

 **Main Street**  
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



**Matthew 8:1-17**  
**“Jesus And The Outcasts”**

June 28, 2015  
(5<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost)

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**“Following Christ From City Center!”**

**MATTHEW 7:28-8:1, 8:2-17**  
**"JESUS AND THE OUTCASTS"**

Mighty In Words (5-7), Now Deeds (8-9)

**IIIA' 7:28-29, 8:1 CONCLUSION TO SERMON ON THE MOUNT: JESUS' AUTHORITY (M).**

28 1 And when Jesus finished these sayings, //7:28-29, 11:1, 13:53, 19:1, 26:1 Ends Each Of 5 Discourses  
 2 the crowds were astonished at his teaching, Awe And Wonder In His Self-Authenticating Presence  
 29 for he taught them as one who had "authority" and not as the scribes. 10:1, Scribes: Authority From Teachers  
 8:1 1' When he came down from the mountain, Travel Before Miracle, 8:1, 5, 14; Approach: 8:2, 5, 16  
 2' great crowds followed him. New Disciples, No Footnotes, Authority = out of himself from Holy Spirit  
 Micah 7:15, As In Exodus, 10 (Ex. 7-12)

**IVA: 8:2-17 THE HEALING POWER OF GOD'S SON PLUS SCRIPTURAL WARRANT. 1-2-1'**  
 //4:23-25 = Kingdom Healing, 3/10 Miracles In 8:2-9:35

**1) vv.2-4 CLEANSING OF THE MALE LEPER BY JESUS (TOUCH).** First //Mk. 1:40-45, Lk. 5:12-16  
 Focus = Who Jesus Is (Christology), Lean Stories

Illness **a) vv.2-3 Healing Of The Leper (Came On Behalf Of Himself).** b. Sanhedrin 47a, Ant. 3.10.1-3  
 2 And behold, a leper came to him and knelt before (lit. worshiped) him, saying, Bold, Leper//9:18, 15:25, 2 Kgs. 5:1-15  
 Appeal "LORD, if you will, you can make me clean." Problem: Unclean Wisdom 12:18, Lord: 8:2,6 8  
 3 2 And he stretched out his hand and touched him, Jesus's Touch Breaks Law, Ex. 4:4  
 Cure 2' saying, "I will; be clean." Jesus' Word No Prayer, Jesus Desires /Is Able  
 Proof 1' And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. Cure: Leprosy Cleansed 10:8, MARGINALIZED LEPER  
 Lev. 5:1-3, 13:45-46, 14, 2 Bar. 73:1-2, Jesus Heals What Only God Can!

**b) v.4 Post-Healing Instruction: Ritual Requirements (Jesus As Faithful Jew).**

4 And Jesus said to him, "See that you say nothing to any one; //9:30, Social Segregation Ended  
 but go, show yourself to the priest, 5:17-19 Fulfills Law, Forces A Response From Priests  
 and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a proof (witness) to the people." 11:5, Guilt Offering, Lev. 14:2-9, 10-32  
 Reintegrated Into Society, Mishnah Nega'im 3:1

**2) vv.5-13 HEALING OF CENTURION'S SERVANT AT A DISTANCE (BY WORD).**

No Jewish Middlemen, Jn. 4:46-54, //Lk. 7:1-10, 13:28-30 (Q)

**a) vv.5-6 Problem: Servant Paralyzed (Came For Healing Of Another).** Base Camp, 28:19-20

5 As he entered Caperna-um, a centurion came forward to him, 4:13, 9:1, 11:23 MARGINALIZED GENTILE  
 Illness beseeching him (6) and saying, Supplication Not Normal For The Powerful  
 Appeal "LORD, my servant (son?) is lying paralyzed at home, in terrible distress." 4:24, Right Title From Gentile  
 Syrian Gentile Garrison At Capernaum

**b) v.7 Initial Promise Of Healing (Boundary Statement: Clean/Unclean).**

7 And he said to him, "Shall I, by coming, heal him?" Or, I will come and heal him (?) (?)

**c) vv.8-9 Speech Of Centurion: Humility And Authority.**

8 But the centurion answered him, 8:2, Long Digression On Authority  
 "LORD, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; Scruples: Jn. 18:28, Acts 10:28  
 but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. Insight, Faith In Jesus' Word  
 9 For I am a man under "authority", with soldiers under me; Analogy: He Understands Clout  
 and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, Faith Of Man, Not The Sick!  
 and to another, 'Come,' and he comes,  
 and to my slave, 'Do this,' and he does it." Short Commands  
 Jesus Also Under Delegated Authority

**c' vv.10-12 Speech Of Jesus: Faith Of An Outsider: Example To Disciples.**

10 When Jesus heard him, he marveled, and said to those who followed him, //8:1, 10  
 "Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith. In/Out, Exemplary  
 11 I tell you, many will come from east and west Is. 2, Ps. 107:3, Example: Gentile Mission  
 and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, Is. 56:3-8  
 12 while "the sons of the kingdom" vv.11-13 //Lk. 13:28-39 (Q), Gentiles At Kingdom Table  
 will be thrown into the outer darkness; No Light, Legitimate Heirs Dismissed  
 there men will weep and gnash their teeth." 3:9, 13:38, //Lk. 13:28-29, Is. 25:6-8  
 Warnings: 7:21-23, 13:36-43, 47-50; 22:11-14, 24:45-51, 25:1-13, 14-30

