

If You Are Willing

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[0 : 00] We're going to look at Matthew chapter 8 verses 1 to 4, a very short passage, but let me read it for you.

It's, I think, on page 782 or thereabouts. 972. Close enough. Right numbers. Wrong way round. Okay.

When Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. And a man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.

Jesus reached out with his hand and touched the man. I am willing, he said, be clean. Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy. And then Jesus said to him, since you don't see that you don't tell anyone, but go show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded as a testimony to them.

Friends, I wonder what you think the things are that humans normally fear. In fact, what are the things that you as a human being fear?

[1 : 04] Is it the physical or perhaps the material? Or do you fear illness or pain or disability or suffering or death or lack of wealth and prosperity or do you fear other sorts of things?

That is, do you fear perhaps isolation? Isolation from others? Isolation from the things that you love? Isolation from people you love and that love you?

Isolation from people or even perhaps isolation from God? And what about we Christians in particular? What are the things that we fear? What about those of us who know God?

Are there things that you fear or that others, you know, fear who are believers in God? Are there things that I fear, for example, as God's person?

Well, I suspect some of you are probably like me. You see, I personally fear God's willingness. Let me explain what I mean by that. I am a believer in God.

[2 : 02] I believe in his authority. I acknowledge and I hold to his power. And I assent to God's essential goodness. But I also fear his willingness.

That is, I often find myself doubting whether God is willing to give me this or that or care for these particular needs. It might be my health, my prosperity, my worth, my work situation.

Sometimes I wonder whether God really, you know, is willing to enrich aspects of my life. I have, I feared for parts of my life about whether he would indeed make my children Christian.

Sometimes I fear as to whether he will bless my ministry. Does he, does he, does he care for how this church grows and how it financially meets its needs and all of those things?

I wonder if I could just put it in another way to tweak it a little bit. You see, as I approach my life as God's person, my greatest fear doesn't have to do with God's ability. You see, my greatest fear is for God who cares.

[3 : 12] I know he cares. Please be assured of that. But my doubts are about God's will. That is, is God's will for me what I would like it to be? And if that is you, if you echo some of those things, then let me encourage you to think about this passage.

You see, this passage can fill me and us with great comfort. You see, in this passage, I find a leper who wonders the things that I wonder at times.

It's not my normal state of Christian life, but it does happen. So let's have a look and let's see what God can, what God teaches him and see if it can help me and you in our doubts as well.

So turn in your Bibles again, if you haven't, to Matthew chapter eight. And I want to examine the life and times of a leper in Jewish society in the first century.

You see, in the Old Testament book of Leviticus, there were extended examinations of various sorts of conditions that would show up in leather, in clothing, in the walls of houses and even on human skin.

[4 : 18] When these conditions affected humans and affected their skin, the common thing appears to have been that it would disfigure the face and the body and may have been contagious at times.

The conditions that are mentioned in the Old Testament undoubtedly included what we in the contemporary world would call leprosy. But it also undoubtedly included a lot of other skin diseases as well, some of which, you know, we might have ourselves these days.

The first thing to understand is that about being a leper. If you're a leper, you see, you were someone who had some sort of visible and probably disfiguring skin disease disorder.

It may have been contagious, may not have been. It may have been very enduring and very serious to your overall health. Sometimes it may have just been something that occurred just temporarily and then went away, in which case it didn't have the enduring effect that others would.

But if you had this sort of enduring and even to some extent temporary, but the worst was the enduring skin disorder, then you were a person who was avoided by healthy people.

[5 : 31] You were a person who was to be shunned. But there was more. You see, if you were a Jew and had such a disease, you were an inheritor of the rules that are laid down in the book of Leviticus.

And those rules are very strong and very clear. However, those people with these skin conditions were ceremonially unclean. That is, they were ejected from ordinary society because of the risks that they had, that they were to that society.

And when you were ejected from that society, it meant being ejected from your family. Ejected from your association with your wife, your husband, your parents, your children, your grandchildren, whatever.

You were ejected from normal social intercourse. You were ejected also from normal religious life. You see, because you couldn't go into the temple because there are other people there. And so for some, being a leper was a sign that you had also been ejected from the presence and the goodness of God.

Because you couldn't even go to where God was. That is, where God was worshipped with the people of God. You were isolated. Isolated from health, society, family, and seemingly isolated from God himself.

[6 : 44] It's a terrifying thought, isn't it? And yet, it existed. See, being a leper in the first century was a miserable, debilitating situation in life.

And Matthew assumes that we know all of that. But then he lets us into another part of the leper's life. He tells us that this leper, not only had he experienced all of this, but he feared something greater.

Can you see it? He has my fear. He fears that Jesus might not be willing. That is, that it is not Jesus' will to fix his situation.

