

He Took Our Illnesses and Bore Our Diseases

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Date: 05 October 2014

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[0 : 00] Good morning again everyone, let's pray. Father in heaven, may my words and our thoughts be acceptable to you. We pray to you as our rock and our redeemer. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Now I don't know about you, but us Rosners love words. Nat and I debate the meaning of words regularly, and we kind of wince at their misuse when we hear it on the radio or read it in the newspaper.

We relish reading Dr. Seuss and Roald Dahl to our eight-year-old son. And as you can imagine, words are very important for my work each day.

I'm always looking for the right word in something I'm writing or in some aspect of my speaking. And I'm always looking for the wrong word when I'm reading a student's essay so I can put a big red mark through it and get them to fix it.

Now I'm not always proud of my love of words, of course. It's no doubt true that deeds are more important than words. And in one sense, who cares if someone's talking about a medium strip rather than a median strip, or if someone talks about a criteria rather than a criterion, or if someone thinks that innovated means feeling energetic, or being a spendthrift is being thrifty, or someone thinks they were bought up.

[1 : 18] I mean, who cares? Well, actually, I do. And I'm sorry I know that pedants are often a pain in the neck. Occasionally it can be quite amusing, of course.

I was listening to the radio the other day concerning the whole kerfuffle over banning the burqa, and a woman rang in and said that the Prime Minister needs to put a halt to the debate and to quickly shut it down.

And she said, the little phrase she used was she said, he needs to nip it in the butt. Now, we obviously know what she meant.

But, yeah. And then there's my hypocrisy, of course. There are some words I regularly get wrong, and some words I actually avoid using, because I'm not sure where they go in the sentence, like who and whom, and datum, and datum, and datum, fewer or less.

So there are several words like that. But the truth is that Christian faith does involve words, doesn't it? Words are very important to us. The Jews were the religion of the book. And it's true that God created the world by speaking, and Jesus is the word, and the spirit is the one who inspired the word of God.

[2 : 35] As Francis Schaeffer put it so beautifully, he is there, and he is not silent. We serve the God who acts and speaks. So I wonder this morning what you think Christianity's most important words are.

I suppose father, son, spirit, would be up there. Sin, grace, cross, love, hope, peace.

Among the most important words for Christianity is the word faith. Just that one syllable. Faith. Faith in Jesus is of course what makes someone a Christian, someone who's not a Christian, someone who doesn't have faith.

And when it comes to the Bible, Abraham onwards, the response God looks for from human beings is faith. Another way of saying Christianity is Christian faith.

So what does the word faith mean? What is faith? How does a person in the street understand faith? How would you define it?

[3 : 37] Well, as it turns out, as well as being among the most important words in Christianity, faith is also one of the most misunderstood. Many people have a wrong idea about what faith is.

Take, for example, the so-called new atheists, those militant intellectuals who are attempting to combat Christian faith. Richard Dawkins defines faith as the great cop-out.

Faith is belief in spite of the lack of evidence. For Christopher Hitchens, faith is the surrender of the mind. It's the surrender of reason. And for Sam Harris, faith is delusional certainty.

Well, are they right? Is faith what you need when there's no evidence? Is faith believing something you wish was true, but isn't? In all likelihood.

Is faith a kind of wishful thinking for the gullible? Is faith for the weak. Now, the passage before us, Matthew eight, that I was assigned this morning, is all about faith.

[4 : 41] In verse 10, Jesus says, I haven't found faith in anyone in Israel with such great faith. So it's, that's the focus. And there's much to learn here about faith, but more importantly, there are some models of faith for us to emulate.

So it's not really about just knowing how to give a good definition of faith. It's about following in their footsteps as people of faith. So what does this passage teach about faith?

There are three people who got healed in the passage. You will have noticed. Let's have a look at the first one in verse one of chapter eight. If you've got the Bible still there, you could open it and follow along. The first man is a man with leprosy.

Verse one, when Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. A man with leprosy came. Now, leprosy is a highly contagious disease.

It destroys the body's nerves that sense pain. And it leads to all kinds of terribly disfiguring injuries. Leprosy is still around today. I've learned on the internet, some 400,000 people.