**b') v.13 Final Promise Of Healing.**

13 And to the centurion Jesus said, "Go; be it done for you as you have believed." p.v., Not A Reward  
 Not Pray; Announced At Distance; Incorporates His Expectation

**a') v.13b Cure: Servant Healed At A Distance: An Utterly Free Gift.**

Proof And the servant was healed at that very moment. p.v. //b. Berakot 34b On Hanini ben Dosa's Miracle

JEW  
JESUS

**1') vv.14-17 HEALING OF PETER'S MOTHER IN LAW AND THE CROWDS (TOUCH).**

Six Verbs: *enters, sees, touches, left, got up, served*

**a) vv.14-15 Healing With A Touch (Discovered By Jesus).** Mk. 1:29ff. // Lk. 4:38ff.

14 1 And when Jesus entered Peter's house, **Fever Seen As Illness In Itself, Not Symptom**  
Illness *he saw* his mother-in-law lying sick with a fever; **Lev. 26:6, Dt. 28:22 As Punishment (Violate Covenant)**  
15 he touched her hand, **v.16 + word, Rabbis Forbid, Jesus Extinguishes Heavenly Fire, b. Nedarim 41a**  
Cure and the fever left her, **No Pre-Conditions, Some Said Fever Only Cured By God**  
Proof and she *rose* and served *him*. **Shows What Following Means (8:1, 10), Resurrection, Response As Service To Him!**  
**Jesus Not Contaminated By Leprosy, Gentiles, Fever! MARGINALIZED WOMAN**

**b) v.16 Summary: Healings At Evening + Isaiah Citation (53:4).** Ends Day That Began At 5:1

16 2 That evening they brought to him many who were possessed with demons; //9:32, Ps. 107:19-20, Drawn By Reports  
2' and he cast out the spirits *with a* word //8:8 (Word), Not Magic, He Takes Initiative (*Took, Bore*), Ps. 107:19-20  
1' and *healed all* who were sick. //4:23-25 All Healed, Demonization/ Healing Distinguished  
**Suffering Servant, Jesus Abolishes All Ritual Uncleaness, Is. 53:4 (LXX)**  
17 This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah, **(M) took away, 1 Pt. 2:24, Fulfillment: Messianic Miracles**  
"He took (away) *our* infirmities and bore *our* diseases." **Free Citation, Matchless Power/Authority: Mission, 1:21**  
**Our Includes Gentiles! Incarnation Of Lavish Compassion, Ignores Taboos**  
**He Takes Into Himself The Penalty Of Sins, i.e. Various Diseases, Demonization, Acts 10:38, Heb. 2:4**  
**Only In The World To Come Will Sickness, Suffering, And Evil Be Finally Banished In New Bodies**

**Signs & Wonders: Miracles Ended Long Ago— Or Did They? by Dr. Bruce L. Shelley**

(*Christian History*, Issue 67, Summer 2000, Vol. XIX, No. 3, Page 43)

During his pastoral ministry, Augustine came to know a woman in Carthage named Innocentia. A devout woman and highly regarded, she tragically discovered that she had breast cancer. A skillful physician told her the disease was incurable. She could opt for amputation and possibly prolong her life a little, or she could follow the advice of Hippocrates and do nothing. Either way, death would not be put off for long. Dismayed by this diagnosis, Augustine reports, "she turned for help to God alone, in prayer." In a dream, Innocentia was told to wait at the baptistry for the first woman who came out after being baptized, and to ask this woman to make the sign of Christ over the cancerous breast.

Innocentia did as she was told, and she was completely cured. When she told her doctor what had happened, he responded with a contemptuous tone, "I thought you would make some great discovery to me!" Then, seeing her horrified look, he backpedaled, saying, "What great thing was it for Christ to heal a cancer? He raised a man who had been dead four days." This story, reported in *City of God*, shows how dramatically Augustine had changed his mind on the subject of miracles.

In North Africa in Augustine's day, belief in miracles was as widespread as today's obsession with angels in America. Early in his ministry, Augustine mocked these popular claims.

In *On True Religion*, written in 390, he asserted that miracles like those in the Bible ended in the apostolic era. "These miracles," he wrote, "were no longer permitted to continue in our time, lest the mind should always seek visible things, and the human race should be chilled by the customariness of the very things whose novelty had inflamed them."

But later in Augustine's ministry, some of his colleagues traveled to Jerusalem and returned to North Africa with relics of the body of an apostle. Little chapels called *memoriae* containing sacred dust sprang up in country estates around Hippo. As biographer Peter Brown puts it, Augustine had to deal with miracles on his own doorstep.

The bishop, who had once scoffed at such folk religion, now found himself preaching to huge crowds drawn by a little bit of dust. He saw the power of the shrines: he knew of a thief in Milan who was compelled to confess his deeds at the tomb of the saints. He needed to modify his earlier, anti-miracle stance.

