

Prayers

Opening prayer

The beauty of Your world astounds me, Lord God, but the cruelty of humanity also shocks me. Help me therefore to live not by the standards of this world, but according to Your Word, the world's only truth, the yardstick of honesty, the arbiter of integrity and the revealer of Your compassion and redeeming love. Shine Your light into our disillusioned world, Lord God, and make Your salvation known to all, we pray: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: The Future

1. For yourself

Pray about the future as you currently see it, and as it applies to you. To what extent is your picture of the future governed by your faith in God?

2. For your friends and family

Pray for your family and those who are close to you, and pray about what the immediate future holds for you. Pray for the Lord's guidance.

3. For the church and its work

Ask the Lord for His guidance for the church or fellowship to which you belong. Pray that God's people will always be willing to do His will

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray for the future of the world and the financial markets in particular, insofar as the effect the whole of the world economy

Meditation

Was there no one brave enough or powerful enough
To stand for fallen people before the throne of grace,
But You, Lord Jesus; God's Son?

Was there no one humble enough or gracious enough
To understand the depths of human sin and misery,
But You, Lord Jesus; our Advocate?

Was there no one good enough or strong enough
To deal with all the sin and sickness in the world,
But You, Lord Jesus; God's Anointed?

Was there no one wise enough or sincere enough
To speak the truth about everything with total honesty,
But You, Lord Jesus; Light of the World?

Was there no one human enough and divine enough
To forge a righteous way for people to find their God,
But You, Lord Jesus; Our Saviour?

Glory be to You! For You have done all things well!

Bible Study

Bible passage – Matthew 8:14-22

¹⁴ Jesus went into Peter's house, and saw his mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever; ¹⁵ He touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she got up and served Him.

¹⁶ In the evening they brought to him many who were troubled with demons. He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all those who were sick. ¹⁷ This was to fulfil what the prophet Isaiah said,

'He took hold of our weaknesses and removed our diseases.'

¹⁸ Now when Jesus saw crowds around him, he gave orders to cross over to the other side. ¹⁹ A scribe then approached and said to him,

'Teacher, I will follow you where you are going.'

²⁰ Jesus replied,

'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head.'

²¹ Someone else, one of his disciples, said to him,

'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.'

²² But Jesus told him,

'Follow me, and let the dead bury their dead.'

Review

In Chapter 8 of Matthew, the order of Jesus' healing ministry is significant. Firstly, he cures a leper (8:1-4), before secondly, healing another outcast from normal Jewish society, the servant or slave of a Gentile centurion. In doing these things, Jesus gave prior attention to the poor and outcast; all this was a practical demonstration of His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (5:3f.), which indicated God's great concern for and prior favour of those who were poor.

Now, in our passage today, the third person Jesus healed was also someone who was underprivileged, and was quite shamefully considered as a low priority for most people in the society of Jesus' day. Jesus healed a woman (8:14,15), moreover she was Simon Peter's mother-in-law. After this touching incident, Matthew goes on to give us a general description of Jesus' healing and deliverance ministry (8:16), which begins to show us something of the difference between these two different but related aspects of ministry. Although we have difficulty knowing the difference between deliverance and healing, Jesus dealt with each of them differently; '*He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick.*' (8:16).

Today, we either find it hard to know the difference between healing ministry and deliverance from demons, or we do not think there is and simply call all help to people 'healing ministry'. However, Jesus knew when He was dealing with the demonic, and this aspect of human experience did not cause Him difficulty as it does for many in the church today. On the one hand, when he became aware of the demonic activity in someone's life, causing perhaps some physical condition, He was not afraid to confront the demons directly. He typically spoke to the demons and took authority over them with 'a Word'. On the other hand, Jesus healed people from physical diseases without reference to the demonic, and there is little we can do today to discern the differences between the people he healed and those from whom He cast out a demon. In addition, when faced with people's illnesses, Jesus seems to have used almost every possible method to handle each case, and no two 'healings' in the Scriptures show Jesus using identical methods. He used almost as many different methods to heal people as there were circumstances for Him to deal with.