[5 : 47] And the Leprosy Mission, which is a Christian organization worldwide, is doing a great job at combating and preventing and curing leprosy. Because there is a cure today. Unfortunately, in Bible times, there was no cure.

And leprosy sentenced someone to a living death, you might say. According to Leviticus 13, lepers were to tear their clothes, leave their hair unkempt, and cover their mouths and cry out, unclean, unclean.

They were sort of in a permanent quarantine. They were cut off from other people, and even from God in one sense. Leviticus 13 says, the leper must live alone outside the camp of God's people, where his presence dwelt.

Lepers were regarded as unclean then, not just because of their illness, but because of their being unfit for God's presence. So in Jesus' day, there was no known cure.

So this first example really does fit what the new atheist said, that faith maybe is for the weak. What does faith look like for this man then?

[6 : 55] Verse 2, A man with leprosy came and knelt before Jesus and said, Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean. So the first thing to notice is his posture.

He doesn't speak face to face, but face to feet with Jesus. He comes begging for mercy. There's no presumption here. His faith is characterized by a humble appeal.

The first word he utters tells us this too. He calls Jesus Lord. And in Matthew's gospel, those who call Jesus Lord are those who have faith, or the disciples. Other inquirers of Jesus tend to call him rabbi or teacher.

Notice too that his request of the Lord Jesus is not if you can cleanse me, but if you are willing, you can make me clean. So the man with leprosy approaches Jesus as Lord and knows he has this power to heal.

The doubt attaches not so much to Jesus' ability, but to his willingness. So we see here that faith is not wishful thinking of the gullible. Rather, faith in the case of the leper is a humble and hopeful trust.

[8 : 08] And it's trust in a person, in the Lord Jesus. We actually use this word faith in that way in our day as well, don't we? We say, I have faith in my husband or wife in this particular circumstance, or I have faith in my children.

You might have said last week, I have faith in Buddy Franklin to win the final. That would be misplaced faith. You'll be glad to know I don't support Sydney. A child might have faith that his or her father or mother might turn up for a special event.

So the key really is with this kind of faith, whether the person is worthy of that trust, who that person is, whether they're able to deliver, whether they're willing to deliver.

So how does Jesus respond to this poor man's faith? Very positively. Verse 3, Jesus reaches out his hand and touches the man. I am willing, he said, be clean.

And immediately he was cleansed from his leprosy. This isn't always the way Jesus heals. Sometimes he just speaks the word. In this case, he touched the man that's underscored by the fact that he reaches out his hand, the evangelist tells us.

[9 : 20] How long had it been since someone had touched this untouchable person? Maybe in years. Imagine years of not having any human contact.

If nothing else, this was a moment of compassion, of humanity and of tenderness. The Ebola virus is something that's worrying our world leaders and many countries in Africa are suffering from this.

You may have seen on television, the doctors who approach those with the Ebola virus are fully clothed in quarantine outfits. And interestingly, I heard on the radio last night that the majority of the doctors who are doing this for the untouchables are Christian missionary doctors.

It's remarkable, isn't it? Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. In fact, in Leviticus 5 verse 3, it says that anyone who touches the unclean leper will himself become unclean.

So the really remarkable thing about this scene is the fact that when Jesus touches the leper, it's not that Jesus becomes unclean, but that the leper becomes clean. Instead, Jesus says to the leper, you be clean.

[10 : 36] And immediately he was healed. I don't know what it would have looked like if the terrible scabs and bruises and wounds were disappeared. Or in some way, it was apparent this staggering thing had happened.

The leper had become clean. We get a second healing that's no less surprising in verse 5 and following. In verse 5, Jesus arrives in Capernaum and a centurion comes to him asking for help.

We meet the centurion. He's a member of the Roman military and the Gentiles. So in Jewish thinking, he was the wrong race. He's wearing the wrong uniform. He's a baddie, if you like. So what's such a person doing approaching Jesus?

He says, Lord, my servant lies at home paralyzed. He's worried about his servant. There's no way in our mind that might not seem that surprising. But in the first century, for someone to be so concerned about their servant was extraordinary.

Servants were property and nothing more. And Aristotle said that servants don't deserve justice nor friendship. But this particular man didn't see it that way. He cares for his servant enough to approach Jesus.

