

“YOUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN”

Matthew 9:1-17

Key Verse: 9:2b

“When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man, ‘Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.’”

Chapter 8 mainly dealt with Jesus’ healing ministry. Beginning in today’s passage, Jesus proclaimed the forgiveness of sins and called sinners. This shows us Jesus’ purpose of coming into the world: it was to solve man’s sin problem. Throughout history, people have tried to discover what is the root problem of human beings. One of the most influential Enlightenment thinkers, Jean Jacques Rousseau, thought that man was good by nature but corrupted by society. He thought the basic problem of human beings was weakness and ignorance and that this could be solved through education.¹ His thought influenced modern people greatly. Yet in understanding human beings, he was fatally in error, not recognizing sin as people’s fundamental problem. This same fatal error is found in every field, including psychology, sociology, and economics. Why is this important? Proper diagnosis is essential for proper treatment. In today’s passage Jesus teaches us what people’s real problem is and offers a solution. Jesus gives genuine hope for a new life. We may assume this passage does not apply to us. We may think, “I’m not like the paralyzed man or the sinful tax collector!” But when we honestly examine ourselves, we will find that in some sense, we are like them: powerless, selfish, and isolated. Let’s learn how sin affects our lives and how Jesus solves our sin problem.

First, Jesus proclaimed the forgiveness of sins (1-8). Jesus, amidst his busy schedule, had crossed the Sea of Galilee. On the way, he and his disciples met two kinds of storms. One was a storm of nature. The other was a storm of demons. Jesus calmed both storms with a word. Jesus demonstrated his divine power as the Son of God and the disciples began to glimpse who he was. It was time to learn more deeply about him. They stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to Jesus’ own town of Capernaum (1; 4:13). Verse 2a says, **“Some men brought to him a paralyzed man, lying on a mat.”** In the original Greek, this sentence begins with the word “*idou*” which means “see” “look,” “behold.” The author wants us to pay close attention to this event. Bringing a paralyzed man to Jesus was an amazing event, a courageous act of faith. The men who brought him were not seeking their own healing, but that of their friend out of deep compassion. They sacrificed their time and energy to bring their friend to Jesus. Though he was paralyzed, they

¹ <http://decodedpast.com/jean-jacques-rousseau-good-nature-corrupted-society/3811>

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believed Jesus could heal him. Jesus saw their faith (2b). This shows us that Jesus sees people’s hearts and knows their inner motive in coming to him.

Their faith moved Jesus, and he said to the man, **“Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.”** The words “Take heart” mean “be encouraged; everything will be okay.” The man must have felt burdensome, and very awkward. He wondered if Jesus would welcome him. But Jesus said, **“Take heart, son.”** This gave him great assurance and peace. Sometimes, when we want to come to Jesus, we also feel awkward, as though we will be a burden to Jesus. However, Jesus welcomes anyone who comes by faith, just as they are. Jesus not only welcomed him, but called him, **“son.”** Jesus entered a most loving, intimate relationship with him. Jesus will do the same for anyone who comes to him by faith; he accepts us as his dear children with grace and love.

People might have expected Jesus to say, “your paralysis is healed.” But to their surprise, Jesus said, **“your sins are forgiven.”** To Jesus, the man’s most serious problem was his sin problem. We tend to think that our happiness depends on our condition, such as being healthy, wealthy and having good relationships with others. If we are sick, poor, or have relationship tension, we feel miserable. So, people try to improve their condition in many ways. But even when their condition improves, they are not happy from deep within. Why? It is because the real problem is unsolved. This is the sin problem.

What is sin? People usually think of sin in moral terms, such as lying, stealing, adultery, violent assault, murder, and so on. But sin is more than that. Sin is rebellion against God the Creator. Sin is putting one’s self at the center instead of God. In a word, sin is self-centeredness. This cuts one off from a relationship with God, who is the source of life. As a result, we have all kinds of problems. We have a sense of abandonment, feel isolated, and become very lonely. We don’t know who we are, where we are going, or why we exist. Life seems meaningless. We try to ignore this inner turmoil by indulging in pleasures or making temporary achievements. But no matter what we do, these problems remain in the depth of our being. This sin problem paralyzes us. We have a desire to do what is good, but we cannot carry it out (Ro 7:18b). So, we are frustrated and fall into self-condemnation, and even despair. We feel burdensome and useless.

