

Matthew 8A

- It's time to turn the page (literally) in our study of Matthew
 - Tonight, we move away from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and into a new section of the Gospel
 - Last week capped off His teaching with a series of illustrations that contrasted His teaching with that of the Pharisees
 - For centuries, the Pharisees misled the people of Israel on the nature of righteousness and the Kingdom
 - Because of their negative influence, the nation of Jesus' day was largely biblically illiterate and unfamiliar with the truth
 - So naturally Jesus' sermon was stunning
 - It challenged everything they had ever heard
 - But what was even more challenging, was the way Jesus taught on that day
 - Notice what Matthew himself said about it

[Matt. 7:28](#) When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching;

[Matt. 7:29](#) for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

- He says that as Jesus finished His first true sermon, the crowds were amazed at His teaching
 - The word "amazed" is more often translated, "astonished"
 - The people just couldn't believe what they were hearing and seeing from Jesus
- In v.29, Matthew says what amazed the people most was that Jesus could teach as one having authority, not as the Pharisees typically taught
 - To understand what Matthew meant, we need to appreciate the normal rabbinical method of teaching
 - I can best explain this problem by comparing the rabbinical teaching tradition to the children's game of telephone

- That's the game where someone says a phrase to someone else, who then repeats what they hear to the next person, and so on
- The message changes a little, with each repetition becoming more confusing over time, until it's indistinguishable from the original
- That's similar to how rabbinical teaching handled the Word of God
 - In the beginning, scribes like Ezra taught directly from the Word of God
 - But as their teaching was handed down from generation to generation, a new tradition developed
- That tradition required that a new rabbi could not contradict previous rabbinical teaching or attempt to interpret the Word of God directly
 - Instead, a rabbi's teaching had to be based on prior teaching, using it as their starting point, without contradicting it
 - The idea is similar to the concept of legal court precedent
 - A judge renders his or her opinion in a case, based on prior case law, so that his decision is rooted in prior decisions
 - So rather than go back to the source, to the Word of God, the rabbis began studying and building upon each other's teaching
 - It was like a centuries-old game of telephone
- So by Jesus' day, rabbinical teaching commonly involved summarizing and applying the teaching of former rabbis
 - A rabbi would introduce his own teaching by saying, "Rabbi Solomon said in the name of Rabbi Saul..." and so on
 - In that way, each rabbi's authority grew out of the authority of those who came before him
 - This tradition also had the effect of keeping any new rabbis in line with prior teaching, thus showing respect for past teachers
 - Ironically, while this system gave a rabbi his legitimacy, it also stripped his teaching of any legitimacy whatsoever
 - Each new generation of teachers had to work from the presumption that all prior rabbinical interpretation was accurate

- So over time, rabbinical teaching moved further and further away from Scripture
- And since rabbis weren't permitted to go back to the Scriptures themselves, there was no hope to correct false interpretations
- So by Jesus' day, the original message of Scripture was but a faint echo, which is why Jesus' sermon was such a revelation to the crowds
 - For the typical Jew who never studied Scripture for himself and only ever heard the rabbis' twisted interpretations, Jesus was a breath of fresh air
 - They were told to trust their rabbis, since they were part of an unbroken chain of authority going back to Ezra and Moses
 - But the rabbis gave the people rules, not truth, and they substituted manmade speculation for godly insight
 - The people might not be scholars, but they knew truth when they heard it
 - So when they encountered a man like Jesus, full of grace and wisdom and power, teaching self-evident truths straight from Scripture...
 - Never once referring to another rabbi's teaching to support His own conclusions...they recognized Jesus' authority instinctively
 - And when Jesus said His teaching was in keeping with the Law and Prophets, something inside them confirmed He was right
 - But by the same token, it began to dawn on some in the crowd that the Pharisees were wrong
 - Jesus' teaching not only undermined the teaching of the Pharisees, it also challenged their very source of authority
 - Jesus invalidated the rabbinical traditions and delegitimized the Pharisees as guardians of God's truth
 - His teaching proved that understanding the Word of God was not a privilege reserved for ancient rabbis
 - The Word exists apart from everything in Creation, such that even after the Heavens and Earth have passed away, the Word of God will remain