[11 : 42] He also approaches Jesus quite humbly, like the leper. He says, Lord, twice, in fact, in verses six and eight. So like the leper, the centurion's faith is characterized by humility and a lack of presumption.

Well, how does Jesus respond? Verse seven, Jesus said to him, shall I come and heal your slave? He says in verse eight, Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof.

The centurion replied, just say the word and my servant will be healed. So here we see a humble faith, that not only calls Jesus Lord, but recognizes his absolute authority as Lord.

In verse nine, the centurion explains why he came to this. He says, for I myself are a man under authority with soldiers under me. I tell this one, go and he goes and that one come and he comes.

I say to my servant, do this and he does it. Before coming to Ridley, I didn't have a leadership role of this kind. And it was still a bit of a surprise to me when people at college call me boss.

[12 : 51] And I remember when I first met the non-academic staff, who were in a room having morning tea and they introduced themselves. And hi, I'm Ruth from the library. I'm Katrine from the registry.

I'm Annabelle. I'm your PA. I'm Lloyd in facilities. What was the PA thing? What's that? So I had no idea that I had a PA until coming to Ridley.

And it still kind of takes me aback that when I ask someone to do something, they basically do it. That's what authority is about, isn't it? The other side of authority I'm also keenly aware of is the fact that the buck stops with a leader in an organization.

So it's not all roses, is it? But this centurion recognized this nature of authority and he saw in Jesus an ultimate authority.

And Jesus says at the end of Matthew, all authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. So the centurion was right. Just say the word.

[13 : 53] That's faith in verse eight. That's what he says to Jesus. Just say the word. Absolute reliance on and confidence in Jesus power and authority.

In verse 10, when Jesus heard this, he was amazed. So not only was the healing amazing, Jesus himself is amazed and stunned by how great this man's faith was.

He said to those following truly, truly, I say to you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. Verse 13. Then Jesus said to the centurion, go, let it be done.

Just as you had faith that it would. And his servants, his servant was healed at that moment. The third account of healing brings yet another surprise.

Verses 14 and 15. When Jesus came into Peter's house, he saw Peter's mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever. Might have been something more serious than simply a temperature, something like malaria, perhaps.

[14 : 52] He touched her hand and the fever left her. Now, the odd thing here, of course, is that no one has faith. Peter and his mother-in-law were presumably people of faith, but it doesn't say that they requested of Jesus in faith that she be healed.

The remarkable thing is that there's no model to emulate. Jesus is not asked for help. He's completely able to heal with or without faith. Faith is not the critical thing in the end.

The Lord Jesus, his authority and compassion is the critical thing. Faith is not like a trigger that we have to pull for God to do something. It's not a box we have to tick.

Jesus power to heal does not depend on us in any way. Jesus just heals Peter's mother-in-law, presumably out of compassion and love. So friends this morning, it's good to remember that sometimes God does things for us, even when we forget to ask in faith.

But in another sense, we do learn something here about faith. Verse 15, Jesus touched her. The fever left her. She got up and began to wait on him.

[16 : 07] The woman's obedience is an expression of her faith. Faith in Jesus then leads to serving Jesus. Her faith did not lead to her being healed, but her waiting on Jesus expressed her faith in response to the healing.

So what are we to make of these three accounts of healing that we read in Matthew 8, as surprising as they are? What is faith? Four things to notice.

First of all, faith is a big deal. Verses 11 and 12. Jesus said, I say to you that many will come from the east and the west and will take their places at the feast of Abraham with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.

But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. So we see here that faith is not a trivial matter.

It's not a style or an issue of personal preference. It's not like one person saying, I like coffee, you like tea. Or I like the mountains, you like the seaside. It's much more significant than that, because faith has eternal implications, Jesus says.

[17 : 22] According to Jesus, whether you have faith or not decides whether you enter his kingdom and enjoy a feast to end all feasts, as Isaiah 25 described it so beautifully.

And missing out is described in more sobering terms. Outer darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth, a place of terrible remorse and regret.

