

Matthew 8:4

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[0 : 00] Now I don't know about you, but sometimes reading the newspapers can be a little bit depressing, can't it?! Whether it's death, extortion, corruption, suffering.

! But a question I'd like us to think about just as we start is this. Why, in all the mess of this world, do we and others fail to go and seek help from Jesus Christ?

Why, in all the mess of this world, do we fail to do that? Do we come to him for forgiveness, for wisdom, for new life? Just have a moment to think.

I don't know what reasons have come to mind for you. Perhaps we just can't be bothered, or we think that the problem is someone else's, or we think that actually Jesus just can't deal with it, the scale, the depth.

Now these four short verses from Matthew's Gospel blow that out of the water. They show us that Jesus Christ is exactly the person we must come to.

[1 : 10] Now as I said earlier, this passage is straight after the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has come down the mountain. He's had this great teaching that he's been given. And then verse 2, we meet a leper.

We meet a leper who knows Jesus is exactly the person to come to. And the first thing for us to see is this. The leper, he knows his need.

He knows his need. Now a leper in this context may mean he has leprosy. It could mean he's got a variety of skin diseases.

But his skin is falling apart. He is in pain, in suffering. And as we read about in Leviticus, this has massive impacts on his life.

It would not have been as it should have been. Just personally, just imagine the pain he's in. Even the smell with the lack of hygiene and the heat. Be horrific. But more importantly, we saw in that Leviticus passage that he would be called unclean.

[2 : 16] This biblical word. And it meant a number of things. But he would have been a social outcast. He would have had to have cried out, I'm unclean, when anyone came near.

Can you imagine? He would have lived outside of the city alone. Alienated from friends, from family. The loneliness. He couldn't have touched anyone.

But even more significantly, he was unable to go to the temple. He was unable to worship. The horror of his skin disease led to an ostracized life.

All these symptoms of his disease. One writer puts it, the lepers were considered the living dead.

Dead men walking. Now, he could have asked Jesus, you know, tell my friends, can you just be a bit nicer to me?

Can you actually just tell the priest? Can they just let me in just briefly? Or maybe can you give me a new t-shirt just to cover up so no one actually sees what's wrong with me? But it would have been ridiculous to ask for those things, wouldn't it?

[3 : 23] They were just dealing with the symptoms. But no, he doesn't ask for that. He asked, you notice, he says, Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.

He asked to be clean. It's like, I need to be made new. I need new skin. He didn't want to deal with the symptoms. He wanted to deal with the cause, the root problem.

Now, uncleanness in the Bible, as you may know, is about much more than just skin disease. All those symptoms, especially being cut off from God, point us to a deeper problem in our lives.

This passage is not just about skin disease. Because we have lots of symptoms wrong with us too, actually very similar to the leper. With others, we can often be alienated from one another.

We perhaps have fallen out with a friend or family members don't speak anymore. Or perhaps we've fallen out with those we don't even know. We experience crime.

[4 : 26] There's terrorism in the world. But also we know we are separated from God. We're separated from him. People are under judgment now and for the future.

And even in ourselves, we know there are anxieties, eating issues, tempers, addictions. We are dead men and women walking. And it is no accident that Matthew has put this event straight after the Sermon on the Mount.

If you've never read the Sermon on the Mount, read it. It is full of hard-hitting truths about the standards of God. Jesus said this. He said, you therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Jesus was showing us all the symptoms. How we're failing to miss the mark. You can't read the Sermon without knowing there's something wrong with us. And the thing is, we can't help but screw things up, can we?

It's like you have a beautiful meal with someone you love. You know, the candles are on the table. The beautiful food's in front of you. And then you just have to go and mention a long-standing argument like why they didn't put the bins out or something.

[5 : 34] We just can't help but ruin a beautiful evening. And we do it with a lot of things God's given us. He gives us good friendships. And yet in our best moments we're even arrogant.

We're lazy. We're judging. God gives us his word. And yet we still try and make it about ourselves. God gives us families. And yet we still hurt each other and speak unkindly.

All these symptoms point us deeper. So what is the cause? We know it's our sinful nature, don't we? We are sinners.

We need a new heart. We need a deep clean. But the horror of the leper's skin points us to the horror of our sin. Sin is like that painful, rotting flesh on his hand and his arm.

