

“Faith Alone”
Matthew 9:1-13
January 7, 2018

INTRODUCTION:

Chapters 8-9 of Matthew’s Gospel contain stories of several of Jesus’ miracles, which are sometimes referred to as “signs and wonders.” They are wonders in that they inspire awe on the part of those who observe them or read about them. But they are also signs, pointing to the truth that Jesus is the King who comes to establish God’s kingdom. The peace, justice and prosperity we all long for will be brought to reality through the work of Jesus. We called the miracles of chapter 8 “restoration miracles” because they show Jesus’ ability to restore creation to its original harmony, free of the curse from sin.

The miracles of chapter 9 focus on the root problem of all, the sinfulness of mankind. The greatest problem facing this world is not disease or environmental degradation or even the injustice the powerful inflict on the powerless. Those are all problems that Jesus will put right. But the greatest problem facing the world is that every single human being has been put under a sentence of everlasting condemnation because of our mutiny against our Creator. We have all said in our hearts, if not with our mouths, “I don’t want God in my life.” The good news of the kingdom is that Jesus has come to take care of this problem too.

But humanity has a part to play in their own healing, and that part is well-described in one of the “solas” of the Reformation, Faith Alone. Our salvation is by faith alone, which means that we contribute not a single ounce of merit for our salvation. The attempt to do so is just one more expression of our rebellion against God. But while we don’t contribute any merit to our salvation, we are to come to Jesus. This is expressed beautifully in that hymn we sing. “Come, ye sinners, poor and wretched, weak and wounded, sick and sore; Jesus ready stands to save you... come, ye weary, heavy laden, bruised and broken by the fall; if you tarry till you’re better, you will never come at all; not the righteous, not the righteous—sinners Jesus came to call.” The two miracles in today’s passage teach us all about faith and its nature. Let’s look more carefully at each story.

I. Faith in Christ Alone brings Forgiveness – v. 1-8

A paralyzed man is brought to Jesus for healing. Matthew is very spare in the details of this story, omitting the extraordinary detail supplied by both Mark and Luke. They tell us that Jesus was inside a crowded house, so crowded that it was not possible to bring a paralyzed man to him. Undeterred,

the friends of the paralyzed man tore a hole through the roof of the house and lowered him to Jesus. Matthew says that **“when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven’** (v. 2). I understand Matthew to be speaking of the faith of the friends, not that of the paralytic. This ought to be a great encouragement to all who have friends and loved ones who need Jesus. Through prayer we can bring our spiritually paralyzed loved ones to Jesus for his healing.

Jesus’ response to the paralytic must have been something of a surprise to him and his friends. They came to Jesus for healing of his paralysis, and Jesus makes a pronouncement about his sins being forgiven. Jesus responds like this in order to make the clear statement that our root problem is not physical but spiritual. Our physical illnesses are but symptoms of our spiritual malady, our sinful rebellion against God. Jesus has come to remove both the root and fruit of sin, and his forgiveness of this man is the removal of its root. Sometimes Jesus starts with the root, as in this case, and sometimes with the fruit. But for any who come to him in faith, he will remove both. Sometimes there will be a wait required between the removal of the root and fruit. All of us who know Jesus are in that waiting period even now, with our sins forgiven fully but not all the fruit of sin being yet removed.

There were scribes in the crowd whose theological antenna went up when Jesus made his pronouncement. Scribes were the Bible scholars of the day, and they heard in Jesus’ words what they considered blasphemy. It’s very different to say, “The Lord forgives you” and to say “your sins are forgiven.” The first one recognizes what God has done while the second lays claim to the authority to make it so. They correctly understand Jesus to be making a claim of such authority, authority belonging only to God. Had these words been spoken by anyone else, they would be blasphemous. Jesus says that they are thinking evil in their hearts because they are not recognizing his authority.

So he asks them a question to help them come to recognize who he is. **“Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk?’**” (v. 5). What is the answer to Jesus’ question? Which is easier? It depends, doesn’t it? If your claim to forgive sins is a false claim, it’s easier to say, “Your sins are forgiven,” because that’s something that happens in the heart of God. There is no way for a man to know what is going on in the heart of God unless God tells us. But if Jesus’ claim to forgive sins is true, then it’s much easier to heal someone’s physical paralysis than to take away his sins. To heal sickness requires only a word from Jesus, since he is God, while taking away sins will require his death. So to demonstrate the authenticity of his claim to forgive sins, Jesus heals the man’s paralysis with a simple command: **“Rise, pick up your bed and go home”** (v. 6). He goes home healed both of his spiritual and physical paralysis.

