

SERIES: The Good News, as reported by Matthew

SERMON: **Can God Heal Today? Does He?**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 8:1-17

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Have you ever wondered, if Jesus performed great miracles and healed people at will (which He did), and if Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever (which He is), and if Jesus said when He sent the Holy Spirit, “greater works than these will you do,” (which He did indeed say), then why don’t we see more signs and wonders in the church today? So persuasive is this argument to some that a whole branch of the charismatic church has emerged called “the signs and wonders movement.” They hold that either there must be miracles in the church today or the church is a sham. And so we see faith healers like Creflo Dollar and Benny Hinn drawing hundreds of thousands to his crusades—people seeking miraculous healing or other evidence that the miracle-working power of Jesus is still available and active in the church today. I want to address this issue head-on this morning by asking two questions: “Can God heal today?” and “Does He?”

Our Scripture passage today is the first half of Matthew 8, which tells us of a series of healings that Jesus did immediately following the delivery of the Sermon on the Mount. By the way, we are going to stay in the book of Matthew for three more messages, and then we will be doing a two-month series on the life of Joseph. Please give your attention to Matthew 8:1-17:

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

Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man, “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” Immediately he was cured of his leprosy. Then Jesus said to him, “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.”

When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. “Lord,” he said, “my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering.”

Jesus said to him, “I will go and heal him.”

The centurion replied, “Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am 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.”

When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, ‘I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast 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.’

Then Jesus said to the centurion, “Go! It will be done just as you believed it would.” And his servant was healed at that very hour.

When Jesus came into Peter’s house, he saw Peter’s mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever. He touched her hand and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on him.

When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

*“He took up our infirmities
and carried our diseases.”*

We have been privileged over the past three months to sit at the feet of Jesus, along with the crowds that overheard his awesome Sermon on the Mount. They were amazed because of the uniqueness of His teaching—He taught as one who had authority. Now we are confronted with another aspect of the uniqueness of Jesus—His healing power. And just as there was no one who could teach like Him, so there was no one who could heal like Him.

Jesus demonstrates His unique healing power.

The healing of the man with leprosy. (1-4) The first vignette offered to us by the Apostle Matthew concerns a man with leprosy. This was such a frightful disease that it meant isolation from society and even being ostracized from the temple. This leper came and knelt before Jesus and spoke these words, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.” I love the way he puts that. He has no doubt about the Lord’s ability, only about His purposes. Friends, whether or not we always attach the words, “if You are willing,” to our prayers, those words should always be expressed in our hearts.

I am troubled by the habit some people have of “naming it and claiming it” in their prayer lives. On occasion I hear a prayer like this: “God, I claim healing for so-and-so. In fact, I thank You that You have already healed him.” I suppose they say that because it sounds like a strong faith statement; but I think it’s more presumption than faith. We have no right to demand anything from God or to try to manipulate His favor with strong faith statements. We do, of course, have the right to express our desires, and God urges us to do so.

Jesus responds to the man’s statement, “if you are willing,” by affirming, “I am willing. Be clean!” The difference between Jesus and everyone else is that His will and His ability are in total harmony. I am willing to do certain things but can’t. I can do other things but I’m not willing. But whatever He willed, He was able to do.

I also love the fact that Jesus reached out and touched the man. Touching a leper was something you simply didn’t do, for the family of diseases that went by that name were extremely contagious. And of course Jesus didn’t have to touch him in order to heal him, as the next story will make clear—He didn’t even have to be in the same vicinity! But He did touch Him—probably to show His compassion and love. The result? Immediately the man was cured of his leprosy. There was no process through which he had to go; he didn’t have to go dip himself in the Jordan seven times; he didn’t have to return later for another treatment; he didn’t have to come to the stage and fall backward after the healer whacked him on the forehead; he was just immediately made whole.

One final thing I note about the leper's story is Jesus' strange instructions, "See that you don't tell anyone." Have you ever known a faith healer to do that? Well, I guess we wouldn't know about it if he did, but I am personally quite skeptical that it's ever happened. More often than not they have TV cameras fighting for the best angle. But Jesus was not interested in publicity—only in changed lives.