We are bent on doing wrong. We are rotten and we are dirt ridden. We need a deep clean. The leper knows his need.

[6 : 36] And the thing is, I think in society we try and treat the symptoms and forget about the cause. For example, in ourselves, there's a lot of positive thinking.

That's all we need to do. We just need to smile more. There's an author called Roy Bennett who said this. He said, just stop comparing yourself to other people. Just choose to be happy and live your own life.

Just choose. That's all we need to do to deal with all that's wrong in the world. Just choose to be happy. Or with God. We make up more and more laws. Say this lots of times.

Don't eat or touch that. I don't know. If we struggle with lust, we may just need to get other people to cover up. We deal with the symptoms. With other people. We're just very nice to people, aren't we? We put on a smile. We're kind to people. And then when we get home, we slag them off behind their back. We're dealing with the symptoms and not the cause. A few months ago, I twisted my ankle pretty badly and it swelled up like a balloon.

[7 : 38] Now, it wasn't broken, luckily. But just imagine that my ankle had been broken. And I went to the doctor and the doctor just said, here, have some paracetamol. You know, that will deal with it.

That would have absolutely wrecked it, wouldn't it? And dealing with the symptoms just will not help. No, we need to deal with the cause. It's in us.

The issue is deep. And that means we've got to stop messing around on the surface. Perhaps you've come to church for years, but you're not really sure what the fuss is all about.

You like the friendships. You enjoy some singing. You've never quite got the whole Jesus thing. Well, perhaps you've never realised your needs.

And you really do have one. And it is vital that we understand this for any long-term change. If we want to know the living God, if we want to have friendships restored, if we want to have inner peace, then we've got to deal with the deep, not the superficial, our sin.

[8 : 42] We need a deep clean. The leper knows his need. Do you know yours? Secondly, he knows God's solution.

He knows his need and he knows God's solution. If we look at verse 2. The leper came to Jesus, knelt before him saying, Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.

He falls at the feet of the man he knew would deal with his problem. He knew it was Jesus. He knew that Jesus had the power, had the authority to deal with this.

Now, how do we know? We're not quite sure how he knew. Perhaps he had seen a lot of Jesus' miracles previously. Perhaps he had been up on the mountain hearing this teaching. But he knew

God's solution wasn't just some generic sort of faith in an idea of God, but it was Jesus Christ himself, God's son.

And not only is it said in our passage that Jesus is the solution, Jesus shows it. Cleanness comes through Jesus at the end of verse 3 we see, and immediately his leprosy was cleansed.

[9 : 53] It's immediate what Jesus does, and it's total. Verse 4, the leper could go to the temple. He's completely restored to all areas of life, especially God himself.

He could offer those sacrifices that we read about in Leviticus. It's sort of the opposite of those stain remover adverts. You know, I'm sure we've all seen them where they say, I can get rid of any stain like paint or ink or grease.

And we know it's a lie. You put it on your carpet and it just gets worse. It gets bigger and just this dull brown. And it's awful. But not Jesus. No, he is a mighty and powerful saviour.

He gets rid of it completely. God's solution is God's person. Not a set of ideas, not a philosophy, or a set of rules. No, it's a person.

Jesus Christ. He has the authority and he has the power. And he dealt with all sickness, all sin, all death supremely in his death and resurrection.

[11 : 00] In his death, the power of sin was completely removed. It wasn't swept under the carpet. No, he took it on himself and destroys it. In Christ, our sin is washed away.

Our deep refusal to do good. The way we destroy the good we've been given is washed away. Cleaned from the inside out.

And because of his resurrection, we are united to his new life. He gives us a new heart. He gives us new desires. Love for God and for others. As we are forgiven, so we can forgive others.

Jesus is a mighty and powerful saviour. As we come to him, it is immediate. It is total. It impacts all areas of our life.

But until he returns, our lives don't fully show it though, do they? As with the leper, some things are completed now and some things we look forward to.

[12 : 05] For the leper, some things were immediately restored. He could go to the temple. His skin was right again. But some things were slow, weren't they? He would have to rebuild his relationships with his friends and family.

And some things would only be got right when Jesus returned. He would still get sick and he would still die. And it's the same with us. As we come to Jesus immediately, we are forgiven.

We are adopted into God's family. Sins are wiped clean. We're given his Holy Spirit. Our hearts are transformed. The root of our sin is cut off. But some things are slow, aren't they?