How can we solve this problem? Actually, we cannot. Only God can solve this problem. In truth, we all stand before God in this totally helpless condition. If God judges us by his standard, no one can survive. But God, in his great love and mercy, sent his one and only Son Jesus Christ, not to condemn us, but to save us

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(Jn 3:17). Jesus came into the world to forgive sins. That is why he said, “**your sins are forgiven.**” This meant that the man now had a right relationship with God. His real problem was solved from the root. Now he was accepted, not abandoned. He had new strength, new spirit, and new life that comes from God.

To the Jews, forgiveness of sins was a very serious matter. Whenever they committed sin, small or large, they were required to offer an animal sacrifice through a Levitical priest to obtain forgiveness. These sacrifices made them ceremonially clean, but could not cleanse their consciences (Heb 9:9). However, Jesus simply proclaimed forgiveness of sins apart from the Levitical priesthood by his own authority. This anticipated his death on the cross as the perfect sacrifice once for all, shedding his own blood. Jesus’ sacrifice cleanses our consciences from acts that lead to death so that we may serve the living God (Heb 9:14). This proclamation of forgiveness of sins was revolutionary. With it, the era of the law was gone, and the era of grace had come. There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Ro 8:1). Now we can come to God through Jesus, the new and living way opened for us (Heb 10:20). We can come to God through Jesus, anyplace and any time. Jesus forgives our sins and gives us deep peace. Jesus’ forgiveness is immediate, unconditional, and complete, with no strings attached. Many people practice, at best, grudging forgiveness. They say, “Okay, I forgive, but I will never forget.” However, Jesus forgives our sins completely and remembers them no more (Heb 8:12). Jesus gives us new life and new relationships in grace and forgiveness. How wonderful is Jesus, who forgives our sins! Thank you, Jesus!

Yet in response to Jesus’ gracious proclamation, there was strong opposition. Some teachers of the law said to themselves, “This fellow is blaspheming!” They reasoned that only God can forgive sins and Jesus was merely human. Jesus knew what they were thinking. He rebuked them: “**Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts?**” (4) Their skepticism was not intellectual honesty; it was evil. They were intentionally suppressing the truth about Jesus. By the way, we should not entertain evil thoughts in our hearts—Jesus knows what we are thinking. After rebuking them, Jesus taught them clearly that he is the Son of God who has authority on earth to forgive sins. He asked, “**Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk?’**” (5) To a mere human being, both are impossible. But Jesus could do both, and more. He said to the man, “**Get up, take your mat and go home**” (6). Then the man got up and went home (7). When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe, and praised God, who had given such authority to man (8).

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To receive and enjoy Jesus’ forgiveness, we should know that he is God himself with divine authority. Jesus makes this so clear that we must either accept him as God or consider him a blasphemer. C.S. Lewis concluded that Jesus is either a lunatic, a liar, or the Lord.² We cannot say that he is just a good man, a good teacher or a good example. Jesus is God. Therefore, his authority to forgive sins is rooted in his almighty power as God, his sovereign rule, and his great love for people. And as God’s word, Jesus’ proclamation cannot be argued with, resisted or overruled. When Jesus says our sins are forgiven, they are forgiven indeed. This is the basis of our great assurance. Though the devil accuses us, Jesus forgives us. Though our consciences may convict us, Jesus forgives us. Though other people may slander us, Jesus forgives us. St. Paul wrote, **“Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us”** (Ro 8:34). Jesus enables us to get up from the power of sin and frees us from all condemnation so that we can live powerful lives. Thank you, Jesus!

Second, Jesus came to call sinners (9-17). Jesus not only proclaimed forgiveness of sins, he also called sinners to be with him. As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector’s booth. Matthew means “gift of Yahweh,” that is “gift of God.” It is a wonderful name, full of grace and hope. However, Matthew’s life was a far cry from this gracious name. As a tax collector, he had deliberately decided to make money though it meant burdening his own suffering people and the loss of his humanity. He must have been greedy, immoral, corrupt, harsh, and even cruel. He wanted to be mindful, but he was mean. He wanted to be sacrificial, but he was selfish. He wanted to be respected, but he was despised. He harmed many other people, and he was also hurt by others. In deep frustration and despair, he was sitting at his tax collector’s booth.

When Jesus saw him, he knew Matthew’s inner agony immediately. Jesus said, **“Follow me.”** It was an invitation to a new life. Jesus saw him with great hope. Jesus believed he would become a great disciple and a source of blessing to the world. Jesus committed himself to be with Matthew and to raise him as a great man of God. For Matthew, it required an immediate decision to leave his old, sinful life and to commit himself to Jesus. Jesus’ invitation was powerful. Matthew got up and followed him. He began to perceive that his destiny had changed. Unspeakable joy overflowed in his soul. He began to sing, “O what a wonderful, wonderful day—Day I will never forget! After I’d wandered in darkness away, Jesus, my Savior, I met. O what a tender, compassionate Friend! He met the need

² Lewis, C. S., *Mere Christianity*, London: Collins, 1952, pp. 54–56. (In all editions, this is Bk. II, Ch. 3, “The Shocking Alternative.”)