- Most importantly, Jesus set Himself apart from the Pharisees as a Man who could teach by His Own authority
 - And that truly astonished the crowds
 - Jesus' teaching was self-evidently true and wise, and it was wholly different than what the rabbis taught
 - The Church can never again allow a privileged few to claim ownership over God's truth
 - Nor should we assume that past teaching, even by scholarly men, is automatically right when it contradicts Scripture
- So in the span of little more than 20 minutes, Jesus has called out Pharisaic Judaism as an illegitimate system
 - He has repudiated Israel's entire religious system and its leaders
 - And He's declared their view of God and righteousness and the Kingdom invalid and in conflict with the Word of God itself
 - In the process, Jesus has knowingly sowed the seeds of His own death
 - This won't be the moment that the Pharisees launch their conspiracy to kill Jesus, but it sets the stage
 - From this point forward, everyone knew that Jesus was on a collision course with the religious establishment of Israel
 - So where does Jesus go from here?
 - Well, in Chapter 4, Matthew ended by saying Jesus was teaching and healing many diseases, including demonic possession
 - Jesus used the miracles to draw crowds and to validate His message as coming from God
 - The argument goes, that if Jesus has authority over the demonic realm and over the Creation itself, then clearly He is more powerful than both
- So naturally, as Jesus wraps up a powerful teaching about the Kingdom, He moves now to showing His power as the promised King over the world
 - And what follows next is a section in Matthew running from Chapter 8 to the end of Chapter 9, in which Matthew records 10 miracles of Jesus

- These ten accounts support Jesus' claims to be Messiah
- Matthew arranges these 10 miracles to invite comparisons with the 10 plagues of Egypt, though in an opposite manner
- While Moses' miracles bring destruction to Egypt, Jesus' miracles bring healing and restoration to His people
- Matthew reports miracles spanning three areas
 - Jesus' ability to heal the body, His power over Creation, and His authority over the spirit realm
 - Most importantly, Matthew's section begins and ends with two miracles that are critical to validating Jesus' claim to Messiah
 - We'll study the first one of those tonight

Matt. 8:1 When Jesus came down from the mountain, large crowds followed Him.

Matt. 8:2 And a leper came to Him and bowed down before Him, and said, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean."

Matt. 8:3 Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing; be cleansed." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed.

Matt. 8:4 And Jesus said to him, "See that you tell no one; but go, show yourself to the priest and present the offering that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."

- Descending the hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee, Jesus is now leading a large crowd, Matthew says
 - As Jesus approached Capernaum, he encounters a man with leprosy
 - Leprosy, called Hansen's disease today, is a bacterial infection
 - Only about 5% of the world's population is capable of contracting it; 95% of the world is naturally immune
 - Interesting fact...here, in South Texas, armadillos naturally carry the bacteria that causes the disease
 - The bacteria is very slow growing, so the disease progresses through a series of stages over many years
 - First, the nerves in the extremities are attacked, leaving fingers and toes permanently numb and susceptible to injury

- Then, over the next 10 years or longer, the numbness spreads and lesions develop under the skin over the whole body
- The skin and hair near the lesions will adopt a yellowish-whitish color, causing the person to begin to turn white all over
- In later stages, the lesions break through the outer layer of skin, forming sores and scabs and making the skin hard and scaly
 - Nails swell and fall off, gums bleed constantly
 - The nasal passage becomes permanently blocked, there is a constant stream of saliva, and the person loses taste and smell
 - In the very last stages, the disease attacks the internal organs
 - The victim suffers from chronic diarrhea, chronic thirst, and a burning fever and ultimately death
- Today, the disease can be treated successfully with a 1-2 year course of antibiotics, but in Jesus' day there was no cure
 - So leprosy sentenced a person to a slow, painful death
 - And because the disease was so mysterious, it made those who contracted it pariahs in their community
 - In Luke's account of this scene, Luke the doctor described the man as "covered" or "full" of leprosy, which means the man was already in the later stages of this horrible disease
- But beyond the horrible physical and social aspects of the disease, we also need to appreciate a uniquely Jewish perspective on this affliction
 - The disease of leprosy is specifically mentioned in Leviticus
 - In fact, this relatively rare disease is the focus of two entire chapters in the book of Leviticus...a total of 116 verses
 - No other disease receives so much attention in the Bible
 - In Leviticus, all suspected lepers were required to be officially diagnosed by the priesthood
 - Once a person was designated a leper, he must tear his clothes and wear torn clothes thereafter
 - He must cover himself from the nose down whenever in public

- And depending on the stage of the disease, a leper could be clean or unclean, ritually speaking, for periods of time

[Lev. 13:9](#) “When the infection of leprosy is on a man, then he shall be brought to the priest.

[Lev. 13:10](#) “The priest shall then look, and if there is a white swelling in the skin, and it has turned the hair white, and there is quick raw flesh in the swelling,

[Lev. 13:11](#) it is a chronic leprosy on the skin of his body, and the priest shall pronounce him unclean...

