

Week of October 10

HOPING FOR HELP

Bible Passage: Matthew 8:1-13

Key Verse: Matthew 8:13

❖ *Significance of the Lesson*

- The **Theme** of this lesson is looking for change.
- The **Life Question** is, How can I get God's help?
- The **Biblical Truth** affirms that believers can live in hope by believing that Jesus will deal with any problem they might have.
- The **Life Impact** will help you express your faith in Jesus.

Who Gets Into The Kingdom Of God?

If you were to walk the streets of any major city and ask the question, "What kind of people get into the kingdom of heaven?" I suspect the answers would vary, but in most cases they would be quite similar. You could possibly run into a few *universalists* who would assure you that everyone will eventually get in. The early Church Father Origen (ca. A.D. 185-254) was of this opinion, believing that eventually even the devil will be allowed back in. You might also encounter some *pluralists*, a growing perspective in our day, who would say all sincere persons who follow faithfully their particular religion will make it. After all sincerity in one's beliefs is what really matters. Of course it goes without saying that the majority would probably argue that we can be certain that all "*good people*" will be allowed to enter the kingdom of heaven (8:11) and walk the streets of gold. After all, God maintains a tally sheet on each one of us, and if my good works outweigh and outnumber my bad works God will just have to let me in. That's only fair, is it not?

The Bible teaches that there are going to be some very surprised people on judgment day. Some who were convinced they had a right to heaven's kingdom are going to be disappointed when they are stopped at the pearly gates. Others who knew they had no right to claim God's grace and enter heaven's kingdom, but threw themselves totally and completely on the goodness and mercy of God, are going to be wonderfully and joyfully surprised. That is what Jesus teaches us in Matthew 8:1-13.

Taking the time to heal a leper and the servant of a Roman soldier, Jesus also provides for us a valuable lesson about the kind of people God stops to help and who get into the kingdom of heaven. His lesson would have stunned the people of His day and it might surprise you as well.

Word Study: *have believed*

The word **believed** in Matthew 8:13 is from the Greek word *pisteuo*. It means to believe, trust, have confidence in. No one uses the word more than John. In his gospel the word occurs almost 100 times. In that gospel it means to trust that Jesus, the Son of God, is

sufficient to deliver from sin and give the gift of eternal life. The noun form of the word is *pistis*, and John never uses this. As a verb the word **believe** is used by Matthew 10 times, by Mark 10, and by Luke 9. Here in Matthew 8:13 the centurion believed, was certain, that Jesus could heal his servant. Our Lord rewarded him according to his faith, what he believed.

Search the Scriptures

Matthew 5-7 records for us “the greatest sermon ever preached” at any place or at any time: “The Sermon on the Mount” (Matt. 5-7; Luke 6:20-49). The last words of the sermon contrast the person who builds their house on the rock and the person who builds their house on the sand. One person hears God’s word and obeys it (Matt. 7:24). The other person hears God’s word and does not obey it (Matt. 7:26). The *rock man* will stand, but *sand man* will fall. The people are astonished by Jesus’ teaching, He did not teach like the other religious instructors.

Matthew 8:1-9:38 is put together in a very definite pattern, quite likely in a topical and not strictly chronological arrangement. Matthew will alternate miracle stories (packaged in 3s) and teachings on discipleship. The first miracle will shock the people. Not only had they never heard it like this, they had also never seen it like this! Jesus will honor a person’s faith, even the faith of the undesirable. What is the key? What must someone whom everyone else shuns do to get Jesus to take notice? How can the helpless find hope?

1. Trust Jesus To Meet Your Needs (Matt. 8:1-4).

How does the leper approach Jesus? What is leprosy? What amazing thing does Jesus do as He heals this man?