Even though the root of sin is cut off, old patterns just slowly change. Old habits are slowly broken. Our hearts are inclined to do good. But we still battle with the sin in our lives.

We still fight against it. And when Jesus Christ returns, that is when our bodies will be made new. And we will never sin again. We will not need to battle again.

[13 : 06] But in Jesus Christ, sin has been defeated. It will not win. We will be made fully new. Jesus is a mighty saviour.

The leper knows God's solution. It is Jesus Christ. It's through him. Now even when we acknowledge the cause of sin, people still avoid Jesus, don't they?

We especially see this in other religions. For example, Islam will acknowledge sin, but yet just take Jesus out of the equation. He is a prophet, but not a saviour. We see in ourselves, we try and make ourselves better.

I can defeat my sin. You see, in liberal Christianity, let's just have the Sermon on the Mount, but no salvation. Perhaps that's you here.

You know your sin, but you don't want Jesus Christ. I used to teach at a school up in York. I was a geography teacher. And a lot of the time, I heard the message, be true to yourself.

[14 : 14] Be true to yourself. Find it within. That's how we deal with things that are wrong in the world. You're the only person you can trust. But the irony was never seen.

You know, when people were expelled for taking drugs, for bullying, for being true to themselves in that way, it was never seen that that completely undermined the view.

Looking inside for the solution is ridiculous, because inside is the source of the problem. The answer is in Jesus Christ. He is the great saviour.

The one who can really make us clean. And that is liberating. The weight falls off our shoulders. We can stop trying. And we come to him.

The leper knows God's solution. Do you? And thirdly, he didn't know if.

[15:16] He knew God's solution. But he didn't know if. Do you notice that in verse 2? He says, Lord, if you will. He's saying, do you want to, Jesus? This is a cliffhanger moment.

This is a cliffhanger moment. Just imagine it. The leper's fallen on his knees. The camera, in a sense, moves to zoom in on Jesus. From the wide angle lens, seeing the whole scene, right onto Jesus Christ.

We know he can, but does he want to? Does he want to? Now, why does the leper ask this? We're not entirely sure, but perhaps it's out of respect.

Perhaps he's honouring Jesus and saying, I don't have a right to this, but I know you can. Or perhaps it's because he's focused in on himself. He's turned inward. He saw his own problems. I'm too sick. I'm too bad, Jesus. You'll probably want to heal others. They've done a lot for themselves. I'm nothing. But whatever it was, here we are in that moment, in that tension.

[16:17] And in this verse, verse 3, we see the incredible love and compassion of Jesus Christ. In verse 3, he both touches him and he wills to do it.

Just imagine that Matthew slows the pace down. It may not feel like that, but he says, he stretched out his hands. Matthew didn't need to say that.

It's obvious he's going to touch him. He's going to stretch out his hands. He stretched out his hands and he touched him. Just imagine that moment for the leper.

He had not been touched in years. Just the wonder, a hand on his shoulder and the deep feeling that must have caused inside.

The compassion of Jesus. And then as he does it, he says, Jesus says, I will. Now that's not short for I will do it. It's saying, I want to.

[17:17] I wish to. I desire to. I choose to. This is amazing. Just the simplicity in those two words. And yet the beauty of them. This broken man trusting in Christ.

Here's those words. I will. What sweet music to his soul. The joy and the happiness that must have filled his heart. And again, this points beyond this incident.

He did much more than just touch disease. At the cross, he took it on himself. He became sick with our disease. He became ill with our sin on the cross.

And he took it willingly so that we could be free from it. Jesus on the cross is the loudest proclamation of I will. The leper didn't know if.

But we do. We do. Jesus wants to clean you. To forgive you. To clean you from the inside out.

[18:23] And at the feet of Jesus Christ, we find mercy and forgiveness. When we seek him, it's as if we feel the touch of a hand on our shoulder. And a voice saying, I will be clean.

We meet a generous and compassionate Lord. Now even when we know it's Jesus who saves us, we can still stand far off.

Perhaps our eyes are stuck on ourselves. I'm just too bad. Perhaps that's you. You look at the depth of your sin. You're like, you have no idea what I've done. And you're like, no way.

Or perhaps you came to Jesus a long time back. And now you just feel like you're a bit blind to your dirt. You've let the stains build up in a sense. You've got used to them. No way will Christ take me back.

