Meaning in the Miracles: Faith in Jesus' Authority
Matthew 8:5-15
January 14, 2018
Dan Hoffman

Please grab your Bible and open it up to Matthew chapter 8. We started a new series last week looking at the miracles of Jesus, and how they are Jesus' validating credentials.

Now that might sound a bit funny, but Jesus needed validating credentials because of the kinds of things He was saying about Himself and the world. So just before the section of text we are looking at Jesus preached His famous Sermon on the Mount which contains arguably the most powerful and weighty words ever spoken. In this sermon Jesus says it is on the basis of whether we do what He says that we can have a relationship with God.[1] This is the equivalent to His statement in another place "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."[2]

Now, other people have talked big like this, but 100% of them have either been lying, or crazy. And all of them are dead now, or on their way to being dead.

But the thing that separates Jesus from these guys is that while He was saying things like "Blessed are you when people… persecute you… because of Me," and, "love your enemies", He was also healing lepers, raising kids from the dead, feeding crowds without food and walking on water.

And Jesus did these things because He knew that without the miraculous nobody was going to be able to listen to His words. So Jesus' miracles were and are His credentials. And so He said:

> I and the Father are one…. Do not believe Me unless I do the works of My Father. But if I do them, even though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father. (John 10:30-38)

…
Let's pick up our text today in Matthew 8 starting in verse 5.

[Read Matthew 8:5-13]

Many Bible scholars suspect that the string of miracles we are looking at – the leper, this centurion and Peter's mother in law which we will get to in a few minutes – all happened on the same day – the day Jesus came down the mountain. But that might raise some questions in your mind. I mean Jesus is constantly running into diseased people. And from our vantage point in 2018 this can sound like a bit of a stretch. After

---

[1] Matthew 7:21;24
[2] John 14:6

all Capernaum was a small village, and Jesus just bumps into 3 deathly sick people in one afternoon. Really? Yes.

We take this for granted, but medicine has advanced exponentially in the last several decades. So even just over a 100 years ago sickness was remarkably different from what it is today. Today, the top 10 causes of premature death in North America include heart disease, cancer, accidents, Alzheimer's and suicide among a few others. But just a hundred years ago this list was almost completely different.

So people did die of heart disease, but it was the number 4 killer instead of number 1. And instead of things like cancer, Alzheimer's and suicide people died of diarrhea, tuberculosis, birth defects and unknown causes.[3] It's hard to imagine a world like that!

We live in an incredible time where life expectancy is greater than its ever been. In 1900, while some people lived into their 90's average life expectancy was 49, and in Jesus' day life expectancy was as low as 20-30. Of course that is skewed by how many children died. So if a child survived to 10 then average life expectancy jumped to 47.[4] But what this means is every parent lost a child or two.

So people were always dying of disease in the first century. Micro-organisms spread without check, and if you caught something it likely killed you. Diarrhea killed you! This was the reality. There were plagues that regularly wiped out cities and even countries. Literally the world Jesus lived in was full of disease.

Now last week I gave you a pretty in depth look at leprosy, and I could do that again with other 1st century diseases like atrophy and dropsy, seizures and hemorrhaging, paralysis and fever which are all listed in the New Testament, but I'm going to spare you from the grotesque details and just concluded that the first century was very different from the one we live in today.

And so the fact that Jesus was constantly bumping into disease isn't surprising at all. What's amazing is what happened when Jesus, and the kingdom of God He was proclaiming, showed up. So just for example, in Matthew 4 we read:

> Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. (Matthew 4:23)

And there are tones of verses like this in the Gospels – Jesus was constantly, miraculously, healing people. He was essentially wiping out disease in Palestine. So life changed when Jesus was around. Worlds were flipped right side up. This is what happens when people use the abilities they have been given to shine the light of the kingdom into the world. And of course, Jesus had all the ability in the universe.

