

Chapter 30: The Authority to Forgive Sinners

Matthew 9:1–13

As we enter the ninth chapter of the Gospel, Matthew continues to spotlight the nature of Jesus' authority. We have previously seen Matthew highlight the manifest authority of Jesus in his teaching (Matt. 7:29), cleansing (Matt. 8:3), healing (Matt. 8:13), bearing away our sins (Matt. 8:17), calling disciples (Matt. 8:22), calming a storm (Matt. 8:26), and casting out demons (Matt. 8:32). Little by little, Matthew is filling out our understanding of Jesus' radically unique authority on earth. Now, Matthew shows that Jesus' authority stretches even into the things that God alone can do: *Jesus has the authority to forgive sinners.*

The Authority to Forgive Sins (Matt. 9:1–8)

Having only just arrived on the other side of the Sea of Galilee (Matt. 8:18, 23, 28), Jesus gets back into his boat to return to the other side (v. 1). As the parallel passage for the healing of the paralytic make clear in Mark 2:1, Jesus' "own city" refers to Capernaum, where Jesus lived and did much ministry (Matt. 4:13).¹ Here, Matthew tells us that some people bring to Jesus a paralytic, who is lying on his bed (v. 2a). Jesus recognizes the faith driving this act, and, without any preliminary conversation, he tells the paralytic, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven" (v. 2b). Why does Jesus say this?

To begin, we must recognize that Jesus does not at any point suggest that this man's paralysis was caused directly by some personal sin.² While the general presence of sin has brought about every problem in this world, this does not mean that we can discern the specific sin that caused every particular problem to arise. Nevertheless, we should see that Jesus treats the problem of sin and the problem of his physical suffering as interwoven, so that his first act was not to heal the man, but to forgive his sins. As R. C. H. Lenski writes, "Men saw only his bodily affliction, Jesus saw the guilt and the contrition in the man's heart."³

Furthermore, we should understand that Jesus forgave this man's sin because of his faith—a faith that he shared with the friends who brought him to Jesus: "though Christ is said to have been moved by the faith of others, yet the *paralytic* could not have obtained *the forgiveness of his sins*, if he had had no faith of his own."⁴ While some have tried to argue that "their" faith should be limited to the faith of the friends, there is no obvious reason to do so.⁵ Jesus, seeing the desperate, active faith of these

¹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 241.

² France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 345.

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 356.

⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 1:393.

⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 355.

men to bring one of their friends to Jesus, tenderly works to heal this man from the inside-out: “As to ‘son’ or ‘child’ (somewhat more literal), either way this is a term of endearment. Combined with ‘take courage’ we witness here the warmheartedness and tenderness of the Good Shepherd. He dispels the sick man’s embarrassment and gloom and as it were embraces him with the arms of his protecting love and care.”⁶

The scribes take offense at Jesus words, saying to themselves, “This man is blaspheming” (v. 3). In other words, they are horrified that Jesus would usurp God’s place by claiming to forgive this man’s sins. In response (v. 4), Jesus not only rebukes their unbelief, but he “gives a proof of his Divinity in bringing to light their secret thoughts.”⁷ To prove his right to forgive sins, Jesus asks a seemingly simple question: “For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk?’” (v. 5).

While this question sounds simple on the surface, the question deliberately emphasizes different aspects of the power of God. On the one hand, it is far easier to *say* “Your sins are forgiven” than “Rise and walk,” since the former would accomplish something that no one could see, while the effectiveness of the latter statement would immediately be judged by all as they watched to see whether the man could indeed rise up and walk.⁸ On the other hand, the task of securing absolution for our sins would be infinitely difficult for Christ, requiring “all the suffering he endured during his earthly sojourn, climaxed by the bloody sweat of Gethsemane, the scourging of Gabbatha, and the cross of Golgotha.”⁹ Ultimately, then, “both require the identical power of God. As he alone can dismiss sins, so he alone can restore a paralytic on the instant.”¹⁰ So, Jesus heals in order to prove that he has “authority on earth to forgive sins” (v. 6).¹¹ That is, the “act which the eyes are able to see verifies the other act which no eyes can see.”¹² The paralytic, then, responded directly to Jesus’ command: “And he rose and went home” (v. 7).