We should learn from this that each situation we face in the healing ministry is different, and that the demonic is sometimes involved. We must also be prepared to receive instructions from God about what we should do to help those in need. Experience is a help, but experience in hearing and discerning God's voice is most important.

As we saw in yesterday's reading (the healing of the centurion's servant ; 8:5-13), Matthew's Gospel contains a developing theme about faith. This comes to the fore in the second half of our passage today, in which Jesus is approached by those who have been inspired by His teaching about faith and His living out of what faith means. They wanted to live the life and show the faith of a disciple. This was surely a noble approach and people who were worthy of acceptance by Jesus, but He spoke strongly to them about their obligations, and left them 'hanging'.

The first person to approach Jesus was a scribe, perhaps aware of his lack of teaching authority after hearing the Sermon on the Mount (7:29). The second person was someone already following him, but who needed

some guidance on how to deal with some family issues that arose in the course of his discipleship. Jesus' reply to each of them is well known, and both ripostes are sharp. Jesus' words identify the highest standards of discipleship, a willingness to go anywhere and do anything for the sake of the Kingdom, and also an ability to put all earthly things to one side, including family, to do the work of the Kingdom.

So far in the Gospel, we have not heard Jesus speak sharply like this and it comes as something of a surprise. We realise that Jesus was not simply touring around pleasing crowds, He was on a specific path of ministry that would lead Him on to do things those around Him would not understand. If they were not willing to be blindly obedient, then they would not stand a chance of staying with Him. Jesus' sharp words seem harsh, but in the light of what would happen later, they are realistic. Jesus was beginning to make His disciples aware that what was required of them was not simple. It was demanding, and required a full commitment.

Going Deeper

Each story in this passage has important themes to study and learn from. It is important for us to imagine that we are back in the times of Jesus, without medicine or any concept of the nature of the diseases and sicknesses which people faced. Only then will we fully appreciate the importance and significance of what Jesus was doing.

Peter's mother-in-law

In Jesus' day, there were a number of diseases that caused serious fever, and often death. Firstly, 'Malta fever', which combined weakness and anaemia with fever and sometimes led to death; secondly a Typhoid prevalent at the time which usually took the form of an intermittent fever; lastly, Malaria, present in the region of Galilee due to the swampy ground in some of the highly populated regions around the Lake of Galilee. Without the medicines we take for granted today, these were 'life and death' issues for those who suffered them.

Jesus saw this (8:14). This time, no-one brought the needy person to Him; it was His caring love towards a woman in distress that triggered his actions. There were no ritual commands in Jesus' day to forbid Him from touching a woman, as there were for lepers or for Gentiles, but there were certainly family and sexual taboos about any kind of approach to a woman or of touching them. Yet Jesus had no hesitation in using touch to heal Peter's mother-in-law! She was instantly healed with no record of anything being said, and as scripture records, she 'got up and served Him'.

This response of Peter's mother-in-law sounds straightforward, but it hides a couple of interesting things. The words 'got up' are from the same Greek word used elsewhere in the Gospel of Matthew for the raising of the dead (Matt 10:8 and 14:2, for example); for Peter's mother-in-law, this healing would most likely have been not far short of salvation from death (see above). She responded to this by waiting on Him. Peter's mother-in-law is not recorded elsewhere in Matthew, but other Gospels occasionally make mention of the group of women who were around Jesus in His ministry and who provided for His needs, and it is at least possible that she was part of this wider group. The importance of these women should not be dismissed, for it was they who gathered at His Cross when the men had fled (Matt 27:55), and were some of the first witnesses of His resurrection (see Matt 28:1f. John 20:1f.). Here, Peter's mother-in-law is a small example of a different kind of discipleship than 'following', which is discussed extensively in Matthew. It is a small point, but 'service' was essential to Jesus, to the Kingdom and to the Church that would arise.