So Augustine, late in life, decided to examine and record the miracles that he personally encountered and to give the verifiable miracles maximum publicity. In fact, he writes that when he learned Innocentia had not told others about her healing, "I was indignant that so astounding a miracle, performed in so important a city, and on a person far from obscure, should have been kept a secret like this; and I thought it right to admonish her and to speak to her with some sharpness on the matter."

When Innocentia did tell her friends what had happened, "They listened in great amazement and gave praise to God." Augustine's hope was that, as apostolic miracles had aided the growth of the early church, miracles in his own day would draw people to Christianity. Unfortunately, pagans and heretics boasted of miracles, too. Augustine did not deny the pagan miracles, but he likened them to the wonders performed by Pharaoh's magicians, in contrast to the miracles wrought by Moses. Pagan miracles occurred, but as they did not bring glory to the true God, they must be dismissed.

Heretics' miracles, according to Augustine, never happened: "Either they are deceived, or they deceive." Heretics are incapable of performing miracles because, by their schismatic nature, they show that they have not love, and he who has not love is nothing. If a heretic claims to have performed a miracle, Augustine warned, he is a false prophet, seeking only to lead people away from Christ. Augustine's exuberance for true miracles in *The City of God* shows that he no longer saw them as sham spirituality but as physical manifestations of God's work in the world. He wrote, "What do these miracles attest but the faith which proclaims that Christ rose in the flesh and ascended into heaven with the flesh? ... God may himself perform them by himself, through that wonderful operation of his power whereby, being eternal, he is active in temporal events; or he may effect them through the agency of his servants. ... Be that as it may, they all testify to the faith in which the resurrection to eternal life is proclaimed." (Bruce L. Shelley is senior professor of church history at Denver Seminary and author of *Church History in Plain Language* (Word).

**A Brief Treatment Of Matthew 8:1-17**

With this thought unit we begin a new subsection that runs from 8:1-9:35 and contains ten miracle stories interwoven with discipleship materials. The choice of ten indicates Matthew continues his analogy between Jesus and Moses (e.g. ten plagues). The mighty words of Jesus in the Sermon are followed by mighty deeds. The first three form a conscious thought unit made so by Matthew's selection and arrangement. The form is a 3:1 concentric pattern (1. vv.2-4, 2. vv.5-13, 1' vv.14-17). The first and last stories are short, the central longer. The first and third are face to face with Jews, the center a healing of a Gentile at a distance. In the first and third Jesus heals by touch (vv. 3a// v.1c) and a word (v.3b//v.16b). A further inclusion is a scriptural allusion to *what Moses commanded* (v.4c) // a scriptural citation from Is. 53:4 (v.17). Each healing concerns those marginalized by Jews: a Jewish leper, a Gentile soldier, a Jewish woman. Jesus breaks old barriers to create God's new people around himself. The address *LORD* is found in the first two stories (vv.2b//v.5c), the word *healed* in the second and third (v.13b//v.16c). All three occur in the environs of Capernaum and begin with Jesus' travel (8:2, 5, 14). The first and last are edited from Mark (vv.2-4 // Mk. 1:40-45, vv.14-17 // Mk. 1:30-32) and reversed in order; the middle story is parallel to Lk. 7:1-10 (Q). The unit concludes with a healing summary and a warrant from Is. 53:4 to demonstrate Jesus' continuity with Scripture. He takes away infirmity and bears our disease. Our bodies receive benefits now and in the age to come. Healing now is preview of resurrection wholeness then.

The bridge between the sermon and this new section is 7:28-8:1 where Jesus' concludes his teaching, leaves the crowds astonished, and descends with followers. He's publicly available, and the first supplicant is a leper who's heard of Jesus the healer (4:23-25). His disease pushed him to the edge of life and society, and many saw him as under a curse. Matthew's *And behold* (v.2) is a call to attention. Our leper kneels in humility, addresses Jesus respectfully, and makes his case, "If you will, you can make me clean," the issue being healing that restores him physically, religiously, and socially. Ability is not in question, only desire. Jesus responds with a statement of intent, "I will," and a command, "be clean," which the Spirit backs with power. The proof is v.3c, "And immediately the leprosy left him," a creative miracle of new skin. Since it was believed only God can heal a leper, Jesus here does the work of God, an indirect statement of his identity as Son. The counsel of v.4 shows Jesus keeps the law, involves the man in his restoration, and makes a way for him to be rejoined to his community as a living witness.

The healing of the centurion's servant at a distance has a 6:2 concentric pattern with parallel speeches at the center (c.vv.8-9 // c' vv.10-12), an initial (b. v.7) and concluding (b' v.13a) statement of healing, and outer frames that present the problem (a. vv.5-6) and cure (a' v.13b). Jesus is approached by a Roman officer with an appeal for what amounts to a family member. For Jesus to cross an ethnic barrier and enter the home of a Gentile would be unusual for a rabbi, and this is the meaning of his question, "Shall I, by coming, heal him?" The speech of the centurion (vv.8-9) is remarkable for its insight into authority, "...but only say the word, and my servant shall be healed." Jesus then draws an unfavorable contrast between this outsider and Jewish insiders (vv.10-12). Faith is where it is found. Jesus' confidence is based on divine revelation as indicated in the passive voice, "Go; *be it done* for you (i.e. by God) as you have believed," and it was, at that moment. Jesus heals with a prophetic word at a distance. The healing of Peter's mother in law is trimmed to the basics by Matthew. Jesus *sees* and takes initiative. Her restoration is then demonstrated in service to him. Matthew has edited the healing and the summary together to form a 4:2 chiasm (fever healed- many possessed // spirits cast out- all healed). How clever!