Verses 1-4 [LifeWay adds]

Matthew 8 actually begins where chapter 4 stops, with the “Sermon on the Mount” as a major teaching parenthesis. Matthew is building an impregnable defense of the Messiahship of Jesus. He is legally qualified through His genealogy (1:1-17), prophetically qualified by the prophecies of His birth and infancy (1:18-2:23), divinely qualified by the Father’s declaration at His baptism (3:13-17), spiritually qualified by His victory over Satanic temptation (4:1-11), theologically qualified by His teaching in the “Sermon on the Mount” (ch. 5-7) and now supernaturally qualified by the miracles He performs (ch. 8-9).

Jesus **came down from the mountain** with a **large crowds** following **Him** (cf. Matt. 4:23ff and note the pattern of preaching and healing). However, it is not the crowd that interests Jesus, it never is, it is the one. In this case, the one is **a man with** the disease of **leprosy**. His situation could have scarcely been more tragic. As a person, hardly anyone would have been more undesirable.

Leprosy (Hansen's disease) may have included a broader category of skin diseases and illnesses in the time of Jesus. Leviticus 13-14 is dedicated to laws concerning lepers. Few diseases were more feared in the ancient world both in terms of the illness, but also in terms of how people would respond. The Jews despised anyone with the disease and viewed the person with it as cursed by God. Healing from the disease was so rare that raising someone from the dead was considered easier. Anyone with the disease was considered ceremonially unclean and he was required to shout "Unclean! Unclean!" He was forbidden from living in any normal community and was not to be touched by anyone not having the disease. In fact the *Talmud* commanded that a Jew was not to come any closer than 6 feet from a leper, and if the wind was blowing, the limit was 150 feet.

Leprosy was an appropriate picture of sin. Like **leprosy**, sin infects and spreads throughout the whole body. It is ugly, corrupting, contaminating, alienating and virtually incurable apart from divine intervention and healing. Verse 2 would have shocked any person in the 1st century. The leper sets aside all social decorum and comes right up to Jesus. He **knelt before Him, saying, Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.** A number of things immediately jump out at us. This man came to Jesus in confidence. He also came in reverence and humility. He worshipped, bowed or **knelt**.

This leper comes to the right person, responds in the right way, and says the right thing. By calling Jesus **Lord** this man confesses more than he understands. It is doubtful that he sees Jesus as God, but he knows God is at work in Him. **If You are willing** expresses humility and reveals that the issue is not "can he" but "will he want to." **You can make me clean** are words of faith and confidence in the divine power that is operative in the man Jesus. He has faith that Jesus can do it, the only question is will He? Here is a faith reminiscent of the three Hebrew children, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego who boldly proclaimed to Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 3:17-18, "If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up."

Jesus, as He often does, does the unexpected. He put **out His hand and touched him.** This would have shocked the crowds and surprised the leper. It was unnecessary for Jesus to touch him, as all would see (8:5-13). However, there is an important point to be made. What Jesus touches immediately becomes clean. Jesus does not receive contamination but imparts cleansing.

In faith the leper defies Leviticus 13:46 and Jesus transcends Leviticus 5:3. The healing is instantaneous, **immediately, his leprosy was cleansed.** The undesirable is made whole. Jesus commands the healed man to **see that you don't tell anyone and go (imp)...show (imp.) yourself to the priest, and offer (imp.) the gift that Moses prescribed as a testimony to them.** Jesus' command to be silent is on the surface surprising, but upon closer inspection altogether understandable. He is no mere miracle worker and He will not present Himself as such. He will not feed the frenzied expectations of the crowds who want a political and material Messiah. Mark 1:45

informs us that the man disobeyed Jesus and “began to proclaim it widely and spread the news” (*HCSB*). What was the result? “Jesus could no longer enter a town openly.”

We should not think, however, that Jesus was encouraging a completely silent witness. There was a right people and a right procedure. **Show yourself to the priest and there offer the gift that Moses prescribed**, a reference to the requirements of Leviticus 14. The healed leper will give a witness and a public one when he appears before the priest in Jerusalem. His healing will be **a testimony to them**, and affirm that one who has authority over disease and sickness is in the midst. How they will respond is up to them but one thing is clear: Jesus will honor faith in Him, even the faith of the undesirable.

