

**Action v. Talk: When Words are Just Not Enough.  
An Intertexture Analysis of the Healing of the Leper in Matthew 8:1-4.**

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*I have always thought the actions of men the best interpreters of their thoughts.*  
--John Locke<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

Sometimes actions really are louder than words. The words of Locke are later echoed by Benjamin Franklin who stated that “Well done is better than well said”. Actions, and the steps that comprise those actions, are more important than what a leader plans to do (or wishes to do, or thought they did). Actions always trump even the most eloquent of words. The story of the leper in Matthew 8:1-4 provides an intriguing example of this, and gives leaders a concise example where actions do speak louder than words.

Matthew 8 and 9 are nicknamed the “Miracle Chapters” where Matthew lists ten miracles that Jesus performed. This list immediately follows the “Sermon on the Mount” in Matthew 5-7 and verses 1-4 serve as an introduction to the second section of Matthew.<sup>2</sup> The order of the list is important but scholars have debated the meaning of its order for many years. No consensus has been agreed upon, but it is interesting to note that the healing of the leper is the first miracle listed after Jesus’ famous sermon.<sup>3</sup>

As Kingsbury describes, the story is broken up into 4 distinct parts:<sup>4</sup>

1. Verse 1 - The introduction.
2. Verse 2 – The exposition.
3. Verse 3 – The miraculous deed.
4. Verse 4 – The conclusion.

This passage separates the individual parts of the story very succinctly. I will analyze each part in detail and will provide an inter-textural analysis of this passage, and the parallel passages in Mark 1:40-45 and Luke 5:12-14 as part of a socio-rhetorical approach to unraveling the meaning in this passage.<sup>5</sup> I will integrate an application of leadership theory throughout this paper and propose a number of ideas that we can learn from this passage about leadership.

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<sup>1</sup> Locke, 1690

<sup>2</sup> De Silva, 2004, p.239

<sup>3</sup> As Kingsbury (1977), Kingsbury (1978) and Thompson (1971) describe.

<sup>4</sup> Kingsbury, 1977, p.344

<sup>5</sup> A socio-rhetorical approach to exploring scripture is outlined by Robbins (1996).

## Introduction – Verse 1

Matthew places the story of the leper first in the list of miracles, and begins to illustrate the dualistic actions of Jesus' life on earth: teaching and healing.<sup>6</sup> The placement of this miracle directly after Jesus' sermon also indicates that it is an important illustration of the words Jesus had just spoken. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all place this miracle very early on in Jesus' ministry.

Jesus left the mountain with “great crowds” following Him. The most obvious sign that someone is a leader is that people follow that person. Jesus had followers, and thus was a leader. People chose to follow Him without coercion or manipulation. He did not need to demand subordination, but rather, followers came to Him without asking; a sign of true followership.<sup>7</sup>

Leadership theory would have much to say about why people followed Jesus. Trait leadership theory, for example, would argue that Jesus had certain traits that caused people to follow Him. This is definitely true with Jesus, but does not fully explain everything about His leadership.<sup>8</sup> A situational leadership approach would state that Jesus adapted His approach to specific situations, and that adaptation may have been part of the reason people followed Him.<sup>9</sup> Regardless of why they did it, great crowds followed Jesus, and they deemed Jesus to be their leader.

## Exposition –Verse 2

Jesus exhibited compassion by conversing with the leper. Luke indicates that Jesus was “moved with pity”. We do not know the full extent of the leper's disease, or if it was really leprosy as we know it today.<sup>10</sup> Regardless, the short conversation was culturally taboo. It was a passive violation of Levitical law that indicates a leper shall wear torn clothes, be disheveled, cry out “unclean, unclean” when anyone approaches him, and must live outside the city.<sup>11</sup> Jesus did not balk at the violation of Mosaic Law by the leper, but rather, recontextualized the law into the new paradigm He was formulating.

The leper had no doubts about the power of Jesus, but did doubt Jesus' willingness to heal him, as indicated by his comment “if you choose.” This comment was reiterated in all three passages exactly as written. This is also a recitation of the “Lord's Prayer” and Jesus' template for prayer that states, “Your will be done.”<sup>12</sup> This

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<sup>6</sup> Kingsbury, 1977

<sup>7</sup> Chaleff, 2003, p.15

<sup>8</sup> For example, Mays (2003) proposes that Jesus had ten core leadership traits. Trait theory is further described in Northouse (1997, chapter 2).

<sup>9</sup> Situational leadership is further described in Northouse (1997, chapter 5). The situational leadership model was proposed by Blanchard, Zigarmi & Zigarmi (1985).

