

Matthew 9:1-17: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 00] Matthew chapter 9 verses 1 to 17 He then said to the paralytic, Rise, pick up your bed, and go home.
- And he rose and went home. When the crowd saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God who had given such authority to men. 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. And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples.
- And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners? But when he heard it, he said, 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. Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?
- [1 : 44] And 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. No 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.
- Neither 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.
- In Matthew chapter 9, we continue the sequence of miracles that we began in chapter 8. That sequence began with the cleansing of the leper, the healing of the centurion's servant, the healing of the fever of Peter's mother-in-law, and then went on to the calming of the storm, the casting out of the two demons, and now we get to the healing of the paralytic.
- These miracles come in threes. The first three are more private, less dramatic miracles. The second three are more dramatic, and come with the sense of authority, and the response to these miracles is particularly highlighted.
- The first miracle of chapter 9 ends the second cycle of miracles, a cycle which places this emphasis upon people's reaction of fear and wonder to Jesus. The authority of Christ is emphasised, and opposition starts to emerge.
- [3 : 09] And in the final cycle, Jesus' fame spreads far further. This block of miracles isn't just a grab bag of stuff that Jesus did, but it's like the rest of Matthew. It's progressively presenting a case for the identity and the authority of Christ, and moving the larger story forward.
- The healing of the paralytic occurs when Jesus returns to his own city from the land of the Gadarenes. From chapter 4, verse 13, we know that the city is Capernaum. The paralytic is carried to him by others on a bed, and Jesus responds to their faith by declaring the sins of the paralytic forgiven.

We've already seen an association between faith and Jesus' work in the encounter with the centurion, and in Jesus' challenging of his disciples for their little faith in the calming of the sea.

We see a further example later on in the healing of the woman with the issue of blood, and the blind man. The faith, in such cases, is looking to Christ for deliverance. It doesn't come with any pretensions of its own or confidence in itself, but just reaches out to him.

And in the centurion's case, Jesus declared that such faithful persons would sit with the patriarchs in the kingdom. And in this case, Jesus declares the sins of the paralysed man to be forgiven.

[4 : 25] As in the case of the centurion, it's noteworthy that Jesus is performing these miracles on account of the faith of someone other than the person who's receiving the healing. Faith is extremely important, but it's not always the faith of the person who is delivered by the miracle.

On some occasions like this, it's someone else entirely. Reading the story of the paralysed man here, we might be reminded of the benefit of praying for others, of bringing them before Christ, even though they may be paralysed in some way, that they may not be able to come before Christ themselves.

We can carry them. And that insistent bringing people before Christ might be part of the calling that we have been given. The scribes think that Christ is blaspheming, claiming a prerogative that is God's alone.

Only God can forgive sins. But Jesus can read their hearts, and he, as a demonstration of his true authority, heals the man. If he did not, in fact, have this authority to forgive sins, God would not give the confirming sign of the healing that follows.

It's a two-stage healing. It's an inward healing, the forgiveness of his sins, and then an outward healing. Jesus once again speaks of himself here as the Son of Man.

[5 : 38] He's acting in a particular office. The Son of Man is a human figure of eschatological significance, a sort of uber-prophet. We can think of the way that it's used in Ezekiel.

The common argument that Jesus forgives sins as proof that he is God seems to me to short-circuit the case that the Gospels actually present for Christ's divinity. The response of the crowd is important to notice here.

They do not see this as proof of his divinity, but proof that this is a truly remarkable prophet. This is a prophet like no other. To whom does God give authority to forgive sins in this way?

You can think about the authority that God gives to people like Elijah and Elisha. They act with authority. They can do great deeds without necessarily having to pray for them to occur.

They are invested with power to do certain acts. But this Jesus of Nazareth seems to be invested with a far greater power than any of these former prophets.

[6 : 37] There's something about him that stands out. And the more that we follow this through in Matthew, the more that we'll realise that he has been given the full authority of God. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given into his hands.

And he acts with the authority of God's very name. This is, I believe, how we'll arrive at a proper account of Christ's divinity. It's a longer route, but it leads to a more decisive understanding.