Several important truths from these verses are:

1. Jesus cares about individuals.
2. Jesus cares about those society deems undesirable.
3. When Jesus touches the unclean, he immediately becomes clean.
4. Jesus honored the teachings of the law of God.

2. Turn To Jesus When You Need Help (Matt. 8:5-9).

What was a centurion? How did the nation of Israel view this type of man? How did this man address Jesus?

Verses 5-9 [*LifeWay adds*]

The scene now shifts to **Capernaum**, an important town in Jesus’ day on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Here was Peter’s home (cf. 8:14-15) as well as a Roman garrison of troops. These hated soldiers, dedicated to the service of Caesar, would be led by a **centurion**, a man responsible for the discipline and deployment of his troops. The **centurion** would most certainly be a Gentile, commanding approximately 100 soldiers. As a Gentile he would have been despised by the Jewish people, as a Roman soldier he is twice cursed in their eyes. However, we are stunned again by the events that unfold, for in them we learn another valuable lesson about those that are welcomed into the kingdom. Those whom many view as unworthy, God will welcome when they approach Him in faith.

Having **entered Capernaum**, Jesus is approached by a Roman **centurion**. He comes like the leper, in humility, **pleading** (pre. tense) with Jesus. Luke 7:3-6 informs us that two groups of person directly interceded on behalf of the centurion, and they note his kindness and generosity to the nation of Israel. Both accounts, however, focus primarily on the centurion’s faith, not his presence. His humility is further displayed as he addresses Jesus as **Lord**, just like the leper (v.2). He then lays the situation before Jesus. His **servant** (“highly valued by him...and about to die” [Luke 7:2]) **is lying at home paralyzed, and in terribly agony** (pre.tense). The **centurion** has indeed turned to the right person. Jesus quickly and compassionately responds by saying, **“I will come and heal him.”** The **I** is emphatic in the original text, adding emphasis and force to the statement of Jesus.

God is always honored by those who trust Him, who have faith in Him. Faith in God is so central, so essential, that even little, tiny “mustard seed” faith is capable of moving mountains (Matt. 17:20). On this occasion a much greater faith is present and it is in, of all people, a Gentile Roman soldier.

The centurion’s response is nothing short of amazing. No one could have anticipated or expected it. It reveals an astonishing understanding of spiritual authority as well as an astonishing understanding of the authority of Jesus. The centurion again refers to Jesus as **Lord**, demonstrating his humility and respect for Him. He goes further still and acknowledges his unworthiness that Jesus should even enter his home. While it may be that he is referring to the ritual uncleanness Jesus would incur for entering the home of a Gentile, it far more likely that the **centurion** is acknowledging his own sinfulness and unworthiness in light of who he believes Jesus to be. This judgment is supported by the incredibly statement he now makes: **Only say the word, and my servant will be cured.** What faith! What confidence.

The centurion believes that Jesus needs to merely **say the word** and his **servant will be cured**, even from a distance, an act of healing that was unprecedented in the ancient world. To this point Jesus has not healed in this way. Why would the **centurion** think that Jesus could perform such a feat? The answer is found in his insight into and understanding of **authority**. Just as he has **authority** over his men to tell them to **go** (imp.) and **come** (imp.) and **do this** (imp.), he believes that Jesus has the same **authority** over disease and sickness. His men are under his **authority**. Jesus is under the **authority** of God and exercises the **authority** of God. When Jesus spoke God spoke. When Jesus acted God acted. God can do anything, even heal from a distance, for He is not bound by space and distance. The same is true for His sent one, His Son, the Lord Jesus.

Several key truths from these verses are:

1. Jesus receives the unworthy.
2. Jesus welcomes Jews and Gentiles who have faith in Him.
3. As God’s Son, Jesus has the authority and power of God.

3. Accept Jesus’ Help To Meet Your Need (Matt. 8:10-13)

What did Jesus think of the centurion’s faith? What does the phrase “from east and west” mean? Why is final judgment so terrible?