## JESUS AND THE OUTCASTS

*“...and he... healed all who were sick.”*

In Jesus we have a preview of what the kingdom looks like at ground level.

### MATTHEW 8 : 1 6

In his book, *God Is Closer Than You Think*, John Ortberg tells a miracle story:

“When my friend Kim was a young, her dad pulled off the road to help a woman change a tire. Another vehicle swerved and in the collision the car was shoved onto his chest. His right thumb was torn off, five ribs broken, his left lung pierced and filling with blood. His wife- barely five feet tall- placed her hands on the bumper and prayed, ‘In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ,’ then lifted the car off his chest so he could be dragged out. (She later found out she broke a vertebra.) Kim's father was in shock, and doctors prepped for emergency surgery. ‘His thumb won't do him any good if he's dead,’ one of them said. Suddenly, spontaneously, (his) skin changed from ashen to pink. He experienced a miraculous healing. He then invited a surprised surgical team to join in singing ‘Fairest Lord Jesus.’ They did not even bother to hook him up to oxygen. He did not find out until later this was the precise moment his father-in-law, a pastor, had his congregation pray for him.”

Ortberg continues with a comment:

“Sometimes such stories come from not-so-credible sources, publications sold in checkout lines with reports of extraterrestrials playing third base for the Red Sox. But here the man was Dr. James Loder, 40 year professor at Princeton Seminary. Until then God had been mostly an abstract idea; now Jesus became a living Presence. His heart grew so tender he became known as *the weeping professor*. He began to live from one moment to the next in a God-bathed, God-

soaked, God-intoxicated world.”<sup>1</sup>

I love reports of God’s power, especially from good sources.<sup>2</sup> They remind us ours is a richly interactive God: the lively communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who as one God is the unbounded source, the historical example, and the power of divine grace flooding the world with possibilities. What we take as natural law—which is the observed regularity of our world—is not the only force in operation. Science answers *When?* and *How?* questions; that’s a good thing; it leads to technologies. But science cannot within its proper bounds answer the equally important *Who?* and *Why?* questions of meaning. The ultimate *Who* is God; the ultimate *Why* is divine love willing to come and suffer. So if you ask, Why did the tea kettle whistle? the scientific answer is that H<sup>2</sup>O reached the boiling point and exerted steam pressure through a small opening. But there is another level of explanation that takes personal agency into account. The tea pot began to whistle because I wanted a cup of tea (the *Why*) and acted to make it so (the *Who*).

To say the generic word *God* and then fill that word with the content of Scripture is to acknowledge an invisible realm beyond measurement. The living God is not an object among others to be put under a microscope. The One who made the patterns of creation may disturb them in response to prayer or simply sovereign choice. The lawgiver is greater than the laws. The author of the story of all life has the ability to write himself into the story as a character, thus Jesus and the healings that came through him as examples of what life looks like when God’s in charge. Miracles as events attributed to God that cause wonder are part of a Christian world view, because that is the original meaning of the Latin *miraculum*, not an act that defies the laws of nature but an unusual act that causes wonder and raises the question, Who did it?<sup>3</sup> And while we are able to build partial models of God’s

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<sup>1</sup> *God Is Closer Than You Think* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 24-25. For Loader’s biography, see the summary under “Protestant educators,” [www.talbot.edu/ce20/educators/protestant/james\\_loader](http://www.talbot.edu/ce20/educators/protestant/james_loader). For his testimony of the event, see James Loader, *Transforming Moment* (New York, NY: Helmers and Howard, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Tim Stafford, “A New Age of Miracles,” *Christianity Today*, Sept. 2012, 48-51.

<sup>3</sup> On the theological, philosophical issues, see Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus The Miracle Worker* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 1999), “The Possibility of Miracles,” 38-56. The standard is now Craig Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, 2 Volumes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011). For a treatment by a philosopher,

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interaction with the world from Scripture and philosophy and experience, the final word is *mystery*. Our learning reaches a diminishing point; it is in our love and prayers and holy desires that we reach past our understanding. We have cumulative knowledge of God in creation and in conscience and in Scripture and in Jesus and in reason and in the wisdom of the church and our own experience.<sup>4</sup>

The Jesus who saves us now in part and later in heaven and finally in the fullness of resurrection is the heart of God for all people. In him disability and disease and the demonic and death were pushed back, but then eventually everyone Jesus healed died without divine rescue except that which comes through and beyond death. It was all temporary, but it was an unforgettable experience of divine love they carried all their days. Since Jesus died around 33AD, there were young people he healed who likely lived to the end of the first century or a bit into the second. They were living witnesses during the decades the gospels were being composed who could— if interviewed— give first hand testimony, so this is not myth and legend.<sup>5</sup> We walk by faith with glimmers of sight, but those glimmers are not to be discounted.

