“HE TOOK UP OUR INFIRMITIES AND BORE OUR DISEASES”

Matthew 8:1–17

Key Verse: 8:17

“This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: ‘He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases.’”

 Have you ever been seriously sick but were not aware of it? It’s kind of scary: Some people have a deadly disease but are oblivious to it. Some intentionally live in denial about their illnesses and don’t want to face them. If we *are* aware of a disease we have, we may just try to cope with it ourselves—especially because medical care can be so expensive. We may not have just one, but multiple sicknesses at the same time, which overwhelms us. And, even if we believe in God and pray, there’s no guarantee that whatever sicknesses we have will be cured—we may just have to live with them. In chapters 5–7 Matthew has recorded Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount, which summarizes Jesus’ teaching ministry. Now in chapters 8,9 Matthew introduces us to Jesus’ healing ministry. He’s not just out to prove Jesus’ miraculous powers; he’s trying to show what Jesus wants to do for us. For Matthew, physical sickness can symbolize spiritual sickness. And he wants us to see that Jesus doesn’t just teach us; he wants to heal us—especially our souls. In today’s passage we can see how Jesus responded to the sick. And we can learn from two people how Jesus still heals today. Through this study may God open our hearts to come to Jesus and truly experience his healing.

 The first time Matthew describes Jesus’ healing ministry is back at the end of chapter 4; it’s a short description, just three verses. Now, beginning in chapter 8, Matthew gives an extended account of Jesus’ healings. The first specific healing Matthew records is of a man with leprosy. It’s a brief but shocking encounter, and it’s loaded with deep meaning for us.

First, let’s think about this man. Read verse 2. Most of us aren’t very familiar with leprosy. It’s a disease people get in tropical climates. In the 19th century in the U.S., people who got leprosy were put on trains, sent to California, then boarded boats to be taken to a leper colony in Hawaii—far away from everyone else. Over 100 years, about 8,000 people were sent there. Leprosy was considered a contagious, incurable disease. It starts out small, with a tiny white spot on the skin, but develops progressively until the extremities of fingers and toes rot off. It gradually disfigures a person, emits a bad odor and leads to numbness, isolation, depression, disorientation, and finally death. In Jesus’ time, leprosy made people “unclean,” meaning they were not allowed to join in worship. This disease of leprosy is a powerful metaphor for the characteristics of sin. Like leprosy, sin also starts out tiny but gets progressively worse. It disfigures, numbs, isolates, and kills. And just like leprosy, sin is incurable. Sin gives us all kinds of spiritual diseases. Some are obvious, such as lust, or depression, or anxiety. But other kinds of spiritual diseases in us we may not even be aware of. We can be sick with pride and not even know it. We can be sick with vanity and not even know it. We can be sick with selfishness and not even know it. We can be sick with fear or greed or cruelty. The power of sin can be growing in us, ruining our humanity and our conscience, making us like a spiritual monster, yet we can be pretending like everything is just fine.

This man had leprosy, yet Matthew wants us to learn from him. Read verse 2 again. The man wasn’t living in denial. He faced the fact that he was so sick and that his disease was incurable. They say that in helping people with physical diseases, the first challenge is to help them realize how sick they are, how serious their illness is, so that they really want help. Likewise, to be healed spiritually, we first have to acknowledge that we have a serious spiritual problem and really need God’s help. Those who are slaves of their own honor can’t admit it. But if we refuse to recognize our spiritual problem, or laugh it off as not serious, we won’t be coming to Jesus for his healing.

But there’s another side to this, too. Once we recognize our problem and how serious it is, it’s actually easy to fall into despair. The more we think about our problem, the more we can lose hope and give up on ourselves. We can think we’ve gone too far and can never turn back. The idea that there’s no hope for me is like a pair of spiritual shackles always dragging us down. This man with leprosy knew his reality. But he wasn’t sulking in a corner in despair. He came to Jesus. His coming to Jesus as a leper was truly a marvelous act of faith.

And there’s more. Read verse 2 once more. We notice that he knelt before him. He called him “Lord.” And he believed that he could make him clean. Each of these things shows his faith in Jesus. He wasn’t your everyday, run-of-the mill beggar habitually trying to get something. He believed in Jesus as the Sovereign Lord and the one who has power to cure anything, even the incurable. Matthew is showing us that the man's faith is totally focused on Jesus. The Bible doesn’t tell us where he got this faith. But 4:24 says that as soon as Jesus started his healing ministry, news about him spread everywhere. It must have even reached the place where lepers lived. News of Jesus stirred this man’s heart. When he heard about what Jesus could do, he found hope. He found strength to come out of his leper’s quarters. He found courage to face hostile people who might start throwing rocks at him. In his society, lepers were the worst of the worst. They were not supposed to come out and be among normal people. But because of his faith in Jesus this man came. Likewise, if we can turn our thoughts away from ourselves and our situation and from people to really meditate on who Jesus is, we can find the hope, the strength and the courage to come to him.