The healing of the Centurion's servant. (5-13) In a sermon last Fall entitled "Does God Approve of Military Careers," I touched upon this incident. Perhaps you will recall that only twice in the New Testament is Jesus said to be amazed at anyone, and both times the subject is faith. At Nazareth He marveled at the absence of simple faith in those who should have known better. Here He marvels at the presence of unusual faith in an unlikely follower.

The key to the story may be found in the words of Jesus: "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith." Faith is one of the most common words in religious discourse, but there is a lot of fuzzy thinking about it, and few people seem to be able to define it very clearly. I found the following definition I thought was excellent: "Faith is a willingness to bet your very life on the promises and character of God."

Who is this centurion who stands out so clearly in respect to faith? Well, he is a military man, a Gentile, probably a Roman serving with the forces of Herod Antipas to safeguard the interests of Rome in Palestine. Yet he is also a compassionate man, as seen in his treatment of his servant, for verse 2 tells us that his servant, paralyzed and in terrible suffering (Luke adds that he is about to die) is valued highly by the centurion. In the first century servants were generally considered personal property. They were viewed as living tools, to be bought, sold, or discarded if they didn't produce. But the centurion sees him as a fellow human being, and the illness generates compassion in him.

The Centurion has heard about Jesus' miraculous healing, and has followed His itinerary sufficiently to know that He has just arrived in town. His friends, according to Luke, argue that he deserves to have Jesus heal his servant, but he himself claims he doesn't even deserve to have Jesus come under his roof. Instead he says, "Just say the word and my servant will be healed." He somehow knows Jesus is not handicapped by not being present. The power is in the word Jesus speaks. Nothing more is needed.

The Centurion illustrates this from his own experience, for he also does not have to be present in order for his command to accomplish his will. When a captain gives an order for an enlisted man to jump, he asks, "How high?" If that's true of him as a military leader, how much more must it be true of Jesus, the Son of God? Thus Jesus' affirmation: "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith." The story ends with this observation: "And his servant was healed at that very hour."ⁱ

Apparently Jesus had never healed anyone from a distance before. He healed the man with leprosy by touching him. In the next paragraph he will heal Peter's mother-in-law by bending over her and rebuking the fever. But there is no precedent for thinking anyone could heal from a

distance. I repeat the profound observation of Buster Sories about this kind of faith:

“Normal faith believes God will do what God always does.
Great faith believes God will do what God rarely does.
Astonishing faith believes God will do what God has never done.”

The healing of Peter’s mother-in-law. (14-15) This story in Matthew is very brief—just two verses—so my comments will of necessity be brief. We know nothing more about Peter’s marriage than the fact that he had a mother-in-law. Whether his wife died early or she was just very much in the background is unknown, but we do know that Jesus healed her mother of a high fever with a simple touch on her hand.

All of us know that there’s nothing particularly miraculous about a fever breaking. It can happen to anyone quickly and almost without warning. But we also know that when a high fever breaks we feel completely wasted, and it takes hours, sometimes days, to regain our strength and return to our duties. The fact that a miracle occurred here seems obvious from the fact that the healing was so immediate and thorough that Peter’s mother-in-law is able to return to her normal work without any recuperative period.

The healing of the multitudes. (16-17) “When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick.” Some have alleged that because people were medically ignorant in that day, they tended to attribute illness to demons. But Matthew clearly distinguishes here between leprosy, paralysis (the Centurion’s servant), fever (Peter’s mother-in-law), and those who are demon-possessed. Jesus knew the difference and His disciples knew the difference. And once again all it takes is a word from Jesus to bring about healing. He doesn’t have to yell and scream at the demons; He doesn’t need to know the demon’s name; He doesn’t have to go through some exorcism rite; He just speaks a word and the demons are gone.

The same verse tells us He also healed all the sick (apparently all those in that area), in fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy in the great 53rd chapter of Isaiah—the classic OT passage about Messiah’s atonement for sin—that “He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases.” Some claim this proves that physical healing is guaranteed in the atonement. I would argue that physical healing is possible because of the atonement, but it is not promised. Physical sickness is always a result of the Fall and sometimes a result of sin in that individual’s life. While Jesus promises to forgive sin, He never promises to remove the consequences of sin in this life.

