

He Took Up Our Infirmities
Matthew 8:1-17
Key Verse: 8:17

"This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: 'He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases.'"

In chapters 5-7, Jesus taught the Sermon on the Mount. Like the early morning dew, God's divine oracle descended from heaven on Jesus' disciples and the crowd alike. In chapters 8-9, Jesus demonstrates his divine power in many ways, showing practical love and care for sick and needy people.

8:1 gives us a general statement about how his practical ministry began. It says, "When Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him." Many leaders tend to stay on the mountain and discuss problems without coming down into the real world. They want to help and give direction from above. Yet due to their lack of understanding, conflicts arise instead. Jesus was different! Jesus came down into the real world which was full of people who were suffering from sicknesses physically, mentally and spiritually. Jesus never despised them or drove them away. Rather, he embraced people as they were, had mercy on them, and helped them practically with great compassion. Jesus did not try to change the social system. Instead, Jesus took care of people one by one according to their need. When Jesus did so, people were healed and experienced the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is not just an ideal concept; it is real. If we come down from the mountain and go into the real world and serve needy people with the mind of Jesus, there will be the kingdom of God. Let's learn how the kingdom of God can become a reality in our lives and ministries.

In today's passage we find that Jesus healed many suffering people from various diseases. They desperately needed help. They were very burdensome people. They brought all their burdens to Jesus. But Jesus was not burdened. Rather, he took up their infirmities and bore their diseases with messianic love and mercy. Like these burdened and sick people, we too need Jesus' mercy. At this time, let's come to Jesus for healing so that we may live healthy lives. Let's also learn how to help needy people from Jesus.

First, "I am willing. Be clean!" (1-4). When Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him (1). Among them Matthew mentions one person, a man with leprosy (2a). Luke 5:12 tells us that he was covered with leprosy. One tragedy of leprosy is that it makes people ugly as well as miserable. Human beings are made in the image of God, which is very beautiful to look at. So, many people spend a lot of time looking into the mirror to admire their appearance, especially women. However, people with leprosy never want to look into the mirror because they are too hideous to behold. According to the dictionary, leprosy is a chronic and infectious disease, characterized by patches of rotting flesh and nerve tissue that gradually spread to cause muscle weakness, deformities, and paralysis. Since the nerve tissue is damaged, they feel no pain even though they are seriously ill. Leviticus 13:45-46 say, "Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, 'Unclean! Unclean!' As long as they have the disease they remain unclean. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp." In that strict Jewish society, those who were unclean were forced into isolation and became like prisoners on death row. Human beings were made to live in society. In our community, we love one another, fight with one another, and sometimes dislike one another. Still, it is a great blessing to live in a community. People don't want to live an isolated life. But this man with leprosy was quarantined and segregated. So he felt extremely lonely. Furthermore, leprosy was considered a curse from God (Num 12:10,12; 2 Ki 5:27; 2 Ch 26:19-21). So he was suffering from guilty feelings. He cried out from loneliness, sorrow, guilt and deep despair.

When a person is sick, it is essential that he have a desire to be healed. If he does, medicine works more effectively. But if he has no desire to be healed, medicine may not help much. Proverbs 18:14 says, "The human spirit can endure in sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear?" The fact that leprosy was known to be incurable must have crushed the man's spirit. Even if he had a desire to be healed, what good would it do? It was rational for him to despair and give up. Kierkegaard said, "Despair is the disease that leads to death." There was no hope for his healing. Yet, when he heard what Jesus had done for other sick people, something happened in his heart (Mt 4:24-25). The stories of Jesus ignited a new hope to be healed within him. Jesus' story inspires any kind of despairing person with a new hope, a desire to be healed, and a reason to live in this world.

However, it was not easy to come to Jesus. It required overcoming himself: self-consciousness, despair, fear, and doubt. It required overcoming the strict legalism of his times that forbid a leper from making contact with others. Furthermore, it was a question whether Jesus would receive him and heal him. He could overcome all these things by faith, just looking at Jesus. He came to Jesus by believing Jesus' love and power. He came to Jesus by depending on Jesus' great mercy. It is amazing that he came to Jesus by faith, overcoming all these obstacles. He came to Jesus and humbled himself, kneeling before Jesus. Even though he was desperate, he honored Jesus as Lord. Then he said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean" (2b). Many sick people demand to be helped. But he did not claim that he was entitled to be healed. He only trusted Jesus' mercy, saying, "...if you are willing, you can make me clean."

