HEALING THE LEPER

When he had come down from the mountain, many followed him. And behold, a leper came to him and knelt down before him, saying, "Lord, if you want to, you are able to cure me." And Jesus extended his hand and touched him, saying, "I do want to. Be whole." And he was immediately cleansed of his leprosy. And Jesus said to him, "Be careful not to tell anyone of this. But go and show yourself to the priests and bring as an offering the gift commanded by Moses, as a witness to the people (or to them)."
Matthew 8:1-4

Matthew moves immediately from the mountain where the sermon teaching on the character of the Kingdom took place to the healing narrative in his Gospel. In the next two chapters, Matthew will record ten miracles, the summary of which was given earlier.

Jesus went throughout all of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing all kinds of diseases and sickness among the people. So a report about him spread throughout Syria. People brought to him all who suffered with various illnesses and afflictions, those who had seizures, paralytics, and those oppressed by demons, and he healed them. And large crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, and beyond the Jordan River.
Matthew 4:23-25

Despite Matthew' s passion for directing the reader's attention toward the Kingdom of Heaven, he, being a Jew, also understands that the ministry of Jesus was directed by necessity first toward the Jews. The leper in this story is clearly a Jew.

Jesus sent out the twelve, instructing them as follows: "Do not go to Gentile regions and do not enter any Samaritan town. Go instead to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."
Matthew 10:5-6

Matthew gives us no specific setting for this event, save its proximity to the Sermon on the Mount which leads us to understand that its placement is general to the narrative and connected to the miracles and healings that will follow it. Though location is important, Matthew's focus is on Jesus whose miracles will confirm that the Jewish Scriptures are now being fulfilled in the promised Messiah.

Matthew's direction in fact, is so attentive to the Jewish Messiah inaugurating the prophesied Kingdom, that though he tells the man to make an offering, he omits the leper's being told to make an offering *for his purification* found in Mark's account of this event.

For Matthew, the reality that Jesus had cleansed the leper is imperative. No ritual under the Mosaic System had made this healing possible which continues to move his narrative toward the Kingdom now arrived and which was revealed *in the Mosaic System and Law.*

> *He told him, "See that you do not say to anything to anyone, but go and show yourself to a priest, and ring the offering that Moses commanded for your purification, as a testimony to them.*
> *Mark 1:44*

Unlike Mark, Matthew also omits the leper's disobedience to Jesus' command to reman silent concerning his healing. It would seem that he has no interest is pointing out the man's disregard.

Matthew presents some interesting parallels that are not readily obvious in this passage.

A leper came to him / Jesus extended his hand.
He knelt down / Jesus touched him.
If you want, you are able to cure me / I do want to, be whole.

Note that no extensive description of the leper's condition is given. Leprosy was a skin condition of various degrees. The reason for this could be that leprosy needed no extra description in first century Palestine, therefore, Matthew leaves out the obvious.

Another curious item to notice is that Matthew makes no mention of the reaction to this healing by those who observed it not by the man healed.

> *The omission of the crowd's reaction in Matthew 8:1-4 serves a specific narrative purpose. According to Theisen's commentary, Matthew focuses on the authority and compassion of Jesus rather than the public's response. This choice emphasizes Jesus' role as a healer and teacher, showcasing His divine power without the distraction of external validation from the crowd. By not detailing their reaction, Matthew invites readers to reflect on the significance of Jesus' actions and teachings directly, rather than through the lens of public opinion.*
> *Commentary on Theissen from Miracle Stories, page 72-80*

> *When he had come down from the mountain, many followed him.*
> *Matthew 8:1*

The *"many"* in this passage is often translated as *"large crowds"* and serves to note the popularity of Jesus and his teaching or at the very least, the impact that it is having.

If Matthew is presenting Jesus as the True Israel and the One greater than Moses, then his mention of the Jesus coming down from the mountain may allude back to Torah and the story of Moses descending from Mount Sinai. Given that Jesus just corrected a flawed interpretation of the Law and delivered Kingdom ethics, this seems intentional by Matthew.