Now so far this morning we have examined four healing narratives from Matthew 8. They demonstrate just how unique the healing ministry of Jesus really was. Never a man spoke like this man, and never did anyone perform miracles like Him. But no matter how exciting and encouraging it is to read about Jesus’ healing power in the Gospels, this question clamors for an answer: “Why don’t we see more of this kind of miraculous power today?” So let’s go to the first of two important questions:

Can God heal *today*?

The question seems almost impertinent. But I ask it anyway because it provides the opportunity to remind all of us of two important truths:

God is omnipotent and can heal anyone anytime He wants. In Genesis 18:14 Sarah and Abraham are told they are going to have their first child at a ripe old age and Sarah laughs in unbelief. Then comes the Word of the Lord to Abraham in the form of a question: “Is anything too difficult for the Lord?” In Matthew 19:26 Jesus is talking to His disciples about salvation, the greatest miracle of all. And Jesus says to them, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” I like the title of a book by Kathryn Kuhlman, a well-known faith-healer who died in 1976, *God Can Do It Again*. In actuality the book itself probably deserved a different title, for its theme is really “God *is* doing it again,” or even “God *must* do it again.” That I do not necessarily agree with, but I do agree that “God *can* do it again.”

He is sovereign and answerable to no one but Himself. God cannot be put in a box. Listen to the words of 1 Sam. 2:6-8:

*The LORD brings death and makes alive;
he brings down to the grave and raises up.
The LORD sends poverty and wealth;
he humbles and he exalts.
He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
he seats them with princes
and has them inherit a throne of honor.
For the foundations of the earth are the LORD's;
upon them he has set the world.*

Or try Job 23:13: “He stands alone, and who can oppose him? He does whatever he pleases.” God is absolutely sovereign.

The answer to our first question, then, is a resounding “Yes!” God *can* heal today. But to be consistent we must also say that *if* He is indeed sovereign, then He can also *not* heal today if He so desires. So, we come to our second major question:

Does God heal today?

On this question there is considerably more difference of opinion.

There are two extreme viewpoints to avoid.

1. God is willing and anxious to heal anyone who exercises sufficient faith. This view, often called health-wealth theology, is very popular in certain segments of the church today. It teaches

that God wants every Christian healthy and wealthy, and if you aren't both, it's because you lack faith. The onus is placed on the individual, with the frequent not-so-subtle message that if you send in sufficient offerings to your favorite TV ministry, your chances of being healed will be a whole lot better.

The advocates of health-wealth theology are not without their proof texts in the Bible, but in my estimation their principal error is selective interpretation.ⁱⁱ Clearly not every faithful believer is promised healing of every illness, and to suggest as much is to mock the many faithful believers who have prayed for healing but have not received it. Paul, to mention just one biblical example, prayed three times for the removal of his thorn in the flesh, but to no avail. But even if we didn't have such examples, God is certainly not bound to operate today as He did in the first century. There is no Scriptural warrant for expecting healing to continue at its NT pace after the Church was founded, and there is substantial evidence that it did not, which we will look at in a few moments.

But the second erroneous viewpoint is this:

2. God is not in the healing business today because the gift of healing ceased in the first century, along with all the other supernatural gifts. Matthew Arnold wrote, "Healings *cannot* happen today, therefore healings *do* not happen and *will* not happen." Now you don't have to have a Master's degree in logic to know there's something wrong with the reasoning process there. Yet many evangelicals seem to agree that the best way to handle their discomfort with tongues, healing, prophecy, and miracles is to simply define them out of existence. However, there is no place I know of in the Bible that indicates that *any* of the gifts of the Spirit have ceased. Furthermore, I believe there is simply too much evidence from godly scholars, missionaries, Christian doctors, and others that healing miracles do occur.

But if these two extreme positions are both without Scriptural merit, with what are we left?

