
The Authority of Jesus to Forgive

Matthew 9:1-17

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Do you believe Jesus has the authority to forgive sins? Don't give me the right theological answer you have been taught. Give me what you really believe. Most of us believe Jesus will forgive us. Think of the worst person you know personally. Would you be glad if God forgave them and called them to follow Him? Would you go to a celebratory feast to share their story with others?

No, I mean, really. Don't make it theoretical. Make it real. In your thoughts, name that person right now... I hope you are ready for what the Spirit through Matthew's writing is going to say to us.

In Forgiving a Sinner (v.1-8)

Jesus' claim to forgive sin is unmistakable.

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.

Who Jesus is and what Jesus can do is authenticated by His words and His deeds.

Back Home (v.1)

After the confrontation with the demon possessed men and the people of the city, Jesus returns to His hometown. Jesus' ministry is clearly rejected by the people of that region. They send Him away. So, of course this involves getting back into the boat. I wonder if there were any hesitations. Or has faith now pushed aside fear?

They come back to Jesus' own city. This is neither Bethlehem nor Nazareth. This is Capernaum. Jesus has made this new hometown. It is in a strategic location and was the home of Peter and some of his family.

The Faith of Friends (v.2)

Matthew is not focused on giving us a lot of details about these stories. We know from Mark that they were in a house that was very crowded. The faith of these friends was such that they not only brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus, but

they had to remove the roof tiles to do so. They believed Jesus could heal their friend. How do they know He can? Possibly they had heard and believed the news or the stories from the earlier healing of the Centurion's servant.

How does Jesus *see* their faith? Does He know it supernaturally by looking into their hearts? No, He sees their faith by what they do. Their belief in Jesus' power and authority over disease can be seen by their actions. Faith is seen by doing. The disciples lack of faith was evident in the storm because of their fear. The faith of these friends was unmistakable, visual.

James in chapter 1 of his letter says much the same. James was there observing what happened on this day. He learned what Jesus was showing and what Matthew was highlighting. You can talk about your faith. But what you really believe is clear from what you want, what you do and how you feel.

The Forgiveness of Sins (v.2)

The young man seems to have been depressed. Jesus says, "Take heart..." This phrase is almost always addressed to the discouraged, the downcast. Jesus then says what for His day and for His time was an astonishing thing. It is still not something any human being on earth can say. "Your sins are forgiven you." Jesus is not saying that someone else has forgiven those sins. This is not a declaration on behalf of God or others. Jesus is saying, "It is I who forgive all your sins. I do not hold any of the charges of your sins against anymore."

Now how do we know that? The reaction of the scribes makes it clear they understood what Jesus was saying.

The Charge of Blasphemy (v.3-4)

Some of the scribes charge Jesus with blasphemy. They understood that Jesus was making a "God statement." Only God can forgive sins against God. I can forgive your sins against me. But what Jesus said, and the scribes understood is the Jesus was forgiving this man's sins *against God*. Jesus is simply making a transparent claim to being God. He is claiming to have the authority to forgive sins against God.

To the religious leaders this was blasphemy. This was claiming a right, an authority that belonged to God alone. They are, in modern terms, freaked out.

The Assertion of Authority (v.6-7)

How does Jesus know their thoughts? Is he a reader of hearts here? I don't think so. Jesus could and often did, but that is not Matthew's point. The thoughts in their heart come out in the words of their mouth. "Out of the heart, the mouth speaks." Words are the voice of the heart.

Jesus turns their accusation back on them. This is a public dialog. The room is full. The disciples are nearby. The paralyzed man and his friends are in front of Jesus. His gaze pierces into the scribes. "Why do you think evil in your hearts?" What is the evil they are thinking? The evil they are thinking is that Jesus does

not have the authority to forgive sins. The charge of blasphemy is a result, not the cause. This is not “little faith”. This is damning doubt. It is evil thinking.

But then Jesus takes the sword of His Word and pierces even their false reading of the scriptures. The Jews of Jesus day believed that major diseases and illnesses were connected to sins. Unless a person confessed their sins, they would never be healed. This is patently not true in either the Old or New Testament. There are many reasons for a person’s infirmities and afflictions, one of which is the glory of God.

Now, what do you think is the answer to, “Which is harder to say?” Is it harder to say, “Be healed”? Or harder to say, “Sins are forgiven?” Listen, for anyone but God to forgive sins against God is *impossible*. That is the point. Only the person sinned against can forgive. I cannot forgive you on behalf of someone else. So, that which is impossible for us Jesus has the authority to do. He is God. He can forgive sins.

