

“Matthew”

Fall Series 1

Lesson 10

“Matthew 8:1-34”

Objective: To understand the message that Matthew meant to convey to his audience and then to come to understand what that message means for us today as those living in the 21st century. We will seek to ascertain what this message means and to determine how we are intended to live our lives as those who are disciples of Christ in our modern context, in light of the message it contains. We will place special emphasis upon application.

Materials: I will begin by examining carefully the Greek text of Matthew, examine other early translations such as the Syriac Peshitta, various modern translations, and any other sources relevant to the historical setting of the first century Roman world that can help us to understand the original meaning. I will then examine early interpretations and understandings and examine commentaries and modern interpretations to enlighten our understanding, help us make application to our current situation.

Procedures

1. We will begin by examining the text from the Greek text.
2. We will examine the contextual setting and seek to understand as much as we possibly can about the historical, cultural, and social settings, in order to understand the message Matthew intended and that God still intends for us.
3. From here, we will seek to find out how to best apply the words of Matthew, for the early disciples, then to our modern contextual framework as disciples of Jesus.
4. We will seek to understand the attitudes that we are called to have as disciples and to reflect not only the actions that are the calling of a disciple, but also to learn how to form our attitudes and thoughts in order to reflect our calling as followers of Jesus Christ.

Lesson

As we come to chapter 8, we enter one of the narrative sections of Matthew, in contrast to the previous section which was a teaching section. Chapters 5-7 were what is known as the *Sermon on the Mount*. As Jesus came down from the mountain were many crowds following Jesus. In this section, we will see the authority of the Messiah revealed not just in the power of His words, but also in the actions that He performs. The first of these actions comes when a man who is said to be “lepros” (λεπρός - *lepros*) approaches Jesus with a request for Jesus to cleanse him. It is perhaps the case that in the era of Covid we can begin to have at least a better conception of the stigma and the strong feelings of fear that exist in the context of the shadow of becoming infected. There has been, and still is a degree of stigma involved with testing positive for Covid in our country today.

The era of the first century, in which this event occurs, is an era that certainly did not have the specificity of diagnosis that we are accustomed to today. Such circumstances of ambiguity can substantially increase the level of fear, and the sense that anyone may be a carrier of infection. In this time, anyone who was even

suspected of having a contagious skin disease was shunned and considered to be ritually impure as well as a health hazard. This meant that not only were they cut off from the community of other human beings, but they were also cut off from access to the places of worship where they might seek comfort and encouragement in their time of isolation and separation from family and community. Certainly, it was not the case that the term *leper* was applied simply to someone that would be diagnosed as having Hansen's disease. The term was used in a more general sense than we would use it today. It was not only people, but fabric, and even structures that were considered to be potentially infected, or made impure by leprosy. There was often a connection made between a person being leprous and the idea that in some sense this was the result of some form of punishment by God (ie. 2 Kings 5).¹

One of the issues for a person considered to be a leper was that they were completely cut off from all human contact. Can you imagine being cut off from all human contact, all community, and all forms of comfort. The last thing that would have been expected

¹ David P. Wright and Richard N. Jones, "Leprosy," in David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 4 (New York NY: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 277-282.

when someone encountered such a person was that anyone would actually “touch” such a person. At 8:3, we are told that Jesus did exactly that, the unexpected thing, He touched the *leper*. He did a thing that expressed compassion, humanity, and He brought healing to more than just to the body. The touch of Jesus restores this man’s humanity, his place amongst the community of human fellowship. More than this, Jesus reveals more of the nature of the kingdom of heaven. In the kingdom of heaven there is no isolation from others, no separation from God or from others. There is also no sickness, none of the things that produce so much fear, panic, and despair, in the hearts of men exist in the kingdom of heaven.

Perhaps today, we are somewhat blinded by the miracles that we see so often in the form of modern medicine. However, as we have seen over this past period of Covid we can once again begin to get a taste for the confusion, the fear, and the paranoia that exists when the fear of contracting a fatal disease is involved. It is interesting that the original request that the man made of Jesus was to be made “clean” (*καθαρίσαι* - *katharisaí*). This is a word which is not just used to cleanse someone from leprosy, but

also to “purify” someone from their sins.² There is here a foretaste of that which is to come. A real and significant change, more significant than simply the healing of all disease, but also a cleansing, a healing, of the truly fatal disease of all humanity, sin. Even today, with all of the wonders of modern medicine, it is still the case that all still die even with all the many cures and treatments available to us. The indication that is given here, in the midst of this miracle, is that things are about to change and that Jesus will cure, not simply the physical, but something deeper and more lasting, the spiritual ailments of the soul.