There is a sensible (and Biblical) medium between these extremes. And I would like to express it by means of three propositions:

1. Both natural healing and medical healing ultimately come from God. This is a profound fact we tend to overlook: every time anyone is healed, whether by his or her own anti-bodies, or by surgery, or by drugs, the healing really comes from God. It doesn't have to be miraculous to be divine. He is the One who created us, and He created our bodies with tremendous power to heal themselves. When I asked Dr. Paul Davis for medication to get rid of a cold and bad sore throat a month ago, he told me I had two options: I could take a powerful antibiotic and be well in seven days or I could just go about my business and be well in a week. I took the latter route, and sure enough I got well.

One physician has written,

God has endowed our bodies with the power to heal wounds, to overcome infections, to

develop immunity, to compensate for deficiencies and adapt to loss of function. As doctors we do not ourselves heal patients, although we may at times be able to alter conditions within the body so that healing can occur.ⁱⁱⁱ

I suggest we acknowledge that all healing is from God—not just the kind we can't explain.

2. God also heals *miraculously on occasion today*. I have no doubt in my own mind that in addition to the natural healing that we all experience to some extent, and the medical healing some people experience to an unusual degree, God also heals some miraculously. Such healing might be defined as “complete, instantaneous recovery from organic disease which takes place without the use of any therapeutic agent whatever.”

A number of cases of apparent miraculous healing were witnessed and documented by reputable Christian leaders during the great revivals in Indonesia in the 70's and 80's. Dr. J. Sidlow Baxter, an eminent scholar and very conservative theologian, has described a number of healings known to him personally in his book, *Divine Healing of the Body*. I have to admit that I personally give little credence to most of the claims of healing by faith healers or at religious shrines, but there are examples of healing in response to prayer that cannot be otherwise explained.

Nor should this surprise us, for the Church has a healing ministry given to it by God, according to the NT. “Gifts of healings” are mentioned several times in 1 Cor. 12 & 14 among the gifts that God has sovereignly given to His church. (Interestingly, this gift is always mentioned in the plural, as if to say that no one has a permanent gift of healing, but rather the Holy Spirit may give gifts of healings at various times). In addition, James 5:13ff tells us that the elders of the church have a prayer and anointing ministry for the sick, and that healing results from that ministry. I don't see how such passages can be ignored or twisted to exclude miraculous healing altogether from the church today, as some want to do.

But by any reasonable accounting, divine healing is relatively rare today, at least as compared to what we see in Matthew 8, and that causes us to ask, “Why?” and brings us to our third proposition:

3. Miraculous healings are relatively rare today compared to NT times, since some of the NT reasons for healing no longer apply. Why did Jesus heal? Let me suggest four reasons:

1. He healed out of mercy and compassion. That is, He loved people and wanted to help them.
2. He healed to stimulate faith. That is, He hated unbelief and wanted to dispel it.
3. He healed to establish His credentials as a revealer of God's truth.
4. He healed as a sign of the Messianic Kingdom He came to establish.

The first of these four reasons is still valid and probably explains most of those healings that occur. God is a God of mercy and compassion, and He takes delight in helping those who are helpless. The second reason probably also has some validity today. Jesus said to His disciples, “Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me; otherwise believe on account of the

miracles themselves.” There is great evidential value in healing miracles, especially in areas of the world where Christianity is a relatively new movement. In our own country, however, where the claims of Christianity are already widely known and many people are skeptical and Gospel-hardened, I would not expect God to use miracles to stimulate faith. Even in His earthly ministry Jesus refused to perform miracles where the people were skeptical or cynical, as in his hometown of Nazareth.

The third reason deserves some careful thought. There were three great periods of revelation in the Scripture; there were three great waves of miracles; and the two correspond exactly. One was at the time of Moses, when the Torah, the first five books of the OT, were written. Another was at the time of the major prophets (when Elijah and Elisha were alive), when most of the rest of the OT was written. And the third was during the ministry of Jesus and the apostles. By far the vast majority of the Bible was written during these three periods, and by far the vast majority of biblical miracles were performed during these three periods.

