

Jesus Forgives
Matthew 9:1-8

Again, we are in Matthew chapter 9 this morning as we continue in our sermon series through Matthew's gospel. And we will pick up where we left off last week, where we finished chapter 8. So this morning we are looking at the next scene of ministry of Jesus, in verses 1-8...

Matthew 9:1-8

1 And getting into a boat he crossed over and came to his own city. **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." **3** And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, "This man is blaspheming." **4** 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 and the disciples had this experience with the two demon-possessed men in the Gadarenes. Jesus casts out the demons, and they go into a herd of pigs, causing them to throw themselves into the sea. The people of the area beg Jesus to leave, so he does.

Jesus and the disciples get in a boat and go back to Capernaum. Jesus has done miracles here before, so the people know about him. A group of people bring to him a man who was paralyzed and he ends up being healed both physically *and* spiritually. His body works as it should *and* his sins are forgiven.

The scribes there don't believe that Jesus should forgive sins, so Jesus reasons with them, saying, it's easier to say something that can't be confirmed. It's harder to demonstrate something tangible, so he physically heals in order to prove that he can also forgive sins.

This is not the first time Jesus heals a paralytic. We read in chapter 4 and in chapter 8, paralytics included in the lists of those being healed by Jesus (4:24; 8:6). So, this scene isn't primarily about the miraculous work of Jesus healing someone who couldn't walk. This story has at its center more pressing lessons for us. And I will point us to two; they

are Jesus *can* forgive sins, because he is God, and Jesus *willingly* forgives sins because he is good.

So, this scene highlights the ability and willingness of Jesus to forgive sins but first we need to recognize from this story that...

I. The greatest need any of us have is to be forgiven of our sins.

No doubt these friends who brought the paralytic to Jesus were hoping for a miracle. I'm sure the paralytic himself was hoping the same. They were hoping that Jesus would look at him and do for him what he had done for so many others in Capernaum and other cities, heal his physical need. But there is no indication that they were expecting spiritual healing as well. Clearly, they had faith in Jesus, Jesus acknowledges that, but I assume that physical healing is foremost in their minds. But that is not what Jesus addresses first.

We shouldn't make the same mistake. It is easy to think we need certain things from God, such as health, healing, restored relationships, new job, provision, and so on. But we should never lose sight that the most important thing we needed was the forgiveness of our sins.

Now, this is certainly not a popular message in our culture today. Maybe you saw this last week, Pope Francis did an interview for 60 Minutes and he offered a much more tempered statement about sin that what I just gave.

In the interview, if you didn't see it, when asked what gives him hope, he said, "Everything. You see tragedies, but you also see so many beautiful things. You see heroic mothers, heroic men, men who have hopes and dreams, women who look to the future. That gives me a lot of hope. People want to live. People forge ahead. And people are fundamentally good. We are all fundamentally good. Yes, there are some rogues and sinners, but the heart is good."¹

Some, like the Pope here, temper the reality of sin in the lives of humanity. It's a view that says people are fundamentally good, though there may be some bad folks out there. Sinners are the outliers. They are on the fringes of society. They are the exception, not the norm.

Or, some hold a view like a former boss of mine when I was in college. It was my first day and met my new manager for the first time, as we were getting to know one another he found out I went to Bible College. He plainly said, "Cody, I am not a sinner and I don't need forgiveness."

¹ Aired May 20, 2024.

Oftentimes, the reality of sin and the need for forgiveness are either minimized or completely denied. Well, Scripture has a very different message for us and one that is plainly seen in the world.

Scripture teaches that sin is a universal reality, affecting everyone, everywhere, and at all times.

Romans 3:10-12

10 as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; **11** no one understands; no one seeks for God. **12** All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”

Romans 3:23

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God

Again, “none is righteous.” “All” have sinned. Everyone in history, regardless of time or culture, because of the fall of humanity, possesses a sinful, corrupt nature, described by Paul in that verse as falling “short of the glory of God.” That is, every person has failed to live a life that equals the perfect moral nature of God, who only does what is right. Jesus is the only exception because he is God.

And the results of sin are devastating. **Sin...**

I. ...brings divine disfavor.

That might sound strange because we know and believe that God is love. But God is also holy, set apart and without any impurity, completely just in every way. Which means that it is part of his holy nature to be opposed to sinful actions. So, as sinful people, we move into the sphere of God’s disfavor.

Our sin provokes anger and wrath, terms used in Scripture of God toward sin. But we should be clear, as sinners, we have set ourselves against God. In other words, our sin reveals that we are hostile toward him.