Look at what he says. Lord, if you will, you can make me clean. The leper doesn't appear to have any doubt about the ability of Jesus to do this. No, he's not worried about that.

He's worried about whether Jesus is actually willing. It's a terrible fear, isn't it? A knowledge that Jesus is great and able, but a fear that he's not good or not willing.

[7 : 57] And then in verse 3, Jesus answers this leper's fear. Throughout his ministry, you see, Jesus regularly touched people. Often to touch to heal. But here there's added emphasis.

You see, Jesus, it's a magnificent gesture, friends. He stretches out his hand. And he touches the untouchable. And he cleanses the unclean.

And he breaks with every social convention. But he also breaks religious and legal rules. He breaks the strict requirements of the law in order to fulfill the core of the law, love.

He breaks taboo. He invades the leper's personal space, as it were, with his hand. He invades with his purifying love. And the results are startling.

Verse 3 tells us that this man's leprosy is cleansed. His life of isolation is ended. It's a wonderful touch, isn't it? Because Jesus could have just said, you are healed. But he stretches out his hand to show that God's love dominates here.

[9 : 06] And his love for this man dominates anything else. And then in verse 4, Jesus gives the man two commands. And have a look at them. He says, see that you don't tell anyone.

But go, show yourself to the priest and offer a gift Moses commanded as testimony to them. Each command is about witness, isn't it? First, Jesus tells the leper not to witness.

But then he says, he is to say nothing to anyone. I think Jesus commands the leper in this way because he wants to avoid the word getting out that he's simply a wonder worker who can do magic tricks.

He's not that. Jesus then tells the leper to fulfill the law and to go to the priest and to offer the gift that Moses commanded. And then he gives the reason as a testimony to them.

The them, I think, is the priest itself. The second, the next thing is, how was the offering of the gift a testimony to them?

[10 : 05] How was it that when you took this gift and you gave it to the priest? How was it a testimony to the, well, I think it's a testimony to the identity of Jesus. You see, Jesus, by showing them this, Jesus is being shown as one who can reach out and can touch and can therefore fulfill the very core of God's law.

Jesus is one who, like God, simply has to say, and it is. Jesus, you see, is not just a miracle worker. Jesus is someone much greater than this. Jesus does what only God can do, and he does it in the way God would do it.

In the book of Leviticus, it says that God gives and takes leprosy. And Jesus demonstrates the hardest. He demonstrates by taking leprosy from this man and curing him.

So there's the story. I think it's simple and plain, isn't it? But what is God teaching us through it? What does he want us to learn about him and his ways through this very simple story, this wonderful act?

How does it help us in our world with all its fears? How does it help me with my fears? Well, I think, first of all, about the physical and material parts of our existence, pain, suffering, death.

[11 : 24] Is God able to do anything about such things? Is God willing? And this story gives an answer to that. Its answer is by showing us God, the Son, in action.

Shows us God who is able. You see, God is able to make the unclean clean and the ill healthy. It lets us into the mind of Jesus and the mind of God.

It tells us not only is God able to do it, God is willing to do it. God is a God of compassion and kindness and grace. He is willing to relieve pain and suffering.

And this story testifies to the fact that he will sometimes do this in this life. However, the rest of the Bible says that he doesn't always do it in this life. And, you know, in my three and a half years here at Holy Trinity, I have seen God do both.

I have seen God take illness from people, take pain from people, give relief to people. Not always when they wanted it, not always immediately, sometimes immediately, but not always.

[12 : 27] At other times, I see some people in our congregations living with illness, pain, difficulty in an enduring and ongoing way. But nevertheless, the Bible does tell us that he can do either.

And it tells us even more. It says that on God's list of priorities. Is goodness. Is the relief of these things.

He will eventually, we're told, do away with all pain and suffering and death and the tears that accompany them. And any little healing on the way is a demonstration that that's where he's headed eternally.

He will do away with them through what Jesus does. Through what Jesus does, he will end pain, suffering, death, crying and tears for all those who love what Jesus has done.

Now, let me just speak to us more as a congregation. You see, as your pastor, I know that many of you here fear the sorts of things I've spoken about. Some of you live with the sorts of pain and suffering that this leper lived with.

[13 : 29] Not leprosy itself, but certainly with its equivalence. If that's you, I want you to hear God's word to you this day. The God and father of our Lord Jesus is able.

And he's willing. And it's entirely right for you to be asking him for these things. Entirely right for you to call out to him. He will hear you. He may even respond and give you relief from these things in this life.

On the other hand, he may also choose not to give you relief until the next life. But I urge you to do exactly what this story urges us to do. He is willing and he is able.

And this is the God we have come to know in Jesus. But I want to now turn to the more psychological parts of our being. And particularly to isolation. Is God able to deal with this part of our existence?

Isolation. Is God willing? Again, this story lets us into the mind of God. Again, doesn't it? And therefore the willingness of God. Look at what Jesus does. He stretches out his hand.