Matthew mentions twice this going home, first in the words of Jesus and then in the description of what he did. Forgiveness is a “coming home” to God. It is a restoration of the way things are supposed to be, both with God and with one’s friends and family. Jesus brings such restoration.

This miracle tells the story of faith both positively and negatively. The paralytic and his friends are commended by Jesus for their faith, while the scribes are guilty of unbelief. Let me point out a couple of things we learn here about faith. First, faith is simply coming to Jesus. The faith of the paralytic’s friends is seen in that simple of fact of bringing their friend to Jesus, with a confidence that he will know what to do. In its essence, faith takes the mess of our lives and brings it to Jesus. We don’t even have to know what to ask Jesus to do with our mess. He knows. All we have to know is that Jesus can take care of it.

Second, faith is characterized by “taking heart.” Jesus says to the paralytic, **“Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.”** The word for take heart is something of a blend of “Cheer up” and “Have courage.” To illustrate its opposite, picture the time in the football game when the camera pans the sidelines of the team that knows the game is lost before the game actually is over. Heads are down and bodies immobile. Words like despair, dejection and gloom come to mind. But when we know that our sins are forgiven, the opposite happens. In a word, forgiveness is empowering. We experience that even on a human level when we are forgiven by a spouse or friend after acting selfishly. Even more so, assurance before God that our sins are fully forgiven, by a pronouncement of such from God himself, moves us, cheers us and equips us for life like nothing else. It gets rid of our spiritual paralysis. Perhaps you feel stuck, paralyzed even, right now. The answer is a return to the basic truth of sins forgiven.

II. Faith in Christ Alone Follows Jesus As We Are – v. 9-13

The early church regarded this story of the calling of Matthew as another miracle. Jesus called this tax-collector to follow him, and he did so. There is power in the call of Jesus. Matthew, the author of the Gospel we are reading, leaves his tax collection booth and follows Jesus. Tax collectors were viewed as traitors to their people because of their collaboration with the Roman government. Why would any Jewish man want to betray his people like that and experience the social ostracism accompanying such a job? Undoubtedly, it was from greed that he did so. Jesus’ powerful word can heal not only a paralytic but also a greedy, self-centered tax-collector.

Upon following Jesus, Matthew’s heart is changed from self-centered to self-giving. He becomes concerned for others and decides that other people need to experience the grace and love of Jesus just as he has. So he decides to

host a party and invite everyone he knows to come and meet Jesus. Since his only friends are other tax-collectors and social outsiders like himself, they are the ones who come to the party.

Following Jesus changed everything for Matthew, and it will change everything for each of us as well. The one thing you can do in 2018 or in any year that will bring joy and happiness to your heart is to follow Jesus no matter where he takes you. Gretchen Rubin is a thirty-something wife and mother who was experiencing what she called a “midlife malaise.” She decided to undertake a project she called “The Happiness Project,” after which she published in 2009 a book by that same title. She determined to devote herself to pursuing happiness and developed 12 personal commandments she believed would yield the happiness she sought. The first one was “Be Gretchen.” That is the essential ingredient in our culture for happiness. Be true to yourself. Look inward, follow your dreams, take care of #1. Matthew wrote a “Happiness Project” book too. It’s the one we’ve been studying. And he too has a number one rule for pursuing happiness, but it’s different than the American model. “Follow Jesus,” not “Be true to yourself,” guides Matthew.

What is your map for happiness? Is it a map that is true to reality, like Matthew’s, or a map that is based on a falsehood, like the American self-fulfillment emphasis? In 1879, Lieutenant George De Long set out with a crew on the USS *Jeannette* to be the first to sail to the North Pole and claim it for the United States. It was commonly believed in that day that the North Pole was surrounded by a polar sea that could easily be navigated by ship. This sea, it was believed, was rich in marine life and possibly even home to a lost civilization. There was a ring of ice around it, but all one had to do was to find the gap in the ring and sail into this polar sea. Cartographers were so sure of this that they drew this polar sea on their maps of the world. But this view, even though widely accepted at the time, was not true to reality. The effects were deadly. In September of 1879 the USS *Jeannette* got trapped in the ice pack, where it sat for almost two years before being crushed and sunk. Some of the crew made it Siberia and survived. De Long and other crew members died of starvation, frozen in the ice.

