

# Matthew 8:1-4

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-8/matthew-81-4/>

*Large crowds follow after Jesus. A leper comes to Him, asking to be made clean. Jesus touches and miraculously heals the leper instantly. This is Matthew's first specific account of Jesus miraculously healing someone.*

The parallel accounts of this event are found in Mark 1:40-45 and Luke 5:12-16.

For the past three chapters, Matthew let his readers hear directly from *Jesus*, as the Messiah shared His kingdom platform with His disciples. Matthew now continues his narration, *When Jesus came down from the mountain* to let his readers know that the following account took place after the “Sermon on the Mount.”

Matthew writes that *large crowds followed Him*. He adds the word *polloi* (*many*) to *ochloi* (*crowds*) to demonstrate that it was a considerable number of people who *followed Him*. Matthew likely included “*polloi*” to differentiate these *crowds* from the crowd (*polloi*) of disciples who *Jesus* spoke to on *the mountain*. This is the same Greek phrase also translated *large crowds* in 4:23-25, just prior to the Sermon on the Mount, which says:

“Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people. The news about Him spread throughout all Syria; and they brought to Him all who were ill, those suffering with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics; and He healed them. Large crowds followed Him from Galilee and the Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan.”

These *large crowds* who *followed Him* were much larger in size than the disciples who gathered to hear their rabbi. Jesus now transitions from a crowd of disciples gathered to hear His teaching, back again to *large crowds* from all of Israel and the surrounding nations who *followed Him*. In this context the phrase, *followed Him* does not necessarily suggest allegiance or obedience to *Him*. The context indicates that people were *following Him* physically, likely in hopes of receiving healing.

Among those *who came to Him* was a *leper*. Leprosy was a dreaded disease in the ancient world.

Physically, leprosy was a skin and flesh disorder that brought about the literal decay of a person's body while they still lived. The first signs of leprosy were white spots on the skin (Leviticus 13:4). *Lepers* often did not know they had leprosy until they accidentally cut or injured themselves without feeling any pain. This was because leprosy deadened nerve endings and did not send the proper signals to the brain. Eventually, grotesque sores emerged across their bodies. Puss oozed from these sores as their flesh began to rot (Leviticus 13:10). As leprosy progressed, *lepers'* skin dried and their flesh degenerated. This brought about fiery itching (Leviticus 13:24). *Lepers* used sticks and broken pottery to scrape and scratch in an attempt to

find a moment's relief from the agony. After a time, fingers, toes, ears, or parts of their nose would break off. Leprosy continued to disfigure and torment its victims until they finally perished.

Socially, the *leper* also suffered anguish. Leprosy was highly contagious. It had no known cure. Accordingly, lepers were ostracized. They were forbidden to have personal contact with anyone, including their family and friends. From the day they were first declared "unclean" they were cut off from all society (Leviticus 14:46). All of their relationships and everything they had worked for was taken from them. Their sense of self was stolen from them. Their reputation and name were erased by their affliction. Their identity became their disease—*leper*.

Lepers were stigmatized and feared. The only community they had was to be found in the *leper* colonies where they would cluster in caves to tend one another as they suffered while awaiting death. Family and friends would bring food near the entrance of these caves for loved ones, but they were careful to keep their distance, lest they too contracted the disease. Whenever a *leper* ventured away from the colony, they were required to warn others to stay away by ringing a bell or shouting "Unclean! Unclean!" Those downwind of a *leper* might smell the stink of death whenever they approached. Boys would throw rocks at lepers to keep them at bay.

In addition to the physical torment and social isolation, was the shame. Lepers were often thought to have contracted the disease as punishment from God for their sins (Numbers 12:10; 2 Kings 15:5; John 9:2). Leprosy rendered a person ceremonially unclean (Leviticus 13:3, 11, 14, 25, 30, 36, 44,). Even a leper's clothes were considered to have leprosy and be unclean. If the leprosy could not be washed out, then their garments and belongings were to be burned (Leviticus 13:47-59). Similarly, if a house were to continue to have leprosy after being thoroughly cleansed and re-plastered, the building was to be torn down and all its timber discarded (Leviticus 14:33-45). Anyone who entered a leprosy house, touched leprosy clothing, or came into close proximity to a *leper* was likewise considered ceremonially unclean (Leviticus 14:46).

