

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MATTHEW 8:1-17

WE now come to the consideration of the section in which the King is seen acting in power in every realm.

In the course of His Manifesto He had presented a great deal of life; but dreams are of no avail unless deeds follow. Men cannot live by merely gazing on a vision. The vision may arrest, may attract; but unless it can be translated into victory, it is of very little use to men. And so, now that the ethic was unfolded, the Manifesto uttered; now that the wondrous words had fallen upon the listening ears of His disciples, and of the crowds, the natural and inevitable question was: What can this Man accomplish? Is He equal to doing, as well as dreaming? Is it possible for Him to realize a victory, as well as project a vision?

In this paragraph we see that He began to answer that question by a series of simple and yet sublime manifestations of the fact that the Unfolder of the ethic, is also the Giver of dynamic; that He is not merely a Dreamer come to suggest better ways to men; but a Doer, equal to reaching them in the places of their need, and making them doers also.

In chapters eight and nine of this Gospel, we have nine manifestations of His power; and these arrange themselves naturally into three groups of three each. He gave three illustrations of power; and immediately afterwards we find the effect produced on the people by what they saw. Then three other illustrations of power, and again the effect produced. Finally, three further illustrations of power, and once again the effect produced.

In looking at these two chapters let us be careful not to imagine that Jesus Christ presented Himself to the people, and asked them to observe what He was able to do.

There was nothing theatrical in these manifestations of power; they were natural, necessary, and beautiful; but they have been so grouped that, looking back, we may see how, having taught in wondrous words, He now triumphed in equally wondrous works.

The first three illustrations were those of:

- The cleansing of the leper,
- The healing of the centurion's servant,
- The restoration of Peter's wife's mother.

Immediately afterwards a man said to him: “**Master, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest.**”

Then moving beyond the realm of the physical, He proved Himself:

- Master of the elements, in the stilling of the storm;
- Master of the great world of spiritual forces, as He cast out the demons;
- Master of disease and its source of sin, as He cured the palsy and forgave sin.

Immediately after these things we read, “**They marvelled, and glorified God.**”

Then we have the third group of three:

- The raising of the child of Jairus,
- The healing of the woman who touched Him;
- The healing of the blind.

Then we read, “**The multitudes marveled.**”

We have now to deal with the first of the three groups only; the leper, the centurion’s servant, and Peter’s wife’s mother.

Let us first take a general survey of the passage.

As Jesus commenced these deeds of His Kingship, we are arrested by the peculiarity of that commencement. Here is God’s attested King; gathering first a small nucleus of loyal souls. He had enunciated the ethic of His Kingdom; now the moment had come in which He was about to accomplish something. He did not form a party, formulate a policy, or plan a campaign. There is nothing more remarkable in all His ministry than the fact that He never held consultations with men, or attempted to form a party in our sense of the word, or gave men a program. He was not restricted by party, policy, or program.

Glancing over the movement of these seventeen verses we notice, first, that the King began to deal with need at its lowest, in the physical realm; with leprosy, palsy, and fever.

This King, in order to set up His Kingdom, did not stay on the summit of the mount; He went down to the depth of the leper’s condition. The first call to the King was the call of the most needy man.

We shall come to a higher plane presently, and find Him dealing with spiritual qualities and quantities; but the first exhibition of His power was given in the realm of the most conscious need.

We notice in the second place, as He commenced His work, that He acted in response to appeals, and voluntarily also.

First there came the cry of a leper, separated from the crowd, and yet in the vicinity of the crowd, **“Lord, if Thou wilt, Thou canst make me clean”** - it was a cry of need and He responded to it.

In the second place, it was the cry of a man, not for himself, but for another, for his servant - **“My servant lieth at home, sick of the palsy.”** And Jesus said, **“I will come and heal him.”**

In the third place, His action was in response to the appeal of friends (see Luke 4:38).

- In the first case He was yet on the mountain;
- In the second He had entered the city;
- In the third He had entered into the narrowest circle the home of Peter.

Then notice, He commenced His work with the unfit in more senses than one. If we had been with Him, and had been Hebrews, as His disciples were, we should have been greatly startled.

- First, He touched a leper, an outcast, whom no man must dare to touch.
- Secondly, He healed the servant of a Roman, who was outside the covenant of Israel, and with whom there could properly be no communication.
- Thirdly, He touched a woman, who, according to Jewish ideas, did not count.

He began with the unfit persons for whom there was no provision in the economy of the nation. A great many people have been sorely troubled about this touching of the leper, saying that in doing so He broke the law. But He was not as other men. On another occasion they said, **“This Man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.”**

They meant to say; Pollution is mightier than purity; though He be pure, contact with sinners will produce pollution in Himself. But He was such that He could be a friend of sinners, and suffer no contamination by contact, but rather surcharge them with His purity. We dare not become friends of sinners, save in the power of His redeeming life, or their pollution will be communicated to us. When He touched them, He imparted His purity to them, and the proportion in which Christ actually possesses us and dwells in us, is the proportion in which we can become the friends of sinners.

