

In biblical times, many skin conditions were known as “leprosy”. Anything from dermatosis, psoriasis, lupus, ringwormⁱ. But it probably also included what we know as leprosy today (Hansen’s disease)ⁱⁱ. True leprosy is a slowly developing, progressive disease that damages the skin and nervous system. Ulcers, skin lesions, flat, pale areas of skin, eye damage, and then later on, large ulcerations, the loss of fingers and toes, skin nodules and facial disfigurementⁱⁱⁱ. It’s an awful disease..... It **is** infectious, but usually only with prolonged contact.

In Jesus' day, leprosy was a death sentence, but even while they lived, it was a living death. Lepers were cut off from civilization. They had to live outside the camp. They weren’t allowed to touch anyone. They had to stay at a distance and cry out “Unclean!” to warn bystanders not to come too close.^{iv}

² A man with leprosy came and knelt before [Jesus] and said, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.”

³ Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “**I am willing,**” he said. “**Be clean!**”

Jesus did the unthinkable – He touched the untouchable. When Jesus touched that leper, by the law, Jesus should have been considered unclean. And He would stay ‘unclean’, until it was proved that **He** had not contracted leprosy. But He touched the untouchable – and healed him...

In 1873, a priest, Damien de Veuster arrived at Kalawao, on an Hawaiian Island (Molokai), to care for the lepers there.

When he first arrived, Damien was careful to take precautions against the disease. Nevertheless, as he lived among his people, tending their sores, sharing their food, ministering the sacraments to them, and working with the same tools they did, he showed no fear of the disease or revulsion of his patients. He didn't shrink back from the call to embrace them as his own brothers and sisters.

By 1885, after eleven years of service, it was evident that Damien himself, had contracted leprosy. In a letter he wrote to his bishop around this time, he said:

"It is the memory of having lain under the funeral pall twenty-five years ago – the day of my vows – that led me to brave the danger of contracting this terrible disease in doing my duty here and trying to die more and more to myself. . . the more the disease advances, I find myself content and happy at Kalawao."

For the next five years, Damien continued to care for his fellow lepers. In 1888, Franciscan sisters came to Molokai to open an orphanage for girls. By then, Damien also had the help of two priests as well as Joseph Dutton, a lay American volunteer. Slowly, Damien's body was overcome by leprosy as his face became terribly disfigured, his larynx and lungs infected, his hands and feet encrusted with sores.

Nevertheless, he persisted in his tireless activity until three weeks before his death, on April 15, 1889. A few days before he died, he said, “The work of the lepers is in good hands and I am no longer necessary, so I shall go up yonder.”^v

Jesus touched the untouchables. Damien did too. How about you? Are you willing to love the unlovable – to touch the untouchable – to socialise with the unsociable????

Today I want to share with you, 4 things. Firstly, we’ve just discovered **the compassion of God, to touch the untouchable.**

Secondly, **the authority of Jesus,**

In the passage we read today, there’s a lot there about healing. The leper was healed. The centurion’s servant was healed. Peter’s mother-in-law was healed. And then towards the end of the reading, many evil spirits were driven out, and Jesus healed **all** the sick who were brought to Him.

The miracles that Jesus performed, were a sign of His authority. Last week, we concluded our series on the Sermon on the Mount, and it ends like this: **Matthew 7:²⁸ When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, ²⁹ because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.**

He then comes down from the mountain, large crowds following this authoritative teacher, and He begins to demonstrate His authority over sickness and disease, and over evil spirits. It's all about authority – He teaches with authority, and the miracles demonstrate His authority.

When Jesus healed the leper, it showed that Jesus had authority to break the old rules. You see, the old Jewish law, had the ability to diagnose what was wrong, and to separate out the unclean from the clean. But what it could **not** do, is to take the unclean, and make it clean.

But Jesus has the authority to do just that. My sins – your sins, cut us off from God, and make **us** unclean. But the one who has the authority to take that sin away, and make us clean again, is the Lord Jesus Christ. He has that authority.

The Roman Centurion, of all people, recognised that authority....

Each of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) – each of the accounts of Jesus' life, ministry, crucifixion and resurrection – These all have their own, specific flavour. And the Gospel of Matthew, is thoroughly Jewish in its flavour. Matthew sets out to prove to Jewish readers, that Jesus is the Messiah – Jesus is the one spoken of by the prophets in the Old Testament – Jesus is the one, they'd been waiting for.

And yet, here in this Jewish Gospel, a gentile – a Roman Centurion – a hated centurion – was the **first** to recognise the authority of Jesus.... Do you know why were centurions hated? I'll tell you why... *Imagine if your country – Australia – was invaded and conquered by the Chinese. And the Chinese military stepped in to keep law and order. Imagine that you lost the right to vote, and yet they taxed you very heavily to fund their military machine. Imagine that they took our natural resources back to their homeland, with no royalties of course....*

How would Australians feel about the military commanders, who walked our streets, policing and squashing any hint of nationalism, that might rise up to rebellion?

And that's what it was like for the Jews. The Roman soldiers weren't there on furlough.. They were there to oppress them – and they did oppression well. And the centurions, were their commanders. And a hated Roman Centurion – their oppressor, was the one who recognised the authority of Jesus. He said, “Lord, you don't even need to come to my house to heal my servant... Just say the word and he'll be healed.” “I know what authority is. I am under authority, and I have the right to give orders to my soldiers. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it.” This man – this Roman Centurion – he knew what authority was, and he could see it in Jesus.

