with Gentiles, and we will sit down someday in the millennial Kingdom with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Now, if that isn't devastating enough, note what verse 12 says:

2. The Exclusion of Jews from the Kingdom (v. 12)

a. The Promise to the Jews (v. 12a) "But the sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." That is a very powerful statement. The Jewish people were called "sons of the kingdom," because by right they are the heirs of the promises and privileges that were given to them (cf. Ps. 147:19-20; Isa. 63:8-9; Rom. 9:4; Eph. 2:12). In spite of that, many will not be part of the Kingdom, because one doesn't enter it on the basis of physical lineage. In John 8, the Jewish rulers boasted that they were the sons of Abraham. Jesus said, "I know that ye are Abraham's seed; but ye seek to kill Me, because My word hath no place in you. I speak that which I have seen with my Father, and ye do that which ye have seen with your father. They answered, and said unto Him, Abraham is our father. Jesus saith unto them, If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham. But now ye seek to kill Me.... Ye are of your father the devil" (vv. 37- 40a, 44a). They hated Him for saying that. Proudly assuming their right to enter, many sons of the Kingdom are going to be thrown out, having forfeited their inheritance by unbelief. b. The Punishment of the Jews (v. 12b) 1) The Place "Outer darkness" was a meaningful phrase in Jewish thought. The rabbis taught that sinners in Gehenna would be covered with darkness. They believed that sinners would be sent away from the light of God's presence.

Paradoxically, hell is not only a place of darkness; it is also a place of fire. Its supernatural quality enables fire to exist in total darkness, a phenomenon created by God for eternal punishment. Outer darkness is a place, just like heaven is.²) The PainThe horrible result of that punishment will be the "weeping and gnashing of teeth." The darkness will cause a loss of all happiness, helpless despair, and the endless torment of eternal blackness.a) Matthew 13:42 -- "And shall cast them into a furnace of fire; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (cf. v. 50).b) Matthew 22:13 -- "Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."c) Matthew 24:51 -- "And shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."Although some people think that Jesus just talked about love, the gospels make it clear that He talked a lot about hell. I have been criticized for being too confrontive. But I have never preached a sermon as strong as Jesus did. I have never said anything as devastating as what He said. So, the message of Jesus is that people who reject Him as the Messiah--even if they are the sons of the Kingdom--are going to be thrown into outer darkness. So Jesus gave a sermon in the midst of healing the centurion's servant that was not easy to forget.

F. The Promise (v. 13)

"And Jesus said unto the centurion, Go thy way; and as thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee. And his servant was healed in the very same hour."

Jesus said, "You can all go back home--he's healed." Can you imagine the little servant boy popping out of his bed and saying, "I don't know what you did, sir, but I'm healed!"? And can you imagine how much greater the centurion's faith was after his servant had been healed?

Notice the phrase "as thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee." Can we claim that? Not necessarily. Jesus said that to the centurion. And Paul believed that God could heal him, but He didn't. That was His sovereign choice. Sometimes God heals people who have no faith. In fact, the Bible doesn't say that the little boy had any faith at all. Jesus healed him for the benefit of the centurion, and everybody else in history who would read about him. As a result, I think there's one more centurion in heaven, and probably one more little boy as well.

Do you see what Jesus was saying here? "I reach for lepers and outcast Gentiles, because My Kingdom encompasses those who believe in Me, not those who are of some particular race." Now just in case his Jewish readers might completely come apart at the seams, Matthew adds one more healing in the next two verses:

III. THE RELATIVE (vv. 14-15)

A. The Situation (v. 14a)

"And when Jesus was come into Peter's house..."

Mark and Luke tells us that He entered the home during the Sabbath. Jesus had been at the synagogue. As the Lord, James, and John walked through the door, possibly to share a meal, they found Peter's mother-in-law sick with a fever. The disciples asked Christ to heal her. From this account, we know that Peter was married, as well as from 1 Corinthians 9:5, where Paul says that it was not wrong for Peter (Cephas) to allow his wife to travel with him in his ministry.

When the Pharisees got up in the morning, they were known to say, "I thank Thee that I am not a slave, a Gentile, or a woman." They believed that such members of society were at the bottom of society. Because of their low view of women, Jesus' healing of Peter's mother-in-law was another cause for an indictment against Him. He was clearly showing His disapproval of their tradition.