Prayer is not magic. We have no leverage on God, no slot in which we drop quarters and then pull a lever to guarantee results. Before the pain of others we stand with empty hands, not magical phrases and proven techniques. We reach out in prayer to the God who is there. Jesus spent much of his time with the sick as if each mattered because they did: made in God’s image, corrupted by sin, living behind enemy lines, vulnerable to evil, sick and tormented, full of hopes and dreams, faith and superstition, wondering where God was, and in great need, just like today! So we pray and wait for guidance that comes through gifts of the Spirit. Before we pray

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see Robert Larmer, *Dialogues on Miracle* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015). For a critique of modern ideas of miracle as applied to the deeds of Jesus, see Richard Horsley, *Jesus And Magic* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), Chap. 2, “The Concept of Miracle and Jesus’ Healings and Exorcisms,” 20-34.

<sup>4</sup> For a defense of divine revelation and knowledge of God, see William H. Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006); Dallas Willard, *Knowing Christ Today* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> For a defense of the gospels against the charge of legend, see Paul Rhodes & Gregory Boyd, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007).

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**Matthew 8:1-17** ..... 8

we acknowledge the Father’s kingdom is not far away,<sup>6</sup> and we ask, “Holy Spirit, come.” We pray as best we can and wait in prayerful silence, but we leave outcomes to God and don’t make false promises. We then pause and interview the person briefly. If there are signs something is happening, if there is energy or warmth or relief or an image given to the person or one of the team, we focus the next round of prayer on what God seems to be doing. If there is peace, we pray for more. If relief, we pray for more. If tears, we ask about losses. If we meet resistance, we ask about the need to forgive and receive the same. If nothing seems to be happening, we pray anyway because we are not dependent on phenomena. God is always at work.

We are gentle and do not blame the sick. We direct them— where fitting— to medical and counseling and addictions resources like A.A. because they are gifts from above. We offer to pray with them again. We freely admit to not being very good at what we’re trying to do, and they often smile. We call them to follow Jesus, be faithful to a local church and turn away from sinful habits and practices. We draw on the examples of Scripture. We read those who are more experienced.<sup>7</sup> And as those who pray, it’s important that we receive prayer. We’re all wounded healers in a long process that ends in God’s kingdom; we are not experts at anything but always beginners. Reading the gospel stories, you never get the impression Jesus was about technique. He stood before a broken human being and trusted the love of the Father and the leading of Spirit. It was personalized, and we believe our Lord never does anything but good for people. And when people ask difficult questions— as they often do in anger or curiosity or disappointment— our most common answer is, “We don’t know. Why don’t you ask God yourself and search the Scriptures and bring us back what you find, then join us in praying for others. It may be that in giving others what you don’t yet have that you’ll receive what you desire.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Mark 1:15, “The kingdom of God is *at hand*, repent and believe the gospel.”

<sup>7</sup> For a popular history of healing ministry in the church, see Francis McNutt, *The Nearly Perfect Crime: How the Church Almost Killed the Ministry of Healing* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen, 2005). Our best current treatment of theology and practice, including the five-step model referenced above, is Alexander Venter, *Doing Healing* (Cape Town, SA: Vineyard Int., 2009). For an explanatory handout, go to [www.vineyardchurches.org.uk/uploads/Resources/5stephealing/5-step-healing-model.pdf](http://www.vineyardchurches.org.uk/uploads/Resources/5stephealing/5-step-healing-model.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> For a pastoral treatment, see Robert Wise, *When There Is No Miracle* (Oklahoma City, OK: Hearthstone, 1997).

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When you examine it, Christianity is a religion of healing: first with God, then ourselves, with one another, and finally our comprehensive environment.<sup>9</sup> Four dimensions: God, me, you, and all God made. All healing is temporary and partial till the kingdom of God engulfs all and we receive resurrection bodies like that of Jesus, and we are not there yet. Life is a whole; systems thinking is onto something. Spirituality, psychology, social justice, and ecology are interactive, and to start with one is to be led to the others because they affect us all. To pray for emotional healing without finding out why a three-time divorcee keeps marrying abusive losers is not enough. To aid a poor man without asking what keeps him poor is not adequate. To pray for healing and not work to remove the causes of preventable disease— including a growing number of STD’s which are self-inflicted— is a half-way measure.

In the modern world we segment people into specialized pieces because it’s easier and there’s just so much to know, but the church does not have that luxury. We are forever general practitioners who deal with the whole person across the whole of life, from before they are born till they are ushered into heaven beyond death, and that’s always messy, never neat. People are not just souls but bodies, male and female bodies, young and old bodies, bodies shaped by family genetics and local histories. Jesus loves us as bodies; it’s why the Son assumed flesh in the incarnation, which is as far as even God can go to identify with us. He came as a male, and he came through a female, so both genders are honored. Biblical spirituality is what we do with our bodies. There is no inner, essential you separable from your body and its gender assignment and created limits. You are not a fallen spark of divine light trapped in recalcitrant matter. You had no former lives, and you will have no multiple reincarnations. Just you in your flesh for one life, living behind enemy lines in a beautiful, dangerous, fallen world and in need of a strong friend like Jesus.