But then to prove that He has power to forgive sins, Jesus raises the paralytic. He commands the man to rise and take his bed and walk. Jesus clearly expects that when the man is healed for everyone to accept that He is God and that He can and does forgive sins.

The Response of Worship (v.8)

The man gets up and went home. Enough said. He believes Jesus has healed him. How do we know? He got up. His actions show, express what is true and what he believes. There is no weakness. There is no learning to walk. He rises and is fully, completely healed.

And he is forgiven of his sins. Jesus said that if He could heal the man, then His sins were forgiven. There goes the man. The paralytic has been freed from both the confinement of his paralysis and from the guilt of his sins.

There were two responses that constitute worship. People were afraid and they praised God. What was the reason they praised God? They were thankful that God had granted this person the authority to forgive sin. There was now, among people, someone who could grant forgiveness. This was worthy of worship, of fear and praise.

One writer says, “The impact of the authority of Jesus is impossible to miss. Matthew has laid enormous stress on it. It is seen in his teaching (7:28–29). It is seen in his power over sicknesses as varied as leprosy, fever and paralysis (8:1–17). It is seen in his authority over nature (8:23–27) and over the demons (8:28–34). And now, climactically, he claims the authority to exercise the divine function of forgiving sins. And he backs it up by a spectacular healing. The implication is obvious; the challenge inescapable.” (Green, p. 122)

In Calling a Tax Collector (v. 9)

Jesus' call to forgiven sinners is unmistakable.

⁹ 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.

Jesus can call the most despised to follow Him and forgive their sins as well.

The Man at His Table

Matthew relates his own call to follow Jesus. He puts this in the context of Jesus' power and authority to forgive sins. It is meant for us to tie it together. Why?

What Matthew did for a living was despised by the Jews. He was serving the occupation Roman government. He was appointed to collect the taxes the Romans levied on the Jews. Tax collectors were often considered to be traitors to their country, to their people and to God. The evil was magnified because the Roman government allowed tax collectors to assess and collect whatever they wanted. All that was required was to collect enough to pay the tax owed by the Romans. The result is that many tax collectors got very rich by levying and demanding high taxes. Many have compared this how we feel about lawyers in our culture.

The Disciple with His Lord

Jesus stops by the table, here identified as a tax booth, where Matthew is collecting the taxes. Jesus simply issues a command. Jesus issues the call to follow Him. This is not a call to someone we would consider a good person. To the Jewish mind, here was a vile, despicable traitor who simply leaves all and follows Jesus. That is the point. This sin laden man – no more than any of us – hears Jesus' Word and he immediately gets up. He leaves his booth. He leaves his lucrative job. He leaves the security of his isolation. He follows Jesus. It seems to be immediate, without question and a total surrender to be a disciple of Jesus.

Don't miss this though. Matthew can become a follower of Jesus because Jesus has the authority to forgive his sins. Forgiven, Matthew follows.

In Eating with Sinners (v.10-13)

Jesus' poise to forgive sinners is unmistakable.

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

It is likely that Matthew is hosting this party. He has invited his friends. Matthew is showing how forgiveness works. The person accepts the truth of being forgiven. The forgiven person is called to discipleship. The forgiven person as a disciple shares Christ with friends.

The Party with New Friends (v.10)

Jesus and the disciples, including Matthew, are at the house. I am assuming this is either the house Jesus had or, more likely, Matthew's house. They are reclining at the table because people in that day did not sit in chairs. The room is open, and Matthew's friends join them. Other tax collectors and sinners of the worst sort are joining in at the feast.

The Challenge by Religious Leaders (v.11)

Now the Pharisees have something to say. They have entered where the feast is being held. They approach the disciples and demand an explanation. This is not a friendly, "Help me understand..." This is a "What is wrong with your rabbi that he would do such a thing? Why are you supporting it?" Righteous people are not associate with sinners. They will be contaminated and corrupted by them. Or so the Pharisees believed.

The Response of Mercy (v.12-13)

Jesus' response is biting. It is meant to connect this situation with the healing of the paralytic. We had better not miss this. Matthew is still talking about forgiveness. The sarcasm is dripping. The Pharisees have no need of a *physician*. After all, they are not sick. They are well. They are righteous. And because they think like this, they are the ones beyond forgiveness. They do not see their own need. They can only condemn the neediness, the sinfulness of others.