Healing, deliverance and prophecy fulfilled

Verse 16 appears to be a summary of Jesus' healing ministry, and it does indeed serve this purpose, emphasising that at the end of the day, when presumably more people would have been free from daily work to come and see Him, He healed everyone who came to Him with a sickness. Jesus did not always heal everyone with whom he came into contact; for example He often argued with those who argued with Him rather than casting out their 'demons' (see Ch 12), but this is not the point. Jesus is generous in His help and caring in His response to those in real need; a point brought home by the stark contrast between the homely stories of Matthew 8:14-17 and the sharp responses he gives to inappropriate requests to follow Him in 8:18-21.

This verse does, however, introduce the important element of deliverance ministry into the work of the Messiah. Jesus faced Satan himself in the wilderness (4:1-11) and now faced the demonic in people by casting out spirits 'with a word'. Overall, this was Jesus' favoured way of dealing with the demonic in Matthew's Gospel, just as touch was His favoured method for healing (apart from the proxy healing in 8:5-13). This, together with the brief mention of 'demoniacs' in 4:24, prepares us for the dramatic deliverance ministry to come, not just in this and the next chapter, but the spectacular confrontations on the issue in chapter 12 which proved to be a critical point on the journey of His ministry.

This work of Jesus was a fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah. Matthew quotes almost directly from the Hebrew version of the famous passage, 'He took hold of our weaknesses and removed our diseases' (Isaiah 53:4) which mention illness and infirmity, but avoids the reference to sin which is found in the next verse of the passage in Isaiah ('he was wounded for our sins'). This is in keeping with the focus of Matthew's Gospel at this point, as he has so far mentioned faith in the healing miracles, but not sin, choosing to emphasise Jesus' pure care for those who were ill and suffering rather than raise any issues about sin or possible responsibility for suffering. Matthew saw in these miracles the Messianic work of Jesus, rather than the wrath of God because of human sin!

Elementary discipleship

The next verse is a little odd; 'Now when Jesus saw crowds around him, he gave orders to cross over to the other side.' (8:18). Earlier in verse 16, Jesus was reported as ministering 'in the evening', and it is quite unlikely that he would go on at night to order a boat to carry Him to the other side of the lake. It is my opinion that we are taking the story up on the next day or some following day, and the brief comments in this verse allow us to see that at this point, people were beginning to go their own way. Some of the crowd clearly decided to stay with Him to see what would happen, and some of them wanted to be His disciples; but others went home. This sets the scene nicely for Jesus' two discussions with people who have different issues with Him about discipleship which reflect what was happening at the end of the day and required immediate decisions on Jesus' part and on theirs..

The first of these discussions was with a scribe who, perhaps aspiring to Jesus' clear authority (7:29), asked Jesus if he could join His followers. This was a quite usual occurrence, as in those days, following a rabbi or leader was the only way of gaining knowledge about Judaism in any depth. This scribe could well have followed many other rabbis before. This is suggested by the way the scribe addressed Jesus as 'teacher' (v19), when everyone else has called him 'Lord'. He was an outsider wanting to come in, and as we have already seen, Jesus had so far selected only a few to become His regular disciple. They were not self-selecting.

Jesus' reply is well known, and sounds stern in comparison with His previous care for people such as the sick (vv14,15). In order to talk about the path of discipleship, Jesus used examples of creatures that were low in the Hebrew hierarchy of life, birds and foxes; ending with the enigmatic phrase 'but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head' (v20). The implication is clear; he needed the scribe to stoop far lower than merely asking to 'join the club'. People often think this passage is about the nature of discipleship in which we must live not knowing where we will next rest our heads. This, of course, can be interpreted in a variety of different ways; however, the point about 'stooping low' is unmistakable and unmovable. This is the characteristic of a disciple; he has been prepared to stoop very low of Christ and for the service of others.