In each of Jesus’ healings we get a glimpse of God’s kingdom and a preview of what’s ahead for the whole creation.<sup>10</sup> No leprosy, no paralysis, no parents begging for children, no crippling fevers, no demonic torments, but life made whole and free again. We are a protest against current management and an announcement

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<sup>9</sup> For an excellent overview, see Amanda Porterfield, *Healing in the History of Christianity* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> For a depth treatment, see Mark Saucy, *The Kingdom Of God In The Teaching Of Jesus In 20<sup>th</sup> Century Theology* (Waco, TX: Word, 1997), particularly “Jesus’ Demonstration of the Kingdom,” 321-330.

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a new regime is already on the way. The church is the place where— in the midst of the mess— we keep telling the stories that keep Jesus and his program before us.

In J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, the characters interpret ancient lore and rhymes in order to discern events in the present, much the same way Christians interpret Old Testament prophecies to predict the coming of Christ.

In the third book, *The Return of the King*, the hero, Aragorn— who is rightful claimant to the throne of Gondor— returns to the city of Minas Tirith. He is victorious in the battle against the dark lord Sauron, but not yet able to claim the throne.

He enters the city in disguise and goes to the Houses of Healing to mend friends struck in battle. As he performs his holy work, an attendant repeats an ancient verse: "The hands of the king are the hands of a healer, and so shall the rightful king be known."<sup>11</sup> As Isaiah first put it and as Matthew quoted in verse 17, "He took (away) our infirmities and bore our diseases." Jesus the healer is our rightful King.

### **TURNING TO THE TEXT**

We know from comparing Matthew, Mark, and Luke that the stories they relate are not identical in the telling or in strict chronological order.<sup>12</sup> Matthew has taken two healings from Mark, a third from a source shared with Luke, and organized them around a theme of Jesus healing three outcasts. The first and third are short. A leper is touched; Peter's wife's mother is touched. The first gets new skin, the other a return to 98.6 degrees. The story at the center of the Centurion's servant is much longer, has a major dialog about faith and judgment at the core, and is a healing *at a distance*— which is even more impressive. The two outside stories are about Jews, a man and a woman, the center story about Gentiles. Jesus is not just for our group.

One thing we observe is that there is no standard technique with Jesus, though there are repeated patterns. Reading the healing and exorcism stories, of which there are seventy-two accounts of forty-one distinct episodes, one gets the sense Jesus was

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<sup>11</sup> PreachingToday.com search under Mt. 8:1-17.

<sup>12</sup> Burton Thockmorton, *The Gospel Parallels* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1979), 31-34. For a summary of current scholarship, see Michael F. Bird, *The Gospel of the Lord: How the Early Church Wrote the Story of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014).

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not operating by technique but by divine revelation fitted to each situation.<sup>13</sup> The Father willed it, the Son enacted it, the Holy Spirit provided stage directions and holy energies. On his own Jesus was sinless but powerless. All he did was a cooperative venture of the Holy Trinity with broken people in ways that became visible: fresh skin for the scaly, paralysis gone, strength restored, fever banished, demons scattered. It was not make-believe or hope-so. A former leper went to a priest for official certification; the Centurion returned home to find it was so; Peter’s mother in law rose and served the Lord a fine supper of fried chicken! In each case there’s evidence something verifiable happened. After an exhaustive review of the history of Jesus, Roman Catholic scholar John Meier wrote, “Nothing is more certain about Jesus than that he was viewed by his contemporaries as an exorcist and a healer.”<sup>14</sup>

**7:28-8:1 Down From The Mountain.**

*Shock and awe* is Pentagon-speak for an overwhelming air attack. There was also something of *shock and awe* when Jesus spoke. He did not quote experts to back his opinions with learned precedent. His sermons needed no footnotes; his credibility was not predicated on degrees and ordination. Nothing about him was derivative, “...the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them *as one who had authority* and not as the scribes.” He was direct and confident; God backed him.

If the words and deeds of Jesus do not astound us, we’ve missed something. He was different from other Jewish teachers. This is God the Son sent by God the Father and guided by God the Holy Spirit. Ours is a Trinitarian reading of the gospel stories. Jesus is magnetic, and when you see people pulled towards him— as in the case of the crowds and the leper and the Centurion— they are responding to the drawing power of his grace which is the activity of the Holy Spirit pointing them in the right direction. This is why curiosity and desperation are each so valuable as precursors for faith: they begin to move people towards the Lord.

**1. vv.2-4 A Worshipful Leper.**

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<sup>13</sup> For cataloging and grouping by type, see Morton Kelsey, *Healing & Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1995), 43-45; also Venter, *Doing Healing*, 331-339.

<sup>14</sup> John Meier, “Jesus,” *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, revised edition (New York: Doubleday, 1986), 1321.

