

Matthew 11:20

Introduction

When we read the Gospels, one of the things that we are immediately struck with is the great number of miracles that they record. Obviously, if we want to read the Gospels obediently, then we're going to have to know how to read these miracles stories. What is their point? How are we meant to respond to them? What do they mean for us today? We've already seen many of the different lessons that the miracles of Jesus were meant to teach about the true nature of God's kingdom (Matthew 8-9), but this morning, we're going to see that there was one basic reason and purpose that was common to all of Jesus' miracles. If we don't get this, then we'll never be able to read the miracle stories with any true understanding of their meaning – and we'll never be able to respond to them as God intends.

“Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent.”

This verse shows us something very, very important – something that should already be obvious from the rest of Matthew. The *purpose* of Jesus' mighty works was to produce repentance. The *reason* Jesus performed all of His mighty works was to lead people to repentance. Now why is this so profound? Well, if you think about it, it's pretty obvious! There are a whole lot of *other* reasons that a person might perform mighty works (if he had such powers). Think about Matthew chapters 8-9. These chapters are a collection of miracle stories and yet there is no mention in these stories of repentance. Jesus heals a leper. Jesus heals a Centurion's servant who was paralyzed and suffering terribly. Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law of her fever. Jesus calmed a storm and saved His disciples from drowning. Jesus healed two men who were tormented and oppressed by demons. Jesus healed a lame man. Jesus raised a girl from the dead and healed a woman of her chronic hemorrhaging. Jesus healed two blind men. Jesus healed a demon-oppressed man who was mute. Why did Jesus do these things? Why did Jesus perform these mighty works? What was the point? Well, we could say that the point was to show love and compassion, and that would be true.

- ✓ Matthew 14:14 – When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick.
- ✓ Matthew 20:34 – And Jesus in pity touched their eyes, and immediately they recovered their sight and followed him.

But if we stopped with love and compassion, then we would just have feel good stories about an amazing man who went around promoting health and prosperity. So we have to dig deeper. Why did Jesus perform His mighty works – His miracles of healing? We could say that the point was to prove to the people that He was the Messiah and the Son of God (proof of identity), and this would also be true. When John the Baptist wanted to know if Jesus was the expected one, Jesus referred him to the evidence of His mighty deeds (Mat. 11:2-6).

- ✓ John 20:30-31 – Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

But if we stopped with proof of identity, there would be no way to distinguish (tell apart) the miracles of Jesus from the miracles of the false Christ's.

- ✓ Matthew 24:24 – For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.

So why are the mighty works of Jesus to be believed any more than the mighty works of any other man? This is not just an academic question! Most often, someone who makes claims to miraculous powers is just trying to draw attention to himself – so that as long as he gets the admiration and wonder of the crowds, he's happy and nothing else matters.

- ✓ Acts 8:9-11 – There was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic [sorcery] in the city and *amazed* the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was *somebody great*. They all *paid attention* to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, “This man is the power of God that is called Great.” And they *paid attention to him* because for a long time he had *amazed* them with his magic [sorcery].

Simon performed his sorcery simply to be praised and admired and paid attention to. Even if he did claim to heal a sick person, the point was still his own advancement. We can assume the same thing about the great signs and wonders of the false Christ's.

- ✓ Revelation 13:11-13 – Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth... It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed. It performs *great signs*, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people, and by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that was wounded by the sword and yet lived.

Once again, the reason for these great signs is to produce amazement, wonder, trembling, and bowing down – but that's about it. The beast doesn't care *who* praises him, just so long as they do. The beast *must* have the worship of the people – regardless of what kind of people they may be. And it's with this goal that he performs great signs that are meant to rival even the works of Jesus. So why should the mighty works of Jesus be more convincing to us than the great signs of the beast? Just because Jesus is “nicer”? We know that Jesus received lots of admiration and praises from the crowds.

- ✓ Matthew 4:23-25 – And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

If Jesus had wanted to, He could easily have had the people's "worship" by using His miraculous powers to give the people what *they* wanted.

- ✓ John 6:14-15 – When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!" ... they were about to come and take him by force to make him king....

But here is the *most* amazing thing: When Jesus performed His mighty works, His point was *not at all* to gain the praise and the acclaim of men. Jesus did many impressive things, but the point was not to gain our worship by impressing. Jesus did many kind things, but the point was not to gain our adoration by being kind. Why not? Because while Jesus is the only one who is worthy of our adoration and worship, He doesn't *need* our adoration and worship.

