

**2 Healing of the Leper**

A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy. Then 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." (Matt 8:1-4)

This is the first miracle of Jesus presented by Matthew in his gospel. The desperate state of the leper could be understood not only in terms of his physical suffering but also in terms of the devastating psychological effect of this disease.<sup>2</sup> A leper is ceremonially unclean and lives away from his family and the community.<sup>3</sup> He is to announce his proximity to other people by calling out "Unclean! Unclean!"<sup>4</sup> No one is to make any physical contact with him; a person who touches him becomes unclean.<sup>5</sup> The lepers are therefore the untouchables of the society/community who are separated from their families and live in hopeless misery. It is in this desperate state of need that this leper approaches Jesus and seeks his healing and cleansing, kneeling and saying, "Lord, if you want to, you are able to cure me."

Jesus responds to this leper positively and heals him by his action and by his word. He extends his hand to touch him and verbally confirms his willingness to heal by saying, "I am willing. Be clean." He could have healed the leper by merely uttering the word of healing (see the immediately succeeding miracle, particularly Matt 8:8), but Jesus, in a radical expression of his love, is not hindered by the taboo of touching an unclean man: he deliberately extends his hand to touch and heal him. And he does this apparently in front of a large crowd. What is the significance of his action?<sup>6</sup>

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2. The disease could be what is now known as Hansen's disease or some other less serious skin disease. These are all covered by the term "leprosy" in the Old and New Testament.
  3. Leviticus 13:45-46.
  4. *Ibid.*
  5. Leviticus 5:3.
  6. cf. the Princess of Wales holding hands with a man with HIV Aids on his sickbed in the late 1980s.

It needs to be noticed that the leper did not directly request Jesus' healing; he merely expressed his faith that Jesus could heal him. In other episodes of healing in the gospel story, the appeal to Jesus for help is much more direct. There is no question that the leper was requesting healing (see his kneeling), but the request was expressed verbally in a form which is slightly veiled (in that form, strictly speaking, it was only a statement of faith in Jesus). It is possible that the leper did not have sufficient courage to ask directly for healing because a direct verbal request might be met by an explicit "no," which would be difficult to take for a man who had experienced the pain of human rejection many times. A veiled request might at worst result in a veiled and less painful rejection. (One may sympathize with the leper's vulnerability and the tentativeness in his request if one has experienced the pain of multiple rejections.) However, it has to be added that the leper did summon enough courage to come near to Jesus, which itself was a law-breaking act. Even though a positive reply from Jesus could not be assumed, his desperate need and the possibility of healing drove him to take the risk and go beyond the limit of traditional law. It was not difficult for Jesus to understand the state of this man, both in terms of his physical condition and his emotional condition. With this understanding, how did Jesus respond? In Mark 1:41 relating to the same healing episode, the description of Jesus' response there involves his inner feeling—"Filled with *compassion*, he reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean.'" In other parts of the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, we see the motivation of Jesus' acts for the people was his compassion for them (Matt 9:36, 14:14, 15:32, 20:34; Mark 6:34, 8:2; Luke 7:13). Jesus certainly was not someone who was aloof from the sufferings of those surrounding him; he was affected deeply in his heart. A better translation of the Greek word used in these descriptions could be "cut to the heart." He felt the pains that the leper (and other needy persons) felt—the pains of social separation, human rejection, and physical disease. In this fellowship of suffering with the leper, in this heart-felt sorrow *with* the sufferer, Jesus stretched out his hand to heal him and verbally gave him the most reassuring reply contrasting with his veiled and tentative request, "I am *willing*. Be clean." Indeed his words were reassuring, but what about his touch? His touch brought the reassurance of his total acceptance of this man, who understandably had not received such a touch from a healthy

person since the onset of the skin disease. Jesus' touch once again opened the world of human fellowship to the leper, a world he was cut off from in his marginalized existence. His touch brought the compassion and warmth of God to the leper who was thought (by himself and others) to be forsaken by God, possibly as a result of his own sin. The power of God worked through the touch of Jesus to infuse healing and wholeness into him, healing not only in terms of his physical body but also in terms of his emotional well-being, healing which should be called holistic (or wholesome) healing, embracing the different aspects of this person's needs. Jesus could have given him physical healing merely with his words of command. But because he saw the different aspects of the leper's need he gave him more than what he asked for. His healing was more comprehensive than what he could hope for; his gifts to him were more abundant than what he could wish. Such was the super-abundance of God's grace, as revealed in Jesus to this man of need.