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The center of Jewish life was the Jerusalem temple, and the entire system of ritual purity was oriented around who was and was not permitted on temple grounds.<sup>15</sup> *Clean* and *unclean* were the operative terms, and it had nothing to do with hygiene. “What is *unclean* is not dirty but potentially dangerous, somewhat like the modern concept of being contaminated by radiation.”<sup>16</sup> To be labeled a *leper*, which means to have any one of a number of flaky, red, skin disorders— and not modern leprosy or *Hansen’s disease*— was to be permanently unclean. Special clothing was required; your presence had to be publicly announced.<sup>17</sup> Your touch rendered others ceremonially unclean, meaning they had to perform lengthy, expensive rituals of sacrifice before being restored. Yours was a living death, a life of social isolation and separation. Most cruelly, leprosy was commonly understood to be the direct judgment of God for heinous sin, often sexual in nature. Your skin was taken as an outward symbol of a diseased soul. No one dared touch a leper because of negative religious associations. It was proverbial that only God could heal a leper, and so when Jesus does so it raises the question of his Messianic identity. If you think of an AIDs patient in a third world country without anti-viral drugs and everyone on the village thinking the disease came from immorality, you have some idea how desperate such people were. They hated themselves, were scorned, and believed God hated them too. Then Jesus came as the path to restoration. He touched them in love.

As he drew near you saw the crowds part in fear and disgust. That he knelt before Jesus and addressed him as *Lord* demonstrates humility and hope. It was not a question of ability but desire, “Lord, *if you will*, you can make me clean.” And with the words Jesus spoke, the power of the Spirit saturated the man’s flesh, “And immediately his leprosy was cleansed.” It was a creative miracle all could see. Every prejudice the crowds had about lepers was called into question. When some of the folk we loathe and avoid do business with Jesus, we will have to ask forgiveness for how we treated them. To say *those kind of people* is spiritually dangerous.

\_\_\_\_\_ That Jesus sent the healed leper to the local priest for certification is for three purposes: 1) so the man could rejoin his family, synagogue, and resume pilgrimages

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<sup>15</sup> Saucy, *The Kingdom of God*, 326ff.

<sup>16</sup> M. Eugene Boring, *Matthew, Volume VIII, The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1995), 224, n. 188.

<sup>17</sup> Leviticus 13-14.

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to Jerusalem; 2) as a sign of Jesus' commitment to the law, and 3) as a witness Messianic actions were being performed. The center of Jewish life is no longer the temple and its management but a Jesus who cannot be managed. His is not a defensive holiness of avoiding the unclean but an offensive holiness of going for the worst, the last, the least and the lost. Jesus specializes in outcasts. It's a new day!

**2. vv.5-13 Healing At A Distance.**

The centurion is a different class of outcast, a member of the forces of occupation, likely a senior Syrian non-com in a garrison stationed at the border town of Capernaum, which was Jesus' base of operations.<sup>18</sup> He was used to giving orders and having them obeyed by a hundred soldiers. As with leprosy, touching a Gentile, going into their homes or eating their food rendered one ritually impure.

Nothing touches the heart of a parent like a ill child. We are not sure about the precise meaning since the Greek word can mean either *servant* or *son*. Whatever the relationship, the centurion cared enough to do the unusual, which was to seek out a Jewish prophet, address him as a superior and ask for help, "Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, in deep distress." The story of the leper encourages us to seek help for ourselves, which is *petition*; here is an example of seeking help for someone else, which is *intercession*. We go to Christ with our pain and the pain of others.

At the risk of being technical, I need to inform you that the words of Jesus in verse 7 can be read as a statement, "I will come and heal him," or as a question, "Will I, by coming, heal him?" as a test of faith.<sup>19</sup> Experts disagree, but I prefer the question because it leads logically to the officer's protest in verses 8 and 9, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; only say the word and my servant will be healed." It is not necessary for Jesus to be physically present. The Father wills it, the Son speaks it, the Spirit carries it out at a distance. In my mind I sometimes picture a cloud of light descending upon a person and absorbing the pain.

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<sup>18</sup> On Capernaum archaeology, see Charles R. Page II, *Jesus & The Land* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1995), 66-70.

<sup>19</sup> For the evidence either way, see Craig Keener, *A Commentary On The Gospel Of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 263ff. A thorough source analysis of vv.5-13 is John Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking The Historical Jesus, Volume 2* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1994), "The Special Case of the Centurion's Servant," 718-727.

\_\_\_\_\_ Years in the army cut a deep groove of authority in this man’s life. He had power, but only as long as he lined up with the purposes of his superior. And in Jesus he saw the same principle, only of a different order. “I say go to soldiers and slaves; he says go to demons and diseases. I operate in my area of authority, he in his.”

That Jesus was genuinely surprised at the man’s faith should not offend us. In the limits of the incarnation he was not omnipotent and omniscient. Jesus always operated at two levels, at the human level learning as we do by observation and deduction, and also at the level of revelation when prompted by God. His deity was fully present but bracketed and held in abeyance during the ministry so that he never operated independently but always dependently.<sup>20</sup> It was precisely at the point of his marveling and delight in the man’s faith that the Holy Spirit flooded Jesus with light as to the meaning of what was happening in front of him.