Jesus now calls Matthew. Tax collectors were despised for their collaborations with the Romans, but also for their injustice. Not only did they deal with Gentiles, they were dealing with the imperial oppressor.

The fact that Jesus would eat with such persons was scandalous to many observing Jews. The setting is important. Jesus is reclining at a table in a house with these people.

This is, as it were, a picture of Israel. The picture of Israel of eating around the table. And in Jesus' ministry, Jesus, particularly in Luke's gospel, but also in the other gospels, Jesus often teaches in the context of a meal.

[7 : 42] A meal table teaches that Israel is being redefined. And a meal table is a picture of that. And at this meal table, all the wrong people are present. It's not just the centurion who's a faithful person who will recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

It's also tax collectors and sinners, the people who are not welcome within polite society. And here the Pharisees enter the picture as one of the key antagonists of Christ in his ministry.

They challenge Christ for his action. And questioning his disciples. But Jesus hears it. And he responds by drawing attention to the character of the law.

He quotes Hosea chapter 6, verse 6. And the original context of that is God's restoration of his people. This isn't just individual repentance. It's God restoring his people to fellowship with him.

And this verse provides a framework for perceiving the entire law. Jesus quotes it again in Matthew chapter 12, verse 7, where he's challenged concerning his practice on the Sabbath.

[8 : 46] Later on in chapter 23, verse 23, he'll talk about the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy, and faith. Earlier on in the Beatitudes, he has said, blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Christ is on a mission of mercy, a mission of righteousness that sets things right that have gone wrong. And this was what the law was always about. This is what God always wanted. We've gone through Jesus' manifesto in chapters 5 to 7 in the Sermon on the Mount, an account of saving righteousness, of righteousness that restores and sets things right that are broken.

And Jesus is teaching the same thing here. God desires that sort of righteousness, not just sacrifice and a multiplication of bulls and rams and goats.

God desires people to give their hearts. God desires people to show mercy and to heal and restore those that are lost. And yet, as tax collectors and sinners seek to get close to Christ to find forgiveness and restoration, all the Pharisees and the scribes can see is a failure on Christ's part to keep himself fully separate.

Something has gone deeply wrong in the way that they see the purpose of God's law. After he has responded to the Pharisees, Jesus is approached by the disciples of John who ask him concerning fasting.

[10 : 08] Jesus' response is one that underlines who he is. He is the bridegroom with his people. And when the bridegroom is around, there should be joy and delight. It should be a time of feasting and celebration.

There will be a time when the bridegroom goes and at that time, it will be appropriate to fast. But while the bridegroom is still there, they should be celebrating. Christ is the one who's restoring Israel.

He's also the bridegroom come to the bride. And as it were, he's inaugurating the great feast of the end of history in the middle of history. People are having a foretaste of what it's like to have the marriage supper of the Lamb.

This response further underlines the importance of what Jesus is doing in these meals and their symbolic significance. After the illustration of the bridegroom and the feasting associated with the wedding, Jesus gives a further illustration.

An illustration of putting unshrunk cloth upon an old garment, followed up by another example of putting new wine into old wineskins. The importance for Christ is that both need to be preserved.

[11:16] There are the practices of the law, the practices of the old order, but there's also the practices associated with fulfillment of the law. And those practices can't be contained by the structure of the law itself.

Those old wineskins will be burst by this new practice of the kingdom. But that doesn't mean that the old practices of the law are to be just rejected and dismissed and ridiculed.

They have their place and they are to be preserved in their proper place. But yet the order of the kingdom is one that goes far beyond them. The contrast here may be more explicitly seen in the difference between John and his disciples, who are existing within those older structures, and Jesus and his disciples, who were the new wine that could not be put into the structure of the old wineskins.

A question to consider. Here and elsewhere, Jesus uses meals and feasts as a framework within which to reimagine Israel and its identity and the order of the kingdom.

What are some of the ways in which our practice of the Lord's Supper can reorder our societies in the light of the kingdom to come?