If we touch a leper, we catch the leprosy because our every fiber is weakened through the agency of sin; but the very material life of the Son of God was absolutely strong, and perfect, and pure, and when He touched a man He took no contamination, for there was nothing in Him upon which leprosy could fasten; but rather He communicated the strength and virtue and purity of His Manhood to the leper, and healed him.

So also He answered a Roman's prayer; and thus overstepped all narrow and provincial bounds; and the cool, healing hand of the Master touched the hand of a woman, and the fever left her.

At the end of this section we read, **“When the even was come, they brought unto Him many that were possessed with devils; and He cast out the spirits with His word, and healed all that were sick.”**

That reads so easily and seems so simple, but let us continue our reading **“That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet, saying, Himself took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses.”**

Here we need to pause for a moment. When He healed with a word, with a touch, what did He? **“Himself took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses.”**

It is a very superficial exposition which makes it appear that the King, as He came to touch and heal, took into His own heart, sympathetically only, the feeling of the pain and the weakness.

This action of healing was the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah, and we cannot interpret this working of the power of the King save in the light of that prophecy.

There is a growing revelation through the teaching of Isaiah until we come to the culminating glory of the great Servant of God suffering to save, and in that sense the fifty-third chapter is the very heart of the prophecy. Here we see that word being fulfilled; **“He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him.”**

Briefly, it is the chapter of atonement, of vicarious suffering; the chapter in which we see the King dealing, not with the superficial externality of things; but getting down until He touched the deep underlying reason of all suffering and evil in the moral and material realm alike.

In order to deal with these He took hold of sin itself; and when He healed the leper, the centurion’s servant, Peter’s wife’s mother, with a word and a touch; and the multitude, halted for a moment with surprise, brought unto Him many possessed with demons, He perfectly understood that all the disability He corrected was the outcome of man’s sin; that at the back of physical leprosy lay sin, not necessarily in the actual leper, but in the past of the race.

When He dealt first with physical need, He knew that His right to work these miracles was the right of the coming Cross in which He should gather into His very heart the sin that lay at the back of all these things. In the Cross was the right by which He distributed His virtues to the impure, and gave of His strength to the sick. Thus the King revealed the fact that His power in dealing with disability was based upon His passion.

We shall see this yet more clearly when we come to another group; He said to the sick of the palsy, **“Son, be of good cheer, thy sins be forgiven thee;”** and when men criticized Him, He said, **“Whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk?”**

He acted as knowing that physical disability and moral malady are linked, and whenever He healed disease it was in the right of His coming Passion, in which He would deal not merely with these manifestations, but with the root of evil from which they sprang. And so it was in the power of the Cross, antedating the historic accomplishment of a Divine purpose, that He healed the leper, and the servant, and the woman sick of the fever.

All this does not mean that immediate physical healing is secured to us in the Atonement. This is not so, any more than immunity from natural dying is immediately secured. Ultimately freedom from disease and triumph over death are ours through the Cross, but for the period of probation sickness is permitted, always with some value in the Divine purpose, even though at the moment we may not know what that value is.

Notice one other thing about these actions of the King.

Not only did He accomplish at cost, He restored to the natural. This is a day in which we are spending a very great deal of time discussing the possibility of the miraculous. As men get to see more clearly, they will understand that a miracle is not a setting aside of law, but that it is rather an operation in a realm of law not yet discovered by men living on a lower plane.

We are constantly discovering laws unknown to our fathers, and applying them. Every miracle Jesus wrought, He wrought, not to prove His Deity, not essentially in the power of His Deity, but in the power of a perfectly poised humanity through which God could work.

These miracles of Jesus, so far from being violations of law, were restorations of men to the life according to law. Leprosy is unlawful; cleansing is lawful. Fever is due to violation of law; and this Man by a touch restored to law. The King came to restore a lost order.

Finally, as we survey this first of the three groups we see that the one thing the King was doing was that of drawing attention to Himself. If we said that of any other man, it would be to utter his condemnation; when we say it of Him, we are all conscious of the eminent fitness of the action.

This Man, meekest of the meek, proceeded from beginning to end along a line that demanded that men should attend to Him, listen to Him, obey Him. The King Who had uttered words of wisdom that astonished men, now came to do such things that must of necessity make the people look at Him, listen to Him, decide concerning Him.

In quiet, kingly attitude, He proceeded through all these miracles of healing in perfect naturalness. **“If Thou wilt, Thou canst make me clean,”** and in a moment came the word of the King, **“I will, be thou clean.”** **“Speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed;”** and the word was spoken, **“Go thy way; and as thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee.”** The touch of the King, and the woman was cured.

Now let us turn from general examination to a more particular one.