Jesus was amazed, astonished. He “marveled” (*NKJV*) at this man’s faith. He turns **to those following Him**, for this is a teachable moment, and He says, **I assure (amen) you**, “I tell you the truth” (*NIV*), **I have not found anyone in Israel with so great a faith!** D.A. Carson pinpoints the significance of Jesus’ statement, “The greatness of his faith did not rest in the mere fact that he believed Jesus could heal from a distance but in the degree to which he had penetrated the secret of Jesus’ authority...this Gentile penetrated more deeply into the nature of Jesus’ person and authority than any Jew of his time.”¹

¹ D.A. Carson, “Matthew” in the *EBC*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 202.

This observation is right on target. The insight of this Gentile approaches that of the recognition of deity. Is he there, we cannot be sure. That he is near there is no question at all. One would have thought so great a faith would have been found in a Hebrew, a Jew, not a Gentile. After all, they had the Scriptures and the preaching of the prophets. They had the promises of a coming Messiah that ran from Genesis (3:15) to Malachi (3:1). However, on this occasion, the awesome faith was found in one the nation of Israel would consider unworthy, but not Jesus.

Jews in Jesus' day might have thought: in grace God might reach out and touch one leper, maybe even one Gentile. After all, as Jonah reminds us, "you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love" (Jonah 4:2, *NIV*). However, it was inconceivable to a 1st century Jew that God would allow His kingdom to be flooded by the undesirable and the unworthy. The thought of "Gentile dogs" rushing into God's kingdom was unimaginable for them, but not for Jesus. In verses 11 and 12 Jesus drops a bombshell. He turns the worldview of the people on its head and reminds them and us, that many may be surprised as to who gets in and who is left out of the kingdom of God. The faith of the unexpected is honored too.

Jesus uses the centurion's faith as an opportunity to teach a very important truth, a truth that needed to be heard in the 1st century, and a truth that needs to be heard in the 21st century. **I tell you** adds force and gravity to what follows. These are words that should cause you to look up and take notice. **Many will come** he says. The kingdom of heaven will not be sparsely populated, for many will find their eternal home there. But one could ask, from where will they come? Jesus' words are breathtaking in their shock value. They will **come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.** The phrase **from the east and west** would direct the attention of His hearers to outside the borders of the nation of Israel. Gentiles, the hated pagans who oppressed the Hebrew people, would come to the Messiah's banquet and find their place in His kingdom. The imagery of such a celebration is found in passages like Isaiah 25:6-9. The promise that Gentiles would share in the blessings of Messiah's kingdom is discovered in texts like Isaiah 11:10-12; 49:8-12; 60:1-6. Jesus also said in John 10:16, "But I have other sheep that are not of this fold (e.g. the Jewish nation); I must bring them also, and they will listen to My voice. Then there will be one flock, one shepherd."

Jesus says people will come from everywhere, from every direction and will **recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.** What is the gist, the essence, of all that He is saying here? Several crucial observations can be uncovered. First, the key to entrance into the kingdom is not your genealogy, national citizenship or race. "God doesn't show favoritism" (Acts 10:34) based on external criteria, "but in every nation the person who fears Him and does righteousness is acceptable to all" (Acts 10:35). Second, the issue of who gets into the kingdom is an internal matter, it is a matter of the heart. God does not judge according to the face or one's status in society (James 2:1-9). He looks within and examines the condition of your heart. Third, the bottom line is, "Who do you trust?" "Where is your faith?" Lepers, Roman centurions and Gentiles from around the world will join believing Jews at the banquet table of God's Messiah,

King Jesus, when they come to Him in humble faith. They too must call on Him as **Lord** (8:2, 6, 8). They too must come worshipping (8:2). They too must recognize their unworthiness (8:8) to come into God's presence on their own merit and righteousness.