What did Jesus do for him? Look at verse 3. "Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!' Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy." Here we learn several things. First is the meaning of Jesus' touch. Jesus could have healed this man with just his words. He could have said, "Okay. I will heal you. But don't get close to me." One man shook hands with a healed leper. There was no possibility of infection. Yet after doing so, the man washed his hands with soap and water again and again. However, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. This was the expression of Jesus' great love. Jesus wanted the man to know he accepted him as he was even if he had leprosy. Jesus loved him as his own precious child. Jesus' touch of love healed the man's emotional and spiritual anguish. A touch of love, such as a warm hug, has great power to heal. Jesus knew this man's deep wounds from rejection, isolation and loneliness. Jesus knew his deep sorrow and despair. Jesus knew he longed for love. Jesus had mercy on him and reached out his hand and touched the man. Jesus' touching hands are the hands of mercy, grace and love. Touching the leper was illegal. However, Jesus' touch of love triumphed over the restrictions of the law. Anyone else who touched the man would have become unclean. However, Jesus' touch took up his uncleanness.

Second is Jesus' willingness to heal the man. Jesus said, "I am willing." When we ask for help, someone might say, "Hmm. Well. Okay." Then we feel like a burden. But if they say, "Sure. I am willing," then we feel very comfortable and we can have a sense of self-worth. When we come to Jesus by faith, he does not feel burdened by us. Rather, he responds with words of encouragement, "I am willing." Jesus was willing not only to heal his ugly body, but also his sin-stained mind and soul. Jesus wanted to restore him in God's image to live a pure and healthy life. Jesus' willingness expresses the heart of God toward sinners. Though we don't deserve his mercy, like the man with leprosy, God is willing to save us from our sins. That is why he sent his one and only Son Jesus as our Savior. God wants us to be cleansed with the blood of Jesus and to live a pure and wholesome life (1 Jn 1:9).

Third is the power of Jesus' word. When Jesus said, "Be clean!" immediately the man was cleansed of his leprosy. His rotting flesh became as healthy and vibrant as that of a newborn baby. His muscles regained their strength, his nerves were healed and he regained his sensitivity. His appearance became as handsome as that of a movie star. He became a new man. Jesus' words have power to cleanse all our dirty sins. Jesus' words have power to restore the image of God in us. After the healing, Jesus told him, "See that you don't tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest as Moses commanded as a testimony to them" (4). Jesus helped him to re-enter society as a normal man.

We should note that the gospel writers record the healing of a leper as the first individual healed by Jesus. The Bible indicates that the symptoms of leprosy are very similar to the symptoms of sin. As leprosy makes a man ugly, so sin destroys the image of God in man, making him hideous. As leprosy dulls sensitivity to pain, so sin sears the conscience. As leprosy separates a person from society, so sin separates us from God and from other people. As leprosy is ultimately fatal, so sin leads to death, both physical and spiritual. As leprosy was incurable, so sin is incurable by any human means. Only Jesus' blood cleanses us from sin and makes us whole. When we come to Jesus as we are by faith, Jesus welcomes us and is willing to cleanse us. Jesus said, "I am willing. Be clean!"

Second, "Let it be done...just as you believed" (5-13). After healing the man with leprosy, Jesus entered Capernaum, which became the center of Jesus' Galilean ministry. As soon as he entered it, a centurion came to him, asking for help. A centurion was a Roman army officer in charge of 100 soldiers. They were the backbone of the Roman army. They had to be well-trained and were usually very strict with themselves and others. The centurion had a servant who was very sick. In those days, servants or slaves were treated like property. When they became ill, their masters could abandon them like an old junk car. The centurion in this passage was different. He had humanity. He did not consider the servant a mere instrument of service. Instead, he valued him as a human being like himself. He was mindful of his servant, even though he became paralyzed. In fact, he loved him as his own dear son. There is a

saying that light shines brightest in the dark hours. So this centurion's humanity was revealed in his servant's desperate situation.

Though the centurion was willing to help his servant, there seemed to be nothing he could do. But when he heard that Jesus was in Capernaum, he was inspired with a new hope for his servant's healing. He went to Jesus and said, "Lord, my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly." His words reveal that he identified with his servant's suffering. The servant's suffering had become the centurion's own suffering. He brought his suffering servant to Jesus, curbing his pride. He was willing to do anything for his suffering servant. He had a shepherd's heart, the image of Jesus. To be a Christian is to be a person of humanity like this centurion. Many people have lost their humanity because the sin of selfishness has eroded their souls. We need to restore our humanity and grow in it through Jesus' healing touch. Then we can be influential in our homes, in our neighborhoods, and in our society.

The centurion's true greatness was his faith in Jesus' words. Verse 7 tells us that Jesus was ready to answer the request of faith. So Jesus said to him, "Shall I come 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" (8). From a human point of view, the centurion was a commander of the occupying forces. Jesus was a poor evangelist from the colony. So the centurion could have demanded Jesus to come. But he did not see Jesus from a human point of view. Rather, he saw Jesus as Lord. He was also deeply aware of the culture of the Jews, and that they were not allowed to enter the homes of Gentiles. Though Jesus was ready to go to his house, compelled by a love that breaks down all barriers, the centurion did not want to put Jesus in a difficult position. To him, it was unnecessary, for he believed that Jesus' words would work beyond time and space. He recognized the absolute authority of Jesus' words. This came from his reverence for Jesus himself. This enabled him trust Jesus' words fully. So he said, "...just say the word and my servant will be healed." This reminds us of Peter's words, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets" (Lk 5:5).