- ✓ John 5:41 – I do not receive glory from people.

That is to say: "I do not receive the carnal and worldly praises of men". Jesus did not use His power to wow and amaze, or to bribe, or coerce, or deceptively manipulate people to adore and worship Him. Otherwise, Jesus never would have instructed people to keep His mighty works a secret. Jesus wanted nothing to do with the people's empty praises and misguided amazement.

- ✓ John 6:14-15 – When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!" Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

When the hardened and unbelieving Pharisees asked for a sign from Jesus, Jesus refused to give them one (Mat. 12:38-39). Simon *needed* the people's admiration – from the greatest to the least. The false Christ's aren't concerned who follows them, just so long as someone does. The beast *must have* the worship of all people. But not Jesus. Jesus didn't perform miracles so that the whole world would worship Him just like they could worship a false Christ who also performed great signs and wonders. So if Jesus doesn't need our adoration and worship, then why did He perform His mighty works? The *point* of Jesus' mighty works was to produce *repentance*. How should we explain this? For most of the people of Jesus' day (and of our day), it was hard to see the *connection* between mighty works of healing and calls to repentance. On the one hand, Jesus made people feel better. On the other hand, Jesus *preached* repentance. So how can we say that the *reason* for Jesus' miracles of *healing* was to exhort and call people to *repentance* – *same* as His preaching. Where's the connection (between repentance and miracles of healing)? Well, according to Jesus, His mighty works were just public manifestations of *God's rule and reign*. But if someone *really* believed *this*, then the obvious question he's going to be asking himself is where does he stand with God (cf. Morris). The mighty works of Jesus *should* have provoked the people to a whole lot of painful soul-searching. There was one purpose common to *all* of Jesus' miracles. They were all intended to bring people to an awareness of their sinful unworthiness in light of God's righteous and merciful rule.

- ✓ Luke 5:4-8 – [Jesus] said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your

word I will let down the nets.” And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a **sinful** man, O Lord.”

Peter wasn’t just amazed at an impressive miracle. Peter wasn’t just touched by a compassionate miracle. Peter saw in the miraculous catch of fish evidence of *God’s righteous and merciful rule* in the person of the promised Messiah, and so the miraculous catch of fish drove him not just to amazement or to gratitude, but rather to a fearful confession of his own sinfulness and unworthiness. Is this what happens to us when we read the accounts of Jesus’ miracles? It is *here* that we see how the mighty works of Jesus are *not* the mighty works of any other man. Contrary to Simon Magus, and the false Christ’s, and the beast of Revelation 13 (and *us* in our native sinful humanity), Jesus doesn’t **need** the worship and adoration of anyone, and He doesn’t **want** the worship and adoration of any but the repentant. That’s why the primary purpose of His mighty works was to cause repentance.

- ✓ **John 6:26** – Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs [not because you saw the true *meaning* of my miracles], but because you ate your fill of the loaves [you were *amazed* and *happy*].

We know from the Bible that mighty works are not always a sign of truth. In themselves, mighty works are no proof at all that something is the truth. But if we understand that the reason for Jesus’ mighty works was to bring people to repentance, then those mighty works become irrefutable proof of the truth. But the only ones who actually see this truth are those who are compelled to respond to Jesus’ miracles as Peter did: “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”

Conclusion

Why did Jesus denounce the cities where most of His mighty works had been done? Because they did not repent. Because they failed to see the glaring difference between the mighty works of Jesus and the mighty works of any other man. Why did Jesus denounce the cities where most of His mighty works had been done? Jesus answers:

- ✓ **Matthew 11:21** – Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.

Wearing nothing but rough sackcloth, people would throw ashes on their heads (2 Sam. 13:19), sit in ashes (Jon. 3:6), lay in ashes (Esth. 4:3), and even roll in ashes (Jer. 6:23), and they did this to express grief and sorrow over their wretchedness (cf. Morris and Calvin). And it’s this heart attitude of repentance that the mighty works of Jesus are always meant to produce in us – not so that the last word is “depart from me Lord”, but so that we might learn the desperate importance of *trusting* in Jesus and living our lives for Him.

