

## Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

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Following the Sermon on the Mount, Chapters 5 through 7, there follows a series of healing stories and calling / discipleship stories:

- Cleansing a man with leprosy. (8:1-4)
- Healing a Roman army officer's servant (8:5-13)
- Healing Peter's mother and others at Peter's house (8:14-17)
- The costs of following Jesus (8:18-22)
- Stilling a storm (8:23-27)
- Casting out two violent demons (8:28-34)
- Healing a paralyzed man (9:1-8)
- Calling the tax collector, Matthew (9:9-13)
- New wine cannot be put in old wine skins (9:14-17)
- Healing a woman who had been bleeding for 12 years, and bringing back to life the daughter of a synagogue leader (9:18-26)
- Healing a man who is blind (9:27-31)
- Casting out a silencing demon (9:32-34)
- The crowds are drawn to Jesus - the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few (9:35-38)

The effect of Chapters 8 and 9 is to show that Jesus is not only an inspiring Jesus, but is also able to put his words into actions.

But for those of us with a scientific and modern medicine understanding, it is crucial to focus NOT on the actions, but on the inter-actions - the **relationships** - between Jesus and those who come to him in order for us to truly get what Matthew is wanting us to know.

### Disease or Demon?

One distinction that is important to note is the difference between healing a disease and casting out a demon. At the time of Jesus, demons, or unclean spirits, were understood to be part of unseen realm of being. Evil attacked good, and anyone whose behaviour deviated in the least from socially accepted norms would be closely scrutinized and evaluated for the cause of their deviant behaviour. If the cause was understood to be an unclean spirit, the person would be forced out of their family and community to live at the margins.

Jesus himself does not behave "normally." And in Matthew 12:22-32 (see also Mark 3:23-27 and Luke 11:17-22), Jesus has to defend himself against the accusation of being an agent of the ruler of the demons, Beelzebul.

So in casting out unclean spirits, Jesus is demonstrating that he is a Holy Man of God with greater authority and power than the unclean spirits. This is illustrated by the frequent honouring of Jesus by the demons - they are the first to address him with such high titles as "Son of God."

The focus for us today is NOT to debate the reality of unclean spirits. We need to focus on where we stand in relation to the authority of Jesus to be able to act decisively in our lives for our good.

Note that although there is no personification of unclean spirits, the story of Jesus "rebuking the wind and the sea" to calm the storm (Matthew 8:23-27) is a similar demonstration of Jesus' authority over unseen evil spirits which were causing the storm.

### **Not "Faith" or "Belief," But Trust and Loyalty Not "Healing," But Hospitality**

When we pay close attention to the relationships between Jesus and others in the healing stories, we see over and over how it is the other's trust in Jesus that is key to their healing:

- Let it be done to you according to your faith (8:13)
- Why are you afraid, you of little faith? (8:26)
- When Jesus saw their faith ... (9:2)
- Take heart daughter, your faith has made you well (9:22)
- Jesus said to (the two blind men), "Do you believe that I am able to do this?"

In the Bible, illness is a disturbance at two levels. One is the physical symptom: leprosy, fever, blindness; "illness," paralysis, bleeding, etc.

The second is the disturbed social relations. Depending on the symptom, every ill person would experience some degree of social isolation; some degree of being seen as unclean; being seen as someone to keep at a distance.

What is revolutionary about Jesus is not so much his healing, but his hospitality. Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners (Matthew 9:11). No self-respecting Jewish man would associate with these sorts of people. But Jesus does, and his radical hospitality which heals social disruptions, is an aspect of his healing which addresses physical symptoms that cause people to be socially isolated and shunned.

Jesus' radical hospitality draws not only the sick and sinners, but also a Roman army officer and a leader of a synagogue - and Jesus receives them equally. This hospitality is the mercy rather than the ritual and social correctness that Jesus refers to in Matthew 9:13.

This hospitality is illustrated by the story of the two daughters in Matthew 9:18-26.

Notice the parallels between the two stories:

Synagogue Leader: "Come and lay your hand on her, and she will live."  
Bleeding Woman: "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well."

The convictions, "she will live," and "I will be made well," are NOT "faith" or "belief" as the translation in the NRSV has it. They are trust and loyalty, a deep openness to this Holy Man of God, Jesus.

Jesus explicitly says that it is this trust that has made her well. And not only does her physical symptom cease, but in referring to the woman as "daughter," Jesus publicly affirms her loyalty - her bond of kinship - with him.

Notice that when Jesus arrives at the leader's house, he does NOT say to the crowd of mourners, "Stick around and watch me." Nor does he claim that he will actually bring someone back to life from death. Jesus is not in the magic trick business. He is not in the celebrity, fame and glory business. He is in the being the real presence of God business. He sends the crowds away; and he down plays what he is doing because his focus is on this one daughter and her father's plea.

### **Sin, Sickness and Second Guessing**

Because we tend to focus on the action in these stories, we get misled into fruitless conversations about miracles. How did Jesus do that? Did that really happen? Why doesn't that sort of thing happen today? And haven't science and medicine proven that demons and spirits do not cause illness? So whatever happened back then really has no relevance now.

But if we focus on the **inter**-actions - the relationships - we see that what is going on is social healing.

Jesus receives everyone: Roman army officer, synagogue leader; tax collector; bleeding woman; leper. People who would otherwise despise each other; avoid being in the same room with each other; are connected because they connect with Jesus. The healing and forgiveness that Jesus provides restores relationships, restores the broken bonds of community.

The effect of Jesus' life and teachings was that people no longer accepted social brokenness - sin and sickness and second guessing (i.e. lack of trust and loyalty) - as irreversible; as powers that one could do nothing about. Jesus demonstrated that there was power, was authority, that could do - and did - something about these things.

**Aside:** *It is my conviction that modern Western science and medicine arose in the Christian West precisely because of this Christian mindset toward sickness. They are the result of Jesus' life.*

Jesus demonstrated that the power of God's presence was embedded in mercy and not in religious rituals (Matthew 9:13). But one had to stop being hopeless and hapless, stop being isolated; and start connecting and trusting. Because "mercy" is a relationship.

If you stop and really think about, the most difficult "miracle" in today's text is not the raising of the girl from death, nor the healing of the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years. The most difficult healing was including the despised tax collector Matthew back into community. Don't believe it? Try thinking of a person your community despises and invite them to church with you.

David Ewart,  
[www.davidewart.ca](http://www.davidewart.ca)