

**“WE MATTER”**

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**Text: Matthew 8:1-4, 16-17 NLT****God’s Word: Leviticus 13:45-46 NLT****Matthew 8:1-4, 16-17 NLT**

*Large crowds followed Jesus as he came down the mountainside. <sup>2</sup> Suddenly, a man with leprosy approached him and knelt before him. “Lord,” the man said, “if you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean.” <sup>3</sup> Jesus reached out and touched him. “I am willing,” he said. “Be healed!” And instantly the leprosy disappeared. <sup>4</sup> Then Jesus said to him, “Don’t tell anyone about this. Instead, go to the priest and let him examine you. Take along the offering required in the law of Moses for those who have been healed of leprosy. This will be a public testimony that you have been cleansed.”*

*<sup>16</sup> That evening many demon-possessed people were brought to Jesus. He cast out the evil spirits with a simple command, and he healed all the sick. <sup>17</sup> This fulfilled the word of the Lord through the prophet Isaiah, who said, “He took our sicknesses and removed our diseases.”*

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The policeman suddenly appeared in the doorway, and everyone stood still. It had been an awesome party up to that point; a bit raucous, perhaps, but great fun. Now, one of the neighbors had complained about the noise. “Who’s in charge here?” the policeman asked. The person whose house the people were in looked sheepish. “Well, nobody’s in charge exactly,” he said, “but it’s my house.” “Well,” said the policeman, “I’m in charge now; and I’m telling you this noise must stop right away.” With that, he left. And so did everyone else. The party was over.

The policeman had authority, whether the people liked it or not. He had the uniform, the police radio, and the law to back him up. He knew it and the people at the party knew it. It didn’t take any special insight to see it, or courage to respond. That was just the way it was.

At the beginning of our Gospel Lesson for today we are told that Jesus “*came down from the mountainside,*” and “*large crowds followed him.*” Jesus had just finished preaching His infamous “Sermon on the Mount.” And it was The Sermon to beat all sermons.

In verses 28 and 29 of Matthew Chapter 7 we are told, “*When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.*”

But did Jesus really have authority? Was Jesus really in charge? Jesus wasn't wearing some police uniform. And, after-all, Jesus isn't some policeman-like fellow anyway. So, if Jesus had authority what would that mean; what would that look like?

Today's Gospel Lesson gives us a sneak peek at what Jesus' authority looks like in practice on the street! The first situation Jesus faces when He comes down the mountain and onto the streets is a man with leprosy. The physical condition of a leper was terrible, but there was something that made it even worse!

The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that lepers were treated "as if they were, in effect, dead [people]." As soon as leprosy was diagnosed, the leper was absolutely and completely banished from human society. Leviticus 13:46 tells us that the leper "shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp."

Can you imagine? Can you imagine what it would have felt like to be a leper? To be totally outcaste, totally rejected—by everyone?

Well, maybe some of us can, at least in some ways. How about the children who are bullied on the playground and in the lunchroom? They are made to feel like outcastes, are they not? Perhaps this is how some of us were treated as children, and maybe some of us still bear some of the scars. Perhaps we still feel as if we "don't fit in." Maybe our "self-esteem" is not where it should be. Maybe you feel a bit like a leper today.

In the Middle Ages, if anyone came down with leprosy, the priest put on his stole and took his crucifix, and brought the leper into the church. He then read the burial service over the leper, who for all human purposes was dead.

How do you think that made him or her feel? Are there any persons who are treated as if they are lepers today? The homeless, perhaps? Are there any persons, who we treat as if they were dead? Are there any persons whom we have totally given up on?

In Jesus' day, no one would even think of greeting a leper. It's said that one Rabbi wouldn't even eat an egg bought in a street where a leper had passed by. Another Rabbi actually boasted that he had thrown stones at lepers in order to keep them away. Other Rabbis hid from lepers, or ran as fast as they could the other way, at the sight of a leper even in the distance. They didn't want to be "unclean."

There has probably never been a disease that so separated one human being from another the way leprosy did. And yet, it was a leper whom Jesus touched when He came down from the mountainside.

To a Jew in the time of Jesus, there could be no more amazing sentence in the New Testament than the simple statement, "*Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man.*" Can you imagine the gasps from the crowd? Can you imagine the shudder going through the onlookers as Jesus reaches out and touches this poor man? But can you also feel the thrill of warmth and of life that came over the leper himself?

