

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Healing Humanity

Matthew 8:1-17

By the time we reach the end of today's text from Matthew, Jesus may have felt like the whole world had been coming to him for healing. First the man with leprosy. Then the centurion seeking help for his servant. Then Peter's mother-in-law. Matthew zooms in and gives us these snapshots of broken bodies made whole. Then he zooms out and speaks more generally, summarizing what unfolded as evening arrived. In short, the people brought many and Jesus healed all.

At this point, we might expect to hear something about Jesus retreating to a solitary place for some rest. But instead, Matthew gathers up all this healing activity into a quote from the prophet Isaiah: "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases" (v. 17).

Matthew knows his Bible. He knows that the Suffering Servant spoken of in Isaiah would deal with the ills of God's people. Not just their spiritual ills but their bodily ones as well. This Servant of the Lord would bring redemption and restoration to the whole person and the whole people.

And by doing so, the Suffering Servant would reveal the will and character of God. This is no distant and detached deity who protects and preserves himself at all costs, not exposing himself to the lostness and brokenness of his creation. On the contrary, the Lord is moved by the condition of his people and his world. In his great mercy, he shows up to do something about it. He shows up most of all in Jesus, who goes about touching bodies and speaking words of healing. He removes disease, runs off demons, and reclaims earthly territory that rightfully belongs to the heavenly realm. According to Matthew, if we want to see God's compassion and concern for broken humanity in action—in decisive and eternal action—then follow the unfolding mission of Jesus.

In his ministry, Jesus heals because it is the will of God to heal us. God wills life and wholeness for us. God does not will suffering and sorrow for us. True, there are many things about suffering, and sorrow, and sin, that we don't understand and can't explain. But we do know that this is not what God has created us for and destined us for. Those who are in Christ are destined for liberation and freedom from disease, death, and the power of the devil. As we look at and listen to today's text from Matthew, we see how God's will for healing and wholeness is exerting its saving power in the form of Jesus and his work among us.

This work of healing comes to a climax in the cross. That may sound like a strange statement, considering the reality of Jesus' crucifixion. After all, crucifixion was designed to be the ultimate statement of defeat and death. But in the plans and purposes of God, it became the event in which death itself was defeated, and humanity restored to God. The great monk Theodore of Studios once contrasted the disobedience of Adam with the obedience of Christ: "How splendid the cross of Christ! It brings life, not death; light, not darkness; Paradise, not its loss. It is the wood on which the Lord, like a great warrior, was

wounded in hands and feet and side, but healed thereby our wounds. A tree had destroyed us; a tree now brought us life."¹

"Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows . . . and by his wounds we are healed" (Isa. 53:4, 5). There's healing in what we call the Atonement, the death of Jesus that reconciles us to God and to one another. Our Lord's death makes us whole. Whole in every way, including our bodies. True, that kind of affirmation doesn't seem to fit with reality, based on outward appearances here in the present. Like the man with leprosy, the centurion whose servant was sick, or Peter's mother-in-law, we're still coming to Jesus with our own cries for help. We come with our broken bodies. We come with our cancer. We come with our heart disease. We come with our sciatica pain. We come with our dwindling eyesight. We come with our substance addiction. We come with our deteriorating joints. We come with our depression. "Lord, free me from this affliction." "Lord, cure me of this illness." "Lord, touch my body with your healing hand." "Lord, speak the word that will drive out this disease."

Sometimes we experience his healing in immediate and dramatic ways. Sometimes we experience his healing over an extended period of time, especially through the resources of medical care, counseling, or therapy. Sometimes we live in that space where one day brings progress and another day brings setbacks. Sometimes we lose ground in the battle with illness. Sometimes the battle and struggle reaches its end, and we face the reality of our own death. But that doesn't mean that the suffering and death of Jesus have lost their effectiveness for us, or that the cross has somehow become powerless. No, the divine compassion displayed in the cross, and the forgiveness it secured for you, are still true, as is the cross and empty tomb's promise of a new body, a resurrection body. Even when we seek the Lord's healing for our present body, we always do so in light of the body to be given to believers at Christ's coming.

But while looking ahead to what is promised at Christ's final coming, we always need to stay rooted in what he did during his first coming, in order to bring us comprehensive healing. Healing from sin. Healing in your relationship with God. Healing in your relationship with others. Healing in your body. Healing in the body of society. Healing for humanity. There's no part of human life that's beyond the reach of Christ's atoning work. That's why Christ came down into our lostness and brokenness.

In one of his books, preacher John Stott describes what the atonement tells us about God's presence with us in this suffering world. Stott tells an imaginary story about a poor man who climbs 2,310 feet up the mountain to the colossal statue of Christ the Redeemer that towers above Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil. After making the difficult climb, the man finally reaches Jesus and says,

I have climbed up to meet you, Christ, from the filthy, confined quarters down there . . . to put before you, most respectfully, these considerations: there are 900,000 of us down there in the slums of that splendid city . . . And you . . . do you remain here at Corcovado surrounded by divine glory? Go down there to the *favelas* . . . Don't stay away from us; live among us and give us new faith in you and in the Father. Amen.

Stott asks, "What would Christ say in response to such an entreaty? Would he not say '[in the suffering of the cross] I did come down to live among you, and I live among you still'?" Then Stott adds,

We have to learn to climb the hill called Calvary, and from that vantage-ground survey all life's tragedies. The cross does not solve the problem of suffering, but it supplies the essential perspective from which to look at it Sometimes we picture [God] lounging, perhaps

dozing, in some celestial deck-chair, while the hungry millions starve to death It is this terrible caricature of God which the cross smashes to smithereens.²

In today's text, Jesus comes down from the mountain after concluding a body of teaching called the Sermon on the Mount. During his teaching, Jesus highlighted people who were powerless, lowly, and marginalized, pronouncing them blessed, from a kingdom of God perspective, a cross perspective. And now, in his next round of healings, Jesus brings the blessings of the kingdom to some people who know suffering and exclusion all too well. Note that all three of them are excluded from full participation in the life of God's people Israel. The man with leprosy is excluded as unclean. The centurion's servant is excluded as a Gentile. And Peter's mother-in-law is excluded as a woman.

But now Jesus has come, and he's bringing a new people of God into existence, a community where the left out are now brought in. This community is made up of disciples who extend Jesus' mission of healing broken relationships and diseased bodies. And at the center of this community is the cross. The cross reminds us that our Healer himself was "despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering" (Isa. 53:3).

Here at the Lord's table, there are signs of the mercy of God. The mercy of God means that God, in and through Jesus Christ, gets personally involved in the suffering, pain, and injustice of this world and our lives. God doesn't love from a distance. God loves from within our condition. He redeems and restores us by entering into our helplessness and need. As he hung on the cross, Jesus bore the weight of our sins and the agony of our afflictions, so that instead of being excluded from the presence of God, we may live and love in the presence of God. As the prophet Isaiah says, "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Isa. 53:4-5).

¹ Saint Theodore of Studios in *Breakfast with the Saints*.

² John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006) 320, 333.