The *leper* who *came to Jesus* demonstrated great faith. It is likely that he heard of Jesus's ability to miraculously heal (Matthew 4:24) and had come *to Him* in a desperate hope and bold attempt to be made whole. He certainly risked, and probably experienced backlash of angry shouts, sharp rebukes (or worse) from onlookers as he violated social norms and approached *Jesus*. The *leper* displayed remarkable humility *when he came to Jesus*. Recognizing his lowly condition, he *bowed down before Him*. Acknowledging Christ's authority, he *said* to Him, *Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean*.

The leper's statement reveals at least two things about his faith in *Jesus*. He referred to *Jesus* as "Lord." The *leper* knew *Jesus* had the power to heal him. He tells *Jesus*, *You can make me clean*. The *leper* had a confidence in the power of Christ. Second, the *leper* displayed humility. He began his request with the right perspective. *Lord, if You are willing*, he said. He does not demand that *Jesus* make him *clean*. He understands that *Jesus* does not owe him health. This humble *leper* simply states his request to be made *clean*, but he leaves it up to *Jesus* to decide what He will do. He had an attitude that seems to accept whatever outcome God decides. It is a similar attitude that *Jesus* will display as He prays to His Father hours before He suffers on a

cross: “Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done” (Luke 22:42).

By asking to be made *clean*, the *leper* was not just asking to be cured from the physical affliction of his disorder. He was asking to be restored to community among his family and friends. The healing of the disease was the means to that end.

*Jesus* understood the *leper* and was moved by his request. He *stretched out His hand and touched him, saying “I am willing; be cleansed.”* The manner in which *Jesus* chose to heal this man was significant. He could have simply uttered a word or waved a hand and the *leper* would have been healed. He *touched him*. Christ did not regard the traditions of ceremonial cleanliness as more important than this man’s brokenness. But by personally touching the *leper*, *Jesus* validated his humanity and restored him to the community of human fellowship once again.

*And immediately his leprosy was cleansed.* He was instantly cured. He not only had no more visible signs of the disease, his body was healthy and the now former *leper* was made whole.

After He healed the *leper*, *Jesus* said to him, “*See that you tell no one.*” At first glance, this seems like a strange request. He makes a similar request of His disciples when *Jesus* affirms to them that He truly is the Messiah (Matthew 16:20). He also forbade demons to tell others that He is the Son of God (Mark 1:34, 3:11-12). It could be that *Jesus* requested this because it simply was not time for *Jesus*’s identity to be revealed, or His kingdom to be visibly established (John 2:4, 6:15, 7:6). However, after telling the man to *tell no one* *Jesus* immediately instructs the man to *tell* someone. This pairing likely meant *Jesus* was instructing the man of the priority in telling. *Jesus* told him: *show yourself to the priest and present the offering that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.*

To be officially reinstated back into society a leper had to follow certain procedures and offer the appropriate sacrifices that God told to Moses (Leviticus 14:1-32). *Jesus*’ command to *tell no one* was likely about the leper’s priority in telling. *Jesus* was asking him first to fulfill the instructions of the Mosaic Law for anyone healed of leprosy. *Jesus* wanted the man to present himself to the *priest and present the offering that Moses commanded.*

This was not necessary to give thanks to God, as the healed *leper* had opportunity to do in person, since *Jesus* is God. Rather, it was for the purpose of providing *a testimony* to the priests. This would be consistent with *Jesus*’ stated mission, to present Himself and His kingdom platform to Israel. It may be that *Jesus* did not want the healed man to tell anyone before he had presented himself to the *priest*.