The final verse in this section is important: “When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men” (v. 8). As at the conclusion of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:29), and in line with Jesus’ own claims to authority (v. 6), the people respond by recognizing something about Jesus’ *authority*. They have some recognition that Jesus is different from the typical teachers, even though “the form and manner of giving was not yet understood by those who were not aware that the majesty of God was united to flesh.”¹³ Here, they recognize particularly that Jesus’ authority extended even to the forgiveness of sins. Previously, we had seen Jesus’ authority to do *human* activities. As extraordinary as teaching, cleansing, calming a storm, and exorcising demons may be, there is nothing that would preclude a great and powerful human from doing these things as God’s servant. Now, however, we are seeing Jesus’ authority to do something that God alone can do: to forgive sins—that is, to forgive sins committed *against* God.

⁶ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 418.

⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:395.

⁸ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 216.

⁹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 420.

¹⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 358.

¹¹ Carson, “Matthew,” 261.

¹² Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 359.

¹³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:397.

The Assignment to Call Sinners (Matt. 9:9–13)

Moving on from there, Jesus sees a man called Matthew (v. 9a). William Hendriksen writes, “In all three Gospels the story of Matthew’s call is related next (Matt. 9:9–13; Mark 2:13–17; and Luke 5:27–32). Moreover, in a rather general way a time and place connection is established between the healing of the paralytic and this call.”¹⁴ Indeed, as we will see, there is a close thematic connection between these two passages. In healing the paralytic, Jesus asserted his authority to forgive sins. Here, Jesus asserts his authority to call sinners to be his disciples. Thus, we are told nothing about Matthew except the fact that he was “sitting at the tax booth” (v. 9b). We do not know, then, whether he had previously met Jesus, heard him speak, or knew anything about Jesus at all.¹⁵ All we know is that he is a tax collector, so that for “Jesus to call such a man to follow him was a daring breach of etiquette, a calculated snub to conventional ideas of respectability, which ordinary people no less than Pharisees might be expected to balk at. Fishermen may not have been high in the social scale, but at least they were not automatically morally and religious suspect; Matthew was.”¹⁶

The connection of these two stories, then, is very important. Jesus does not only *forgive* sins, but he demonstrates the force of his ability to forgive sinners. By calling a tax collector to follow him as his disciple, he proves that his authority to forgive bears such force so as to remove any ongoing spiritual stigma from Matthew. While the world around Matthew may never forgive him for being a traitorous Jew who robbed his fellow Jews on behalf of the Romans and to enrich himself, Jesus declared that Matthew’s sins were *forgiven*. As such, Matthew was purified to follow Jesus as a disciple. As Calvin writes, “Matthew, therefore, was not only a witness and preacher, but was also a proof and illustration of the grace exhibited in Christ.”¹⁷ What Jesus begins here, he amplifies in the next section.

There is a great difference, though, between what someone *may* do, and what someone *must* do. In vv. 10–13, Jesus demonstrates not only that he *may* forgive and call sinners as a matter left up to his discretion, but that he *must* forgive and call sinners as the mandate of his mission. So, immediately following Jesus’ call to Matthew, we find Jesus reclining at table in a house, so that “many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples” (v. 10). While the scribes were offended by Jesus’ pronouncement to forgive the sins of the paralytic earlier (v. 3), it is now the Pharisees who rebuke Jesus’ disciples for the bad company kept by their master: “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (v. 11).

This time, Jesus does not simply know the thoughts of his enemies; he hears what they say, and responds: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (vv. 12–13). Jesus recognizes that the Pharisees have distinguished the tax collectors and sinners as different from them by being more fully guilty and polluted by their sins. In contrast, the Pharisees believe themselves to be “righteous” (v. 13b). Once again, Jesus speaks effectively at multiple levels. At one level, Jesus is innocently clarifying the nature of his mission: “The saying simply defines the

¹⁴ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 421.