[14 : 35] It's as I said, a magnificent gesture. He stretches out his hand. He touches. He speaks. And he heals.

And by his action. Do you know what he does? I mean, it's hard for us to recognize. But he brings this man out of social isolation. And brings him into fellowship with others again.

He brings him out of religious isolation. He brings him home. And this is the glory of the Christian message, isn't it? You see that God announces in his gospel that Jesus died to bring us back home.

That is bring us back to himself. The work of Jesus on the cross allows us to boldly enter friendship with God. The work of Jesus brings us into the church, the home of people who know and love God.

It brings us into the richness of being related to God and of being related to the people of God. This is the beauty of what we do here when we gather each week. You may not recognize its beauty.

[15 : 37] But it is astounding in our world. You see, what we have here on Sunday is unique in this world. It is a place where we can belong.

And where isolation can end, at least if it's done properly. It is our place where we celebrate together the end of our isolation with God. And it's the place where we encourage each other to hear this word from God again and again.

Please understand what I'm saying. You see, in many ways we here at Holy Trinity Doncaster are God's tangible representatives. Friends, there are not many places in this world where this happens. There are not many places left in our world where you will spend two hours together talking with other people afterwards.

Sometimes you'll have to be dragged out. Sometimes I'll get sick of waiting at the door for you to come out and shake hands. Because you are enjoying each other's company, which you share in Christ.

Friends, you can go to the MCG as I did the day after Boxing Day. And you can be there with, you know, however many thousand it was. And you can be in the midst of such a crowd, but it's not the same as being amongst the people of God.

[16 : 51] There you share a love of cricket. But you don't meet like we do. Having our isolation with God ended. Our isolation with each other ended.

You see, we are God's outstretched hand in welcome. In our company, the isolated should feel welcome. If they don't, we have not fully understood the gospel.

In our company, those isolated should feel welcome. They should hear the word of God. But they should also experience the welcome of God and the welcome of his people. We who have been welcomed by God welcome others.

We who have been accepted by God accept others and should accept others. We who have felt the outstretched hand of God welcoming us should outstretch our hand to others and welcome them.

If we're not doing it, friends, we're not being Christian. We whom God has gone searching after like a shepherd seeking a lost sheep are those who should seek others in a similar manner.

[17 : 50] Can you see how this story has spoken to us? It's told us of the story of this leper. It's let this leper speak into our fear and Jesus speak into our fear.

He's asked us what we're afraid. He has asked God what we're too afraid to ask God. Are you willing? And it's presented us with an answer. God is willing. And in this story, he reaches out.

We look at this poor leper. We see his grief, his pain, his isolation, his fear. And in him, some of us see our own grief, pain, isolation. And we wonder, is God willing?

And in his response, God reveals himself to us. And he gives us a resounding yes to our question. I am willing. And let me show you how tangible this is.

And he reaches out his hand. You can see it in his touch and in his words and in his cleansing of the unclean. But having said this, let me tell you that God's yes in this story is only a pale shadow of the yes he gives in the cross.

[18 : 56] You see, in the cross, God deals with our greatest fear that we should be isolated from our creator, from the God who made us and reveals himself in such stories as this.

In the cross, God deals with sin and welcomes us into friendship. Friends, I wonder if you can grasp this. And what God has done for you, it is a wonderful thing that is beyond all knowledge.

It is overwhelming in its scope and in its grandeur. For you and I were once entrenched enemies of God. We weren't just victims of some social skin disease.

No, we were enemies of God who'd chosen to make ourselves enemies of God. We were isolated and afraid. And God acted in Jesus. And he brought us near through the death of Jesus.

And he ended our isolation. He terminated our need for fear. In Jesus, you see, God loved us with a devastatingly deep and costly love. And if God is so for us, friends, then there is nothing to fear, is there?

[20 : 03] There is no fear worth fearing. Do not fear what the world fears. God is for us. No one can be against us. Perfect love, as John the Apostle says, banishes all such fear.

By the way, it might help also to notice the leper's witness here. You see, he goes off to the priest to offer a gift as a testimony to them.

You don't get any impression it's a duty for him, do you? It's not a chore for him. It is not a task that he reluctantly does.

He does it willingly. The willing testimony that he has found someone who loves him. And our witness should be the same. The willing testimony that we have found someone who loves us.

Who stretched out his hand. Who touched us. Who spoke to us. Who healed us. And who will one day banish all pain and all tears and all isolation from his world.

[21 : 03] So let us pray. Our Father, we thank you for your son. We thank you for this magnificent story.

Of him breaking through. And bringing someone home. Thank you that in the cross you have brought us out of a greater illness.

Into a greater healing. Thank you for this. And thank you for your son. In whose name we pray. Amen. Amen.

Thank you. Amen.