Next, we need to look at how Jesus responds to him. Read verse 3. Jesus responded to this man because of his faith. But we can notice several things here. First, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. In the Law God told his people not to touch lepers (Lev5:3). He was trying to prevent disease among his people from spreading. Then people used this law to totally isolate lepers. Today, too, people use God’s laws to isolate themselves from those who are sick with sin. They do it in the name of holiness. But Jesus wasn’t like that. He didn’t *have* to touch this man in order to heal him, but he did. He broke the rule. Why? Jesus touched him to show him that he loved him. Jesus touched him to show that he was unafraid of his illness. Jesus touched him to show that he respected him as a human being who was so lovely, so valuable, made in the image of God. By touching him, Jesus was taking up his infirmity and bearing his disease of leprosy. This tells us that ministry can’t be done from a safe distance. Ministry can’t be superficial. We have to get involved with people closely. We have to get our hands dirty. We have to patiently bear all kinds of diseases people have, out of God’s love. If we’re demanding, intolerant and impatient with people, God can’t use us to bring them to Jesus for healing.

To this man, being touched by Jesus was a crucial part of his healing. Years of isolation had scarred his soul. At last there was someone who reached out to him in love and touched him. In our busy, competitive, cruel society, so many wounded, spiritually sick people are longing for a simple, loving touch. They feel dirty and condemned and so alone, but if only someone would reach out and touch them, it would set them on a new path of spiritual healing.

Next, Jesus accompanied his touch by saying, “I am willing.” Sometimes the devil convinces us that God is not willing to help us. He gets us to think God is stern, that we don’t matter, that our problem is not God’s concern. But it is. God is deeply concerned for us as individual people. He’s our Creator who made us. He longs to be in a relationship with us. He longs for us to know his heart and to experience his love. Whatever our problems are, whether they happened to us by chance or we created them ourselves, God is willing to help us and to heal us.

Finally, Jesus said, “Be clean!” “Immediately” the man was cleansed of his incurable leprosy, by the sheer power of Jesus’ word. It tells us that Jesus’ word still has power to cure our problems, no matter how chronic or hopeless they are. The Bible says that the human heart is deceitful above all else and beyond cure (Jer17:9). But the word of Jesus has the power to clean out our hearts, no matter how ugly or dirty they get (Jn15:3). This is why we all need to be studying God’s word. We live in a world that is full of corruption due to evil human desires (2Pe1:4). In such an environment, we may think we’re okay, that we can handle it, but we easily can become ensnared and entangled by sin (Heb12:1). We constantly need the word of Jesus so that we can be growing not in our sinful nature but in God’s nature and in inner holiness.

The last part of this incident is also important. Read verse 4. We learn two things here. First of all, Jesus wasn’t trying to gain glory for himself through healing this man. Instead, Jesus strictly refused to gain glory through it. It’s very relevant today. Our own self-glory seeking desires can still ruin the good work God wants to do through us for the spiritually sick. Secondly, Jesus was thinking about this man’s whole life. He wasn’t trying to use him to show himself off in that moment; he was deeply concerned about this man’s social healing. He really wanted the man to be integrated back into normal society and be happy. A true shepherd isn’t thinking about using sheep for his or her own glory; he or she genuinely cares about the sheep’s entire life—personally, socially and spiritually.

The second healing Matthew records here is also shocking. Read verses 5,6. What’s a centurion? He was an officer in the Roman army in charge of 100 soldiers. To good Jews, such Roman oppressors were just as hideous as lepers. But Jesus didn’t pre-judge this man. This man, too, had faith in Jesus. If we read the story too quickly, we miss many things.

First of all, we notice that he wasn’t coming to Jesus for himself. Who was he there for? He says, “…my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly.” This is not your average Roman army officer. Most of them were so cruel they would use people up and throw them away like garbage. Because they were officers, they thought they were far above lowly servants who had problems. They didn’t think they could be bothered with such burdensome people. But this centurion deeply cared about his sick servant. He empathized with his condition; he knew he was suffering terribly. We don’t know what exactly paralyzed this man and was causing him so much suffering. But the point is not that; it’s that the centurion understood and cared for him so much. He cared so much that he was even willing to humble himself to go to Jesus and ask his help. His love for this other human being led him to faith in Jesus. We notice that, like the leper, he calls Jesus “Lord.” And he believes that Jesus would care even about a nameless suffering servant.

