

Matthew 9:1 – 13

Mt.9:1 Getting into a boat, Jesus crossed over the sea and came to his own city. ² And they brought to him a paralytic lying on a bed. Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralytic, ‘Take courage, son; your sins are forgiven.’ ³ And some of the scribes said to themselves, ‘This fellow blasphemes.’ ⁴ And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, ‘Why are you thinking evil in your hearts? ⁵ Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, and walk?’ ⁶ But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’ – then he said to the paralytic, ‘Get up, pick up your bed and go home.’ ⁷ And he got up and went home. ⁸ But when the crowds saw this, they were awestruck, and glorified God, who had given such authority to men.

⁹ As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man called Matthew, sitting in the tax collector’s booth; and he said to him, ‘Follow me!’ And he got up and followed him. ¹⁰ Then it happened that as Jesus was reclining at the table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, ‘Why is your teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?’ ¹² But when Jesus heard this, he said, ‘It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire compassion, and not sacrifice,’ for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.’

Historical and Cultural Background

- *Scribes and Pharisees:* In this section, a division between people begins for the first time in Matthew’s story. It will continue to grow. The division involves the ‘scribes’ (9:3), who are legal experts of the Mosaic Law, and ‘Pharisees’ (9:11), who were another faction within Israel linked to the scribes; they were a public pressure group, advocating for heightened observance of Jewish traditions. Let’s understand their take on Jesus. Often when you’re part of a beleaguered minority in a larger culture not your own, you feel spiteful towards people who are ‘sell-outs.’ Matthew is just such a sell-out.
- *Tax Collectors:* The tax collector Matthew makes money by skimming off the top of his own Jewish countrymen. He works for the Roman imperial government which oppresses Israel. His salary is what he is able to charge above what the Romans officially taxed; this was the Roman way of enticing betrayers from among their conquered peoples. Other Jews regarded him as a betrayer of their people, their God, and their cause.

Leader's Notes

- In the first section (9:1 – 8), Jesus establishes his authority and ability to forgive sin. In the second section (9:9 – 13), Jesus extends his forgiveness in shocking ways, with shocking implications.

Questions: The Paralytic

1. Describe the scene: Where is Jesus sitting and teaching? Who else is there?
2. Angle: Focus on the paralytic and his friends. What are they hoping for?
 - a. What might the paralyzed man's life have been like? In what ways has this man been defined by his affliction?
 - b. Which IS easier to say? 'Your sins are forgiven?' Or, 'Arise and walk'? Connect back to what this guy was expecting, and what makes it so surprising: Forgiveness was supposed to be announced at the Temple in Jerusalem, where the presence of God was. But now, Jesus declares it, and they are nowhere near the Temple.
3. If God said, 'You're forgiven,' how would you know that it's for real? Why would that be important? What if God were not to forgive you?
4. Angle: Focus on the scribes and Pharisees
 - a. A Jewish person in that day would have to go to the Temple, where God's presence was, to get healed.
 - b. Why would the Pharisees and scribes not want Jesus to be able to forgive sins?
 - c. If your friend Pat hurt you, or did something that really bothered you, of course you can forgive Pat's action. But what if someone else – a third party who is seemingly unrelated – says to Pat, 'I forgive you?' How outrageous would that be?
 - d. What does it mean for Jesus to take that power onto himself?
 - e. How many claims to God's authority is Jesus making?
 - f. How do you feel about Jesus' taking authority in this way?

Questions: Matthew the Tax Collector

1. Why would the Pharisees not want to forgive Matthew the tax collector?
2. How is Matthew 'stuck' in his situation? In what ways might we feel 'stuck' in our situation, or ourselves? Maybe we've gotten into a bad situation because of a choice we've made...
3. Note the background point: Matthew makes money by skimming off the top of his own Jewish countrymen. He works for the government that oppresses Israel. How might Matthew feel about his life?
4. Often when you're a beleaguered minority in a majority culture that is not your own, you feel spiteful towards people who are "sell-outs." The Pharisees would have demanded that they withhold 'forgiveness' from Matthew, but Jesus forgives him. How would this make them feel?
5. Imagine a person deeply wronging and betraying you. Then imagine your brother (imagine having a brother if you don't) saying to this person, 'I forgive you for that.' Wouldn't you be a bit upset? Doesn't forgiveness rest with you, the hurt party? What right does a third party have to come up and forgive someone who has done you wrong? That's how many Jews would have felt about Jesus forgiving 'tax collectors and sinners.' Who is he? How can he say this?
6. That's the puzzle. How could Jesus offer forgiveness to Matthew and his tax collector buddies? How is it his prerogative in the first place? After all, Jesus wasn't the only person they offended. They offended many, many Jews.
7. Another line of reasoning would say that Jesus should make Matthew and the tax collectors apologize to other Jews (as in Islam). Forgiveness should have been their privilege, right? Wrong: Now the scribes and Pharisees have to forgive Matthew, simply because Jesus did. He establishes his ability to forgive sin in 9:1 – 8, and then demonstrates it with Matthew and other tax collectors in 9:9 – 13.
8. Do you ask this question, too? How can anyone, even God Himself, forgive people if He is a spectator to the conflicts happening between human beings? Unless God is not just a spectator...
9. STATE: By claiming to forgive people's sins, Jesus is claiming that he is just as wounded and offended than you are – and more so – when people hurt you. How can this be?
 - a. Once, when my son was an infant, my wife put him on the bed and turned to fold clothes. When she wasn't looking, he rolled off the bed and fell to the floor. I was really upset with my wife, and had trouble speaking to her for two days. Even though she hadn't done anything wrong to me personally, she had done something wrong to our son. As I forgave her, I had a small insight into why God forgives us even though we sin against each other: He is personally invested as our

heavenly Father in each one of us. An offense against a person isn't just an offense against that person. It's an offense against God.

