

# The Authority to Forgive Sins

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Please open your Bible to the book of Matthew 9, or turn to page \_\_\_\_ in the Bible under the chair in front of you. As we continue our walk through this book of the Bible, we have been seeing Jesus in action – healing people, casting out demons, and calming the storm. Matthew is unfolding for us who Jesus is and why He came.

And that's what we'll see again this morning. Matthew presents us with three conflicts or questions faced by Jesus. He'll be confronted by the scribes when He heals a paralytic man, the Pharisees when he feasts with tax collectors, and then by the disciples of John with a question about fasting. It's the beginning of this tension that will continue to build until it leads to the crucifixion of Jesus at the climax of the gospel.

And through these stories, Matthew wants to influence our lives. He writes these things with a purpose, not just to give us information. Jesus wants to challenge us to wrestle with who He is and why He has come. So let's read what the Spirit has for us today...

Read **Matthew 9:1-17**

I want you to imagine a scenario with me...imagine that you go out of town for a week, just before the hottest week of the year so far. And while you're gone, unbeknownst to you, your AC unit stops working. It's not able to keep your house cool. It's a balmy 85 degrees inside and humid and muggy.

But while you're gone, someone learns of this broken AC unit, and they come by and make the necessary repairs. The unit is fixed and better than it was before.

Well, that was my story last week. We had been gone and the AC in the church parsonage was broken and unable to keep the house cool. But before our family returned, it was fixed, just in time for the hottest week of the year.

That's a cool story. And a true one. I tell you that because I want to say thanks to our trustees and to Aaron Boughton for his work. But now I want you to imagine a slightly different scenario. This time, imagine that it's not just the AC that went out, it's something deeper. It's a crack in the foundation.

You go away on a trip and you come home to find that there's a long, horizontal crack in the foundation of your home. In one of my old jobs, I was trained to recognize that it's the long horizontal cracks that you really need to worry about, not as much the vertical ones.

So you arrive home and discover this problem. And so you do, what I would do, and you go online to see if there's any way that you can fix it yourself. Any maybe some guy on YouTube tells you that there's a way to put some mortar in it or try to brace it or something, so you try those things.

But you know, that something else is needed. So you finally call in a specialist, and he comes and see your foundation cracks, and he tells you, "I'll take care of it." And you think, "Great! He'll do a much better job of filling in the crack or reinforcing the wall or whatever." That's what you think needs to happen.

But the next morning, he pulls up with a bunch of heavy equipment. There's excavators and bobcats and a whole crew of workers who begin to dig out around the foundation of your home. And so you go to the specialist and you learn that he's not just going to fill in some crack, he's going to re-do the whole foundation of your home. And he tells you – that's what I said I would do. I told you "I'd take care of it, and that's what I'm doing. You don't need a minor fix, you need a major change."

And he'd be right, of course. Sometimes, what we think we need isn't really what we need. In this imagined scenario, you may have thought you needed just a simple repair, something to get you by. But what you really needed was a new foundation.

That's the kind of situation that we find here in Matthew 9. This paralytic man is brought to Jesus for healing, but instead, Jesus sees that He needs something else, something much deeper. He needs a new foundation. He needs to have his sins forgiven.

This idea that our sins need to be forgiven is not a common one in our world today. A lot of people don't think of themselves as sinners.

Sin involves breaking God's commands. It means missing the mark of holiness and righteousness. It means going beyond what is good and right and at the same time, falling short of the target. Sin includes the harsh words we say to one another, the hatred we often hold in our hearts, the grumbling and complaining we do, the clamoring for more money or possessions, the ignoring of the needs of others, the lying to ourselves and one another, the lust and objectifying of people who bear God's image, the selfishness and pride which thinks we're really better than others and deserve only praise and approval. It's all of those things and more. It's failing to obey the good commands of God.

But many people don't think that they're really offended God in that way. So the forgiveness of sins is not something that they think they need.

But I want to suggest that this need for forgiveness remains in every human heart, even if the world doesn't use those words. How many people have you known who feel guilt over mistakes they've made in their past? How common is it for people to wrestle with shame and despair because they feel like they're not good enough or not worth loving? People ask in all kinds of ways, "How can I be free from the pain and mistakes of my past?" Our world is obsessed with trying to find ways to deal with the brokenness in our world and in our own souls. And maybe that's you this morning.

I want to suggest to you that these questions are all just different expressions of this fundamental need shared by all humanity – the need for someone who is able to forgive me. Who can forgive my sins? How can I really be made new when I have made so many mistakes?