It seems this was the interpretation, or at least the application employed by the leper. If the leper was told to make *a testimony* to the priest, he would be expected to make *testimony* to many others afterward. It is inevitable that the people in his town would know he had been healed. We can assume he complied with *Jesus*’ request to show himself to *the priest* and make *the offering that Moses commanded*. The Gospel of Mark tells us that ultimately the leper spread the news far and wide:

“But he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news around, to such an extent that Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city, but stayed out in unpopulated areas; and they were coming to Him from everywhere.”

(Mark 1:45)

Jesus stated His plan for spreading His kingdom platform in Mark 1:38-39:

“Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, so that I may preach there also; for that is what I came for.” And He went into their synagogues throughout all Galilee, preaching and casting out the demons.”

However, after the news spread that He healed the *leper*, Jesus had to remain in unpopulated areas due to the crowds. The phrasing from the Mark passage of “But he went out and began to proclaim it freely” might indicate that the leper’s witness went beyond what Jesus preferred. This resulted in Jesus having to adjust His campaign to avoid the hindrance of massive crowds.

After the leper was healed Jesus told him to *Go show yourself to the priest and present the offering that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them*. Again, Christ’s instructions gave the leper an opportunity to bear witness to the priests of Jesus’s power as well as His adherence to the Mosaic Law. Leviticus 14:1-32 presents the priestly protocols for and the sacrifices to be offered for restoring a healed leper back into society. Jesus might have been illustrating to the priests His statement in 5:17 that He had not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it.

Among the burnt offerings (Leviticus 14:13), sin offerings (Leviticus 14:13), guilt offerings (Leviticus 14:14), grain offerings (Leviticus 14:20), and wave offerings (Leviticus 14:24), this offering was entirely unique to lepers who were made *clean*. It involved two birds and it is a ritualistic allegory of the Messiah’s sacrifice for man’s salvation from sin and death. This is the *offering that Moses commanded* which Jesus referenced:

“Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “This shall be the law of the leper in the day of his cleansing. Now he shall be brought to the priest, and the priest shall go out to the outside of the camp. Thus the priest shall look, and if the infection of leprosy has been healed in the leper, then the priest shall give orders to take two live clean birds and cedar wood and a scarlet string and hyssop for the one who is to be cleansed. The priest shall also give orders to slay the one bird in an earthenware vessel over running water. As for the live bird, he shall take it together with the cedar wood and the scarlet string and the hyssop, and shall dip them and the live bird in the blood of the bird that was slain over the running water. He shall then sprinkle seven times the one who is to be cleansed from the leprosy and shall pronounce him clean, and shall let the live bird go free over the open field”

(Leviticus 14:1-7)

Leprosy represents sin and death. The bird placed in earthenware represents God’s Incarnation into human flesh. Its slaying represents the Christ’s death on a cross. The live bird that is dipped in the blood of the one that was slain represents the Christ’s atonement of the sinner. There is the symbol of resurrection and new life when this bird is let go free over the open field.

Later on, when the priest performs the guilt offering for the cleansed *leper*, he does something unusual and rather personal in the sacrificial ceremony. He takes the blood of the lamb and puts “it on the lobe of the right ear of the one to be cleansed, and on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right foot” (Leviticus 14:14). He will also do this with oil (Leviticus 14:17). Touching one’s ear is an intimate act. It is a sign of closeness and affection. It is quite possible that when *Jesus touched the leper to make him clean*, He *touched* his right ear.

The symbolism of leprosy as something with spiritual connections was likely broadly understood. This could account for the additional surge in crowds after word spread of this miracle.

### **Biblical Text**

**8:1-4 When Jesus came down from the mountain, large crowds followed Him. And a leper came to Him and bowed down before Him, and said, “Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.” Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, “I am willing; be cleansed.” And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus said to him, “See that you tell no one; but go, show yourself to the priest and present the offering that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.”**