In Jesus' words of healing and his touch to this leper, we also discern his gentleness and sensitivity to this vulnerable person. The leper was vulnerable indeed. He was not supposed to draw near to healthy people because of his uncleanness. But he broke the law by drawing near to Jesus and his disciples. Emotionally he was vulnerable because of his fear of rejection by Jesus and his disciples. Physically he was vulnerable because of his own illness. In his desperation, he took a risk, exposed himself, and made himself vulnerable to criticism and rejection, to further pain and shame. Indeed, Jesus and his disciples could have criticized him for breaking the law, rejected him and turned him away. That would have been very painful and shameful for him. But Jesus, knowing his vulnerability and weakness, rather than breaking him with a further blow, stretched out his compassionate hand to accept him, restore him, strengthen him and heal him; he spoke his words of healing to reassure him and to comfort him. Jesus Christ knew the vulnerable situation of the leper and he was gentle with him, so that he might not be broken but restored. As the prophet Isaiah had prophesied about the coming Messiah, "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out." (Isaiah 42:3) Jesus in this first reported miracle in Matthew had already fulfilled this precious prophecy about the Messiah.

There is another point to note in this healing episode. Jesus said to him, "Go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses

commanded, as a testimony to them.” This was in accordance with Leviticus 14:1–11 where it is said that the priest acts as the one who verifies the recovery of the person from the disease and offers the appropriate sacrifice to God on the person’s behalf. Based on the evidence (testimony) of healing, the priest was the one who had authority to allow the person back into the community. Jesus, by telling him to go and show himself to the priest, was therefore not asking the healed person to follow him in his itinerant ministry, but to be restored to his family and his community. In this, his familial and sociological bonds which were broken could now be re-connected. Furthermore, the impossibility and prohibition of worship for a leper in a formal or communal setting had been lifted. Officially, he could now be restored to the worshipping community and the full favor of God. Taking all these aspects together, we can see that Jesus’ healing of this person was truly comprehensive or holistic, embracing these aspects of his human needs—physical, emotional, social and spiritual. There is a further important point to note in this healing episode.

This point relates to the issue of ritual cleanliness specifically, but it also relates to the whole question of rules and boundaries in Judaism at that time (see Introduction above). Jesus’ touching the leper can be interpreted in its wider significance and in the broader context of Jesus’ other radical acts. It is not insignificant that this is the first miracle presented in any detail in the gospels of Matthew and Luke (5:12–15), and it is the first healing miracle presented in the gospel of Mark (1:40–45). This miraculous act which transcended a rule and boundary (of ritual cleanliness) of the Jewish traditions, is the first of many others in the gospel story, as will be seen later in this chapter. In this sense, it paves the way for the readers to appreciate what is to develop in the story on this very theme of Jesus’ relationship with some of the rules and boundaries and hence the theme of his relationship with the Pharisees and scribes on these matters. It is the first taste of the things to come.

What we can learn from this first episode concerning the ritual boundary and barrier is that Jesus wills not to heal the leper from afar. He wills not to let any barrier bar him from drawing close to this leper. He confronts this ritual barrier, breaks it, and transcends it by purposefully extending his hand to touch and heal the leper. There can be no holding back of his love to this needy person; there can be no prevailing obstacle obstructing his love. In this he, as the perfect Son