---

[3] Stats on both modern and 1900 death rates taken from https://www.alternet.org/personal-health/how-lucky-we-are-how-people-died-100-years-ago-and-how-we-die-today

[4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life_expectancy (accessed January 11, 2018)

But this is true today as well. When we use the abilities and talents God has given us to shine Jesus' light into our community the result is cities are transformed as people's lives are flipped right side up. And we are excited about this at Lighthouse. We want to be part of Jesus transforming Prince George. And our small groups are the pivotal way this happens. So if you want to put your talents to work and participate in what Jesus is doing to increase His glory in our city talk to Jared or Spencer and ask them if you can get into a group. And don't take "no" for an answer. These groups are shining the light of Christ into our city and it's awesome!

…

Now as we speak about the miracles of Jesus there is a tension that we need to hold together. So on one hand, because Jesus is alive and is increasing His glory and expanding His kingdom in the world including right here in Prince George, we should expect our neighbours to be encountering Him and having their lives transformed.

So James, who was Jesus' half brother – the son of Mary and Joseph – tells us:

> Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. (James 5:13-16)

This is a passage which talks about the transformation of the kingdom breaking into the world we live in. And the eradication of sickness of part of this. That means this still happens and we should pray for it. And we should pray in faith believing that Jesus can heal; He has the power to make you clean, He has the power to alleviate you from any suffering you are experiencing.

But there is a danger here that can cause disillusionment and distrust in the midst of the Jesus-following community when it comes to healing.

There are communities within our faith which will tell you that if you believe enough then you will receive the healing you want for any disease or discomfort you are suffering from. But the mistake with this is that the miracles of Jesus aren't promises that He is going to take away our pain or suffering. In fact, Jesus' central message revolves around patiently enduring and even embracing suffering in our desire to live our lives for His glory. So in Luke 9 we read:

> Then [Jesus] said to them all: "Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow Me." (Luke 9:23)

What Jesus is saying here is that following Him isn't about you. Denying yourself, and taking up your cross isn't about getting what you want – it's the opposite of that. It's about putting what you want totally second to living your life for Jesus' glory.

I think sometimes we forget that a cross wasn't a piece of jewelry to hang around our necks, it was a barbaric instrument of torture designed to amplify shame while producing an excruciating slow and painful death. And this is the metaphor Jesus uses to describe what He's asking us to take on – take up your cross.

So He is saying choose to go to every extreme to put Me first in your life. If you are going to follow Me there is no sin worth holding on to, there is no relationship too important that it can't be put on the back burner. There is no aspiration too important not to be willing to let go of. I will be God in your life, or I won't have anything to do with you at all. That's what Jesus says to His would be followers.

So Jesus doesn't exist to make our lives easy. We exist to live our lives to His glory.[5] But in consumeristic Canada this is an incredibly radical idea to sell. You see everything in our culture is built up around us getting what we want and living in the most extreme comfort we can.

So every commercial on TV centers around some new product that is going to make your life just a little better and more enjoyable. In consumerism the customer is always right, which means you are god and your will is catered to for a price.

And we take this with us as we come to church. And so we try to tell Jesus, I'll do what you want – I'll do my devotions in the morning, I'll work up faith in my heart, I'll be kind to my neighbours, I'll go to church – as long as You do what I want. So heal me. Get me a good job. Fix my relationship problems. Make my life better. I deserve it!

And then when Jesus says "No, you aren't My god, I don't work for you." We think following Him isn't working, or maybe God doesn't even exist. When the real problem is we've been worshipping a god we made up to fit our consumeristic culture.

But I'm not interested in worshipping a god I made up, and I suspect you aren't either. Any God that can fit inside our puny skulls – no offense intended – isn't worth worshipping. I want to connect myself with something eternal no matter what it costs.

I want to worship the God of miracles; the God Jesus shows us in the Gospels. But the only way this is going to happen is if seeking God's pleasure is more important to me than buying a new pair of jeans or having my pain relieved.