Which brings us to the fourth lesson – **the faith of the outcast**

Jesus said, “I’ve never seen faith in all Israel, like this man has”. You see, at this point of history, the Jews saw themselves as the people of God. And everybody else – the gentiles – well they were cut off from God. The Jews had the law – they had the 10 Commandments – they had the temple sacrifice system – they were the chosen people of God, and everybody else was out.

And Jesus said something that ripped at the heart of their elitist view of themselves:

“Many are going to come from the East and the West (from the outside), and will be included in the Kingdom of Heaven.

12 But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

What we find, right throughout Matthew, is the last will be first, and the first will be last. You’re not **born** into the Kingdom of God – you enter the Kingdom of God by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. And the miracle of God, is that often, those who we might consider the least likely candidates, are precisely the ones who do enter the Kingdom of God. God calls nobodies, and outsiders, to become Christians.

What type of person, do you think, is most likely to become a Christian?

- A nice person

- A moral person
- Someone who loves others
- A rich man, but a generous rich man

What type of person, becomes a Christian?

Well, there **is** no type. And if we look at what happened with Jesus, it was the tax collectors; it was the prostitutes; it was the Roman Centurions; the blind; the beggar; the diseased; the outcast....

Don't you ever say "I'm not good enough to be called by God". God doesn't call the good – God makes the good. *I've got a friend, and he loves to get hold of an old tractor, and restore it. He pulls it right down. He cuts out the corrosion and welds in fresh plate. He takes the worn out parts and replaces them with new ones. He takes an old piece of junk, and makes it new.*

And that's what God does with us. He takes an old piece of junk, and makes it new. None of us, are born into the Kingdom of God – you enter the Kingdom of God by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. And many who we might think are likely candidates for the Kingdom of God, because they're nice people, good people, gentle people; from the right class; or from the right family..... will be excluded, because they're not disciples of Jesus Christ. God embraces, even the outcast, who puts their faith in Jesus Christ. But He casts out, those who do not have faith...

The fourth and final point I want to address is: **The sovereignty of God.**

In our reading today, we heard of a whole bunch of people, who were healed by the power of God... Does that still happen today? Does God still heal people? Do Christians still have the authority, to call on the name of Jesus, for healing in 2013?

Well, I believe the answer is “yes”, but then we’re faced with the problem of “Why isn’t everybody healed?” I’m pretty sure, all of us here today, have (at some time) prayed for somebody who is sick, and they have **not** gotten well. Maybe they’ve gone on and died.

My Dad got pancreatic cancer. We prayed for His healing, and later on, when the doctor looked at a new scan, he said “It’s gone. The surgeon must have cut it out, but the surgeon said “No. When I looked, it was too big and spread too far. I couldn’t do anything. I just sewed him up and left it there.” But it was gone. God healed him. He took it away. But within 2 years, he was dead. He’d died of lymphoma – a different type of cancer. And this time we’d prayed, and God didn’t heal him..... Why? Why does God sometimes heal people and other times not????

Why does God heal???? I'll tell you why. It brings God glory... You agree with that don't you? When you pray, and your prayers are answered, doesn't that bring God glory?

And when Jesus healed, it was all about Jesus – it was all about God, and yet when we ask for healing, usually we make it all about ourselves. Matthew tells us **why** Jesus healed all these people:

¹⁶ When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. ¹⁷ This was to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

“He took up our infirmities
and carried our diseases.”

Jesus healed, to demonstrate His authority. Jesus healed, to glorify God. Jesus healed, to prove that He was the one spoken of, by the prophet Isaiah. And Isaiah **did** speak the truth “He [did take] up our infirmities
[He did carry] our diseases.”

And you know when Jesus returns, there's not going to be any sickness or disease, in the place that Jesus is preparing for us now....

We live in a new era. We don't live by proof – we live by faith. If Jesus has to heal someone to prove to me that He is Lord, then I've missed the whole concept of faith. **Jesus has**

nothing left to prove. He has demonstrated His authority and His Lordship, once and for all, by putting the vacancy sign up on a tomb in Israel... He's already given the proof. Now, we have to live by faith...

And that's just how the leper approached Jesus. He trusted in Jesus' power, but he did not presume upon it. The leper didn't **demand** healing. He didn't try and **co-ere** Jesus into healing him – he left room for the sovereignty of God. And until we understand that God is sovereign – that God has a will – and His will is perfect – ... Until we understand, that God is good, and nothing that He does is bad – until we begin to let God be the good god, that He is,... and trust Him in that, we will continue to be plagued by the question , “Why does God heal some and not others.”

But you know...., when you know that God is sovereign – when you know that God sees and understands all things – when you trust that God **is** good, and everything He does, is a demonstration of that goodness, despite how we feel about it... That question won't bother you any more.

The leper said, “**Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.**” Firstly, He acknowledged that Jesus is Lord. And if Jesus is Lord, that means He is sovereign. Jesus is not some kind of vending machine, we put in the right amount of money, and do the right thing, press the right button, and out pops the healing. Jesus is Lord, which is why the leper said, **if you are willing, you can make me clean.** The leper had

the faith to know that God can and does heal. And he asked for that healing – if it was God’s will.

To pray in faith, is to trust God, no matter what His answer is. Of course, we can and should, tell Him our heart’s desires, but above this, to pray for His will to be done. The biggest faith, is to agree with God, that His sovereign will, is best.

Questions...

ⁱ Wilkins, MJ. The NIV Application Commentary p.340

ⁱⁱ <http://www.answersingenesis.org/articles/am/v2/n3/the-disease-that-shuns>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.onhealth.com/leprosy/article.htm>

^{iv} Green, M. The message of Matthew. The Bible speaks today. p.114

^v <http://www.swordofthespirit.net/bulwark/november09p11.htm>