[Lev. 13:12](#) “If the leprosy breaks out farther on the skin, and the leprosy covers all the skin of him who has the infection from his head even to his feet, as far as the priest can see,

[Lev. 13:13](#) then the priest shall look, and behold, if the leprosy has covered all his body, he shall pronounce clean him who has the infection; it has all turned white and he is clean.

[Lev. 13:14](#) “But whenever raw flesh appears on him, he shall be unclean.

- During some stages, leprosy left the skin intact while turning the body white, and during this stage, a person could be declared clean
 - During more active stages, open sores would be present on the body, making the person unclean
 - As the disease progressed, open sores were the norm and therefore, the person remained in a perpetual state of uncleanness
- The Jewish people understood leprosy to be a defilement, something that made a person unclean to God
 - In fact, even the Hebrew word for leprosy reflects this thinking
 - The word *tzaraat* translates “mark” or “blemish”
 - It refers to something that marks or stains something that is otherwise clean and pure
- When unclean, a leper could not enter the Tabernacle or Temple compound to worship or give sacrifice
 - They were barred from the feasts and family
 - They could not even touch another human being, for doing so made that person unclean for a time

- Lepers were made to walk down the road yelling “unclean” to warn others to steer clear
- But Leviticus also gave instructions for when a leper was healed of their disease
 - In Leviticus 14, the Lord instructed the priests to verify any supposed healing of leprosy
 - They carefully examined the person’s body for a week, including shaving all body hair to examine the skin
 - If after seven days, there was no evidence of leprosy found, the person was declared healed and the eighth day became a day of rituals to mark the healing
 - The priests conducted a sin offering, a trespass offering, a burnt offering and a meal offering
 - Blood was applied to the leper’s body on the right ear lobe, right thumb and right big toe multiple times, and the body was anointed with oil
 - During the history of Israel, there had never been a time when Leviticus 14 had been used
 - Now there had been famous cases of people struck with leprosy
 - Miriam – however she came before the Law
 - Gehazi, Uzziah were all struck with the disease
 - And none of them were ever healed under the Law
 - In fact, in the time since God gave Israel the Law in Leviticus, no Jew had ever been healed by God of leprosy
 - So the healing rituals in Leviticus 14 had never been put into practice...the eighth day ritual had never been done
- For all these reasons, the disease had come to be a picture of sin itself
 - Like leprosy, sin lives in the flesh of our body, growing over time to consume us
 - It defiles the body, robbing us of our senses and destroying our fellowship with others
 - It renders us unclean and unable to approach God

- Ultimately, sin is a death sentence for everyone, just like leprosy
- And like leprosy, no one can be cured of sin apart from God's mercy
- But also like leprosy, when we are clean of sin, we are as white as snow

[Is. 1:18](#) "Come now, and let us reason together,"

Says the LORD,
 "Though your sins are as scarlet,
 They will be as white as **snow**;
 Though they are red like crimson,
 They will be like wool.

- And the Bible also says that such a cleansing can only be accomplished by the application of blood
 - In the case of curing leprosy, Leviticus 14 required the blood of animals to be applied to the body
 - But in the case of sin, only the blood of a perfect sinless human being will satisfy God...only the blood of Christ
- By the time of Jesus' day, the leprosy cleansing ritual had never been instituted because God had not yet provided a cure for the disease
 - And in the case of sin, the solution had not yet appeared either
 - As it turned out, both awaited the arrival of the Messiah
- In fact, the similarities of leprosy and sin led rabbis to conclude that God intended to associate the healing of leprosy with the arrival of the Messiah
 - They concluded that the first person to heal a leper would be the Messiah Himself
 - Supernatural healing was not unknown in Israel
 - The Lord permitted ordinary men to heal the sick and raise the dead by His Spirit, men like Elijah and Elisha did these things
 - But the Father validated His Son's claims to being Messiah by performing similar miracles in Him

- So that begs the question, how would the Father distinguish between the miracles regular prophets performed from those done by His Son?
 - The answer is, the Father reserved certain specific miracles for Jesus, miracles that no other man had ever been permitted to perform
 - Dr. Fruchtenbaum has coined the term “Messianic Miracles” to describe these special, Messiah-authenticating miracles
 - One of these unique miracles was the healing of leprosy described here in Matthew
- Until this moment, no Jew had ever yet been cured of leprosy, so Leviticus 14 had never been put into action
 - But now, a man approaches Jesus with advanced leprosy, and as he does, he bows before Jesus
 - And as he seeks healing from Jesus, he begins saying “if you are willing”
 - Those two details tell us everything we need to know about the man’s heart
 - First, by kneeling before Jesus, the man enters into a posture of worship
 - He makes a public declaration of deity, which is no small thing in Jewish society
 - Jews were extremely adamant about not worshipping anything other than Yahweh
 - They even barred images of people or animals on their coins for fear of violating the commandment against idolatry
 - Yet here’s a Jew willing to give His worship to Jesus, which indicates he recognized Jesus to be God in some sense
 - And saying “if you are willing”, the man acknowledges that Jesus has the power to do something that had never been done before in history
 - For this man, it wasn’t a question of if Jesus could accomplish this miracle
 - The man knew Jesus had the power to heal leprosy, so the only question was whether it was God’s will to do so