And this is the challenge we encounter in verse 5 as this centurion comes to Jesus.
…

---

[5] "The chief end of man is to glorify God, and enjoy Him forever." (Westminster Catechism)

Now last week we looked at the leper who came to Jesus. Lepers were the most despised people in society. They were both physically disgusting and spiritually they were walking illustrations of sin. So they were totally outcast. Lepers didn't come to anyone. They kept to themselves. And yet this one came. That's amazing! But even more amazing is that he came to Jesus in a way that pleased Jesus, that provoked Him to pleasure. He bowed at Jesus' feet and instead of demanding or even asking to be healed he simply worshipped. He said "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." The implication being, if you aren't willing to change my circumstances that's okay, I'm still going to worship.

And Jesus responded by touching and healing him. Jesus could see the Father was working in this leper – that's how he was able to come and worship without demanding anything in return – and so by healing him Jesus was proclaiming "The kingdom is for broken people with real problems like this guy, and when the kingdom breaks into your world it flips it right-side up." And healing was part of that for this guy.

…

Now we move to a very different person, but still someone who would have been an outsider, and that's because this centurion is a Gentile and a Roman soldier. The Jews hated the Gentiles, and saw them as inferior, but they particularly hated the Romans because Rome had conquered them. So while there was nothing Israel could do to get rid of the Romans, every time they saw one they turned their noses up and walked the other way. And that is what this centurion was up against when he considered coming to Jesus. He expects to be rejected. And yet he risks this to come to Jesus on behalf of his servant who was paralyzed – he was going to die.

And in verse 6 this centurion speaks to Jesus just like the leper did. He says "Lord, my servant lies at home paralyzed and suffering terribly."

It's a statement of worship, and it isn't a request at all. It's just information and faith. Here is the need Lord, I lay it before you. I know you have the power to do something about it. But it isn't what I want that matters. Your will is what matters."

Now, when we looked at the leper last week we said the big shock was that he came to Jesus at all, and again there is a parallel. The shock here is that this centurion has come on behalf of his servant.

So in Rome there was no 'slave's lives matter' movement. If they suffered it didn't matter. If they lived or died it didn't matter. Slaves were the possessions of their masters and had less rights than animals do today.

So today if your neighbour kicks their dog you call the police or the SPCA and they get in trouble. But in the first century slaves could be abused or killed without any consequence at all.

Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, said:

> There can be no friendship and no justice toward inanimate things. Indeed, not even towards a horse or an ox or a slave. For master and slave have nothing in common. A slave is a living tool, just as a tool is an inanimate slave."[6]

That's the prevalent thought in first century Rome, but that isn't the way this centurion thinks about his slave. You see God is at work in him already, and the evidence is that he cares about his servant enough to risk contacting this Jewish rabbi even though Jewish rabbis didn't give Roman soldiers the time of day.

And Jesus recognizes that God is at work.
…
Have you ever seen God at work in someone who wasn't a Christian yet? Have you ever received unexpected hospitality, or generosity, or kindness from someone who didn't know Jesus? Watch for this. This is the kingdom of God breaking in, and this is where we need to invest our gifts and abilities because these people are ripe for having their lives transformed for Christ's glory. Don't waste your time on the hardened atheists.[7] Look for where God is at work.

And when you see this say "Hey, I noticed you went out of your way to be kind to that guy. That's not what normal people do. And in my experience this happens when God is at working in someone. I think God is working in you." Just see where that conversation goes. If they are ripe God is going to spark something in them.
…
So Jesus sees that God is at work and asks him "shall I come heal your servant?"

And look at how this centurion responds. God really is at work. He's unnaturally humble. He responds "Lord, I don't deserve you in my house, and besides you don't even need to come. I know how these kinds of things work. I can see authority all over You. Just speak the word." He knows Jesus has the authority to heal by word.

And then in verse 9 he fleshes out where this understanding comes from. "I'm a middle management soldier. I'm not Caesar, I do what I'm told. But I've also got guys who work for me, 100 of them. And when I speak they do. I know how authority works. And I know authority when I see it. And You've got it Jesus.
…
And then we get some of my favorite words in scripture. Verse 10 says Jesus was "amazed", or another translation says "He marvelled" It's almost like He was surprised to find such incredible faith in this guy who wasn't even a Jew.