B. The Sickness (v. 15a)

"And He touched her hand, and the fever left her..."

The hypothalamus in the middle of the brain controls the body temperature, keeping it at 98.6. However, infection in other parts of the body can overwhelm it. As the body attempts to fight the infection, its temperature can rise to as high as 108 degrees.

We don't know whether her fever was the result of malaria or some other disease, but Luke indicates that it was so severe, she could have died from it. However, Jesus reached out His hand and touched her. Immediately the fever left her.

C. The Service (v. 15b)

"...and she arose, and ministered unto Him."

In gratitude for being healed, Peter's mother-in-law prepared a meal for Jesus and the others. I believe that the reason the miraculous healing of Peter's mother-in-law was included was that she was Jewish. It would have been hard for a Jewish person to accept the healing of a leper and a Gentile and hear Jesus say that many were going to be shut out of the Kingdom. So Matthew records Jesus healing a Jewish woman, almost as if to say, "Yes, the Kingdom will embrace Gentiles, but I'll never turn My people Israel aside." There will be healing for them too. In Romans, Paul says that although the natural branches were Jewish, the Gentiles have been grafted onto the tree (11:17-24). But the day is coming when Israel will be grafted in again to the stock of blessing (11:24-25). I see that truth inherent in the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. If you can deny that Christ is God in the face of the healings He did, it is not because there is no evidence; it is because there is no faith in your heart.

Focusing on the Facts

1. Having preached a monumental sermon in Matthew 5-7, what are some questions that many would have asked Jesus?
2. Identify some diseases in the time of Christ? Why were many of them a cause for fear?
3. What effect did Jesus' earthly ministry have upon disease in Palestine?
4. Why would many Jewish leaders have criticized Jesus for doing a favor for a centurion?
5. What did the centurion's petition show? Why was that unusual in the Roman world?
6. How does Luke show us that the centurion was a God-fearing Gentile who was held in high esteem (Lk. 7:4-5)?
7. Although many Jewish leaders knew Jesus could heal, what were most not willing to recognize?
8. How did the centurion demonstrate his humility?
9. What two things did the centurion's faith demonstrate a knowledge of?
10. What caused Jesus to be amazed?
11. Where should Jesus have found faith like the centurion's? Why did Jesus occasionally have to rebuke His disciples?
12. What indicates that there is an essential Jewishness to God's plans for the world?
13. Who did Jesus predicted would come from the East and the West and sit down with Abraham in the Kingdom?
14. According to their tradition, who did the Jewish people believe would be included in the Kingdom?
15. How will many Jewish people forfeit their inheritance?
16. What is the paradoxical punishment that those who reject Jesus as Messiah will receive?
17. Can we claim the same healing that Jesus promised to the centurion's servant? Explain.
18. How did the healing of Peter's mother-in-law show that Jesus disapproved of Jewish tradition?
19. What is one possible reason why Matthew records the healing of a Jew after saying that many Jewish people would be excluded from the Kingdom? What type of healing is still in store for Israel?

Pondering the Principles

1. The centurion was held in high esteem by many Jewish people in spite of the fact that he was a Roman soldier and possibly even a Samaritan. Do you think that those who disagree with your philosophy of life, or more specifically, your commitment to Christ, hold you in high esteem because of your personal integrity? Do you uphold the same high standards of godliness whether you are at

work, at home, in the community, on vacation, or anywhere else? When we do, even those who would oppose us can have reason to respect us. Consider the early church as they preached a controversial message: the Jewish leaders had rejected and crucified their Messiah, who had risen from the dead. Among other things, Acts 2 characterizes the early church as having unity of mind, gladness, and sincerity of heart (v. 46; NASB). As a result, what were other people's response to them, according to verse 47? Then, even after the fear-inspiring discipline of Ananias and Sapphira, how did people feel toward the church according to Acts 5:13? Are you willing to uphold the smallest commands of God as much as the more important ones? Such integrity can have a dynamic impact upon the watching world.

2. Compare your faith to that of the centurion's. Do you think your faith would give Jesus any cause to marvel? Have you stretched your faith lately by believing God for something that is humanly impossible? Do you have reservations about Jesus' power or His authority? If so, meditate upon Matthew 28:18; John 11:38-44; 20:30-31; Colossians 1:15-20; Hebrews 1-2; and Revelation 5.

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