The most reasonable explanation for this overlap is that when God was speaking to His people, He attested or validated the message of those who spoke for him by means of miracles. Isn't that what the author of Hebrews says in regard to the message of salvation which came through the apostles: “This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will” (Hebrews 2:3-4).

But one of the most basic assumptions of orthodox Christianity is that God is no longer giving normative revelation to His people. I don't mean that He doesn't give personal guidance through the Holy Spirit or that He doesn't speak to us through His Word, but He is no longer giving new revelation for the whole Church. If that is true, then perhaps we should no longer expect the same level of miraculous activity that was common during the three great periods when normative revelation was being given.

The fourth reason for Jesus' healing was as a sign of His Messianic kingdom. When John the Baptist was languishing in prison and his circumstances began to cause cracks in his armor of faith, he sent a message to Jesus, asking, “Are you the Messiah or should we look for someone else?” And Jesus replied: “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor” (Luke 7:20-23). In other words, who else but Messiah could do such things? The Kingdom is upon you!

If healing is a sign of the Messianic kingdom, then perhaps we should probably anticipate another wave of miracles immediately preceding the Second Coming as a sign of the final fulfillment of Jesus' Messianic Kingdom.

My point in this discussion of the purposes behind Jesus' healing miracles is to show that some of those purposes do not apply today and that therefore we shouldn't be surprised if the frequency of miracles is not the same today as it was in the first century.

What we do need today is two things: a greater openness to the working of the Spirit of God, but at the same time a greater discernment of the spirits. We need to quit putting God in our little theological boxes, telling him what He can and can't do in our day. Frankly I think there is room in the church today for more faith of the kind the centurion expressed. But at the same time we also must try the spirits to see if they are of God. I quoted Jesus' statement last week from Matthew 24:24, "False Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect."

There is a final issue I want to touch upon briefly this morning:

The most important healing God does is *spiritual not physical, eternal not temporal.*

I think it is critical for us to understand that Jesus never healed people as an end in itself. If His purpose was simply to alleviate suffering and restore people to health, His life was a miserable failure, for He only touched a few hundred people over a period of three years—just a scratch on the surface of human pain and suffering. He didn't even heal all the people with whom He had contact in His very limited travels. No, Jesus' primary concern was to bring people into right relationship with God. Physical healing was merely a symbol of the far greater need of healing from sin.

Do you need physical healing today? I can't guarantee that, as much as I would like to. No one can. I will pray for you, and I urge you not to hesitate to pray for healing, with an attitude of submission to God's will. But if you need spiritual healing, I *can* guarantee that to you—today, right now, if you will by faith receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. You can be right with God now and for eternity.

i. I think this story has special meaning for all of us who have never seen the Lord Jesus in the flesh. The centurion may never have actually met Jesus. At a distance he made an appeal and Jesus answered him. We too will never see the Lord physically, at least until the Second Coming. We too must trust the word and authority of One about Whom we have heard but have not seen. When Doubting Thomas finally acknowledged Jesus' Lordship, Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

ii. Paul E. Billheimer, *Don't Waste Your Sorrows*, 41,42 states the position of health/wealth theology, though disapprovingly:

In the Word, therefore, there is a perfect theology of health and prosperity. From Genesis to Revelation run the glad tidings that the atonement covers the entire scope of human need. The more than 32,000 promises assure us that all we need for body, soul, and spirit for both time and eternity is provided in the atonement. Nothing could be more sweeping than Phil. 4:19, "My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus." Also

III John 2, "Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth." These promises are amplified and supported by thousands of others guaranteeing health and prosperity to God's obedient people. . . .

How could it be otherwise? The Lord taught His disciples to pray: "Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven." We are sure there is no sickness or poverty in that fair land. Since these are the result of sin, they cannot be God's preferential will because sin and all of its effects are against the will of God. HALLELUJAH! The entire universe is moving toward a social order called the kingdom of God, where none of these can exist (Rev. 21:4-5 and 22:2-5). Therefore, they cannot be God's choice at any time for any part of His dominion. All of God's universe-wide activity is directed toward the total elimination of sin and all of its consequences from all spheres of His redeemed creation. Since all of these things are true, why should any obedient child of God suffer?"

iii. Citation lost.