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of my heart—Shadows dispelling. With joy I am telling, he made all the darkness depart!”³ His joy was so great that he felt compelled to share it with everyone he knew. This was largely tax collectors and other sinners. Matthew spent a huge amount of money and prepared a great feast for them all. The guest of honor was Jesus, who must have shared gracious and truthful words with everyone. It was a great heavenly feast filled with repentance, joy and thanksgiving. One man’s decision of faith had a great influence on the people in his community.

However, there was one group of unhappy people: the Pharisees. To their credit, they tried to live holy lives and recognized the seriousness of sin. Yet their way of dealing with sin was quite different from that of Jesus. They had a legalistic understanding and practice of the law. For those who could not keep it, there was no hope. They put such people outside the community and kept them permanently isolated. In this way, they purged evil from the community and maintained purity. They were like the ancient Spartans who killed all the weak members of their society so that only the healthy and strong remained. The Pharisees complained to Jesus’ disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” Their only concern was: “legal or illegal.” They did not care about people. They had no mercy.

Jesus, on hearing the Pharisees’ complaint, was not upset with them. Rather, he had compassion on them and said, **“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick”** (12). Here, Jesus identifies himself as a kind of doctor. He sees sinners like a doctor sees patients. Doctors distinguish between a disease and a patient. They see the disease as the enemy, and treat patients with respect, compassion and hope. They believe that after the patient is healed, they will be fine. In the same way, Jesus distinguished between sin and people. Jesus saw sin as the enemy, and treated sinners with respect, compassion and hope. Jesus believed that after their sin-sicknesses were healed, they would be good people.

Jesus wanted to help the religious leaders change their mindset toward sinners. This was not a matter of learning a skill or bedside manner; it required a change of heart attitude. Jesus wanted them to be useful to God as genuine shepherds for people. He said, **“But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners”** (13). According to this word of God through Hosea, God desires mercy more than sacrifice. God’s heart is a heart of mercy. Mercy refers to the exercise of power to save the weak, not crush them. The purpose of Jesus’ coming was to show God’s

³ “Heaven Came Down.” Words and Music: John W. Peterson, 1961.

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mercy to sinners. Jesus wanted the Pharisees to learn God’s heart. Though they had studied the Bible diligently, they had missed a key point: God’s mercy. It is easy for us to do the same. We may study the Bible diligently, accumulate knowledge, and then use it to judge and criticize others. But as God is merciful, he wants us to see others with mercy. Let’s pray to see others with mercy!

Another group of people came to Jesus with a complaint. They were John’s disciples. They said, **“How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?”** In Jesus’ time, it was customary for religious leaders to fast twice a week (Lk 18:12). They did so to abstain from sinful desires and temptations and to seek God. Jesus himself had fasted and spoken favorably about it (Mt 6:16-18). Fasting can be a fruitful spiritual discipline. The problem is that John’s disciples overlooked the Messiah and fixated on his disciples. Furthermore, they wanted to apply their practice of the law toward Jesus’ ministry as a basis for criticism.

Jesus taught two important truths. The first is that it was time to rejoice because the long-awaited Messiah had come. Jesus compared himself to a bridegroom and his disciples to his guests (15). Figuratively speaking, when Jesus is in our hearts, our lives are full of joy like at a feast. But if Jesus is not in our hearts, we lose our joy and become legalistic and complain. Then we should repent and fast. The second truth Jesus taught is that he was beginning a new history. To do so, he used two metaphors which are very similar. We cannot repair old garments with new patches (16). Nor can we pour new wine into old wineskins (17). This results in torn garments, burst wineskins, and wasted wine. So new wine must be poured into new wineskins. Jesus wanted them to understand that gospel ministry was not an extension of Jewish legalism. It was the beginning of something totally new. Jesus’ proclamation of forgiveness of sins and his calling of sinners was a new history. This new history came from God’s love and mercy. Jesus’ disciples enjoyed his forgiving grace and his shepherding in the hope of growing as great men of God who could change the world. Jesus did not want them to master Jewish legalism, but to learn his heart. Let’s remember Jesus’ words: **“Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.” “Follow me.” “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”** Let’s come to Jesus as we are. Then our sins are forgiven and we can live a new life with a great new hope and make a new history.