At verse 4, we have the first of many times that Jesus will instruct the one that He heals to keep it quiet (cf. 9:30). Jesus recognizes that there is the great potential for His mission focus to be deflected by the tyranny of the urgent.³ How many times do we allow the urgent to crowd out the important things in our life. We see Jesus in this instance seeking to retain the proper focus in His ministry, in the warning, that He issues regarding telling others about His healing power. Jesus instructs former *leper* to go and

² *Sirach* 38:10 **Stay far from error, direct your hands rightly, and cleanse your heart from all sin.** CEB.

³ Charles E. Hummel, *Tyranny of the Urgent* (Downers Grove IL :IVP, 1994).

show himself to the priest and offer the sacrifice that was commanded (Leviticus 14:8-10). This would entail taking a trip to Jerusalem and back before the man would be able to rejoin Galilean society. However, once the inspection of the priest and the sacrifice was offered He would be accepted and no longer shunned as one that was unclean and there would also be the implication that his sin had been forgiven because the curse of his illness was lifted.


At 8:5-6, a centurion, a Gentile, approaches Jesus pleading for Jesus to come and heal his servant. He indicates that his servant is paralyzed and in terrible suffering. Jesus responds that He will come and heal him. However, the centurion replies that as a man of authority Jesus could just order it done without actually having to travel and do it in person. Jesus recognizes that there is something unique and special in the man's grasp of who He is and what the breaking in of the kingdom of heaven means. This is the only time that we find Matthew applying the verb "amazed" (*ἐθαύμασεν - ethaumasen*) to Jesus Himself. It is often the reaction of other people to the things that Jesus says and does, but

in this instance Jesus is amazed at the faith of the centurion, a Gentile.⁴

In this moment of amazement, Jesus will break out into a prophetic announcement regarding the “sons of the kingdom,” (οἱ δὲ υἱοὶ τῆς βασιλείας - *hoi de wioi tes basileias*) they will, shockingly, be cast out into outer darkness, away from the presence of God, where there will be much weeping and the anguish expressed through the gnashing of teeth. Jesus, here at verse 12, uses a term that was usually applied by the Jews to Gentiles. Here, instead it appears to be applied to at least some who are Jews.⁵ Even here, Jesus conveys a warning that is connected to the concept of “faith,” engender trust in God. Taking part in the kingdom of heaven is about more than ancestry, bloodlines, or DNA. The focus is upon “trust.” Will people “trust,” will they “believe,” in God? The same question that the writings of Matthew leave here for his first audience still stand as a challenge for us today. Will we have faith, will we trust in God? At 8:13, Jesus makes it clear that the request that the centurion made of

⁴ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* series (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), p. 315.

⁵ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, pp. 316-317.




Him will be fulfilled. At that very moment the servant of the centurion was healed. The great faith was immediately and decisively rewarded.

In 8:14-17, there is the account of Jesus going home with Peter. When Jesus arrives there, Peter's mother-in-law was there lying in bed with a fever. At verse 15, we are told that Jesus simply touched her hand and the fever left her. The touch of Jesus brings the power of the kingdom of heaven into the life of a person even one who gives no response. The setting for this miracle is still the city of Capernaum. It is interesting to me that she got up and immediately began to serve Jesus and the others. Surely, this should persistently be the reaction of those touched by Jesus. We are then told in verse 16 that in the evening people brought many people to Jesus that were demon possessed. This, demon possession, is potentially a controversial subject for us today, but for people of that day this will have been perceived as a sign that even more powerfully was seen as a portent of the breaking in of the kingdom of heaven into the world than was the healing of diseases. Jesus was actively overcoming the power of the enemy, of Satan, and He does it with ease. He speaks and they obey. This

will lead to accusations later among the enemies of Jesus that He is somehow in league with the forces of evil. How easily people twist things to fit their own narrative of reality.