In addition to this, this verse (8:20) is the first use by Jesus of the term 'Son of Man' when describing himself. Some people think that it was something of a mistranslation of Matthew from an Aramaic expression (Aramaic was Jesus' home tongue) meaning little more than 'me' or 'I'; but conjecture such as this is virtually irresolvable, and Matthew's Gospel is indicative of more than this. Whatever Jesus said about Himself as 'Son of Man', the verse (8:20) has the feel of being made unwelcome (see also Matt 8:33, 10:14), and perhaps a sense of the coming judicial persecution (10:16-20), family hostility (10:21,22,34-36) and fleeing from persecutors (10:23) that the disciples were told by Jesus to expect as disciples. In other words, Jesus would be outcast from society, which was a reversal of his authoritative position with the three people he has just healed! This was the beginning of Jesus' hard teaching about the exacting call of discipleship and the road that would eventually demand of the disciples 'take up your Cross and follow me' (Matt 10:38).

The man who came next to see Jesus had already been following him, but he is not identified as one of the four that Jesus has so far specifically chosen (v21). His desire was also to follow 'the Lord', but he had a pressing family problem. It is quite uncertain from the text as to whether he had ageing parents whom he had to take care of before they died, or whether he was asking permission to see out the statutory year of mourning for a parent after which their bones were officially buried, or a request to observe the seven days of family mourning after a death, or a need to bury a father on the day of his death, according to Jewish law! All possibilities have been examined, and the text trawled for clues as to 'which one' is most likely! This has proven to be quite inconclusively, and perhaps Jesus was quite simply saying 'let other arrangements be made'; He was certainly sharp in His reply (8:22).

Discipleship

Application

Too often we look in the wrong place for the meaning of scripture. The 'almost committed disciple' was indeed seeking permission for some family need just as Elisha did when Elijah called him (1 Kings 19:20), but was he using this as an excuse to evade the call of the Messiah? If Jesus was the Messiah, from the point of view of the disciple, surely this fact alone should be more important than anything else. And in just the same way that it was known that the anointing of a Nazirite or a High Priest absolved a man from nearly all other religious obligations, Jesus was saying that the call of discipleship was the highest possible call upon a man or woman.

Jesus frequently upheld family values (see, for example, 15:3-9), but on other occasions downgraded the exclusive nature of the call of the family and other family ties (see 10:34-37, 12:46-50, 19:29). Jesus taught that there are no absolutes in life except the call of God.

From the passion and care of Jesus' healing ministry we have suddenly switched to the absolute and exacting requirements of discipleship. What Jesus did in His healing ministry has now been passed to us, in order that we might help those in need today. That is the 'nice' part of being a Christian. Yet the things Jesus taught reveal the exacting demands of discipleship, and in the light of these latter verses (18-22), few of us measure up to them. How strange that we often see healing ministry as hard and discipleship as easy, when this passage makes them out to be the other way round! These sayings are truly stern challenges for us, just as they were to the scribe and the 'would be disciple' who first heard them.

Questions for groups

1. What is the difference between healing 'with touch' and deliverance 'with a word' today? Is the difference false, or is it applicable to us in any way?
2. In what way is sin connected with sickness?
3. What is the hardest thing you have been asked to do in your spiritual life, and how have you dealt with it? Share your testimony with others.

Discipleship challenges

- *Write a list of people who are ill and who need your prayers. Pray regularly; asking the Lord to heal them, and maintaining those prayers until something happens. Record what happens and whether people are healed and how.*
- *Do you feel able to pray for yourself when you are ill? What problem does this face you with, and who would you go to, asking for personal healing prayer?*

Final Prayer

Thank You, Jesus, for the love we receive from others, even when we do not know it. Help us to respond well when people help us or show us love; and give us the grace to show love in return. In so doing, may we fulfil your call, to 'love one another' both practically and spiritually. In Your name we ask this, Lord Jesus: AMEN
