

If there's one type of entertainer that bores me, it's magicians. Mary likes them but I have no interest in how they cut their assistant in half. I was card tricks and just accept that they work, I never feel the need to know how. I tend to accept what I see, which is just as well or Jesus' miracles may cause me problems. I accept by faith that Jesus can do miracles, and that He is the living God who can do all things through His will and power. But it takes more than just Jesus to bring about a miracle, it also requires the faith of the person or people for whom the miracle is to benefit or heal.

We're looking at three stories from Matthew chapter eight: A leper, a centurion and a woman. They are all different, yet they belong together since none of them belong. They are outsiders and so it's not surprising to find them lumped together here in Matthew's book. Matthew who was a tax collector knew what it was like to be rejected. He also knows what it is like to follow Jesus and be used by God. There are lessons we can learn from these outsiders that are important for the church today. Let's take a look again at these three people.

First, **Matthew 8:1 to 4** - *When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed Him. And behold, a leper came and worshiped Him saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean." Then Jesus put out His hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing; be cleansed." Immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus said to him, "See that you tell no one; but go your way, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."*

The Lepers story – The leper was considered an outsider because of his disease, and the word *leper* literally means *to peel*. Leprosy is a disease that's highly contagious and it eats away at the limbs of the people who have it. Lepers were forced to live in colonies outside of the city, and there's a district in Edinburgh called Liberton which comes from Leperstown. They were to announce their coming by ringing a bell to others could avoid them.

You can imagine what it must have been like for the man Matthew wrote about, he was forced to leave his family and he was shunned by society. The leper had no dignity or self-respect! Under these circumstances, it's amazing that the leper even approached Jesus. No other rabbi would have shown interest in this man but Jesus did. This poor man knew that there was no one other than Jesus one who could make a difference to his life, by healing him. The leper's story has lessons for us. Just like the leper, we need to courageously approach Jesus, because we too have been cursed with a horrible disease; and it's called sin. Sin doesn't cause us to have sores all over our bodies. However, it does cause us to carry around wounds in our conscience and emotions. Sin can give us the feeling of being beaten down. The stuff in our upbringing or background can follow s around and make us feel less than worthy, like an outsider. However, Jesus doesn't look at people that way. While we see people the way they are right now, with their bad habits and sinful characteristics; Jesus sees people for what they could be.

Like the leper; Jesus is the only person who can make us clean! Leprosy was incurable and the only place where a leper could be healed was in the presence of Jesus. The Bible tells us that there is no other name under heaven by which we can be saved. It's only in Jesus Christ that we have the hope of being cleansed from sin. For all of those people who have been beaten down by the lifelong effects of sin, the leper challenges us to courageously approach Jesus, for He's the one who can make a difference. Hebrews 4:16 assures us: *We have a high priest who has been tempted in every way, just as we are; yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

Second: **Matthew 8:5 to 13** - *Now when Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, pleading with Him saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, dreadfully tormented." And Jesus said to him, "I will come and heal him." The centurion answered and said, "Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."*

When Jesus heard this, He marvelled, and said to those who followed, “Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel! And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Then Jesus said to the centurion, “Go your way; and as you have believed, so let it be done for you.” And his servant was healed that same hour.

The Centurion’s Story - The centurion was an outsider because he was a Gentile. Worse than that, he was a commanding officer in the occupying army of the Romans. I would have thought that this man was hated but this was not the case. The Jewish people appreciated him because he helped them build their synagogue. This centurion was accepted in Capernaum. The centurion had a servant that he deeply cared about, who was ill to the point of death. The centurion approached Jesus in desperation and Jesus was willing to help, and so he went to the house of the Roman Centurion to heal the servant. Think of the fuss this would have caused! I can just hear those holier-than-thou Pharisees say something like: *Some Messiah, huh, He is not going to rid Israel of the Romans, look He is helping them.*

Listen again to what the Roman centurion said: *Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man of 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.* The response of Jesus was astonishment at such great faith. There are only two times in the Gospels where it says that Jesus was astonished at something. Here at the faith of the centurion, and in Mark 6:5 at the lack of faith within His home town. The centurion had faith that Jesus was the very person who could help him out. So he laid aside the cultural and spiritual divide, and the centurion laid aside the pride that could divide! And He approached Jesus who was the only one who could make a difference. What lesson do we have in the centurion? *It’s that faith is more than believing. Faith is about asking and receiving!* The Centurion asked and He received.

In chapter 21 of Matthew's gospel, Jesus says these very inspiring words. *If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.* Now, please don't think I'm saying that if your prayer is not answered then it must mean you don't have enough faith, because I don't believe that. However, I think there are times when we pray not really believing that what we've prayed for is going to happen. If we are praying for something that we believe to be in God's will, then we just need to trust Him through faith. We can believe through faith that Jesus Christ is the Son of the Living God. However, we must also be obedient to what the Bible says our faith should cause us to do; which is repent, confess, be baptised and then live a faithful life of obedience to God. To all people who are looking for someone to believe in, the Roman Centurion tells us to place our faith in Jesus Christ.

Third and last: **Matthew 8: 14 to 17** - *Now when Jesus had come into Peter's house, He saw his wife's mother lying sick with a fever. So He touched her hand, and the fever left her. And she arose and served them. When evening had come, they brought to Him many who were demon-possessed. And He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: "He Himself took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses."*

Peter's mother in law – We may be asking why Peter's Mother in Law is considered an outsider? She's an outsider because she's a first century woman! I know that today to call a woman an outsider just because of her gender would be an outrageously politically incorrect thing to say. And I agree that it is senseless to look down on anyone for anything, especially for the gender that our Creator God formed them in. The truth is that Jewish women in Biblical times were looked down upon as second class citizens, and they almost considered property of males.

Women weren't allowed to speak in public to other men, unless their husbands were with them. They weren't allowed to worship in the same area of the synagogue as the men were, and in orthodox synagogues today this is still the case. They were mistreated and disrespected.

We don't know for sure how Jesus knew this woman was ill and it's probable that Peter asked Jesus to help her which He did. It's what happened after that brings us our lesson. She got up and she served Him. I hope you see the pattern I am trying to communicate! Like the leper, we're all plagued with the disease of sin. We all need to courageously approach the throne of grace. Like the centurion, we have to place our faith in the only person who can save us from our sin, and in obedience to God, give our lives to Him.

Like Peter's Mother-In-Law, once we have become obedient unto salvation, we must serve Him. You see, Christianity isn't a give and take relationship. In a give and take relationship we wait for someone to give us something and we take it. Then we give something and they take it. Christianity is a receive and give relationship! We receive forgiveness, hope, purpose, a family of faith and then eternal heaven. We give our lives!

How well do you serve? The leper took a courageous step to the Lord! The centurion took a leap of faith! Peter's mother in law made a step to serve! And there is our right response to God. *Amen!*

(1918 words)