Is your map true to reality? If your map says, “Follow Jesus” as the number one priority, then it is. But what does following Jesus look like? It means that we have to be true to the reality of our sin. This becomes clear through yet another controversy Jesus gets into, this one with the Pharisees. They see Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners and cannot reconcile that with their understanding of what constitutes a holy life.

The Pharisees are easy to condemn, serving as the perpetual bad guys of the New Testament. But before we write them off as such, let me remind you of two things. First, they were the true conservatives of their day. They believed the Bible and took it seriously. Second, the Bible does commend separation

from sinners. The first psalm begins by pronouncing a blessing upon those who do not **“walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the way of sinners nor sit in the seat of scoffers.”** King David wrote, **“I will not sit with the wicked”** (Ps. 26:5). But here is Jesus sitting and eating with notorious sinners. But clearly the Pharisees are in the wrong here. Why? They are wrong because they underestimate the cleansing power of Jesus. The need for separation is to reduce our risk of being tainted by sin. But with Jesus, things work in the opposite direction. The clean Jesus doesn't get tainted by the filth of sin, but the filth of sin gets cleansed through Jesus. But as we will learn later, the cleansing Jesus brings will require that he take the blame for the filth of sin by receiving its guilt upon himself.

Jesus speaks of this cleansing he brings through a famous metaphor. **“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick”** (v. 12). I believe this is an example of sarcasm on Jesus' part. As I mentioned during my Christmas Eve meditation, sarcasm is a coded message missed by the unaware. The Pharisees likely found themselves agreeing with Jesus, while patting themselves on the back for being so spiritually healthy as not to need Jesus. They are not the last who try to avoid Jesus by avoiding sin. I like what Matthew Henry says about this verse. “Those who consider themselves righteous will sooner be sick of their Saviour than sick of their sins.”

So Jesus has a word to give to the Pharisees, and to us. **“Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice’”** (v. 13). He is quoting from Hosea 6:6. What would he have us learn from this? We are to learn that if we want to see ourselves as needy sinners we must focus on the heart instead of upon duty. A heart of mercy is what God desires. The Pharisees were champions at doing their duty. Duty is a good thing in itself, but a rotten thing by itself. If you mouth a prayer to God that consists only of words, there is a sense in which you have done your duty. But if your heart doesn't want to pray, your duty is a rotten hypocrisy. And guess what? We are all guilty of such hypocrisy. Jesus wants us to see the sickness of our hearts and come to him for healing. That is why he has come.

CONCLUSION:

I notice that Jesus is in the middle of many controversies. The scribes think him guilty of blasphemy and the Pharisees consider him guilty of insufficient separation from sinners. In the previous chapter, he was rejected by the Gentiles after he cast the demons into the herd of pigs and they ran into the sea. At the end of our current chapter, we find the Pharisees concluding that Jesus **“casts out demons by the prince of demons”** (9:34). Matthew Henry said it well: “None was more quarreled with by men than he that came to take up the great quarrel between God and man.” He brings peace in that latter quarrel to all who follow him.

Small Group Discussion Questions
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1. Can you think of a time in your life when you were refreshed and encouraged by the free forgiveness someone extended to you? Describe it.
2. For at least a brief time, the paralytic had his relationship with God restored prior to the use of his arms and legs. Though that gap was only a brief one for him, for many it is a much longer gap. Joni Eareckson Tada has been a quadriplegic for fifty years. In a recent article describing what she has learned over these fifty years, she wrote, “It sounds incredible, but I really would rather be in this wheelchair knowing Jesus as I do than be on my feet without him.” Think about Jesus’ statement to the paralytic to “take heart.” What does that mean and how can you do that with the trials and sufferings of your life?
3. After his healing, the paralytic is told to go home. What are some of the ways that receiving God’s forgiveness is like coming home?
4. Are there ways you can think of in which you are stuck (sort of spiritually paralyzed)? It might be a particular area of your life where you just don’t seem to be making any progress in your sanctification. Or it might be a loss of motivation, even a depression. What would it look like to come to Jesus for healing of your paralysis?
5. The singular call of Jesus to Matthew was, “Follow me.” We said that this was Matthew’s “Happiness Project” (see sermon text). What are the rivals to following Jesus that you look to for happiness?
6. Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6 to the Pharisees and tells them that they need to learn what it means. In saying that God desires mercy over sacrifice, he is saying that we will come to see that we are among the sick in need of Dr. Jesus as we focus on the heart rather than duty. Duty is a good thing in itself, but a rotten thing by itself. Do you recognize this same struggle in your life? That is, do you perceive that you rest content with duty even though your heart might be far from the Lord? What does that look like in your life?