Here was a Gentile soldier who had a quality of faith Jesus had not seen before, “Truly I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.” Then, as an additional revelation signaled by a second formula of *I tell you* in verse 11, Jesus was carried in a vision to the great banquet at the end of age. Seated here are the patriarchs of Israel: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. At the table sits our centurion and many like him who’ve come from east and west seeking the true God. So this man’s faith in Jesus has potential not only to open his loved one to healing but to carry him through this life into the kingdom of God. Many others who thought they had reserved seats because of history and heritage— be it Jewish or Christian— will be ejected by heaven’s angelic bouncers. If God is indeed light, then hell is darkness, and since God is the ultimate opportunity, to reject God means eternal regret:

“I tell you,” said Jesus, that “many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of God, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into outer darkness; there men will weep gnash their teeth.”

Missing God’s party because you did not take Jesus seriously. A quote helps illumine this horrible possibility. It is from a mentor of John Wesley, William Law:

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<sup>20</sup> The clearest statement is John 5:19, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise.” Jesus was, in this sense, a perfect mimic.

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“Men are not in hell because God is angry with them; they are in darkness because they have done to the light which flows forth from God as a man does to the sun when he puts out his own eyes.”<sup>21</sup>

And if— in the midst of a healing at a distance— Jesus was prompted not just to speak of the healing work of God in this life but of the two destinies beyond this life, then perhaps we should be less shy of speaking of two destinies as well. Keeping them both before us has— as I have noticed— a certain salutary and sobering effect.

It was then that Jesus knew and spoke, “Go; be it done for you as you have believed.” This is not to say the healing was a reward for the faith, but that the centurion was prepared to receive what God was eager to give. All the faith we require of the sick is the willingness to receive prayer and give an honest report of what is or is not happening. Here the faith of the sick person is not involved at all, just the trust of the one who interceded for him. And if your prayer does not bring any immediate good, make sure your attitude does no harm. Verse 13b, “And the servant was healed at that very moment.” Now the centurion had to go and see if it was so. This was one of the stories that was retold and preserved when others were forgotten. Pray for those you love; listen for what Jesus would have you do.

### **1' vv.14-17 A Family Matter And A Mob.**

We think of fever as a symptom, but then it was regarded as a disease itself.<sup>22</sup> Matthew tells the story more concisely than Mark, omitting all unnecessary details. The verbs are all active: Jesus *enters*, *sees* and *touches*. Then three more verbs regarding Peter’s mother-in-law: the fever *left* her; she *rose*; she *served* him. Bam, bam, bam. All action. In Matthew’s version there is no conversation, no prayer, no word of command, just the touch of the healing hand of Jesus. Some come to him for themselves: the leper; some come for others: the centurion; some he seeks out.

What links these three healing accounts is that *they all concern outsiders*, people at the edge: a leper, a Gentile, a woman. Those the world pushes to the edges Jesus draws to the center, and if we are not willing to be in their company and make them our friends, what hope is there for us when they are so dear to him?

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<sup>21</sup> Edited, Martin Mauser, editor, *The Westminster Collection of Christian Quotations* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2001), 166-167.

<sup>22</sup> David Garland, *Reading Matthew* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 97.

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That evening Peter’s courtyard was a mass of broken people; think of a big city ER on a Saturday night. Jesus dealt with each and every one in turn to this awesome ending, “...and he cast out the spirits with a word, and healed *all* who were sick.” Illness and spiritual bondage are distinguished, and each is dealt with for the good of people. A church where hospitality is offered and where people receive loving prayer will always have about it the fragrance of the Lord. We cannot guarantee anything except that we will love and listen, we will pray and listen, we will wait and listen. We believe in healing, but it’s not under our control. How weak we appear.

Because Matthew was such a lover of Scripture, his mind alternated between Jesus and his Bible, and at the end of this collection of three healings he sums up their significance with a quote from one of the songs of the suffering servant, Isaiah 53:4, “He took (away) our infirmities and bore our diseases.” What Jesus did on the cross was not different from what he did every day. He obeyed God no matter where it led. He entered the pain and lostness of people and offered a way out. He offered himself to us and for us, and in the cross it all came to a focus, like so many cords gathered and tied in a knot. This is what it cost him to be our healer. Daily sweat, and in the end tears and blood. “He took (away) our infirmities, and bore our diseases.”

### CONCLUSION

This world needs our witness to Jesus and healing at every level. Our American culture seems designed to shred people and spit them out. A few winners, loads of losers. I invite you to consider the following four items:

1. Pick someone and pray for their healing. Ask God to increase your faith and ability to hear. Dare to obey the ideas that come if they lead to love.
2. Consider meditating your way slowly through all the healing stories in the Bible. I have provided a listing.
3. Keep your eyes open for outcasts. Ask for love and courage to reach out with kindness and a listening ear. It will revolutionize your faith.
4. Be honest with God and one other person about areas of your life in which healing is not complete. Let them pray for you and you for them.

I love these stories. I aim to follow the one they glorify. Prayer is an experimental laboratory, and I am never going to quit believing and asking for more of the kingdom to become visible. There is much more to this faith than we have yet explored, and I spell the word *faith* R-I-S-K. I may be a fool, but I am his fool.

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