In 8:17, we are informed that all of this is the fulfillment of the words of Isaiah.⁶ The passage which the quotation is drawn from is known as the “Servants Song” and it runs from Isaiah 52:13-53:12. The implication of Matthew here is that Jesus is bearing the infirmities of the people and relieving their suffering. In many ways, this is to be seen as a foretelling of more, and even greater, things that are yet to come. Over and over again Jesus will convey the purpose of His ministry. We as humans so easily are distracted from that which is central, that which is crucial. We are often so like a dog that is walking along focused on one thing and then sees a squirrel and immediately loses focus and its attention shifts to something else. If we are carefully paying attention then we will see that this is the same message that God conveys over and over again throughout the Old Testament, and in this message is the challenge, the encouragement, for us as those made in the image of God to replicate the nature and actions of God. We are

⁶ Isaiah 53:4 - **It was certainly our sickness that he carried, and our sufferings that he bore, but we thought him afflicted, struck down by God and tormented.** CEB.



called to be servants, serving one another, serving God, fulfilling His plans, participating in His designs. Such is the kingdom of heaven, when all things, and all people, will obey God and things will be done on earth as they are done in heaven. This concludes Matthew's account of this series of healing episodes.

At 8:18-22, the topic will shift somewhat as Jesus appears to want to get Himself and His disciples away from the crowds, and so they proceed to the other side of the lake. This then introduces us to some teaching on the costs of following Jesus. At verse 19, a scribe, an expert in the Law, approaches Jesus and indicates that he will follow Jesus wherever He goes. Unlike most of the scribes that we will meet in the Gospel account this one desires, at least for the moment, to follow Jesus. I say for the moment, because this is a moment when it is perhaps easy to follow Jesus. All of us have those moments when things appear to be going so well and it is so appealing to follow Jesus. Jesus is healing, teaching with authority, driving out demons, and things are going extremely well at this point in His ministry. At this juncture of His ministry Jesus is extremely popular. It is easy for people to follow Jesus in the midst of His newness, in this moment of novelty, or at least they



claim to want to follow Jesus, but the reality is that the footsteps of Jesus do not lead away from controversy, trouble, or pain. Instead the path of Jesus leads directly into the heart of all of these things. Trouble is very much on the horizon. If a person truly follows Jesus they can expect that there will be conflict, trouble, and pain. At the end of the Jesus' path is the cross. Before one gets to the resurrection there is the terrible, crushing weight of the cross. There is no skipping that part. There is no pain killer that can take away that part.

Jesus indicates that He will find no place of rest, no safe-haven in which to seek refuge. He is on a mission and as such He must continue to press into that mission, to continue to pursue the agenda that God has set for Him. At 8:21, another man, one of his disciples, asks to go and bury his father. Some say that what he is asking for is more than just to go and bury someone who has already passed from this life. If such was the case, then he would not be asking for a long postponement as there was no refrigeration at this time so burials usually took place within 24 hours of death.⁷ Kenneth Bailey indicates that this is a western

⁷ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 329.


reading of the text. Because of his insight drawn from Arabic commentators and his own experiences of middle eastern culture and the idioms from the middle-east Kenneth sees this passage very differently.⁸

He indicates that were the father just recently deceased the son would not be out listening to some rabbi. Instead, he would be keeping vigil and preparing for the funeral. This then would mean that what he is asking of Jesus is for an indefinite postponement of discipleship. This would likely be a postponement of years rather than mere days.⁹ If such is the case, then the response of Jesus is far less shocking that it at first seems to us. Jesus is not being cold and harsh, but He is challenging this man in the same way that He challenges others, in the same way that He challenges each of us to commit to following Jesus. This would then mean that the discipleship request made by this man is really not very serious. In either case, there is still an element of stark sharpness to the words of Jesus.¹⁰ Jesus asks for an incredible level of devotion and commitment to being a disciple.

⁸ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), pp. 25-27.

⁹ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, pp. 25-27.

¹⁰ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 329.



Jesus calls for those that follow Him to be focused on the mission to such a degree that they are willing to leave behind all comfort, all family, all that hinders, or distracts. Jesus calls for a radical level of commitment on the part of His followers. He, not family, nor anything else, is to take priority over the obedient following of Jesus.

At Matthew 8:23-27, we come to another account where we find Jesus doing what He does so well, combining teaching with both words and actions. Jesus climbs into a boat and His disciples follow Him. Jesus evidently went to sleep in the boat while they were out on the lake and a great storm arises.¹¹ The waves began to come over the side of the boat. Apparently in a panic, the disciples wake Jesus up pleading for Him to save them. Surely, this is a prayer that all of us should have. If only we recognized that we are all in the midst of a raging storm. Living in the midst of a storm we have become accustomed to the turmoil and we have begun to see it as normal and ordinary, the way things are. We do not recognize the danger. Danger surrounds us and in truth we

¹¹ Literally a great shaking, (σεισμός μέγας - *seismos megas*).

are in the midst of a great storm, a raging danger stalks us and hopefully we too come to Jesus and plead for Him to save us.