Nobody had touched him for a long time, perhaps many years. No one had even given him the time of day, for that matter! In the eyes of the people, he was a dead man. We don't know why the leper felt compelled to come and kneel before Jesus calling Him "Lord," and saying to Him with confidence, *"if you are willing, you can make me clean."*

We must remember that before the Sermon on the Mount began, we were told that *"Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people..."*  
...and *"News about him spread..."*

Perhaps the leper had been told about Jesus by someone else who had been healed. Maybe he had heard Jesus teaching on the mountainside, heard the Word of God on His lips and thus believed Jesus was capable of healing him.

Whatever the reason for the leper's belief, he approached Jesus with confidence. He seemed to have little doubt that, if Jesus willed, Jesus could make him clean. Reaching out His hand and touching the man, Jesus replied *"I am willing. Be clean!"*

Jesus welcomed the person whom everyone else drove away. Jesus touched the person whom no one else would even come close to. For Jesus is filled with compassion.

The law said that Jesus must avoid contact with that man and threatened Him with terrible uncleanness if Jesus allowed the leper to come within six feet of Him; but Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him.

The medical knowledge of the day would have said that Jesus was running a desperate risk of a horrible infection. But for Jesus, there is only one obligation in life, and that is to help, heal and save.

There is only one law—and that law is to love. No one need ever to feel too unclean to come to Jesus Christ. No one need ever feel unforgivable.

And yet, so many pastors and other Christians encounter a regular barrage of folks, of fellow human beings, who do not feel good enough to come to church. Do you know how many people there are outside of our doors because they are afraid that if they were to step inside they would be judged?

The Church is not some perfect English Garden!!! The Church is a place which is filled with messy, imperfect people! There is a very good book which presses this point well. It's entitled, *No Perfect People Allowed!* The Church is not a museum for saints but a hospital for sinners! How can we do a better job of getting that word, that truth out? As Christians we are to break any social clique and take any risk in order to help those who are in need find Christ!!!

Jesus has the power to heal, but the point of this passage of Scripture goes beyond that! With the leper, Jesus is restoring this man and renewing him as a member of Israel! Jesus said that He has come, not to destroy the law but to fulfill it! The leper not only needed physical healing, but also to be reintegrated back into society, back into his family, back into his village.

It wouldn't have done the leper much good to go home and claim to be cured unless he had the official authorization. A person with leprosy who had been cured could not re-enter society until that person had officially been pronounced clean by a priest.

Thus, Jesus said to him, *"go, show yourself to the priest..."* The man needed to be restored as a full member of Israel. And restoring people is what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is all about, is it not?

When Jesus had finished preaching to the crowds, the people *"were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law."* When Jesus came down the mountain He gave a hint of what His authority looks like, on the street by healing the man with leprosy and restoring him as a member of God's people.

Today, we might ask: "What does it mean to recognize, and submit to, the authority of Jesus Christ?" "What does it mean to call Him 'Lord' and live by that?"

Nowhere in the New Testament does it suggest that "faith" in God is some general awareness of some supernatural dimension somewhere. Nor does the Bible give any indication that "faith" is some kind of trust in the goodness of some far away and distant deity. No.

The Bible shows us that God is up-close and personal! And "faith" in Christian terms, means believing that the One Living God is Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ alone, who is now using His authority for the salvation of all who will believe.

If the policeman...and nothing against policemen...used his authority to break up a party, Jesus is using His authority to set in motion a much bigger party...a much, much bigger celebration...one which is filled with compassion and love...one that goes on for all of eternity...And Jesus invites all of us—everyone everywhere to come and take part!!!

The words of Jesus we heard in this healing story were *"I do choose. Be made clean!"* Faced with a request, and given the choice, Jesus chooses to say "yes." And he says "yes" to each precious and treasured life. Recovered wholeness is offered to everyone and will look different for each one.

Remember that piece of glass that you signed on Wednesday and some of you signed this morning? It is broken, right? Think about those rough edges. It is totally unique. Then think about your own rough edges. What broken edges in your own life need help? What will you do in this Lent season to focus on the healing of your body, mind and spirit?

Remember this: God has a purpose for broken things and God has a purpose for you! God can take our brokenness and turn it into a treasured, beautiful piece. Never think for one minute that you do not matter. That is so wrong. You do matter! You are God's treasure, and just as Jesus healed that leper, He can heal you, too.

The parting words Jesus' gave to those he healed were often as much balm as the healing act itself. We hear words of encouragement from the One who makes beauty from brokenness.

Amen.