- b. Jesus' claim to forgive sin is a window into the nature of reality. Behind it lie other massive claims.
- c. Does Jesus treasure all human beings as his very own?
- d. Is he invested in all relationships?
- e. Does he determine all moral reality?
- f. Does he define all spiritual truth?
- g. If Jesus forgives Matthew the tax collector and welcomes him into the family of God, then so must the other Jews. If Jesus forgives the person who hurts us and welcomes that person into the family of God, then so must we. Ultimately, forgiveness is not ours to give. We can only *reflect* the forgiveness Jesus offers, and retain it in our own hearts.
- h. Read this illustration: During World War II, on February 28, 1944, Corrie Ten Boom and her sister Betsie were arrested for housing Jews in their home in Holland. They were taken eventually to Ravensbrück, a prison camp in Germany where they were treated horribly. Corrie watched labor camp guards strike Betsie for being too weak to shovel. Betsie later died. Corrie was discharged in 1945, and she began to share all over Holland, Europe, and the United States what God had done in those dark days. Then, she went to Germany, and this is what she writes in *The Hiding Place*:

'It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbrück. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there--the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie's pain-blانched face.

He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. 'How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein,' he said. 'To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!'

His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people in Bloemendaal the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.

I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness.

As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.

10. In human terms, 'forgiveness' is a change in the mind of the one doing the forgiving. In Jesus' terms, 'forgiveness' is a change of the person who is forgiven. How do we see that here?
 - a. It's like this: If you graduate with lots of student loan debt, there are two ways you can be forgiven of that debt. The first option is if someone else comes along and pays your debt for you. You would be forgiven in that sense. And sometimes Scripture uses idioms like debt-payment (e.g. Mt.18:19 – 34; Lk.7:36 – 50), but in a very fictitious sense to make it clear that that's not actually what's going on. The second option is if you participate in a criminal investigation into your alma mater, which was a lot more sinister than you realized. Someone else is coming to take it over. To protect you, the legitimate government changes your identity in a witness protection program. So the old 'you' [fill in your name here] wouldn't exist anymore. You would be given a new identity. The debts you racked up in your old identity wouldn't even be valid anymore because the old [your name here] wouldn't exist! That is what Scripture is talking about when we come 'into Christ' to receive forgiveness (e.g. Eph.1:1 – 14; Col.1:13 – 14). We participate in God's changing of our identity in Jesus as we join Jesus' side and tell the truth about what regime we were under before.

- b. Notice: As soon as Matthew comes to Jesus, Jesus turns him into an evangelist (someone who shares this Jesus). How do we see this in the passage? What does this mean for us? Jesus doesn't rip us out of the relationships we already have. He sends us back into our relationships as a new person, with him.
 - c. How does this passage make you feel? Give you hope? Or challenge you?
11. APPLICATION: Let's grow in forgiveness. Think of someone who hurt you. Recognize that Jesus has forgiven them, in order to help them rise up from their sin.
- a. Spiritual conversation with a non-Christians. Ask someone, 'What would it be like if someone came along and said, 'I forgive you for what you did to that other person'?'
 - b. (optional) Read the quote by C.S. Lewis:

'What are we to make of Jesus Christ?... On the one hand you have got the almost generally admitted depth and sanity of His moral teaching, which is not very seriously questioned, even by those who are opposed to Christianity... The other phenomenon is the quite appalling nature of this Man's theological remarks... On the one side clear, definite moral teaching. On the other, claims which, if not true, are those of a megalomaniac, compared with whom Hitler was the most sane and humble of men. There is no halfway house and there is no parallel in other religions. If you had gone to Buddha and asked him, 'Are you the son of Brahma?' he would have said, 'My son, you are still in the vale of illusion.' If you had gone to Socrates and asked, 'Are you Zeus?' he would have laughed at you. If you had gone to Mohammed and asked, 'Are you Allah?' he would first have rent his clothes and then cut your head off. If you had asked Confucius, 'Are you Heaven?' I think he would have probably replied, 'Remarks which are not in accordance with nature are in bad taste.' The idea of a great moral teacher saying what Christ said is out of the question. In my opinion, the only person who can say that sort of thing is either God or a complete lunatic suffering from that form of delusion which undermines the whole mind of man... We may note in passing that He was never regarded as a mere moral teacher. He did not produce that effect on any of the people who actually met Him. He produced mainly three effects--Hatred--Terror--Adoration. There was no trace of people expressing mild approval.' (C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*)