At 8:26, Jesus rebukes the disciples for their lack of faith. He challenges them to trust in Him. He then gets up and rebukes (ἐπετίμησεν - *epetimesen*) the wind and the sea. What happens next causes another act of amazement. There was a great calm that comes over the lake. In this miracle, Jesus demonstrates a power and authority over even the forces of the earth. It might be the case that today the healing miracles of Jesus do not have the force nor generate the sense of wonder that they once did, but perhaps in our modern era the miracle of the calming of the seas and the wind is seen as even more startling and amazing to us. Even today, with all of our technology and scientific knowledge, we cannot even predict the weather accurately, much less control it. This miracle powerfully and forcefully conveys the message that Jesus is the Son of God. He does what only God can do. The amazement of the disciples comes because they begin to recognize this reality.

At 8:28-34, we have an additional demonstration of the authority of Jesus. This time Jesus will exercise control over the

spiritual realm. As Jesus arrives on the other shore, after calming the storm, two demon-possessed come from the tombs to meet Him. They were so violent that no one could travel that road because of them. At 8:29, they began to shout as if in complaint, almost pleading, asking Jesus what He is going to do with them? They recognize who Jesus is. In other places Jesus will indicate that He does not want the testimony of such evil creatures, but nonetheless Matthew will relay their witness as an additional part of the testimony regarding who Jesus is. You might wonder how they knew who He was? We are not told, but somehow they recognize Him.

I find 8:29 to be a fascinating verse. In this verse, there is the clear indication that these demons know that a time of judgment is coming. They also seem to recognize, that at least for them, this is not going to be a great day of joy and thanksgiving. They appear to understand that they are going to be punished, or tortured when that day of judgment comes. This seems to indicate a number of things: 1. They know they have done things that deserve punishment. 2. They know they have no ability to resist the power and authority of God. 3. They seem to have some

understanding, or at least an expectation, of when that will occur.

They seem to think that this is not the appointed time. James indicates that the demons have a level of understanding about who God is and of His power. James 2:19 **You have faith and believe that there is one God. Excellent! Even demons have faith like that, and it makes them tremble.**¹²

The demons ask Jesus what He is going to do with them. They recognize that they have no ability, no power, to resist His will. Despite this, they plead their case and ask for Jesus to send them into the pigs if He is going to cast them out. So Jesus commands them to go and they depart from the men. They enter into the pigs. I wonder what it means that the pigs immediately run down the cliff into the lake and drowned? Does it mean that in some way pigs are more spiritually astute than are humans? They found relief from the demons quickly and we are not told how long these men had been possessed, but it appears to have been for some considerable period of time. It takes a while for people to a reputation. They appear to have had a reputation for being dangerous and violent. There are a number of interesting

¹² CEB.

aspects to this story: 1. It is likely the case that this is a Gentile region as faithful Jews would not have been tending pigs. 2. The tenders of the pig are aware of the scenario that has just occurred and they go into the city and report everything that happened. Then the whole city comes out and pleaded with Jesus to leave. Notice they did not try to force Jesus to leave. They may not understand much of what has just taken place, but they recognize that this is a man of authority and power.

In this chapter, through the narration of events, Matthew conveys the story of Jesus in such a way as to let us know that Jesus is the Messiah of God. Through acts of healing, through driving out demons, and through the calming of a storm Jesus demonstrates that He is the Messiah, the one from God who would initiate the new era, the new age. This would be the age when the kingdom of heaven would begin breaking in upon the kingdom of this world and changing things, changing the rules of power, authority, and the way things work. The old order is beginning to wane and pass away. In the midst of this is the call into discipleship. Will we allow the power of Christ begin to change and transform us into the likeness and image of Christ? Will we


walk the path of faith, or will we turn and walk away, will we delay our following, or even ask Jesus to go away from us? Each day we all face the challenge of such questions. Will we be people of faith, or will our faith, our trust in God fail?

Synopsis

In this section, we have a narrative that recounts not so much the teachings of Jesus as it does the actions of Jesus. Jesus encounters a *leper* and He does that which is unexpected, unprecedented, so powerfully human, as to be shocking: He touches the man. He heals, and cleanses, the man of his infirmity and sends Him away with the warning not to tell anyone.