Or perhaps you know you've got a new heart. You know God's changing you. But in the midst of that, your sin just seems darker than ever. Well, no. Jesus is willing.

[19:27] I will be clean, he says. Not coming to Jesus a bit like this. Let's just imagine a child broke a window.

And then they ran to their room to hide because they were scared of saying sorry to their parents.

Now that would break a parent's heart, wouldn't it? Christ loves us so much that he died for us.

So to finish, two final applications. Firstly, be like this leper. Be like this leper.

We must live daily in verse 2. Coming to Jesus Christ. Now this is for all of us. We know the problem. We know we have sin in our lives.

We know that it lurks deep within. We know our need. And we know the solution. We know it is Jesus Christ. He is the loving saviour. We know he is willing.

[20:28] And so we all come to him like the leper. And it's not a one-off. It is a rhythm of the Christian life. It's the life of a repentance. Now what does that look like?

We can't literally fall down at his physical feet. Quite like the leper. But instead, isn't it? It's prayer. It's the attitude of our hearts. It's like the leper.

We need to recognise we need help. We speak to him. We acknowledge our sin. We speak it out. We tell him our faults. And then we recognise Jesus' authority.

We know he is the solution. And we ask for forgiveness. We could pray physically on our knees. We don't need to. But we come to him. Called by him. Knowing our problem.

Knowing he's the solution. And knowing he's willing. And this rhythm of life is most clearly seen, isn't it? In our Sunday worship. Our weekly worship. Every week. Sunday by Sunday.

[21 : 24] We come together. We repent. We seek forgiveness. We hear God's assurance. We've done it today. And it's not a formality. We're not doing it because we just always have.

We do it because it is the fitting response to our sin and to our saviour. Preparing this sermon has really challenged me. I am slow to repent.

I am slow to recognise my faults. And I can treat that liturgy. That coming to confession is just a formality. May I, may you, know the privilege and the importance of what we do.

Let's take that part of the service seriously. It's not something we just get through before we get to the sermon. It's a serious part of our worship and response to the living God.

And then this weekly rhythm of repentance spills out. It overflows into our daily lives. Each morning, let's be on our knees before our God. Like this letter.

[22 : 23] Before our saviour. And then as we do, dwelling on this daily, God changes us. Imagine if we were a church that repented from the heart.

How we would see Christ more gloriously. And we'd see God's work in our lives. Our desires change. We'd start to want to live God's way more.

So whether you've done so for years or you've never done it before ever. Come to Jesus Christ like the leper. Be like this leper. But secondly, be like this leper.

But don't live like you're still a leper. Don't live like you're still a leper. Not only do we live in verse 2. Always coming to Christ. But we also live in the results of verse 3.

In verse 4, Jesus tells him, Go to the temple. You can now go to the temple. His life has changed. So until Christ returns, if we keep seeking him, then we live as cleansed, forgiven people.

[23 : 29] We can approach God. We are fully restored to his people, our brothers and sisters. Now there is a tension here. We are still sinners.

We still need to come to him. We are also restored in him. I think the problem is, is we can stop living in that reality and go back to living like a leper.

Even though we know forgiveness and cleansing in Christ, we live like he's done nothing for us. We live like we're still a leper. Just imagine that leper. Just imagine if he didn't go to the temple when Jesus said he should.

Just imagine if he went back to living outside in the camp, avoiding touch, shouting among clean, being lonely, no contact with anyone, no hugs.

It would be ridiculous, wouldn't it? And yet with God we can do the same. With him we can be like, we can just ignore him rather than spending time in his word and praying.

[24 : 34] Rather than coming to Sunday church regularly. I have a relation who once said to me, I believe in Jesus Christ, but I just don't go to church. I've just heard it all before. He was living like a leper.

And with others perhaps we do the same. Perhaps at the end of the church service we run off. We avoid people. We get home quickly. Actually rather than getting to know our brothers and sisters, loving one another, caring for one another, encouraging each other.

Perhaps we live on the fringe and we don't get stuck in. Stop living like you're still a leper. So to finish, Jesus can and he wants to deal with our deep problem of sin.

Come to him. Be like this leper. Trust your Lord and Saviour. He is mighty to save. He is a loving King. Let's pray to him now.

Amen. Amen.