¹⁵ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 219.

¹⁶ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 351–52.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:399.

essential nature of Jesus’ messianic mission as he himself saw it...he is not dividing men into two groups but is disavowing one image of what Messiah should be and do, replacing it with the correct one. His mission was characterized by grace, a pursuit of the lost, of sinners.”¹⁸ In other words, Jesus is soothing the apprehensions of the Pharisees in their criticisms that he was spending time with the right sort of people. Not at all! These were the very people whom his mission compelled him to reach.

On the other hand, Jesus is also implicitly—yet powerfully—rebuking the hard-heartedness and lovelessness of the Pharisees. Lenski explains this well:

He takes these Pharisees’ own estimate that they are, indeed, “righteous men.” Then, of course, they do not need him. His business has to do only with “sinner,” the unrighteous, to give them the true righteousness. But the very way in which the argument is stated shatters the supposition of these Pharisees that they are really δίκαιοι [*dikaioi*; “righteous”], able to stand before God’s judgment bar. They had to feel that their claim to be righteous shut their own mouths when they complained about the help Jesus was offering to unrighteous sinners whom they only despised. And thus the hollowness of their own claim became apparent. Could they really be righteous when they knew no mercy for the sinners, were blind to the prophet’s word demanding that they have mercy, and railed at the merciful Physician who labored among those who, according to these Pharisees themselves, so sorely needed his help? We thus see how the reply of Jesus to these Pharisees was a masterful effort to reach their hearts; for they were even worse sinners than those whom they despised.¹⁹

As Calvin notes, this hard-heartedness is particularly prideful:

Now, if we feel disgust at being associated by Baptism and the Lord’s Supper with vile men, and regard our connection with them as a sort of stain upon us, we ought immediately to descend into ourselves, and to search without flattery our own evils. Such an examination will make us willingly allow ourselves to be washed in the same fountain with the most impure, and will hinder us from rejecting the righteousness which he offers indiscriminately to all the ungodly, the life which he offers to the dead, and the salvation which he offers to the lost.²⁰

It is not the mission and mandate of Jesus alone to call sinners, but the requirement of God for all his people: “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice” (v. 13; Hos. 6:6). The Pharisees criticized Jesus for doing the very thing that God had called his people to do.

¹⁸ Carson, “Matthew,” 265.

¹⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 366–67.

²⁰ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:402–03.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think that Jesus begins his conversation with the paralytic by telling him to “take heart,” and assuring him that his sins are forgiven (v. 2)? How does their “faith” play into this forgiveness (v. 2)? Why do the scribes think that Jesus is blaspheming by pronouncing the forgiveness of his sins (v. 3)? What do the scribes get right in this about human authority to forgive sins? What do the scribes get wrong in this about Jesus’ authority to forgive sins?
2. Why does Jesus charge the scribes with “evil” (v. 4)? Why is Jesus’ question so difficult to answer: “For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk?’” (v. 5)? How many different angles might someone answer this question? What point(s) is Jesus making by this question? How does healing the paralytic prove the authority of Jesus to forgive sins (v. 6)? What do the people learn about Jesus’ authority from all this (v. 8)?
3. Why do you think all the Synoptic Gospels narrate the call of Matthew immediately after the healing of the paralytic (Matt. 9:9–13; Mark 2:13–17; and Luke 5:27–32)? How do these two stories relate? Why does Jesus then recline at a table with other tax collectors and sinners after calling Matthew to be his disciple (v. 10)? How does this demonstrate the absolute authority of Jesus to forgive sins?
4. What does Jesus’ response to the Pharisees in vv. 12–13 tell us about his mission? Whom did Jesus come to call as his followers (v. 13)? Whom does this mission exclude? Why does Jesus permit us to approach him when we recognize that we are sinners, but not when we believe we are righteous? Why is it so hard for us to admit that we are sinners? Does this authority and assignment of Jesus to forgive and call sinners give you comfort? Why or why not?