So, if the stories of Jesus' miracles don't convict us of our sinfulness and unworthiness in light of God's righteous and merciful rule, then we are not yet reading them rightly. If the stories of Jesus' miracles don't reorient our entire life so that it is no longer sin and self, but rather God's righteous and merciful rule that is the focus of all our desires, thoughts, words, and actions, then we are not yet reading them rightly. We need to read the miracle stories in Matthew 8-9 and learn to respond like Peter did after the miraculous catch of fish – and then get up out of the ashes and pursue the righteous and merciful rule of God in our lives with a totally renewed perspective and zeal.

There is one other lesson that we should learn from all of this. What can we learn from the fact that the entire point and goal of all Jesus' mighty works was repentance? Well, I think we can conclude from this that repentance and forgiveness of sins is a far bigger deal than any other miracle that Jesus ever performed (not counting His own resurrection)! Think about the healing ministries of many of today's false prophets. They are rarely, if ever connected with the genuine message of biblical repentance. We must remember that even if these healings were verified, this, in itself, would prove nothing at all – nothing more than the great signs and wonders of false Christ's and the beast himself. We must not be led into false doctrine (no matter how subtle it might be) even should someone come back from the dead. But the problem is that to many people, a miraculous work of healing is more impressive and awe-inspiring than the message of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Praise God it is true that one day "He will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore" (Rev. 21:4). It is true that this is what gives meaning to the church's present work of meeting people's physical needs. But the miracle of complete and final healing will only come with the new heavens and the new earth. When Jesus was here on earth, He did not heal every single person who had faith – though He could have. The *main* point and the most *amazing* miracle, even to all eternity, will *not* be any miracle of healing the sick, or calming the storm, or even raising the dead, but the miracle of true repentance and full forgiveness of sins.

It just so happens that Jesus is the *only person* whose mighty works are *meant* to lead us to repentance. When we understand this, we can be assured of two things: We'll never be deceived by the great signs and wonders of any false teacher who claims to speak for God (not even if someone should rise from the dead). And we'll finally be able to read the miracle stories in the Gospels for all their worth – in light of their true power and beauty.

Teaching our Children

Discussion starter: Other people besides Jesus may perform great miracles (See Matthew 24:24, Acts 8:9-11, & Revelation 13:11-13 on page 2). Why should we believe the mighty works of Jesus and not the mighty works of someone else?

Q. What do Simon Magus, and the false christs, and the beast all *want* and what do they all *have* to have from *all* people (what are they desperate for)?

A. These miracle workers are all desperate for the attention, and the admiration, and the praises, and even the worship of men.

Q. How is Jesus completely different from these miracle workers?

A. Jesus does not *need* the adoration and worship of men! (**See section on page 3 beginning with John 5:41 and ending with the reference to Mat. 12:38-39 and discuss**)
Jesus cares about *the hearts* of those who praise Him (**See John 6:26 on page 4**)

Q. If Jesus doesn't need our adoration and worship, then why did He perform His mighty works?

A. The main reason for Jesus' mighty works was to cause people to repent of their sin (See Matthew 11:21 on page 4).
(CONTRAST this with other miracle workers!)

Q. How would Jesus' mighty works (healing, raising the dead, calming storms) cause people to repent?

A. Jesus said that His mighty works were signs of God's righteous rule. If people really believed this, then every miracle that Jesus performed would only make them more aware of how sinful and unworthy they were (they couldn't *just* be amazed and grateful). (**READ Luke 5:4-8 on pages 3-4**)

✓ Imagine that you lived in Jesus' day and you had heard Jesus preach about God's righteous rule.

✓ Then imagine that you had just witnessed one of Jesus' mighty works (ex. healing a leper).

✓ Now try to imagine responding to this miracle by putting on sackcloth and rolling in ashes.

✓ It is this attitude of repentance and unworthiness that we should still have today when we read in the Bible about the mighty works of Jesus.

✓ The mighty works of Jesus should lead us to make God's wonderful rule the main focus of our entire life.

✓ Encourage your children to read about the mighty works of Jesus in Matthew 8-9.

Q. Do mighty works (miracles) always prove that a person's teaching is true?

A. NO! We should not be deceived by any miracle (even if someone is raised from the dead!), because ***repentance and the forgiveness*** of sins are even ***more amazing*** than someone being raised from the dead!

And Jesus is the only person whose mighty works are meant to lead us to repentance!