You see, people spend so much effort trying to repair cracks in their foundations, when what they need is total replacement. Our most fundamental need is to be forgiven and made new. And that's what this passage shows us today.

Here's what I believe is the Main Idea this morning:

***Jesus has the authority to forgive sins.***

This is what Matthew wants us to see. It was a critical part of Jesus's ministry and preaching – that He offers forgiveness for sinners. That's His purpose in coming to earth in a human body. It's at the center of His purpose.

We see this clearly in the surprising interaction that Jesus has with this paralytic man. It may be familiar to you, but Matthew greatly shortens the story which is also told by Mark and Luke. They talk about how the crowd around Jesus was so great that no one could get near him. And this paralytic man can't walk on his own through the crowd, so his friends cut a hole in the roof and lower him down through it on a mat.

But Matthew doesn't tell us any of that. He wants to simply highlight the authority of Jesus to forgive sins. And that's surprising because this man's disability would have seemed like the biggest issue in his life. It probably felt like his biggest problem. Maybe he felt like he deserved this. It's somehow my fault and I'm being punished by God.

And now these friends of his have worked hard to get him to Jesus, this man who has been doing miracles and healing people. And when's he's finally there, Jesus says...

**Matthew 9:2**

And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven."

We're not told exactly what this man's response was – but I have to guess that it would have been at least confusion if not disappointment or even anger. Wait...what? My sins are forgiven? What about my legs that need healing?!?

I'm sure some of you have had similar thoughts about the pains and struggles in your life. God, why haven't you done something about this issue? Doesn't my suffering matter to you?

And Jesus's response here may feel cold, harsh, or out of touch. But when Jesus tells this man that his sins are forgiven, it's not that He doesn't see or care about his physical needs. But Jesus sees beyond those things. He aims at the root and addresses the underlying foundation. What does this man need more than anything else? He needs to be forgiven, so that He can be spiritually restored.

The greatest need that this man has is to be made right with His Creator so that he might not just be healed for a brief time, but so that he might have eternal life, forever enjoying the presence of God in His Kingdom. The forgiveness of this man's sin – taking away his guilt and shame, it was what he truly needed most.

The pronouncement by Jesus is therefore good news. It's gospel. But it's not seen that way by everyone. The story continues in verse 3...

**Matthew 9:3**

And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, "This man is blaspheming."

The Old Testament is clear that God alone can forgive sins. In this the scribes are correct in their assumption – by pronouncing the forgiveness of sins, Jesus is putting Himself in the position of God.

And this makes sense, right? It is only the one who is sinned against who can truly offer forgiveness. Sin is the breaking of God's law, so only God can forgive it. You can only forgive something if you're the one who was offended.

If my son James, who is 11, "borrows" my car and wrecks it into a tree, he has sinned against me (just another imaginary scenario...) And after making sure he's ok, he's going to face some consequences for the damage he has done to something that didn't belong to him and for his disobedience.

Now, would it be right if my other son, who's 8, came up to James and said, "Hey don't worry about the car. I forgive you."? No. That's great that he wants to offer forgiveness. (That's unusual...) But the problem is that it's not his issue to forgive! Someone has to pay for the car repairs. And someone has to make amends for the trust that was broken by the disobedience. That's between me and James. It's only the one who has been sinned against who can offer forgiveness.

And so only God Himself, the Creator and Ruler over all, He alone can forgive our sin and the broken relationship our sin has caused. He must absorb the cost if it is to be forgiven. Only God can forgive sins.

So the scribes see this truly in one sense, but they are blind to who it is that is before them. They are calling Jesus a blasphemer as though He has no right to say what He has said. The story continues...

#### **Matthew 9:4-8**

But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? 5 For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’? 6 But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he then said to the paralytic—“Rise, pick up your bed and go home.” 7 And he rose and went home. 8 When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.

So Jesus sees what they’re thinking, and He challenges these scribes with a question. Is it easier to say, “Your sins are forgiven” or to say, “Rise and walk”?

Of course, on the surface, it’s easier to say, “Your sins are forgiven” because that’s a spiritual reality that you can’t verify easily. How can you tell if Jesus really forgave this man’s sins? But if you tell a paralytic man to get up and walk, then you’d better be able to back that up. So it seems like pronouncing forgiveness is easier. But is it really?

Again, to forgive someone’s sins is to address their deepest need. It’s a claim to demonstrate that you have divine authority, that you are speaking as God. And that is a far bigger claim. This is the real claim that Jesus is making. It’s the reason He didn’t just immediately heal this man’s disability. He intends to show that He has the true authority to forgive sin.