Romans 8:7-8

7 For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. **8** Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

And because we do not “submit to God’s law,” sin also...

II. ...brings guilt.

Like a criminal who breaks the law of the land, we have broken or transgressed the law of God, making us guilty before him.

And since we are guilty, sin...

1. ...makes us liable to punishment.

This is justice. Not primitive, cruel, or the mark of vindictiveness on the part of God. We owe a debt for breaking God's law, and his holiness demands justice. It demands that sin is punished.

So, sin also...

2. ...brings about death...death that is physical, spiritual, and eternal.

Physical death is a result of sin's entrance into the world. It is part of the curse of the fall. But physical death is not the only way mankind has died. Spiritually, we are dead in our transgresses and sins. We are separated from God entirely. And if something didn't change, then our death would be an eternal death, forever separated from God.

All of that to say...Whether he knew it or not, all of this was true of the paralytic that day. And whether you know it or not, without faith in Jesus it is true of you today as well.

But there is good news in this story and for you. Again, a central lesson of this scene in Capernaum is that...

2. Jesus *can* forgive sin, because he is God.

Again, so far in Matthew we've seen Jesus' divine authority demonstrated in numerous ways. We've seen his authority over sickness as he heals many people, over creation as he commands the winds and waves with just a word, over the spiritual world as he casts out demons, and now demonstrating authority over sin as he forgives this paralytic. Jesus is further demonstrating his divine authority.

At the center of the Christian faith is Jesus. The belief that Jesus is God in the flesh is what separates Christianity from all other religions. Christians believe that Jesus is the eternal, Second Person of the Trinity, who took on a human nature, died, and rose again to new life, reigns today, and will one day return to make all things new.

But most of the world doesn't believe that. Most don't believe that Jesus is God. And that was certainly true of the scribes there that day. They were upset because Jesus, in their eyes, was blaspheming. By claiming to forgive sins, Jesus is claiming to be God, because only God has the authority to forgive sins.

For example, if you came to me and said, "Cody, I got a speeding ticket this week, will you forgive me and erase the fine? Would you take away the penalty for my driving transgression?" I would say, "I don't have that kind of authority. You are talking to the wrong person."

But if I said, "Yeah, don't worry about it. Tear up the ticket, ignore any correspondence from the police department or court, or tell them, Cody said it's all taken care of," I would be seriously overstepping my role and authority in the community.

So, the scribes are saying, wait, Jesus is forgiving sins, and since sin is transgressing God's law, only God can forgive sins. And since Jesus is not God, he is blaspheming. This was the extreme opposite of belief in Jesus. He wasn't Lord, he was guilty of trying to take his place.

Most don't believe in Jesus today, but oftentimes their view is a little less extreme than the scribes here. In other words, it's a denial, but it is often a softer denial of Jesus' identity. Probably the most common belief about Jesus today is that though he isn't God, he was a good, moral teacher.

But that really isn't one of the logical ways to view Jesus. Jesus' actions and claims don't allow for such a moderate view of him.

If you've ever read *Mere Christianity* by CS Lewis, he writes about this. He says that Jesus can only be one of three things: a liar, lunatic, or Lord.

From what we know, this argument was originally penned by a Scottish pastor in the mid-nineteenth century. He wrote, "Christ either [1] deceived mankind by conscious fraud, or [2] He was Himself deluded and self-deceived, or [3] He was Divine. There is no getting out of this trilemma. It is inexorable."²

Lewis, though, expanded this with his own style and wrote,

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his

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claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. . . . Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God.”

He would also write in another essay, “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.”

And this scene with Jesus, the scribes, and the paralytic show this to be true. Either Jesus was lying, out of his mind, or demonstrating his true authority as the Son of God, God in the flesh. There was no room for “mild approval.” He was either God or he was a blasphemer, punishable by execution according to the Old Testament Law (Lev. 24:16).

But to confront their unbelief, Jesus says, I will give you the tangible sign of my authority to forgive sins, by healing this paralytic. He demonstrates his ability to heal the spiritual by healing the physical.

Jesus *can* forgive sins, because he is God. But another important lesson here is that...

3. Jesus *willingly* forgives sin, because he is good.

Notice Jesus’ compassion on this man. He is moved by what he sees and addresses his spiritual state before he’s even asked. This is the heart of Christ, ready and eager to forgive.

This is so important to grasp after acknowledging the weight and devastation of sin. Yes, in our sinful state we are hostile to God, enemies of him, and yet, God loves sinners. And God has done what needed to be done to redeem sinful men and women back to himself.