Mark how the leper came to Jesus. He came with a known need.

“If Thou wilt, Thou canst make me clean.” If we are coming to the King, we must know what we want. All the prayers that storm heaven are brief. There is a place for the longer prayer. There is a place for the adoration and the pouring out of the heart; but it is when a man knows what he wants, that he takes hold of God.

“Lord, if Thou wilt, Thou canst make me clean.” It is hardly a prayer, it is a statement, an affirmation, a cry of need. Next, his attitude was submissive he worshipped. His cry was an honest cry, **“If Thou wilt, Thou canst make me clean.”** Why question the willingness of Jesus? Because the man was not sure that Jesus would be willing, and he was honest enough to say so.

If we look closely we see that this man had learned a lesson, that the will of the King is supreme; **“If Thou wilt, Thou canst.”** He did not question His power. It is not that he questioned His willingness unkindly, but that he recognized that it must be as He willed. It is when a soul gets there that he makes contact with all the power of Jesus Christ. To state it boldly, the Master, Jesus Christ, could not possibly do other than answer this man as He did. This King had come to claim the surrender of the will, and the man yielded. **“If Thou wilt.”** And glorious and Kingly, like the flashing of the sun illuminating the morning, came the answer, **“I will, be thou clean.”** When the man’s will bent to the will of Christ, Christ’s will touched the man’s will, and through that contact there was communicated to him the power and virtue of the King.

Then He sent him away, telling him not to tell anyone of this miracle, to keep silent about it. That is the first intimation that Christ’s estimate of the physical is that it is secondary. He always prevented men talking about physical miracles because He did not deal with-things-on-the-surface. In the fourteenth chapter of the Book of Leviticus you will find that when a man was healed of leprosy he had to offer sacrifice. Through all the Hebrew economy men were taught that this is the basis of man’s approach to God. Clean or unclean, there must be the ceremonial law of sacrifice. Christ’s was not accomplished, and until it should be this man must go back to Moses and offer the shadow of sacrifice. The healing that had come to him was at the cost of infinite sacrifice, of which all others were but shadows.

The next case is that of a man coming to Christ, not for himself, but for another; and the first fact to be noticed is, that he stated his need, and Jesus said, **“I will come and heal him.”** When reading the New Testament nothing is more wonderful than the tremendous assumptions of Jesus. The man came to him in trouble. Christ did not say, I will come and see what I can do. He said, **“I will come and heal him.”** There was perfect confidence in Himself. It was the quiet, but dignified voice of a great authority.

The centurion said, **“Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed.”** Notice the centurion’s faith, **“Speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed.”** And then notice his philosophy of authority. **“For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to this man, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it.”**

The centurion was not putting himself into contrast with Jesus, but was saying, What is true of me is true of Thee; Thou art also under authority, and because Thou art under authority, Thou art able to exercise authority. This is the true philosophy of government. And so, **“when Jesus heard it, He marveled.”** The word **“marveled”** does not mean necessarily that He was surprised, but that He admired his faith, that it startled Him by comparison with the faith of other men. What was it in the faith of the centurion at which Jesus marveled? Probably the intelligence of it.

We hear a good deal about simple faith. But here is a man whose faith is based upon a true philosophy of life. With the leper it was the consciousness of a great need in himself, a great might in the Master. But when the centurion came, Jesus marveled at his faith and said, “**Verily, I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel.**” It was a moment of great joy for Jesus. But with the joy a great shadow came, for He saw the exclusion of the very children of the King, who, disobedient to the King, should be cast out.

In the case of the woman in a fever, the appeal was made by her friends. He touched her, and the fever left her, and she arose and ministered unto them. He touched her, the fever left her, and she responded by becoming His servant.

Then we have that last brief account of the wonderful eventide. It is a great picture - the incapable and suffering gathered to Him, possessed of evil spirits, and all manner of diseases; and the King, by speaking a word, imparting health, and all in fulfillment of prophecy.

In conclusion; as to the King we learn from these first three movements, that the Dreamer is the Doer, that the Teacher is a Man of action, that the Unfolder of the great task is the Giver of a new dynamic; and these facts, first revealed in the physical, are for us to-day true supremely in the spiritual. If not, He has merely revealed a great ideal.

You are a leper and need cleansing; palsied and need healing; fever-stricken and need to feel the touch of His coolness and His balm. Oh, blessed be God, the Teacher is the same, great in words; but to a poor struggling heart, greater yet in works. If there be something in your life, something of moral depravity, something of incapability, some evil desire that prevents your doing the thing you would, come to Him as the leper came, “**Lord, if Thou wilt, Thou canst . . .**”

Come as the centurion came, “**Speak the word only!**” He is close to you, and if you will only look into His face with all the pain of your incompetence, and sigh in trust, He will touch you, and break the power of cancelled sin, and set the prisoner free.

~ end of chapter 18 ~

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