Now <u>when Moses came down from Mount Sinai</u> with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand,
Exodus 34:29

Matthew often uses the phrase *"followed him"* in the sense of discipleship.

He said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." They left their nets immediately and <u>followed him</u>.
Matthew 4:19-20

It is unlikely, given Jesus' language regarding the cost of the narrow gate and straight way, that most of this crowd were such disciples. Surely some would have been but as the narration of Matthew progresses, it becomes clear that *many* of these followers did so more out of curiosity and novelty than true belief.

And behold, a leper came to him and knelt down before him, saying, "Lord, if you want to, you are able to cure me."
Matthew 8:2

The use of the word *"behold"* is an imperative. It connotes that something important is about to happen. And here we do indeed behold that a leper comes before him with a posture that relates to us his humility and his homage.

Some translations may use the word *"worshipped him"* but Hagner thinks this phrasing too strong. In Mark's account of this passage, the Leper does not use any designating descriptions for Jesus, but simply makes his request and confidence known.

The designation Matthew places before us by the leper for Jesus is indeed *"Lord"* but this does not convey the deity of Jesus as God incarnate, but could merely be the Lerper's belief that Jesus is God's messianic agent.

"Lord, if you want to, you are able to cure me." This statement reveals that the leper reached the conclusion of Jesus' ability to heal him before he came to him. Perhaps and most likely, he witnessed or had heard about the other miracles Jesus had performed within the region of Galilee. If the leper believed Jesus to be God's messianic agent, than his expectation of this messiah to be able to heal him was expected.

Jesus answered them, "Go tell John what you hear and see. The blind see, the lame walk, <u>lepers are cleansed</u>, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news proclaimed to them.
Matthew 11:4-5

The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute shall sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.
Isaiah 35:5-6

Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the land.
Isaiah 26:19

If such was the case regarding the leper, then his statement to Jesus: *"Lord, if you want, you are able to cure me."* is more a question of Jesus' desire rather than in his ability.

And Jesus extended his hand and touched him, saying, "I do want to. Be whole." And he was immediately cleansed of his leprosy.
Matthew 8:3

The man coming to Jesus had leprosy. Few things if any, in the time of the ancient world were more feared than leprosy. According to the Old Testament Law, many skin ailments could qualify as leprosy but for the sake of our story, we will assume this man suffered from the type we call Hansen's disease.

The horror of this disease was not just physical but social and psychological as one became an outcast from community life.

And when the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?
2 Kings 5:7

"And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them were cleaned, only Naaman the Syrian."
Luke 4:27

To contract the disease was, by the society of the day, to leave one as good as dead and believed to be under God's judgment.

And Aaron said to Moses, "Oh, my lord, do not punish us because we have done foolishly and have sinned. Let her not be as one dead, whose flesh is half eaten away when he comes out of his mother's womb."
Numbers 12:11-12

A leper, as it is written that Aaron said to Moses with regard to Miriam's leprosy: "Let her not be as one dead (Numbers 12:12).
Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 64b

And Azariah the chief priest and all the priests looked at him, and behold, he was leprous in his forehead! And they rushed him out quickly, and he himself hurried to go out, because the LORD had struck him.
2 Chronicles 26:20

As outcasts, there were also protocols for lepers to follow when entering the presence of others.

"If the disease reappears in the house after the stones have been torn out and the house scraped and plastered, the priest is to go and examine it and, if the disease has spread in the house, it is a persistent defiling disease; the house is unclean. It must be torn down—its stones, timbers and all the plaster—and taken out of the town to an unclean place. Moreover, whoever enters the house while it is shut up shall be unclean until the evening.
Leviticus 14:43-46

And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance.
Luke 17:12

Thus, when a leper entered the community, he must yell *"Unclean, unclean!"* Though this fact is not conveyed to us here, for the leper to come into the presence of these people, such a humiliating warning must have been given.

And Jesus extended his hand and touched him – is made even more extraordinary when one considers the social protocols of leprosy.