Jesus will then travel to Capernaum and be approached by a centurion, a Gentile, who pleads with Jesus to heal his servant. Jesus agrees, but then the man objects and says as a man of authority He can just command it to be done and it will be done. Jesus is amazed by the faith of this man that stands outside the chosen people of God. Jesus issues a warning to those within the fold of God's chosen people to take care and remain faithful, indicating that there is an impending judgement coming for all, even those that consider themselves to be faithful. Some will be punished; it will be those that are found to be without faith.

Jesus heals with just a touch and the response of the one healed (Peter's mother-in-law) is to begin to serve. Jesus also



begins to drive out demons and to heal the sick. Matthew connects this with the great prophecy given in Isaiah 53 that indicated that God would take on their illnesses and carry away their diseases. Jesus begins to travel to the other side of the lake away from the crowds and there encounters two men who claim to want to be followers, but may not have counted the cost or make excuses for not following immediately. Jesus challenges them to make a radical decision.

When Jesus got into the boat He went to sleep. A powerful storm arises and the disciples awake Jesus who rebukes the storm, but He also rebukes them for their lack of faith. In this event, He demonstrates more clearly who He is. This demonstration of power and authority will continue when Jesus arrives on the other side of the lake and He is confronted by two demon possessed men. He drives out the demons and they enter a herd of pigs who drown themselves. Jesus once again demonstrates His power and authority. The people of that Gentile region ask Jesus to leave their country.

Main Points

- Jesus heals and cleanses people and crowds follow Him.
- Jesus encounters great faith in a Gentile, a centurion and challenges everyone to exercise faith.
- Jesus heals many, drives out demons and fulfills another Old Testament prophecy.
- Jesus challenges would-be followers in their commitment to Him.
- Jesus commands the winds and the waves and once again challenges His disciples to faith.
- Jesus drives demons into swine and is asked to leave an area.

Questions

1. When is a time in your life that you have felt lonely and isolated?
2. How do you think it makes a person feel to be told that they are unclean?
3. How important do you think it is for people to have human contact?
4. What does the word authority mean to you?
5. Where do you turn for relief when you are in pain?
6. What are some ways that people can express faith in Jesus?
7. Why do you think Jesus continually warns people of the dangers of not having faith in God?
8. Why do you think demons would possess people?
9. What are some things that deter people from following Jesus?
10. Do you think Jesus is overly harsh in telling one of His disciples to let the dead bury the dead? What do you think Jesus means?
11. Why do you think Jesus rebukes the disciples after they wake Him during the storm?
12. What do you think it means that even the winds and waves obey Jesus?
13. What are some things that amaze you about Jesus?
14. What do you think it would be like to be possessed by a demon?

15. Does a person who is possessed by a demon still have freewill?
16. How do you think the demons in the country of the Gadarenes recognized Jesus?
17. Why do you think the demons were afraid of Jesus?
18. Why do you think the demons obeyed Jesus?
19. Why do you think the demons preferred being allowed to enter pigs rather than just being set free?
20. Why do you think the pigs ran down the cliff and drowned?
21. Why do you think the people who heard about the incident with the pigs asked Jesus to leave their region?

To Take Home

What is Important to know?

It is important to know that the words of Jesus are backed up by His actions. The message of Matthew is that action is required by followers of Jesus. There is a connection between ideas and actions. What we really believe will be transferred into our actions. Just believing things in your head is not sufficient to be called “faith.” The challenge of the Gospel of Matthew is to transform our sense of reality and for us to start becoming what God created us to be. What are some ways that you are encouraged to pursue God by the message of Matthew?

Where is God in these words?

God is in these words conveying not only that He loves us, but defining what love actually is. Often people distort love and have no real concept of what love actually is. It is quite easy to misunderstand the meanings of words and actions. God repeatedly has conveyed the same message through both words and deeds. This has been His plan throughout history. What are some ways that the love of God, displayed in the sending of Jesus, challenges you to understand love in a different way?

What does any of this mean for how I live my life?

The way we live our lives, the priorities we demonstrate through our actions, and through our words, convey the reality of our heart. There are times that we claim to believe one thing and do another thing. In each of us there is a struggle that goes on each and every moment, of each and every day. How we respond indicates the reality of our faith. What are some ways that you strive to live in a manner that reflects the realities of the kingdom of heaven each day?

What is the word of God calling us to do?

The word of God is calling us to follow Jesus. Following Jesus is hard for us, because it requires us to see things through the eyes of God. The ways of this world challenge our vision of what is important in life. We need to be constantly reminded that we are to view the world differently. In this chapter, Jesus challenges the perception of what is possible by performing many great and powerful miracles. What are some ways that you are reminded each day of the possibilities of life with God?