

Chapter 33: The Merciful Son of David

Matthew 9:27–34

In the last passage, we considered Jesus' compassion. He does not only possess authority, but he possesses compassion to use that authority for the good of his people. As we come to the final section of a cycle of stories dealing with Jesus' healings, we are confronted with the question of how people respond to Jesus' authority and compassion. In Matthew 9:27–34, we see that *Jesus is the merciful Son of David*. Even so, will people trust him to extend to them the mercy that they need, or will they reject him in one way or another?

The Significance of Jesus' Power (Matt. 9:27–31)

After restoring the ruler's daughter to life, Matthew tells us that Jesus "passed on from there" (v. 27a). On his way, "two blind men followed him, crying aloud, 'Have mercy on us, Son of David'" (v. 27b). This is not the first time that Jesus has been identified as the "Son of David" in the Gospel of Matthew, since establishing Jesus' lawful claim to the throne of David through his adoption by Joseph was one of the pressing themes of Matthew 1 (see Matt. 1:1, 20). Nevertheless, this is the first time where someone *calls* Jesus the Son of David.¹ By this term, they were confessing Jesus as the Messiah, the heir to the Davidic kingdom, and the restorer of Israel, as will become clear when the chief priests and scribes try to stop others who will come to call Jesus the Son of David in Matt. 21:15–16.² There is a wonderful irony that blind men should *see* this fact so clearly, and so early.³ Along these lines, it is worth noting Jesus healed the blind more often than any other category of people, and yet we do not find stories of the blind being healed anywhere else in the entire Bible outside the Gospels.⁴

Strangely, Matthew suggests that Jesus ignores them, for we do not hear Jesus' response until he has entered "the house" (v. 28a). This seems at odds with Jesus' habit of responding immediately to the needs of those who present themselves before him, including the people in the immediately preceding story.⁵ Why, then, does Jesus ignore the blind men? In part, it is likely that Jesus does not want to respond to people who are calling out to him as "Son of David," since the term carried with

¹ Carson, "Matthew," 272.

² Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 435.

³ Carson, "Matthew," 272; "It is interesting...that in Matthew such recognition comes primarily from blind people and Gentiles (viewed by many as spiritually blind)." (Blomberg, *Matthew*, 162–63.)

⁴ Morris qualifies his point: "the restoration of sight to Saul of Tarsus, Acts 9:17–18, is not of the same order." (Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 232.) The restoring of sight to the struck-blind Syrian army in 2 Kings 6 is also substantially different.

⁵ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 233.

it an idea of a political king, whose kingdom is of this world.⁶ From another angle, it appears that Jesus intended to test the sincerity of their faith.⁷ To do this, Jesus not only “holds them in suspense,” but he “tries their patience” by ignoring them.⁸ Yet, when Jesus asks them if they believe that he is “able to do this” (v. 28b), their response “is immediate and decisive”: “Yes, Lord” (v. 28c).⁹ It is unclear exactly what Jesus is seeking, although he certainly does not wish for them to think of him as a political king.¹⁰ It is also possible, as Calvin has suggested, that he is testing whether they believe that he is *willing* to do what they have asked him to do, for “our knowledge of his power will be cold and unprofitable, if we are not convinced of his willingness.”¹¹ Osborne is probably the closest when he judges that the “emphasis is on the depth and certainty of their faith.”¹²

Jesus then does for them what they ask of him: “Then he touched their eyes, saying, ‘According to your faith be it done to you’” (v. 29). Blomberg rightly notes that, when Jesus says “according to your faith,” he “means *in response to* not *in proportion to* their faith.”¹³ In other words, their faith was not a meritorious work, and neither was it the power behind Jesus’ healing. Instead, Jesus is proving that their trust in him was well-founded: “Their trust in his divine power is justified by what this divine power works in them.”¹⁴ With that word, “their eyes were opened” (v. 30a).

Just as Jesus responded strangely by ignoring the blind men until he was in private with them, so again Jesus acts strangely: “And Jesus sternly warned them, ‘See that no one knows about it’” (v. 30b). As Osborne observes, “The language here is particularly strong, with ἐνεβριμήθη [*enebrimēthē*] (meaning “filled with anger” in John 11:33, 38) a stern admonition here, almost a rebuke. Jesus could not be more direct; he wanted no one to know.”¹⁵ The reasons behind both instances of Jesus’ strange behavior are likely linked: here, as earlier, Jesus does not want the public to come to think of him as “the Son of David”—not because that would be wrong, but because they would understand the meaning of “Son of David” wrongly.¹⁶

The fact that Matthew captures the sternness of Jesus’ warning may also anticipate their ultimate disobedience:¹⁷ “But they went away and spread his fame through all that district” (v. 31). Still, it is difficult to know how to judge their disobedience. Are we to criticize their unfaithfulness to the Lord’s words, or are we to sympathize with their boundless joy over the Lord’s kindness (i.e., that

⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 377.

⁷ Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 254.

⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 1:417.

⁹ Osborne, *Matthew*, 355.

¹⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 377–78.

¹¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:417.

¹² Osborne, *Matthew*, 355.

¹³ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 163.

¹⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 378.

¹⁵ Osborne, *Matthew*, 356.