Here is what they must learn. This is what they do not understand. The Old Testament was clear in text after text. What God desires is mercy, not sacrifice. This is not the substitutionary sacrifice of lambs. This is the excessive righteousness that demands the sacrifice of sinners. What God requires is the mercy that offers forgiveness. These sinners need the healing of salvation's forgiveness, not the bloody, sacrificial knives of religious legalists.

Just to make sure that they get it, Jesus says, "For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." Know who is Jesus is pointing to? Matthew... the disciples... a room full of sinners.

In Explaining New Wineskins (v.14-17)

Jesus' teaching about forgiving sinners is unmistakable.

¹⁴Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" ¹⁵And 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. ¹⁶No 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. ¹⁷Neither 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."

Notice that Matthew is not changing subjects. At that feast, in that moment, with Jesus' declaration, John the Baptist's disciples have a question. The question is about fasting. They are confused about Jesus' feasting. Jesus' answer is about forgiveness in this age of the new covenant.

The Puzzled Question (v,14)

Unfortunately, the disciples of John connect themselves to the Pharisees. They say, "Why do we, the righteous people, fast but Jesus' disciples don't?" Now I think this is being asked at the feast. They are watching this go on. They are not concerned about the sinners at the table, give them credit. They are concerned about the disciples not doing what all God's true people do. Should they not be fasting instead of all this partying?

The Helpful Analogies (v.15-17)

Jesus responds with three vivid analogies. One is certainly tuned for the ears of the church.

Why would guests mourn (the real reason for real fasting) when the groom is with them? That is not the time for fasting. That is the time for feasting. There will be a proper time to fast and mourn... but not yet, not today. Jesus is here with His divine authority to forgive sins. This does not make us sad. This fills us with joy.

The second and third analogies are related. You don't patch an old garment with a new piece of cloth that has not been washed and shrunk. The old garment will become useless if the new patch is not fitted for it. Old garments need to be patched with old cloths. Similarly, one does not put new wine in old wineskins. The wine and the skins will be destroyed. New wine must be put in new wine skins.

The Coming Newness (v.16-17)

What is Jesus implying and what is Matthew teaching?

The Old Covenant with its Mosaic code cannot be patched, fixed up, made useful by merely patching it with pieces of New Covenant truths.

The Old Covenant with its Mosaic code cannot bear the new wine of the New Covenant. The New Covenant is not meant for Old Covenant containers. It is meant for new containers and new ways arising from new understanding of truths.

What has this to do with Jesus' authority, forgiveness and mercy? It has everything to do with it. The mercy of God and the authority to forgive the sins of sinners is a part of the new cloth and the new wine. The old was never meant to be the final thing. It was meant to be temporary. It was meant to be in force until Christ came with His Kingship and authority. It was meant to give way to the New Covenant with its mercy and forgiveness.

The Old Covenant was a sufficient garment and a useful wineskin during its time. But the time of scribe and Pharisee and John's baptism and disciples was passing. Now Jesus has come and everything is becoming new. There are new cloths, new wineskins for the new covenant.

Reflect and Respond

Why do we get wrong what is so clear from this text?

- Jesus' claim to forgive sin is unmistakable.
- Jesus' call to forgiven sinners is unmistakable.
- Jesus' poise to forgive sinners is unmistakable.
- Jesus' teaching about forgiving sinners is unmistakable.

Now is the age of the gospel, of mercy for the Gentiles, yes for any sinner. Now is the age of forgiveness, of being accepted in the beloved.

Now is the age of the gospel, where crippled sinners, tax collectors and sinners are all shown mercy and may be forgiven of their sins.

Now is the age of the gospel where Jesus has made a feast and invited us to come and dine.

Now is the age of the gospel where the new wineskins of the church are filled with the new wine of the gospel. Do not try to pour this new wine into the old skin of the Mosaic Law. You will destroy both.

Remember that God desires mercy, not sacrifice. If we are to be merciful to the lost, how much more merciful must we be to those around the table?

Do you often find yourself to be like the scribes, using the Bible to challenge Jesus' authority?

Do you often find yourself to be like the Pharisees, quickly judging the spiritual liberty and freedom of God's people?

Do you often find yourself to be like the John's disciples, not quite understanding that Jesus has come and now is not the time for mourning but the time for joy?

Do you need Jesus' mercy? Jesus' forgiveness? Will you submit to Jesus' authority?