Now, to impress Jesus is a pretty big deal – right? I mean Jesus knew what was going on inside people's minds,[8] and surprising a mind reader is tough to do!

---

[6] As quoted by John MacArthur https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/2258/jesus-power-over-disease-part-2 (Accessed January 11, 2018)
[7] Matthew 7:6
[8] Matthew 9:4

But I don't think that's really what is being emphasized here. I don't think Jesus is caught off guard by this guy. Rather I think this centurion has provoked Him to pleasure just like the leper did. You see Jesus was all about proclaiming and participating in the good news that God's kingdom was breaking into the world. This was Jesus' gospel. So at the very beginning of His ministry we read:

> Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1:14-15 ESV)

And here this man is acting in a way that proves the kingdom of God was at hand. He is humble – centurions weren't humble! And he comes to Jesus without demanding help. He simply states a need. The implication is, if you don't heal I'll still worship. And he cares for others. It is his servant, of all things, that he is bringing to Jesus, he isn't asking anything for himself. And he is full of faith. He knows Jesus has the authority and power to meet his need, and he is willing to risk his reputation to prove this.

And Jesus responds in verse 13 "Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would." And the servant was healed at that moment. Jesus used His ability to proclaim and act out the good news that God's kingdom was breaking into the world.

And can you imagine that moment? The boy just sits up. He's a paralytic. He can't move at all. And then all of a sudden he's lying there and his body just opens up. His muscles loosen and strengthen all in the same second. Today even with modern medicine when someone recovers from a period of paralysis there is massive rehab required. And that's because if you don't use your muscles they atrophy fast. But there's no rehab when Jesus does miracles. The servant was healed in that moment.

I can see him running around the house when the centurion gets home and saying "Sir, I don't know what you did. I don't know what happened, but I'm all good!"

And can you imagine what seeing Jesus act would have done for the faith of this centurion? I mean he believed in Jesus before he saw this miracle. What must he have been like after? We don't know. We never hear from him again, but I will bet you that centurion went on to live his life for Jesus and is with Him now. When the light of the kingdom shines into a persons' world it gets flipped right side up in a way that produces abundant, eternal life. And Jesus has chosen you and me to sine His light into our city for the same transformation. Do you want in?

Between the statement from the centurion and the healing Jesus says something that would have blown His Jewish listeners away. He says 'many are going to come from the east and the west – that's the Gentiles – and they are going to take their place in the kingdom while the subjects of the kingdom – that's the Jews – will be thrown out.'

What Jesus is saying is we don't get into the kingdom of God by blood line, we get in by faith line. And that's why this centurion amazes Jesus. Faith acted out pleases God.[9]

Ask yourself, how am I acting out my faith in a way that pleases God?
…
Today's passage ends with another miracle. Look quickly at verse 14.

[Read Matthew 8:14-15]

So Jesus' first miracles after the Sermon on the Mount involve a leper, a gentile and a woman. These are the credentials Jesus uses to back up His incredibly big words. But they are also strategic statements about where the kingdom of God is breaking in.

Women in the first century were like slaves. They were the possessions of their husbands. Men didn't even talk to women. And yet Jesus touches and heals her. Jesus' kingdom isn't for the powerful. It isn't for those who have their lives together. It is for the broken, the outcast and the unimportant. It is for people who need a Saviour.

And the interesting thing is that these kinds of people came to Jesus. They saw His authority, they recognized their need, and they came in faith. And by doing this they provoked Him to pleasure. These were Jesus' kind of people.
…
So two questions to leave you with: first, are you Jesus' kind of person? Are you someone who sees Jesus' authority and worships whether He changes your circumstances or not? If you need to make this statement don't leave today without praying and telling Jesus that you are going to live your life to His glory whether He changes your circumstances or not. And second, are you putting the abilities you've been given to work shining the light of Jesus' kingdom into the situation you've been placed in?

What could you begin doing today to grow in your ability to provoke Jesus to pleasure? This is why we exist.

---

[9] Hebrews 11:6