¹⁶ “Yet he could not specify this point and the reasons for not allowing himself to be broadcast as the great heir to David’s throne; for such explanations could not be made clear to these men, mere beginners in faith that they were.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 379.)

¹⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 368.

“what had happened to them was so incredible that they could not keep it to themselves”)?¹⁸ Osborne writes, “There are probably aspects of both here.”¹⁹

The Singularity of Jesus’ Power (Matt. 9:32–33)

As in the preceding story (Matt. 10:18–26), one interaction leads directly into the next: “As they were going away, behold...” (v. 32a).²⁰ This time, “a demon-oppressed man who was mute was brought” to Jesus (v. 32). We read Jesus’ speaking only one word to cast out the demons from the two men in the Gadarenes (Matt. 8:28–34). Here, we see a similar minimalistic treatment of Jesus’ casting out of the demon: “And when the demon had been cast out, the mute man spoke” (v. 33a). As Nolland observes, this description is so minimal that we must “infer from the context even the fact that Jesus was responsible for the exorcism.”²¹ The reason for such a minimalistic treatment is to focus our attention not so much on what Jesus *does* as to how the people *respond*: “more than half of this little pericope deals rather with the subsequent responses.”²²

The first response comes from the crowd, who marvel at Jesus’ deeds: “And the crowds marveled, saying, ‘Never was anything like this seen in Israel’” (v. 33b). As most commentators observe, this response does not encompass only the exorcism of the mute demon-possessed man, but rather all of the miracles that Jesus has performed in Matthew 8–9.²³ This response of the crowd to Jesus’ miracles corresponds to the response of the crowd after Jesus finished teaching: “And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, or he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes” (Matt. 7:28–29). Jesus is singular in his words and his works; there is no one like him.

It is difficult to know precisely how to characterize the response of the crowds, since they are notoriously fickle. Today, they are amazed; however, we cannot read their praises of Jesus without immediately thinking of their eventual demand that Jesus be crucified, and that Barabbas be released instead (Matt. 27:21–23). Theologians typically speak of three parts of faith: (1) knowledge, (2) assent, and (3) trust. When James says that “even the demons believe—and shudder” (Jas. 2:19), he means that they have the first two parts of faith: knowledge and assent. What makes the demons demonic, is that they believe without trusting. In the same way, this crowd believes that Jesus’ power is unprecedented, but they do not cry out to him for mercy as the Son of David as the blind men did.

The Source of Jesus’ Power (Matt. 9:34)

Yet, while it is difficult to understand the mind of the crowds, the mind of the Pharisees is unmistakable: “But the Pharisees said, ‘He casts out demons by the prince of demons’” (v. 34).

¹⁸ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 402.

¹⁹ Osborne, *Matthew*, 356.

²⁰ “The connection of time is plainly marked: those coming in passed those going out.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 379.)

²¹ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 403.

²² France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 368.

²³ e.g., Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 380.

Whereas the crowd have some “sense of the divine glory,” the “wickedness [of the Pharisees] has reached the height of blindness, [so that] there is no work of God, however evident, which it will not pervert.”²⁴ It is not even that the Pharisees tried “to deny the reality of these mighty works....They did something even more wicked. It was to the enabling influence of Satan, the prince of the demons, that they ascribed Christ’s power to perform miracles.”²⁵

Lenski notes that the Pharisees will again attribute Satan as the source of Jesus’ power in Matthew 12:24, after Jesus again casts out demons: “The fact that they have an answer only to the miracles wrought upon demoniacs indicates that they had no reply for all the other miracles. Matthew thus informs us that in his miracles Jesus met this opposition and that it centered only on this one type of miracle.”²⁶ Here, we see the height of blindness—not only to misunderstand something, but to rage against it to such a degree that they contrive a twisted, demonic explanation for the salvation of God in their midst.

Discussion Questions

1. What do the blind men cry out to Jesus (v. 27)? What do they ask for when they seek Jesus’ mercy? What did the title “Son of David” mean? Why is it important to see that blind men are the ones who call Jesus the “Son of David”? Why does Jesus ignore their request at first? Is Jesus worthy of their trust in him? What do these blind men teach us about the significance of Jesus’ power?
2. What does Jesus do for the man who was demon-possessed and mute (v. 32–33)? Why does Matthew tell the story of Jesus’ exorcism of this demon so indirectly? How do the crowds respond to Jesus’ various miracles of healing that we have read throughout this section (v. 33)? What is good about their response? What is lacking from their response? How does the whole Gospel of Matthew teach us to understand the dynamics of the crowd?
3. How do the Pharisees react to Jesus’ casting out a demon (v. 34)? Why did they not reject whether Jesus had cast out the demon, and instead criticize the source of Jesus’ power to cast out the demon? Why do you think that the Pharisees react to Jesus’ power in this way? What is missing and lacking from their response to Jesus’ power? In what ways do people reject Jesus’ power today? How are those rejections similar to that of the Pharisees? How are they different?
4. How do you respond to the power and authority of Jesus? If you have read this far, you have knowledge—but do you assent to that knowledge as true? Why or why not? If you assent to the knowledge as true, do you trust in that knowledge for yourself? Why or why not? Do you see the fact that Jesus is the merciful Son of David as significant for you? What would it take for you to follow the example of the blind men to cry out to him for his mercy?

²⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:419.

²⁵ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 438.

²⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 380–81.