

The Gospel According to Saint Matthew

Session 7 – Wednesday May 13, 2020

The first two chapters of Matthew's gospel are vital for understanding how Matthew uses the Old Testament Scriptures to reveal Jesus' identity in relation to God's salvation history in Israel; ideas worked out in the rest of the gospel. Similarly, the Sermon on the Mount is vital to understanding the unity between Jesus' teaching and actions, and what it means to be a *follower* of Jesus.

The first Beatitude, *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they shall see the kingdom of heaven*, is something we will encounter again and again. The recognition that one is not self-sufficient, but reliant on God's grace, and the grace worked out in a community seeking to be formed by God's love in Christ, is the first step toward discipleship, holiness, and righteousness.

Chapter 8

There are a few things to think about as we enter into a new section of Matthew's gospel. First, we should be struck that it is only now, nearly one third into the gospel, that we are getting to Jesus' deeds. Up until now things have happened to Jesus, as an Infant, and Jesus has called and taught the disciples. Why does it take Matthew so long to get to Jesus' deeds, when there has been so much emphasis on *bearing good fruit*.

Second, we should remember that Matthew has given us a few bookends to hold together sections of the gospel. Jesus' entire ministry in Galilee is bookmarked by the phrase *from that time Jesus began...* We find that at the beginning in 4:17; and again at the end of His Galilean mission, at 16:21.

Similarly, we find the same phrase repeated in 4:23 and in 9:35: *Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people.* (In 9:35 *Galilee* is replaced by *cities and villages*). The repetition of this phrase seems to indicate that we should consider everything in between as a unit. That is, what we read in chapters 8 & 9 are to be understood as immediately connected with the Sermon on the Mount.

There are ten miracles in this section - 9 are healings, 1 is nature miracle.

Some attempts made to see a pattern. Davies-Allison suggests there are three sets of three, and notes that at the end of each three Jesus says something (8:1-22; 8:23-9:17; 9:18-38). In this pattern the suggestion is that the first section deals with the theme of *Christology*, the second with *discipleship*, the third with *faith*. All of these themes are certainly present, but I think the narrative is more interwoven than that, and the pattern is forced, weakening the connections Matthew makes between this new section, and the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew has trained us to hear *Coming down from the mountain*, (Exodus 34:29)

and immediately to think of Moses coming down from Sinai, and in case we have forgotten Moses is mentioned in v4.

Jesus described His ministry as bringing *light to those sitting in darkness*, the Gentiles, outsiders to the Covenant, and here we find Jesus' first healing to be directed toward another outsider, a leper. Jesus reaches out and touches the leper and says: *I will, be clean*.

At the end of the Antitheses we heard Jesus says: *You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect* 5:48. Among the things we observed about God's perfection is the complete unity of thought, will, and action. What God wills is accomplished. That is what we are seeing in Jesus' first healing: *I will, be clean*. Jesus' thought and the will are made manifest in the world through His word, *be clean*, and His action, *reaching out and touching*.

Everything we learned in the Sermon on the Mount expresses Jesus' thought and will, and now He works out His will by bringing healing, wholeness. The good tree bears good fruit. The perfect tree bears perfect fruit.

Right after Jesus said: *Let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven* 5:16 Jesus moves on to the discussion about the Mosaic Law. *Not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished* 5:18

So, in this first healing, this first *good work* Jesus gives glory to God by sending the leper to the Temple to offer the gift that Moses commanded. In the Mosaic Law, in great detail (Leviticus 14:1-32) someone healed of leprosy had to show the priest that there had been a healing, and then give a thank offering for the healing. The priest then would re-admit the person to the community.

Jesus is commanding the person to be obedient to the Law, and the worship of Israel, and to be re-admitted into the community – not a new community. Jesus could have said, *be healed, and join my merry band*. But Jesus sends the healed leper back to the Mosaic Law, back to the worship of Israel, and the community from which the leper had been excluded.

At the same time, Matthew already identifies the leper as belonging to the new community of Jesus' disciples. The leper kneels before Jesus and addresses Him as Lord. Lord, the title for God, is a post-resurrection title for Jesus, which the disciples use exclusively in Matthew's gospel to address Jesus.

Nb: *Kurios, Lord*, is sometimes translated as *Sir*. It is legitimate, and need not be a reference to God. But I think that we saw in the introductory chapters that Matthew is keen to draw alignments, Herod, Pharaoh and the Pharisees on one side; faithful Israel, Moses, Jesus and His disciples on the other.