And then Jesus backs up this huge claim by telling the man to rise, pick up your bed and go home. Just as He has pronounced forgiveness of this man’s sins and so causes new life in His heart, He now pronounces healing and new life in this man’s body.

Jesus very clearly giving direct evidence to back up this claim that He has the authority to forgive sins. So this is what Matthew wants to show us about Jesus...

#### ***Jesus has the authority to forgive sins.***

He can address our greatest need! And He can do that because He is God and has divine authority over all things.

That raises a question for us, doesn't it? Do you believe that Jesus can forgive you? You personally? Do you believe He has that power? That He really has that authority?

Here's one way that you can tell if you really believe this – are you able to rest in the promise that you're forgiven when you call on Jesus in faith? If you believe that He has the authority and power to grant forgiveness, then that means you don't have to add anything yourself; in fact, you CAN'T add anything to the authority of Jesus.

So many of us spend so much time and effort trying to add to what Jesus has already accomplished. I have talked to many people over the years who are desperately trying to clean themselves up before they'll consider coming to church or thinking about religion. They feel like they just need to be in a better spot before they can do that. Or they'll say that they just don't know how to really let go and rest in the promise that they can be forgiven. They sense that their sin goes too deep, that they're too far gone, or that they're not worth being loved and accepted.

But listen to what the Bible says. This is what God has declared...

**Colossians 2:13-14**

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, **14** by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

If you have put your faith in Jesus, this is true for you. God has made our dead hearts alive. He has forgiven us all our trespasses. He has cancelled the entire record of sin that testified against us. He has nailed it to the cross. There's no more that needs to be done, nothing more that CAN be done. That's why He has the authority to forgive sins.

Your sins are never so deep that the blood of Jesus cannot cleanse them. And these next couple stories draw out some of the implications of this amazing truth. All of these other things flow out of this one truth.

Jesus has authority to forgive sins. So that means...

## **Jesus came for sinners, not the self-righteous**

Because Jesus has the authority to forgive sins, then it is to sinners that He has come. He isn't concerned with establishing additional rules or giving just another opinion on how to obey the Torah or do religious things. He came to offer forgiveness for sinners.

### **Matthew 9:9-12**

As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him.

**10** And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. **11** And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" **12** But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

Here's the scene, Jesus passed on from there, "there" being Capernaum, and He sees this man called Matthew in a tax booth. This would have been alongside the road, so that he could stop people as they passed by and charge them taxes. You can picture it almost like a toll-booth today.

And Jesus calls Matthew to follow Him, and he does. Now, you may have heard that tax-collectors were despised in that day. And that's true for a few reasons. One, they were seen as traitors. They were working for the enemy, collecting taxes for the occupying forces of Rome. They had betrayed their own countryman and fellow Jews by making their living off of helping the Romans collect taxes.

And so tax collectors were viewed kind of like snitches. They were almost like spies because they worked for the enemy. So for example, a tax collector couldn't testify in court, because their testimony was deemed untrustworthy. If you were robbed out of the road and the only witness was a tax collector – his testimony didn't count. It wouldn't be enough to convict the thief. Tax collectors were seen as traitors and liars.

And more than that, they were seen as extortioners. Tax collectors made profit for themselves by charging additional fees on top of the taxes collected for Rome. And they could charge whatever they felt like they could get away with.



You probably know what that's like. Has anyone bought a ticket to a sporting event or a concert or anything like that recently? Did you have to use Ticketmaster or LiveNation or one of those companies like that? They put one price for the ticket, and then on top of that, they charge all of these extra fees and surcharges. They know they have a monopoly, so that just jack the price up to whatever they think people might be willing to pay. It's crazy and somewhat infuriating.

I saw this meme online, maybe you've seen something similar...[\(show picture\)](#)

#### **Ticketmaster be like:**

**Concert Ticket: \$40**  
**Venue Fee: \$21.32**  
**Access Fee: \$18.32**  
**Paperless Transmission Fee: \$12.03**  
**Fee Fee: \$8.84**  
**Fee Fi Fo Fum Fee: \$4.50**  
**Cuz We Can Fee: \$2.01**  
**Might As Well Fee: \$1.89**  
**Another Dollar Won't Hurt Fee: \$1**

It's angering, isn't it? Well, the point is that tax collectors were like the Ticketmaster of the day. Only, they could add fees to your taxes and essentially take it right from whatever salary or income you earned and not just from getting a ticket somewhere or using a toll road.