who is like the Father, reveals *his Father's indiscriminating, compassionate and radical* love on earth (cf. the sixth antithesis in Matt 5:45–48). This radical and indiscriminating love of God overcomes and transcends all boundaries and barriers to reach humanity in need, as shall be seen also in other acts of Jesus. Jesus, in revealing his Father's love, reveals his radicalism in this move. Just as he was ready to transcend the Torah (law of Moses) with his radical new teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, here he is prepared to transcend the Torah's prohibition on touching the unclean with his radical new action to heal. In his radicalism, Jesus is bringing what is new and liberating in the Kingdom of God (cf. Matt 9:17 about new wine). But bringing and wielding what is new and radical in God's rule or kingdom requires authority and boldness for it to be decisive and effective. One without authority and courage simply cannot bring oneself to such ground-breaking work. Here, Jesus' authority is already seen, not only in the direct, unencumbered and bold manner in which he extends his hand to the leper and breaks the ritual barrier, but also in the manner of his speech and the result that it brings. The words—"I am willing. Be clean."—betray the underlying fact that it is within *Jesus' own will, freedom and authority* to decide the fate of this man, whether he will be cleansed and liberated or remain bound as he was. He does not need to ask a higher authority for miraculous power, or solicit help by some kind of incantation in order to heal. Who is he that he is able to do all these? According to Matthew, he is the divine Lord (3:3) and therefore has his own proper authority and freedom not only to transcend ritual barriers, but also to bring healing to the needy and the sick. Lastly, his Lordship, freedom and authority, manifested in his radical act and comforting speech, is vindicated, confirmed and revealed in the miraculous recovery of the leper. His recovery shows that Jesus' Lordship, freedom, radicalism and indiscriminating love are not in vain, that his act and speech are not those of a self-deluded fanatic with an inflated ego. His radical act and comforting speech are indeed those of the true and compassionate Lord who has the authority to bring in the liberation of the Kingdom of God.

In Matthew's presentation as seen above, Jesus is the Lord (3:3) who in every way—in his will, word and action—shows himself to be the true author of this healing. He does not invoke another authority or another name in healing as some do, e.g., in Matt 7:22, those who drive out demons and perform miracles in Jesus' name (cf. Acts 3:6

where Peter heals a crippled beggar in Jesus' name). Rather, he exercises his own will and his own authority ("*I am willing*") in his word and action in this healing. In this sense he is set apart from his disciples and those Old Testament figures who performed miracles with authority not inherently their own (e.g., 1 Kings 18:36f; 2 Kings 2:21, 3:16, 4:43). While Jesus' disciples and the Old Testament figures can be regarded as secondary authors or channels of miracles, Jesus in Matthew's presentation is the true and proper author of this miraculous act.

Even though Matthew (the writer of the gospel) clearly presents Jesus as the author of this act of healing, it is implicit that this healing action is also the action of God his Father. In the order of Matthew's presentation, at this point he does not explain how the action of Jesus the Son can also be implicitly seen as the action of God the Father. This explanation he reserves until Matt 11:25–30 which clearly attributes the works of Jesus to God—"Father, . . . , you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children." The following verses elaborate that it is in the context of Jesus' close and unique communion with the Father that the Father is revealed through the Son's work.<sup>7</sup> Or, through the Father's communion with his Son, the Father partakes in the work of his Son and reveals himself through his Son. In that sense, the work is both the Father's work as well as the Son's. John 14:10 expresses the same idea—"Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work." There is a *concurrency* between the Father and the Son in the Son's work. In particular, Matthew presents Jesus' authority as his very own, yet this authority is not exclusively his own because it also rightly belongs to his Father. Neither the gospel of Matthew nor the gospel of John (nor indeed Mark and Luke) makes explicit the exact nature of this concurrency but they both point to its indispensable foundation in Jesus' communion and unity with his Father through the Spirit. Some attempt to appreciate further this mystery of the Trinity—the unity of Jesus

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7. "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No-one knows the Son except the Father, and no-one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." (Matt 11:27)

with his Father through the Spirit, and his distinction from his Father—will be attempted in chapter 6.

### **3 Healing of the Centurion's Servant**

When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering." Jesus said to him, "I will go and heal him." The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! It will be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that very hour. (Matt 8:5–13)<sup>8</sup>

Matthew's presentation of Jesus' authority, radicalism, and unconditional love is already evident in the first of the miracles. In the second miracle following immediately the first in chapter 8, Matthew continues with these themes about Jesus and in some way heightens the theme of his authority and radicalism. A centurion (a Roman official overseeing one hundred soldiers) whose servant is in great need comes to Jesus for help. The centurion is implicitly a gentile. Jesus responds to him by saying, "I will go and heal him." Despite the fact that a Jew would become ritually unclean if he visits a gentile's house, Jesus is ready to go to the centurion's house without any hesitancy. He is quite prepared to go to the centurion's home himself and heal his servant even though it means that he will incur the risk of being accused of breaking Jewish customs and rendering himself ritually unclean. His boldness in transcending this ritual barrier for the

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8. Translation from the New International Version.