Though Jesus did not need to touch the leper to heal him, he did so, which indeed, was a violation of the law in Leviticus 5:3. However, in the case of Jesus, the law was not violated because Jesus himself did not become unclean after touching the man. Rather, the leper became purified, clean, and whole. Actually, what Jesus did in healing the man was an act of mercy which is truly what the law was aiming at.

When he had come down from the mountain, many followed him. And behold, a leper came to him and knelt down before him, saying, "Lord, if you want to, you are able to <u>cure</u> me." And Jesus extended his hand and touched him, saying, "I do want to. <u>Be whole</u>." And he was immediately <u>cleansed</u> of his leprosy.

Note Matthew's three-fold pattern of repetition here in the use of the underscored words. This is a literary device to emphasize the completeness of the action.

Whereas Matthew often remarks on the crowd's astonishment at the words and actions of Jesus, none here is given.

The silence on the part of the crowd could be - though not stated - due to their having dispersed when the leper appeared among them calling out *"Unclean, unclean!"*.

And Jesus said to him, "Be careful not to tell anyone of this. But go and show yourself to the priests and bring as an offering the gift commanded by Moses, as a witness to the people (or to them)."
Matthew 8:4

Jesus warns the healed man not to tell anyone of this. Matthew records other such instances of this command.

And their eyes were opened. And Jesus sternly warned them, "See that no one knows about it."
Matthew 9:30

Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. And many followed him, and he healed them all and ordered them not to make him known.
Matthew 12:15-16

Then he strictly charged his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.
Matthew 16:20

The question one might ask of such commanded silence is *why*.

Jesus desires simply to avoid inflaming popular, but mistaken, messianic expectations that looked for an immediate national-political deliverance. It is clear, however, that Matthew is less interested in the messianic motif than is Mark. In the present instance, the report of the curing of a leper would perhaps have caused the crowds to think of an eschatological prophet.

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent to the king saying, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come now to me, that he may know that <u>there is a prophet in Israel</u>.
2 Kings 5:8

Hagner – Matthew, page 199

But go and show yourself to the priests and bring as an offering the gift commanded by Moses – was a requirement for the cleansing of a leper. By sending the healed man to the priests, Jesus is shown being faithful to the stipulations of Torah.

as a witness to the people (or to them) – can be viewed in several ways.

1) as a witness to the priests or the people about the faithfulness of Jesus to Torah;
2) as a witness perhaps against the priests or people (that Jesus was indeed the Messiah.
3) to the priests and the people that the man was indeed, cleansed of the disease.

Of these, the third option is most likely and makes sense in the context. Jesus understood that the man needed to keep Torah restrictions in order for him to be able to reenter community whole.

> *The story fits "the context of a Jewish-Christianity which respects Temple sacrifices and Law, but, as a result of its new faith, is no longer inwardly bound by these authorities.*
> *Hagner – Matthew, page 200*

> *The unique authority of Jesus, just previously heard in his exceptional words, is now to be seen in a series of exceptional deeds. The first of them is recounted briefly and directly. There is a sense in which leprosy is an archetypal fruit of the original fall of humanity. It leaves its victims in a most pitiable state: ostracized, helpless, hopeless, despairing. The cursed leper, like fallen humanity, has no options until he encounters the messianic king who will make all things new. His simple confidence in the ability of Jesus to cure his disease is impressive. If only he will do it! But this precisely is the work of the Messiah: to restore the created order from its bondage to decay: "I do want to do it!" The very presence of Jesus represents God's "Yes!" to the request of this poor man and to all who suffer. As Jesus reached out to the leper, God in Jesus has reached out to all victims of sin. The leper was cured immediately by only a word from Jesus. This same Jesus cures his people, the Church, from a whole host of maladies stemming from the fall, both spiritual and physical. Indeed it is the ultimate purpose of Jesus, as a part of the future eschatological consummation, to heal every malady without exception.*
> *Hagner – Matthew, page 200*