Eternity might seem remote, and there's something to occupy us with our lives every day, isn't there? But the point is that whether you have faith in Jesus now sets the course of your life forever, and the destinies could not be more different.

Faith then is about confessing Jesus as Lord now, because when the end comes, God's kingdom in its fullness, every knee will bow and confess that Jesus is Lord.

Faith is a big deal. Secondly, faith has nothing to do with being respectable. According to Jesus, those with faith in him and those who enter the kingdom are not the ones you expect.

[18 : 30] The sons of the kingdom is literally what it says under where it's translated, the subjects of the kingdom. Those to whom the kingdom belong by right as heirs, the Jews, Jesus is thinking of in his day.

So those who expect to be present at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are excluded. This would have come as a great shock to many of Jesus' listeners.

And those you expect to be on the outside come in. The three who are healed are representative of the many who come from east and west. Here, Jesus confronts those who attempted to presume on God's acceptance.

There's a Jewish prayer from the first century where a Jewish man prays, Lord, I thank you that I was not born a Gentile, a slave, or a woman. Terrible prayer, isn't it?

Anyway, yes. And did you notice what we have here? We have a Gentile's slave and a woman and a leper to boot whom Jesus says really belong at his table in the kingdom.

[19 : 34] And the faith of the leper, the centurion and the woman illustrate that faith turns up where you least expect it. Every church I've been involved with has had people like this.

And I thank God for them. Some people with not much money, not good looking, perhaps with a disability, awkward socially. Jesus says, to such is the kingdom of heaven.

The people you might not be tempted to walk, to talk to after the service during morning tea. But Jesus stretches out his hand and touches the leper. He's amazed at the Gentile soldier's faith and he takes the initiative to heal an elderly woman.

God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, the weak things of the world to shame those who are strong. So we do well to learn from Jesus' actions here and never draw boundaries in a church based on social standing or money.

Faith has nothing to do with being respectable. Thirdly, the focus of faith is Jesus. This is really the point of the whole chapter, isn't it? As it turns out, the main thing we learn about faith is faith's object.

[20 : 49] Back in Matthew 4.23, I don't know how long ago the series was operating in Matthew 4, it says, Jesus went through Galilee preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease.

Then in Matthew 5.7, we get Jesus teaching and preaching and then in Matthew 8.5, we get him healing. This is all about learning about Jesus. This is what Matthew spells out in verse 16.

When evening came, many were demon-possessed, were brought to him, he healed all the sick. And verse 17, this was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah. He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.

The three stories are examples of this, how he healed all the sick. But the bigger picture is that Matthew is concerned with what we learn about Jesus' identity and mission. Who is Jesus?

He's the promised servant of Isaiah who carried the burden of our pain, our defilement, our exclusion. And the rest of the gospel shows, as it says in Matthew 1.21, he came to save us from our sins.

[21 : 54] The faith that all of us must exercise today is faith in Jesus to save us from our sins. The healings are signs pointing beyond themselves to the cross and the kingdom that the cross will bring, will remove all sin and suffering, death and alienation.

The focus of faith is on Jesus. Finally, faith is for the weak. This is one area in which the new atheists are spot on. Faith is for those who have an acute need of God.

Not just your need for healing, also your need for forgiveness, reconciliation, a sure hope as we look beyond death to the feast in the kingdom of God.

And great faith is faith in a great God, the Lord Jesus Christ. And like the leper's faith, such faith never presumes but always expects.

No matter what our problems, what may feel like a crushing burden, we should remember the man with leprosy who said, he came, he knelt before Jesus, Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.

[23 : 06] Faith says to the Lord Jesus, just say the word, believing that he can fix my awful situation, whatever it may be. And if he doesn't, it isn't that he can't but rather that in his wisdom, he's not willing.

Faith never presumes but always expects. Faith is not wishful thinking for the gullible. It's not a surrender of reason. It's not a delusional certainty.

Faith is about trust in a person. Faith is about recognising the authority and compassion of Jesus, taking him at his word, trusting that he is able and willing to save us and acting in obedience in response.

And I have a choice and I will not meet you to understand this as a person. I am very stable and I have to hold out this question for a whole bunch of people.

I want to ask you to get his name and keep him along with range chi and there may be a good idea and tell me