How does Jesus respond to him? Read verse 7. At first it’s hard to understand what Jesus is saying here. In Greek the emphasis is on the word “I.” It seems Jesus is drawing attention to the fact that the centurion is a high-ranking Roman officer, whereas Jesus is a lowly Jewish rabbi. It was well-known that Romans thoroughly despised Jews. Jesus wants to know if this man is really ready to cross the racial barrier to ask his help. With this question Jesus is gently testing his faith.

What does the man say? Read verses 8,9. In brief, the centurion is saying, “Don’t bother coming over—just say the word.” Again Matthew is emphasizing the healing power and authority of Jesus’ word. This centurion knew firsthand the power of words. If he gave any kind of order, his soldiers would immediately obey it. It seems he learned to think twice about the words he spoke and the suggestions he made. He wasn’t an overbearing and demanding commander, but a compassionate and thoughtful one, so he used his words carefully. Proverbs 12:18 also warns us about the power of words: “The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”

Most of all, this man was thinking about Jesus. If his own words would be obeyed by his soldiers absolutely, how much more would the words of Jesus! He had “just say the word, and my servant will be healed” faith. Let’s skip ahead and look at verse 13. It tells us how God can use us to heal others. *We* can’t do it at all. We can’t force or manipulate people to be changed. But we can believe that even one word of Jesus can completely heal people from the inside out. Whatever is paralyzing people or causing them terrible suffering, we need to pray that Jesus will just say the word, and the person we love will be completely healed. This is the kind of faith that pleases Jesus.

So how does Jesus respond? Read verse 10. Usually Jesus isn’t amazed by anything. But he is truly amazed by this centurion’s great faith. Often Jesus rebuked his disciples for having so little faith. There were so many religious Jews around him, but their faith was only cultural, and they were spiritually complacent. It’s a kind of stinging rebuke that a Roman centurion had better faith than all the spiritually proud Jews in Israel. Jesus wants all his followers to learn from the great faith of the centurion.

And he doesn’t stop there; he goes on. Read verses 11,12. Jesus is warning the Jews that God’s kingdom is going to be filled with Gentiles from all around the world, whereas many Jews who feel entitled and superior are going to find themselves thrown out into the darkness. It reminds us of the Bible verse: “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble” (Jas4:6; Pr3:34). The man with leprosy and the centurion are examples of those who are social outcasts, but humble, humble enough to come to Jesus and ask his help. Jesus is also warning complacent Christians, people who assume that they’re good with God, even though they don’t really care about others or struggle to have faith in Jesus. In the end they’ll find out too late that they’ve made the worst mistake.

The third healing Matthew records is of another kind of overlooked person. Read verses 14,15. Again, Jesus is personal and uses his touch to heal. And the person he’s healing is Peter’s mother-in-law. She may have been in bed with a fever because she’d become so upset after Peter left his good-paying fishing job to follow Jesus, leaving her daughter so vulnerable. In any case, Jesus considers this woman important. He shows her his love and his healing power. Her fever leaves her, and she begins to serve Jesus. We can’t force people to serve Jesus, but when we experience Jesus’ love and healing, we *want* to serve him.

Jesus’ healing continues. Read verse 16. Demon-possessed people are another kind of impossible people to help. They’re scary. Nobody can control them. People run away from them. But Jesus didn’t. Even though it was evening, getting dark outside and Jesus was tired, he kept on healing. Again Matthew tells us that Jesus “drove out the spirits with a word.” The power of Jesus’ word can even drive out evil spirits from people. It says Jesus healed “all the sick,” missing no one. There was no disease Jesus could not heal. Jesus worked past his limitations. He showed his healing love even when it was inconvenient and intrusive to him. It showed his true colors: he really cared for people. He was willing to sacrifice himself and suffer to bring people God’s healing.

Read verse 17. Matthew often tells us how the details of Jesus’ life and ministry fulfill prophecy. In this case, it’s the prophecy of Isaiah 53:4. Jesus was like the best doctor who stays with an overwhelming number of sick people to heal them all, even to the point of his own exhaustion. Matthew wants us to know that Jesus is not indifferent to our suffering. He doesn’t run away from us, even though we can be so burdensome. Immanuel Jesus is willing to be with us until we are healed, just as a good mother or father is willing to be with a sick child all through the night.

What brings people healing? Yes, it’s the power of Jesus’ words. It’s the faith of someone who loves them. But most often, Jesus’ healing comes into a person’s life when someone is willing to take up their infirmities and bear their diseases. How? By just being with them. It takes time. It takes patience. Sadly, so few people are willing to take the time to just be with someone who’s spiritually sick—not really teaching or correcting, just bearing in love. It may seem like a waste of time. But slowly and steadily it brings healing.

Read verse 17 again. May God grant us the faith to come to Jesus honestly and humbly for his healing of our spiritual diseases. May God help us experience the healing power of his word. And may God help us learn how to touch and heal others by being with them and bearing their sicknesses patiently with God’s love.