- Taking those two statements together, there's no doubt this man believed Jesus to be the divine Messiah promised to Israel
- So by his faith, this man sets the stage for Jesus to perform the first of three Messianic Miracles, proving His claims to be Messiah
 - And in the process, He also takes the opportunity to distinguish Himself once more from the Pharisees
 - Jesus stretched out His hand and did the unthinkable in Jewish society...He touched the man
 - This may have been the first human contact this man had experienced in years
 - No self-respecting Pharisee would have dared to do such a thing, even if he had the power to heal leprosy
 - But Jesus touches the man to make Him clean
 - So in effect, Jesus makes the man clean by taking upon Himself the man's uncleanness
 - Symbolically, Jesus took the man's curse so that the man might be freed from it
 - And in the process, Jesus performed the Messianic miracle
 - He didn't just stop the progression of the disease
 - That's all modern medicine could have done for this man... killing the bacteria just stops the worsening of the conditions
 - But existing damage can't be repaired
 - Unless you're God, of course
 - The Gospels say the man was instantly cleansed, as in all traces of the disease were removed immediately...a divine miracle
 - The man was as good as new
- Now notice in v.4, what Jesus tells the man to do next
 - Jesus first says, see to it that you tell no one
 - Jesus' concern wasn't secrecy, but rather priority

- Jesus knew this man would be overjoyed at his healing, and naturally, he would want to share it with everyone he knew
- But Jesus' priority was the fulfillment of Leviticus 14, and so He commands the man not to become distracted with celebrations
- Instead, Jesus wants the man to take the three-day journey south to Jerusalem to present himself to the priests in the temple as Leviticus 14 requires
 - And when he arrived at the temple, the man was to present the offering as Moses commanded
 - This was that 8-day complex series of offerings required by Leviticus 14, an event that had never before been seen in all Israel's history
- So what do you suppose the response was going to be among the priests and all the leaders of Israel when a cleansed leper arrives at the temple?
 - They will not be able to deny his healing
 - Because Leviticus 13 would have required this same man to present himself to the priests on numerous occasions in the past
 - And so his leprosy would have been well-known and his diagnosis would have been recorded in the temple records
- But now the man appears fully cleansed, and not just in remission, but his body completely restored
 - As they recognize the magnitude of what has happened, the priests will realize that one of the Messianic miracles will have taken place
 - They will have no choice but to acknowledge that the Messiah was in their midst
- What's more, the priests will be digging out Scripture to remind themselves of what they do next in response, since it was unprecedented
 - And as they accomplish the rituals required, they perform a beautiful picture of the atoning sacrifice of Christ for the sake of sin

- That's why Jesus ends His instructions in v.4, saying this will be a testimony to them
 - This man's healing was certainly a blessing to him personally, and as such, it was a beautiful display of God's mercy and grace
 - But more importantly, the restoration of His body was intended to communicate something far more important to Israel
 - That a divine Healer had arrived, the One Who had power to heal both the body and the soul
 - And that He had the power and willingness to make men clean
 - As a result of this miracle, Mark reports that Jesus could no longer openly enter a city, for fear of the Pharisees
 - Because as soon as the Pharisees learned of this healing, they traveled down from Jerusalem to investigate the miracle
 - That was a requirement of rabbinical law, that when a Messianic miracle took place, an investigation must follow to verify the man's claim to be Messiah
 - So the question was, would these religious leaders embrace Jesus as Messiah in light of the incontrovertible evidence Jesus was giving them?
 - But there's where things get difficult
 - Because for the priests and scribes to acknowledge Jesus was Messiah, meant they also must concede that their system was bankrupt
 - Jesus has set Himself against the establishment and its way of teaching, so you couldn't have it both ways
 - So if you were a rabbi invested in the current system, you had to make a tough choice
 - In order to embrace the Messiah and the Kingdom, you had to reject your culture, your system, your livelihood, your own identity
 - Or you could hold on to your prized position of power and reject Jesus despite His miracles, which meant you must find a way to discredit His claims

- Every generation since then has been faced with the same choice...keep the system that rules your life, or reject the world and come to Jesus