The ancestors of faith also had the same attitude toward the Lord's words. When Noah heard the word of God's judgment, it seemed to be unbelievable. But Noah revered the Lord and believed that his word would be fulfilled just as he had said. So he could invest his entire life in building an ark of salvation. When Abraham heard God's word of promise and blessing, it sounded too great to believe. But he simply believed God's word, left everything behind, except his wife, and began his life of faith without knowing the exact meaning of becoming a blessing. Later he could offer his beloved only son Isaac to God as an expression of his reverence for God and his word. When we have reverence for God and his word we can experience the power of his word and enter deeply into God's world.

In verse 9 the centurion explained why he had such faith in Jesus' words. He said, "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." He could understand the nature of command in two ways. One was through serving in the army, and the other was by living in a social system with slavery. People generally do not like to be under authority. But this centurion was different. He could submit to the authority over him, so he could also exercise authority over his subordinates. When he saw Jesus, he recognized him as his chief commander. So he applied this principle to Jesus. His faith was expressed through submission to the authority of Jesus' word. This is what we should learn from him. However, it is not at all easy. People hate the word "submission," because we have a fallen sinful nature. Adam's disobedience and Cain's rebellion are circulating in our blood. In order to submit to God's word, we must fight a fierce spiritual battle to deny ourselves. In order to experience the power of faith, we have to learn how to submit ourselves to Jesus' authority. Jesus, even though he is the Son of God, learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Heb 5:8-9).

Look at verse 10. "When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, 'Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.'" Jesus was rarely amazed at anything. But here, Jesus was really amazed at the centurion's faith. Jesus was amazed that even though he was a Gentile Roman soldier, he had greater faith than the people of Israel. Through his faith, Jesus had a great vision that many Gentiles from the east and west would humbly accept him as their Savior and participate in the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven (11). But at the same time, Jesus foresaw that even though the Israelites were chosen by God, when they had no faith in Jesus, they would be thrown outside into the darkness, where there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth (12). Here we learn that any person who has faith in Jesus, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, gender, religious heritage, or any other human distinctive, can enter the kingdom of heaven through faith in Jesus.

Look at verse 13. Jesus blessed the centurion's faith, saying, "Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would." Jesus was pleased with his faith and blessed his faith. And his servant was healed at that moment. Here we can see that Jesus pours out blessing upon the needy through those who come to him with faith and compassion. Yet in the context of the Bible as a whole, faith is a personal matter. Jesus' blessing here was the healing of a man's body, not the salvation of his soul. For salvation, each person must make his own confession of faith in Jesus. Many young ones among us have received abundant blessings through the faith of their parents and shepherds. But ultimately each of us needs personal faith in Jesus for salvation.

Third, Jesus healed all the sick (14-17). When Jesus came into Peter's house, he saw Peter's mother-in law lying in bed with a fever (14). Why did she have a fever? Perhaps it was due to stress over the fact that Peter was crazy to follow Jesus, abandoning his fishing business. She wondered how he would provide for her daughter. Maybe she began to speak ill of Peter; then she got a fever. Jesus understood this woman very well. Without any request, he went to her and touched her hand and the fever left her. Jesus' healing touch is not limited by the requests of people. Jesus pours out his mercy and grace upon people all the time by his one-sided grace. When Peter's mother-in-law was healed, she got up and served him with a delicious meal (15). Here we can learn that Jesus heals us so that we may serve him joyfully.

When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him. Jesus must have been tired. He had been serving people all day long, using all his energy. However, Jesus did not tell the crowd of needy people to go away and come back during office hours. Instead, Jesus welcomed them and drove out evil spirits with a word and healed all the sick one by one out of his great compassion.

When the author Matthew saw Jesus serving many kinds of needy people with mercy and love, he remembered the words of Isaiah the prophet: "He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases." This is a quotation from Isaiah 54:4 which foretold the coming and ministry of the Messiah. God did not abandon mankind to suffer with infirmities. In his great mercy, God sent Jesus as our Messiah to bring healing and restoration. No one can bear others' infirmities, for we are each fully burdened by our own infirmities. But Jesus took up our infirmities and bore our diseases. Jesus did not feel burdened by our infirmities, or blame us for our sins. Instead Jesus understood our weaknesses and took up our infirmities. Eventually Jesus bore all our sins in his body and took them away through his atoning sacrifice. Jesus wants us to be strong and healthy and to live a fruitful life. Jesus wants to heal us physically, mentally and spiritually and restore God's image in us fully. Thanks to Jesus who took up our infirmities and bore our weaknesses so that we may live a healthy and happy life. Jesus wants to raise us as beautiful people of noble humanity who can be a blessing to others in this dark world. Let's come to Jesus with faith.