<sup>10</sup> Kee, 1983, p.29

<sup>11</sup> Leviticus 13.45-46

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 6:9-13

showcases the leper's knowledge that he could not force Jesus to do anything, and he approached Jesus with a humble attitude. A person can ask God to do something, but the ultimate decision to act is up to God.<sup>13</sup>

### **Miraculous Deed – Verse 3**

In continuing with Jesus' revolutionary approach to Mosaic law, Jesus then reached out and touched the leper. Both Luke and Mark indicate that Jesus touched the leper as well. Levitical law in Leviticus 13 and 14 indicates that, aside from touching a dead body, this was the single most unclean action Jesus could have done as a Jew.<sup>14</sup> Rabbinic rules also indicated that people had to stay at least six feet away from a leper at all times, and up to 100 feet away if a person was downwind from a leper on a windy day.<sup>15</sup> The crowds must have been shocked to see such a popular teacher openly "violate" the Mosaic Law. The Pharisees, in enforcing the rigidity of Levitical law, did what they thought best...but missed the heart of the law. Leaders may have to be rigid at times, but must also accommodate the hearts of the humans they work with.<sup>16</sup>

Jesus' touch was also symbolic of a King exercising power.<sup>17</sup> The Jews believed that a miracle worker's touch could beget harm as well as healing.<sup>18</sup> The crowds would not have touched the leper because they thought the leper might infect them. Jesus' simple gesture of affection must have shocked the leper, while exhibiting extreme confidence by Jesus. The leper had probably not been voluntarily touched by a non-leprous person since he contracted leprosy. Jesus knew His strengths, and was unfazed by the possibility of infection. He openly demonstrated that His power imparted healing, and Matthew further illustrated His power through the other nine miracles listed in chapters 8-9.

Jesus then chose to rephrase the leper's words when He replied, "I do choose", and this must have been another boost to the leper's confidence. It was important enough that Mark, Luke and Matthew all documented Jesus' response. Jesus then stated, "Be made clean", and the leper was healed immediately. This was a dangerous statement to make, because only the priest could pronounce a leper clean. Jesus knew that a cooperative conversation would benefit the leper's confidence along with the healing.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Kretzmann, p. 42

<sup>14</sup> Leavell, 1962; Shepard, 1939, p. 136

<sup>15</sup> Shepard, 1939, p. 136

<sup>16</sup> As Pfeffer (1998) describes in his depiction of a humane approach to leadership.

<sup>17</sup> See Exodus 7:5, 14:21, 15:6 and 1 Kings 8:42

<sup>18</sup> Kingsbury, 1977

<sup>19</sup> The cooperative conversation principle is described by Grice (1975, p. 44-46)

## Conclusion – Verse 4

Jesus then told the leper to “say nothing to anyone” and adhere to the Law of Moses regarding cleanliness.<sup>20</sup> Why would Jesus care whether the leper told anyone? Jesus knew that humans love secrets and love telling “secret” messages. The command to secrecy probably intrigued people (it still intrigues us today). The Proverb “Let another praise you, and not your own mouth—a stranger, and not your own lips”<sup>21</sup> applies here. Jesus knew that the secret would be let out, and also knew that other people would promote Him better than He could Himself. Mark and Luke indicate that word about Jesus’ spread even faster after this miracle.<sup>22</sup>

Kingsbury notes that the command to say nothing is the obverse of the commands “go”, “show yourself” and “offer the gift” later in verse 4. The commands are connected by the word “but” which indicates a correlation between the commands.<sup>23</sup> Hostetler argues that the act was merely a further proclamation of the power of God.<sup>24</sup> Shepard argues that Jesus intended to forestall inevitable crowds coming to Him by commanding the leper to spend time becoming ceremoniously clean.<sup>25</sup> This may be true, but it seems more likely that Jesus has given us insight into the first viral marketing campaign listed in history.

Jesus chose to induce change gradually. He already declared the man clean, but Jesus also knew that people were still learning about His own Messianic power. He knew that change takes time, and that the revolution would evolve throughout the time He spent on earth. As leaders, we often want to change everything now. Ken Blanchard wrote about the “Rule of 1%” where a fictional character vows to change things one percent each week of work. Over time, drastic changes can occur almost without anyone knowing that change is occurring.<sup>26</sup> Most change efforts eventually fail, and one reason for their failure is that leaders attempt to change too much at once.<sup>27</sup> Jesus chose to make a revolutionary action by healing the leper but then ensured the change was not too confounding by ensuring the leper performed the rituals. In doing so, his fame spread around the nation.

## Summary of Leadership Application

In summary, there are four specific leadership applications we can obtain from an inter-textual analysis of this passage. These include:

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<sup>20</sup> Leviticus 13 & 14

<sup>21</sup> Proverbs 27:2

<sup>22</sup> Luke 5:15 & Mark 1:45. Matthew does not note this in his description of the healing.

<sup>23</sup> Kingsbury, 1977

<sup>24</sup> Hostetler, 1988, p.67

<sup>25</sup> Shepard, 1939

<sup>26</sup> Blanchard, 1993.

<sup>27</sup> Kotter, 1996, p.11

1. A leader's actions alone should give people the opportunity to brag about him or her. Actions, not just words, started to spread news of the power of Jesus across Israel like a wildfire consuming a forest.
2. Active listening skills are an integral part of our communication with the people we lead. Even Jesus took the time to listen to the lowliest people around him and made them feel important by actively listening to them.
3. Leaders do not play favourites. Jesus spent time with all types of people, regardless of the cultural stigma around them.
4. Successful change efforts start slowly. Even Jesus did not change everything at once. He chose to repeat His message and illustrate it through the numerous miracles he performed.

### **Conclusion**

Jesus is the epitome of a leader, and even the minutest details of his life on earth can give us incredible nuggets of insight into his leadership. In this case, the healing of the leper helps us learn that what a leader does is much more important than what he or she verbalizes. Jesus backed up his words with action. He healed people. He performed miracles. He did not have to promote Himself, but let His actions do the talking. In this story, well done, was clearly more effective than well said.

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