

## Watch and Learn

Matt. 8:1-34

Matthew 8 invites us to walk alongside and to be with Jesus as He encounters the needs of people. It is not a formal "teaching" chapter like the Sermon on the Mount but, the opportunity to learn from Jesus - to be, in effect, taught by Him is one we should not miss. In the chapter Jesus cleanses a leper, heals the Centurion's servant, heals Peter's mother-in-law, called possible disciples to a greater level of commitment, rebuked the winds and waves that threatened their safety, and healed two demon possessed men. Our interest is in not just what Jesus did but how He did what He did and how He interpreted what He did and what He expected of those He helped.

Notice first, the leper. The skin diseases known as leprosy in the first century were so contagious that lepers were quarantined. They could travel but they were required to warn anyone coming their way so that they could keep a proper distance from them. The leper who came and worshipped Him had already broken past what was allowed by doing so. His words reveal the inspiration for his boldness, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean." He had seen and heard enough of Jesus to believe that Jesus could heal him. He must have also believed that there was a good chance that Jesus would want to heal him or else why would he have come? Still, he was a leper and the lepers of his day knew almost nothing but rejection and so he put it cautiously, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean." How many times did he rehearse this request? How many versions of it did he consider before he found the one that seemed best? His whole life, every dream and hope for a new and different future were contained in this single sentence that he spoke to Jesus. What would Jesus do or say? Imagine how much this man had invested in this single moment...

Jesus put out His hand and touched Him. The leper had broken the rules by coming as close as he had to Jesus. Jesus answered by doing the unthinkable. He touched a leper. Any rational person knew that to do so, to do what Jesus did

was to become a leper. Jesus reached out and touched him. When He did, He did more than the leper would ever have asked. In that moment, the man was lifted by Jesus above his own understanding of himself. He was freed from the condemnation of his culture, "unclean" no more. Jesus regarded him to be a man like other men and thus, a touchable man. "I am willing," Jesus answered, "be cleansed."

And then the power that many had witnessed before in other cases came again. "Immediately his leprosy was cleansed." Imagine the moment. Leprosy is visible. It is evidenced by scaly sores and deformed flesh. The appendages such as the fingers, ears and nose are unsightly and no doubt, embarrassing. "Immediately his leprosy was

healed." All who were present observed. They witnessed the impossible. The man's skin became smooth and whole and beautiful. They saw it change. No longer a leper, just a man. No longer a leper but fully and completely and wonderfully, a man. No longer an outcast, set free from the prison of his own flesh, a new life waited.

Jesus gave him parting instructions. Don't tell anyone. Go and show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them. There is a contradiction within these instructions. Don't tell anyone. Go and show yourself to the priest. Don't tell anyone. Tell the priest. Let's make some observations. The shouting and celebrating of the enthused is not very convincing to those who are uninvolved or distant from them. The priests were part of this distant group. They must have had a record of those who were diagnosed with leprosy. The priests were instructed by the Law to test for leprosy and to declare those found unclean as such. Examining this man now would demonstrate that he was no longer a leper. Naturally, he would tell the story of his healing. The priest could think whatever he wished of the story but the fact that he was no longer a leper and that he had been healed could not be denied. This lifted the cloud of condemnation from his head. Now, officially, he had a new life.

Jesus operated completely outside of officialdom. This was His mission. He did not come to change the system but to offer an alternative to the system. Atrocities took place on both sides. The Centurion loved his servant. Almost

certainly, he was his Jewish servant. The servant must have been a good man. His integrity had broken through the defenses of the Centurion to the point that he had found a place in his heart. This was an unusual and exceptional situation.

Jesus responded immediately. "I will come and heal him." I wonder if there was a connection between Jesus and the Centurion as in the Centurion and his servant was like Jesus and His disciples. Jesus and the Centurion on a mission in a hostile land who found good men whom they came to love. If it is true that Jesus understood the Centurion in this way then it also appears that the Centurion had a unique understanding of Jesus. "Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only that You should speak a word and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, "Go," and he goes and to another, "Come," and he comes; and to my servant, "Do this." and he does it."

The insight of the centurion was remarkable and Jesus said so. "I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!" What he understood was that Jesus' authority came from the fact that He was under authority. The Centurion's source of authority was Rome and Jesus' source was God. God is greater than Rome and therefore the

Centurion found himself to be unworthy, lesser than Jesus. Even in his diminished state, he could command those under him and they would carry out his wishes and so he was certain that Jesus could do the same. Therefore it was not necessary for Jesus to come to his house, just speak the word and my servant will be healed.

Jesus took the moment to declare that there would be some very surprised people at the judgment. "Many will come from the east and the west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness..."

Give thought to what the Centurion knew and felt in the person of Jesus. Do you get the heart of God?