

MATTHEW 8-9

Jesus has just descended the mountain, giving his core teaching, teaching that will shape his direction and purpose to the cross and resurrection.

Now he begins to implement his teaching in his actions and interactions with the crowds, disciples, scribes and Pharisees. These two chapters end with Jesus feeling deeply the compassionate burden for all the people who need mercy and direction. He needs trained labourers to send into the harvest. The story will shift to the more specific call of the disciples in chapter 10.

We have already been told that Jesus was “proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.” (4:23) We have also been told of the different kinds of afflictions and illnesses people had: demon-possession, epilepsy, paralysis, pains and diseases of various kinds. (24) Finally, we have been told that great crowds followed him from Galilee and the surrounding regions. (25) The 3 chapters of the Sermon on the Mount are a kind of intermission on this journey. The crowds are growing and so is the attention. Jesus is cautious about all the attention at this point. He anticipates, quite rightly, that people don't really understand what his vision is about, what his healings mean spiritually in terms of what he has come to accomplish, and why he is calling people to follow him. The misunderstanding will only grow.

In Chapters 8-9 we get a closer look into the kinds of diseases Jesus is tackling, the way healing happens, and how Jesus understands and explains their meaning.

1) Jesus heals a leper, a gentile centurion's servant, Peter's mother-in-law suffering from a fever, two men who are demon-possessed, a paralytic, a woman suffering hemorrhages, a girl thought dead, two blind men and a mute man. He also heals the natural elements by settling a stormy sea, and sinful hearts by declaring forgiveness. Each of the healings tells us something about Jesus, his authority, his message and his call to people.

2) Jesus touches those who are ritually “unclean” such as lepers, the dead, a woman who his menstruating, etc, and by so doing heals them and makes them clean. By offering a sacrifice at the temple, accepted by a priest, they would then be publicly restored to the community. Jesus is also offering forgiveness of sins. Such actions by-pass the temple-sacrifice system which is the religion of Israel. Clearly in these and other instances, Jesus is challenging the existing religious system and declaring that those who follow him are given all they need to be truly God's children.

3) Healing requires the initiative of those who are healed, or their friends (in the case of the paralytic). Such initiative is an act of faith, a trust that Jesus can do something. Without faith, healing can't happen. Also, such initiative restores dignity to those who have been rendered helpless, treated as useless, and rejected and isolated by their communities. Jesus restores not only body but spirit. He tells people that without their faith, the healing could not be achieved.

4) Jesus' healings clearly have spiritual meaning. They are like sacraments – physical expressions of spiritual meanings. By healing the people Jesus is taking on their “infirmities” and “diseases.” (Isaiah 53). By declaring the forgiveness of sins upon those who are healed (sickness was linked to sinfulness and uncleanness) Jesus is also communicating the purpose of his mission and the kind of liberation from slavery he has come to accomplish. The cross will be understood precisely in this way, as a taking upon himself the sins (infirmities and diseases) of the world and giving in return the infinite forgiveness of God. This is a summons to live life transformed by the healing love of God in Jesus. Such love is the key ingredient of the kingdom of heaven Jesus has come to get going in the world, beginning with the small community of his disciples. This love is what Jesus taught about in his Sermon on the Mount.

5) Matthew, like all those called, are healed/forgiven/'raised up' by Jesus. To be a disciple of Christ requires that we meet Christ with our poverty of spirit (5:1). But then we are raised up to our truly intended destiny before God. To follow Christ means following him through the troubles and burdens of life (the son of man has nowhere to lay his head) as disciples of God's love. It also requires single minded commitment (Follow me and let the dead bury their own dead), otherwise it won't last through the troubles and challenges of life.

6) Matthew “rises” from his tax booth. The little girl “rises” up from being apparently dead. The paralytic “gets up,” etc... These movements pre-figure the resurrection which is the ultimate promise of those who follow Jesus to the end. But it's hard to have faith in the resurrection when you are in the midst of the cross in your life. It requires faith, or else healing cannot and will not happen. We often pray for healing. Do we pray for faith? Or do we expect faith will come after the healing? Clearly, we pray because we believe it can make a difference. But we also pray because we are desperate. The latter is a weak substitute for the former.

7) The Pharisees are already trying to undermine Jesus. He is getting too much attention and his healing abilities are dangerous. He is attacking their whole religious system. In the sermon on the mount he was advocating peace and love versus militant nationalism as the solution to Israel's freedom and victory in the world. Now he is undermining the religious system centered on the temple and surrounded by synagogues where the scriptures are read and interpreted by Pharisees and scribes. They can't deny Jesus is healing people. But they can argue that his power of healing comes from evil rather than good and he is a dangerous manipulator working for the dark side. “Beware of him, for he is changing the ancient religion given to us by God through Moses and we are its authoritative teachers and interpreters” they are saying in essence.

Jesus is claiming that he is new wine who can't be fit into old ways of thinking and worshipping. People need to listen to Jesus with child-like openness and trust (poverty of spirit 5:1), submit to his authority and interpretation of God's will and way, and recognize that his actions and call are the actions and call of “the son of God” (even the demons confess this).