

Matthew 9

Read verses 1-8. Jesus obliges the angry crowd, hops in a boat, and heads back across the lake to his home city. While there, some people bring him a paralyzed man, lying on a bed. When Jesus sees their faith, he does something strange. He says, “Take heart, my son, your sins are forgiven.”

Wait, did they bring the paralytic to be forgiven of sin? Or to be made to walk?

Why does Jesus go for the spiritual sickness before tackling the physical one?

Here’s what N.T. Wright says: *Jesus has authority. You can’t miss it. Authority in his teaching. Authority over diseases at a distance. Authority over the storm, over the demons. Now, authority to do what normally only God does: to put away sins, to change a person’s life from the inside out, to free them, from whatever was gripping them so tightly that they couldn’t move.*

Think about the different ways each of us gets stuck. There are wounds in our lives that leave us stunted in our growth, and when left untreated, we start to atrophy. Do you know people who seem like they haven’t developed past a certain age or incident? They’re just stuck there?

There must be a physical dimension to this man’s paralysis because of what happens next, but Jesus knew there was a spiritual dimension to it as well. By treating the deeper issue of his heart, Jesus prepares him to walk in freedom, quite literally.

After hearing Jesus forgive the man of his sin, the religious scholars start to grumble, “Who does this guy think he is? Only God can forgive sins.”

Jesus overhears and replies, “Which is easier, to say your sins are forgiven or get up and walk?”

What do you think; which *is* easier?!

Making someone walk is the greater display of power, which is why Jesus says, “Okay then, rise and walk!” It’s a mic drop moment. People are shaken, and they worship God. It’s obvious to them that Jesus is plugged into something greater.

Here’s another point: most conservative churches focus on issues of personal morality: lust, fear, anxiety, greed, guilt, etc. Most mainline or liberal churches focus on social issues: poverty, injustice, activism. Jesus embodies both. So why do we try to separate the two? He doesn’t leave the man forgiven, but still paralyzed on the mat. He forgives him and lifts him up off the mat, able to walk home and live a completely different life.

Last thought: this man had friends who brought him to Jesus when he couldn’t move on his own. Who do you have in your life who carries you to Jesus in prayer when you are totally stuck? And who do you bring to Jesus in prayer and through care when they are stuck as well?

We’re told Jesus was amazed at *their* faith – their collective faith, meaning his friends. It’s what prompted Jesus to heal them. Do not underestimate the power we have to carry the people we love closer to the one who heals.

Questions:

- Why do you think some communities tend to focus on personal morality while others focus on social issues? How are these two things connected in your own relationship with God?
- Is there any place in your life in which you are paralyzed, stuck on the mat? Who can help bring you to Jesus?
- Do you know anyone who is stuck, who needs help growing again? How can you help pick up their mat and lead them closer to the one who heals?

In verses 9-13, Matthew leads us to the story of his own calling. It's easy to miss: *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 Jesus.*

Tax collectors were reviled by the Jews for their collaboration with the Roman empire and their frequent extortion of ordinary citizens. These are people who get rich at the expense of the poor. They're on the side of the oppressor, and they benefit from the system of oppression.

What does it mean that this is who Jesus called to be his disciple?

Later, Jesus and his disciples are seen eating with a bunch of them, likely even Matthew himself. But Jesus is not just eating with tax collectors. There are other kinds of "sinners" there too.

Think about that for a moment. Who would that mean is gathered around Jesus's dinner table today, in 2022-23?

When the upstanding Jewish leaders question the disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with those people?" Jesus responds: *"Those who are well have no need for 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."*

"Go and learn," means, "Look a little closer. Read the text again." He then refers to [Hosea 6:6](#), a line from the prophet scolding Israel for maintaining the rituals of worship while totally abandoning the heart of God. Jesus is holding up a mirror, telling them they've missed the whole point. God isn't interested in what kind of music they play in church, what they wear on Sundays, or even whether they tithe regularly. He's interested in how they love others, especially those who are far from God.

This passage is hard for those of us who are way more Pharisee than scandalous sinner, who spend *a lot* of energy proving to God (and those around us) that we are healthy and well, not sick and in need of spiritual care. Because of this, we might actually be missing Jesus.

If you can identify, here is our permission slip to be unwell. We have nothing to lose by admitting our brokenness and need for the great doctor. In fact, we have everything to lose by trying to prove we are not desperately in need of his healing.

Questions:

- Where do you see yourself in the reading today?

- What does it mean that Jesus called a tax collector to be in his intimate circle of friends? Can you think of any modern-day equivalents to this kind of person? How does it mess with your idea of God that even this person would be brought into the kingdom?
- How do you make sense of the phrase, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice?”

When we wrestle with our readings, we struggle to discern how Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel connects to what’s happening *today*. It’s sort of the obvious question as we read these healings, right? If he made a paralytic walk, is he doing that today? If he healed a blind man, does that still happen?

“American Dirt,” Jeanine Cummings’ gripping novel about an immigrant mother and her son, fleeing cartel violence in Mexico, looking for safety in the U.S. has been a powerful reminder of the kind of suffering millions of people endure daily, all over the world. Where is Jesus in *these* stories?