Lepers were required to announce their contagious disease to others by shouting out from a distance – Unclean! Unclean! I think it is intentional that this first healing is related thematically to John’s baptism for the washing away of sin, the making clean of the individual and community. Jesus reaching out and touching the leper, the *unclean*, rendered Himself unclean (Leviticus 5:3). Jesus submitted to baptism in order to align Himself with those needing to be washed clean, both as individuals and as a nation.

Nb. The Greek word *pais* can be translated either as *servant* or *son*. *Uius* is the more usual rendering of *son*, and Luke uses *doulos*, which is *slave*. This might indicate that servant is to be preferred translation. However, we have seen how important the idea of *sonship* is to Matthew.

This is the only healing in Matthew’s gospel that is not included in Mark.

The healing of the centurion’s servant again deals with an outsider. *Never in Israel have I found such faith*. The slowness of Israel to believe in Jesus is a theme that will continue to be developed in the gospel (9:2, 22, 29; 15:28; 17:20; 21:21; 23:23). It is the first use of the word *faith* in the gospel.

The first healing was the leper’s request for healing for himself; the second is a request for healing of another. The servant’s healing is not based on the servant’s faith, but his master’s. This is one indication of the grace that can be extended through the community of faith. Our prayers can accomplish a lot for other people. Further, it is a healing at a distance. In

the first healing the *reaching out and touching* of the leper was the manifestation of Jesus' will together with the words *be healed*. The healing of the centurion's servant is accomplished without any of these outward words and actions. Jesus' thought and will is instantly accomplished, as is the Father's in heaven.

Again, there is here a commentary on community. Gentiles will be brought into the community of God's people. Matthew quotes Isaiah at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, in which the full quotation of the *fulfilment prophecy*, shows there is no other messianic mission, than the one that joins Jew and Gentile in a new community.

Those inside can be excluded. *Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven* 5:20. We should note that Jesus speaks of this community with reference to *sit at table with...* the kingdom of heaven as a banquet is an important illustration from OT, that Matthew brings forward, and governs what follows. The healing of Peter's mother-in-law is connected with dining, as are the healings which follow.

Matthew provides us with another *fulfilment prophecy*, quoting Isaiah 53:4. This is the first fulfilment prophecy since Jesus began His ministry, where Matthew quotes Isaiah – *the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light*. Matthew quoted that passage immediately before Jesus called His disciples to follow Him. So, Matthew quotes Isaiah again, immediately before some

of the people in the crowd offer to become followers of Jesus.

The *fulfilment prophecy* is surprising. It seems to suggest that Jesus is healing people by taking into Himself their sicknesses. We have already encountered a number of references to the Suffering Servant passages of Isaiah – *by His stripes we are healed*. This is precisely the passage where this *fulfilment prophecy* comes from. Matthew seems to connect Jesus' healings with the crucifixion. In making that connection, Matthew underscores the perfection of unity between thought, will, and deed, being worked out both by the physical healings in Jesus' ministry, and the spiritual healing wrought by Christ's death and resurrection; physical wholeness as a sign of the wholeness we find in God's kingdom, which Jesus is bringing near. Sickness and sin are certainly being connected, as are health and salvation, but again, in the sense of *aligning* things as we've seen Matthew do elsewhere. There will follow shortly a critique of the common, and biblically unsound practice of the Pharisees, to make the connection between physical suffering and sin too specifically.

Go over to the other side. There is a geographical character to this phrase – they are in Capernaum, Jewish territory, and Jesus is giving instruction to go over to Gentile territory. But it is also a phrase that has a spiritual character. It is reminiscent of the Magi, going home *another way*. It speaks both of a different route, and also of a different spiritual state. Having met Jesus the Magi went home *another way* than they arrived.

We find a surprisingly brusque exchange between Jesus and two would-be disciples. Jesus speaks of Himself as the *Son of man*, a title that comes from Daniel 7:13f with eschatological significance. The second would-be disciple reminds us again of the call of the disciples with reference to Elijah calling Elisha to be his disciple. Elisha wanted to kiss his father good bye before following.

Again, the radical call to follow Jesus is being emphasized. It also says that Jesus is calling us to life. He isn't interested in death. *Weeping and gnashing of teeth* belong to those who are not of the kingdom.

The use of the term *teacher* as opposed to *Lord* may be significant. In Judaism disciples sought out their *teacher*. In the gospels, however, it is almost always Jesus who seeks His disciples. Being a *follower* of Jesus is an increasingly important theme: 10:34-39; 16:24f; 19:29; 20:26f.

Both cases seem to relate to what we encountered at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, *not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven... I never knew you; depart from me* 7:21ff