But Jesus comes to this man Matthew, this one who has betrayed his fellow Jews, the one who is seen as a liar and a thief. And Jesus calls him to become his disciple. And he does.

And the next verse tells us that Jesus is reclining at table in the house. Which house? Presumably, it's Matthew's house. And he's throwing a party. And he's invited his friends to come and eat with Jesus. But who would come to a party thrown by a tax collector? Well, the only people who will hang out with tax collectors is other tax collectors and sinners.

But that's where Jesus is – right in the midst of these people who need Him the most. He has the authority to forgive their sins, and so He comes to them and dines with them. In doing this, He's not condoning their sins or approving of their choices to steal from their neighbors. But He does love **them**. And so he feasts at this table with them.

Matthew wants us to see very clearly – Jesus came for sinners. One of the questions that you and I need to wrestle with is this: who is the gospel for?

If the gospel is a message about the forgiveness of sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus, then the ones who need this gospel are those who recognize and admit their own sin.

And this is scandalous for those who think that God only approves of them. God only cares about us.

**Matthew 9:11-13**

**11** And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” **12** But when he heard it, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. **13** Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

So who is the gospel for? It's for sinners. It's not just for those who are interested in spiritual things. It's not for those who want to look down on others or believe that you're part of the 'in crowd.' It's not a message for people who believe they've got it all figured out. The gospel is a message for sinners.

It can be tempting to think that the gospel will never reach that person in your life who seems so far from the truth of God or far from the life that Christ taught us to live. We cannot write people off because of their pride month posts or their Truth Social account. That person's so different in their beliefs and lifestyle that it seems impossible that they could become a Christian. They'll never walk in true love and grace. They seem like they're beyond hope.

Maybe you're thinking about someone right now who you would be just shocked to find out that they have put their faith in Jesus. I'm talking about some of your family or friends, your co-workers or fellow students...the gospel is for them just as it is for you.

There's a warning here in this story that we need to identify and eradicate this Pharisee mentality in our own hearts. If the gospel can save you, it can save them.

I think of my own story. I was a self-righteous kid who needed to see that I needed the forgiveness of God...I was just a kid, but I was on the path of pride and self-reliance. I

was headed towards a life of Pharisee-ism. I thought I was better than the other kids because I knew John 3:16 by heart and because I brought my Bible to church. I knew the answers in Sunday School. But I didn't know Jesus. And it was only after being convicted of my own personal sin that I put my trust in Jesus to save me.

The gospel is for sinners. That's why it's good news for us as a church family. It's the only people we have here – sinners saved by grace.

I hope you've been inviting folks to join us at the family night at the pool this evening. I expect that there will be people there who don't belong to our church. People who wouldn't come to a church building.

And we have an opportunity, not to show off or somehow invite people to consider living a better way. We have an opportunity to love them and tell them how Jesus saved you, and how He brings freedom and grace to our messy lives. Jesus came for sinners, not the self-righteous.

### **Jesus desires mercy, not sacrifice**

Secondly, because Jesus has the authority to forgive sins, that means He is looking for mercy and humility in His kingdom, not external shows of righteousness.

Look at this statement Jesus gives to the Pharisees...

#### **Matthew 9:13**

**13** Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

If Jesus has the authority to forgive sins, and He came so that sinners might be forgiven, then that means He is far more interested in hearts who have been transformed by His grace than by external acts of religion devoid of true worship.

Here Jesus turns around a common practice of the Pharisees on themselves. It was common for the Pharisees to tell their students to 'go and learn what this means.' It's a way of saying, "You need to go back to the Scriptures and make sure that what you're saying and doing lines up with what they teach..."

And then Jesus quotes from the Old Testament prophet Hosea. In that passage, God is calling His people to repentance. They were being fickle in their love, trying to appease God with their religious show but not truly following Him in their hearts. And that's never been what God is after.

I was recently reading in Isaiah, and listen to the harsh rebuke God gives for the people who feel like they're doing all the right things on the outside...

**Isa 58:3-4**

Why have we fasted, and you see it not?

Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?'

[this is their complaint – why don't you care about our religious works?

But this is God's response...]

Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure,  
and oppress all your workers.

**4** Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist.

Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high...

You're upset with God because He's not responding to your fasting and religious performance. But God says, I know what's really going on in your hearts. I see that your fasting doesn't stop you from your fighting and hurting one another. That's not what I'm after, God says.