So often, when we read the Gospels, we rightly read it to understand and get to know Jesus. Try something different here. Try instead to consider the person Jesus is impacting. For example, instead of zeroing your lens on Jesus alone as he heals the bleeding woman and raises the dead daughter to life, try to allow yourself the space to imagine what it was like to be the father of the girl or one of the mourners, maybe even someone in the crowd who was jostled by the unclean woman.

For most of these people, their encounter with Jesus is momentary and yet unforgettable. His words and his touch alter the entire trajectory of their lives. But think about how much they *didn’t* know. They didn’t know the Apostles’ Creed. They didn’t know words like justification or sanctification. They may never have experienced the Lord’s Supper or sang a popular praise chorus. All they knew was this man’s extraordinary compassion and power to heal. And that was enough for them to pay attention.

When reading the stories from *their* perspective, it’s easier to imagine the ways God is moving around us today—and to remember the ways he has moved in your life. In each reading, of course, study Jesus in the story, but also pick another character whose shoes you can walk around in for a few minutes. It might actually help you see Jesus more clearly in the end.

Read verses 14-26. Jesus is different from what people expected. Even the most committed followers of John the Baptist raise questions: “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” (Remember the reading, where the Pharisees asked, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”)

In other words: “We and the Pharisees are working a lot harder over here; it looks like your disciples don’t take this seriously. They party too much. What’s up with that?” (If you had ideas of Jesus as a stick in the mud or legalistic nut, this interaction should dispel that immediately.)

The regular fast days these guys are referring to commemorated all the tragic things that happened in their history, including the destruction of the Temple.

They fasted to wait and pray for the Messiah to come and make all things right. Jesus and his disciples don’t fast because they’re announcing that the long-awaited day is here. The old way and the new way don’t fit, hence the imagery of cloth and wineskins. “The practices appropriate for the nighttime are now no longer needed,” comments NT Wright.

Jesus is like the doctor, here to heal the sick. (9:12)

He’s like the bridegroom, here to celebrate a new union of heaven and earth, a new family. (9:15)

And in the midst of this discourse, Jesus is interrupted. A man rushes in and kneels before him, “My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.” What faith!

Take a moment to read vs. 18–26 slowly. Imagine what it would have sounded like and felt like to be there, watching the action unfold.

NT Wright offers this context from his commentary: *In societies before modern medicine, where you couldn’t cure infections nearly as easily as we can now, it was vital to have strict codes about what you could and couldn’t touch, and what to do if you did contract “impurity.” These weren’t silly regulations; they didn’t mean you were being “legalistic.” They were and are practical wisdom to keep society in good shape. The Jewish people...had codified them further to make it clearer to people exactly how to keep from getting sick. And two of the things that were near the top of the list, things to avoid if you wanted to stay “pure” in that sense, were dead bodies on the one hand, and women with internal bleeding (including menstrual periods) on the other. And in this story Jesus is touched by a hemorrhaging woman, and then he himself touches a corpse.*

*No Jew would have missed the point. In the ordinary course of events, Jesus would have become doubly “unclean” and would have had to bathe himself and his clothes and wait until the next day before resuming normal social contact...**But at this point we realize that something is different. Her***

uncleanness doesn't infect him. Something in him infects her...Here is the mystery: Jesus has the power to heal, but those who receive it are those with faith.

What Jesus was doing was the beginning of his whole work of rescuing the world, saving the world, from everything that polluted, defaced and destroyed it. And those who would benefit would be those who would believe.

So the question we're left asking is, "Do we believe like this?"

Consider what drove the man with the dead daughter to rush to Jesus. Imagine the desperation of being powerless to save your own daughter. He runs to Jesus and kneels, imploring him, "Just lay your hands on her, and she will live." What do you pray for when you hit rock bottom? Is it this kind of bold request?

Jesus comes, *but* he's interrupted on the way. (Now, imagine what the grieving, desperate father is feeling!) In the bustle of a crowd, a woman who's been hemorrhaging for 12 years, cast out from society because she's a health hazard, decides, "This is my chance." She reaches out just to touch the hem of his robe, thinking, "Surely that will be enough to heal me!" Consider what drove her to do this. She's basically been in quarantine for over a decade, untouched, unloved, unseen. Not only does her bleeding stop when she touches him, but Jesus wheels around and *sees her*. She was content to stay invisible, but Jesus makes eye contact and says, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." She can now be restored to her community.

After this brief pause, Jesus and the man return to his home. (If she wasn't dead when he left, she certainly is now!) Jesus dismisses her death as a mere sleep. This is the first time we see him overcome death itself in the series of healings Matthew describes. He takes her by the hand, and ([in Mark's Gospel](#)) says, "Little girl, arise." And she does.

Questions:

- What bad circumstances in your life can you allow to drive you to Jesus, and quickly?
- What circumstances might you be ignoring that *could* drive you to Jesus?
- What do you have to risk by asking Jesus to boldly heal what is broken in your life?