Matthew has already taught us that the gospel came through the seed of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Matt. 1:1-2). However, its benefits are not limited or restricted to the nation of Israel only. We have hint of this with the coming of the Magi (Matt. 2:1-12). We have this confirmed in our Lord's Great Commission (Matt. 28:16-20). The blessings of the gospel and the kingdom of heaven are appropriated by faith. Your history and heritage matters not one wit! As Paul makes plain in Galatians, "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus...there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (3:26, 28). It is wonderful to realize that many will be surprised by joy when it comes to entering the kingdom, surprised that the simple condition is faith and faith alone in the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 10:9-13, 13).

People have all sorts of ideas about who will get into God's kingdom and what is required. In 1st century Israel it was thought by many that just being a Hebrew, a descendant of the Patriarchs, would be enough. Not so says Jesus. Those who respond to Him in repentance and faith will joyfully discover that they are welcomed whatever their ethnic, racial, social, national or sexual background. In contrast, many from within the nation, who by their ancestry were sure they would be there, will painfully and tragically discover that they are not welcomed. Referred to as **the sons of the kingdom**, Jesus says in spite of their privileged status (Rom. 3:1-2) they **will be thrown into the outer darkness**, denied entrance into God's kingdom.

Darkness is the opposite of the place of light which speaks of the place and presence of God, of Jesus who is the "light of the world" (John 8:12). It is a place of moral **darkness** for it is the place reserved for Satan, his demons and the souls of evil, wicked men. It is also a place of spiritual **darkness** because there is no awareness of the presence of God except in wrath and judgment. It is also a place of eternal **darkness**, for the person who has said no to God's grace in Christ will be confined here forever. The horror of this **darkness** cannot really be captured in words. Eternally excluded from God's presence when you thought you were in: could a worse fate be imagined?

For those **thrown** out into this place of **outer darkness**, Jesus adds, **there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth**. This phrase occurs six times in Matthew's gospel (see also 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30). It expresses the sorrow, the pain, the agony, the despair that those who go there experience.

Sometimes people who are lost will say that when they die that they want to go to hell because that is where all of their friends will be and they want to be with them. The implications of what they are saying is that they will find some comfort by being in hell with their friends. Not so says Jesus. Only **weeping**, crying, and wailing will be heard. Only the **gnashing of teeth**, the grinding of the teeth in excruciating pain will be felt. There is no pleasure in hell only pain, no rejoicing only regret, no happiness only horror,

no comfort only crying. The contrast between the **kingdom of heaven** and the place of **outer darkness** could not be greater.

Verse 13 records the response of Jesus to the centurion's request concerning his servant. The faith of the unworthy is honored. Jesus responds with a simple command, **Go** (imp.). **As you have believed, let it be done for you. And his servant was cured that very moment.** In grace and mercy Jesus speaks words that encourage the heart of this Gentile soldier. **Go.** Be on your way. Head on home. Great faith shall receive a great blessing. What you hoped for you will receive. What you sought you will find. The text is emphatic as to the precise time of the healing. Literally the text reads "and was healed the boy in the hour that." The very hour that Jesus spoke the word the healing took place. Complete, instantaneous, at that very moment the paralysis disappeared and the continuous dreadful torment vanished. Jesus does have authority over disease and sickness. He will honor the faith of the undesirable, He will honor the faith of the unworthy.

Several key truths from these verses are:

1. Jesus always honors faith.
2. Getting into God's kingdom is a matter of faith, not family descendants.
3. Judgment Day will be surprising for many.

Spiritual Transformations

Many of us claim to be Christian and are confident that we will be welcomed into the kingdom of heaven. Be careful, be very careful. Even those who profess to be a child of God can be excluded from the kingdom and cast into hell, into the place of outer darkness, if they do not place their faith in the right place, the right person. You can trust Jesus to meet your needs now and forever no matter who you are, where you have been or what you have done. Are you undesirable, unworthy, unexpected to enter the kingdom? Not to Him, if you come in faith by way of His cross. Come this way and you will find that you will be welcomed to sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Even better, you will be welcomed to sit down with Jesus, in His kingdom, forever.

Prayer of Commitment: Lord, thank you for meeting our needs now and forever, when we come to you and trust you in humble faith. Amen.