16 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. **17** For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. **18** Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

It is true that your sin and my sin have separated us from God. But you should never hear the message that your sin has separated you from God without also hearing that God has sent Jesus to take the penalty of your sin for you in order to bring you back.

The gospel declares to us that we stand condemned because of our sin, but the One who is our Judge is gracious, merciful, and compassionate. And so the Judge worked in such a way to become our Advocate, Intercessor, and Substitute. Remaining completely just by punishing sin at the cross, God is abundantly gracious for all who would look to the cross as the only hope of their salvation.

And this is the other obstacle that sin brings. As I said earlier, sin causes many to deny their own sin. But the other challenge, for others, is not to deny their sin, but to try to atone for their sin themselves. By emphasizing in their goodness, or comparing to others, we try to right the wrong that is our sin.

But the gospel offers forgiveness, not penance. There’s a difference. Penance is when we try to work off our debt on our own. We try to make up for the wrongs that we’ve done. For example, we view church attendance as penance for a crazy weekend. Or we view spiritual disciplines like prayer and Bible reading as punches on a reward card hoping to earn a free eternity with God.

But God offers us more than a chance for penance. He offers us forgiveness. Complete. Total. No strings attached. No fine print. *Absolute* forgiveness for the person who turns to the Lord with the open hand of faith, no longer trusting in their works, but believing and trusting in the work of Jesus to save them.

And when you do that, God has promised us through his Scriptures that your condemnation is canceled (Rom. 8:1), eternal life is gifted (Rom. 6:23), and peace really can be experienced (Rom. 5:1).

There is an incredible picture of salvation in a powerful passage in the Old Testament, there are many of them, but one is found in the book of Zechariah. Might not be a book you spend a lot of time in, but in chapter three, the prophet Zechariah has this incredible vision that illustrates both the necessity of forgiveness and the availability of forgiveness in Christ.

In a heavenly courtroom scene, Zechariah writes for us...

Zech. 3:1

1 Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him.

Again, he sees Joshua the high priest with Satan standing at his at his right hand like a prosecutor ready to bring the accusations before the judge.

But notice what he sees and hears...

Zech. 3:2-5

2 And the Lord said to Satan, "The Lord rebuke you, O Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this a brand plucked from the fire?" **3** Now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments. **4** And the angel said to those who were standing before him, "Remove the filthy garments from him." And to him he said, "Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments." **5** And I said, "Let them put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments. And the angel of the Lord was standing by.

This is what happens in salvation. We stand before the Lord with our filthy garments, our sinful nature and record of wrongdoing. Satan, our true enemy, is more than happy and ready to point out all the ways that we've sinned against the Lord, and through our faith, the Lord silences the accuser, removes our filthy garments, and gives us clean clothes.

Forgiveness is *needed*, but forgiveness is *available*. And it is available in Jesus today.

If you've never trusted in Christ for your salvation, know that is your greatest need, but Jesus can forgive and is willing to forgive. Turn to him in faith today.

For Christian this morning, we need to be reminded of the free, gracious offer of forgiveness time and time again, because even though we've experienced it, we have a nasty tendency to revert back to a posture of penance with the Lord, feelings that the gospel is too good to be true, that surely God doesn't love me the way others say he does, that I need to prove my faithfulness before he will be truly forgiving of my past and present sin.

I've had countless conversations with people seeking counsel who might not have used those words exactly but definitely carried the weight of those beliefs. I've

personally carried the weight of those beliefs at times. But what they needed and what I've needed is to hear the gospel once again.

Christ has atoned for my sins, and by faith in his finished work, I am fully forgiven now and for all eternity.

And maybe you need hear that once again this morning. If you've trusted in Christ, hear the same words he spoke to the paralytic in Matthew 9, as if they are spoken to you...

"Take heart, son or daughter; your sins really are forgiven."

CONFESSION

PRAYER

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

On one of his missionary journeys, Paul declared to his hearers...

Acts 13:38-39

38 Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, **39** and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.

Forgiveness of sins is truly available in Jesus. Since this is true, let's stand in worship...

VERSES

Matthew 9:1-8

Romans 3:10-12

Romans 3:23

Romans 8:7-8

John 3:16-18

Zech. 3:1

Zech. 3:2-5

Acts 13:38-39

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the common perceptions of "sin" in our culture today?

2. How would you answer someone who believed that Jesus was merely a good, moral teacher?
3. Have you ever struggled with the idea that God is *willing* to forgive your sin?
4. What are some ways we pursue penance rather than resting in forgiveness?