**Isaiah 58:6-7**

**6** "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness,  
to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

**7** Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

This is what the Lord is after. I don't want your fasting while you are ignoring the needy. I don't want your religious performance when that's all it is – a performance. I want your heart. I desire mercy over empty religious rituals. I'm not impressed with your going to church or singing songs or prayers before others if you're not loving your neighbors and walking in justice and integrity. This is once again what Jesus taught in the sermon on the mount. He is after our hearts. Flourishing are the merciful for they will receive mercy.

So that should make us reflect on our own lives. Are you moved in compassion and grace towards the “sinners” in your life? Do we have mercy for them or only scorn and judgment? The late Tim Keller once asked, “If our churches aren’t attractive to the tax collectors and prostitutes and sinners in our day, is there something off about our imitation of Christ?”

Would anyone be able to look at your life or observe this church and be able to ask – why do they hang out with sinners? Is that true for you? For me?

Jesus came to forgive sinners. He came as a physician for the sick. And He desires mercy, not sacrifice.

### **Jesus brings something new, not more of the old**

Because Jesus has the authority to forgive sins, then that changes the fundamental ways that people relate to Him. He has come to bring something new, not more of the old.

So while Jesus is feasting with sinners at Matthew’s house, there comes to him a question about fasting from the disciples of John the Baptist. We pick up in verse 14...

#### **Matthew 9:14-17**

Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” **15** And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. **16** No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. **17** Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.”

So these disciples of John the Baptist come to Jesus. John is in prison at this point, but those who followed him are confused by how Jesus and His disciples are living. They ask, “Why are we fasting and you’re not?”

And Jesus responds with a couple illustrations. First He asks, “Can the wedding guests mourn while the bridegroom is with them?”

This is wedding season, you know. And I love weddings. But how appropriate would it be if during the 17 speeches or the 25<sup>th</sup> special dance, I began to loudly groan and complain about how hungry I am or how long the reception is dragging on. That would be out of place, right?

Jesus is saying that's not appropriate for a wedding. And He says, I'm the bridegroom. And while I'm here, it doesn't make sense to mourn and fast. There'll be a day for that, but it is not this day.

Now, on this side of the Cross, it is appropriate for believers once again to fast and long for the return of Christ, to pursue more of God and allow our hunger to drive us to prayer. But we must remember that God desires mercy over religious rituals – they were never the point.

And then secondly, Jesus says it doesn't make sense to put new cloth onto an old garment or new wine into old wineskins. If you do that, when the new cloth shrinks or when the wine ferments and expands, it'll tear away and burst.

He's using these images to illustrate what is happening with His coming. Jesus is changing everything. As the long-awaited bridegroom, as the one who has authority to forgive sins, He hasn't come just to add to the existing institutional practices – He is transforming all things.

The old wineskin of the Old Testament systems and rituals won't hold the new wine of the New Covenant. The Passover and sacrifices and food laws and rituals like fasting are being fulfilled and transformed in the New Covenant.

What is the new wine being brought about in the New Covenant?

I don't have time to unpack this all, but we've been talking about some of them already. The new wine of the New Covenant includes things like the full forgiveness of our sins. There is no more need for a priesthood and sacrifices or a day of atonement – we can be forgiven by a word from Jesus.

It also means the promise of the Holy Spirit within us. He now lives in His people. Jesus says here that there will be a day when the bridegroom is taken away. On this side of

the Cross, we know that He was talking about His death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. And now He has sent His Spirit to live within His people.

And so, third, we now are empowered by the Spirit for true obedience from the heart. In the New Covenant, we can walk in love for God and one another in a way that transcends ethnic groups or geography. The gospel goes deep in our lives and broad to all the nations of the world. That's the new wine for new wineskins.

Here in Matthew 9, we see that Jesus has the authority to forgive sins. He has come to bring a new foundation to the home of your life. And that raises some questions...

First, have you come to Him for forgiveness? Have you put your trust in Him to save you?

And if you have, take heart, forgiveness now means full healing one day, either now or in His Kingdom. Be encouraged. Hold on to hope.

And because Jesus can forgive sins, He has come to sinners. He came to the sick and the outcast. Are we following His example? Are we showing a Christ-like hospitality?

And because God desires mercy, are we walking in self-righteousness or humility? Do we live in gratitude for who Jesus is, or pride about what we deserve?

Jesus is the bridegroom who has come and will one day come again.

Because Jesus brings something new, are you resting in the grace of the gospel? Don't try to fit Jesus into the box of religious rituals, He won't fit. Jesus brings transformation.

The gospel is new wine and central to its message is that Jesus has the authority to forgive all your sins. Let us go and learn what this means...

Let's pray...