

Calling Sinners

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[0 : 00] Now, we'll continue our little series in Matthew chapter 8-10, under the general heading, The Kingdom Advances, and we're going to read the passage, which is chapter 9, verses 1-17.

And you'll find that on page 813. Page 813, Matthew chapter 9. And going into a boat, Jesus crossed over and came into his own city.

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.

And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, This man is blaspheming. But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier to say, Your sins are forgiven, or to say, Rise and walk, 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. And the man rose and went home. When the crowd saw it, they were afraid, and glorified God, who had given such authority to men.

[1 : 23] 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 Matthew 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?

When Jesus 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. 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.

[2 : 40] 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.

This is the word of the Lord. Now let's pray. Lord God, we praise you for this beautiful summer day. A reminder of your ancient promise that as long as the earth remains, summer and winter, sowing and harvest, day and night will never cease.

We thank you. You are a good and generous God, who gives to us gifts beyond all our deserving and all our imagining. But above all, we thank you for the great gift of your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, for his death and resurrection, and the promise of his coming again, and the way that he has opened the kingdom of heaven to all who will believe.

And so, Lord, as we come to look at your word for those moments, we pray that you will open that word to our minds and our hearts, that you will open our minds and hearts to the word.

In Jesus' name, amen. When I went to my first ministry, there was a picture in the vestry, which I got rid of at the earliest opportunity.

[4 : 04] It was one of those alleged portraits of Jesus, blue-eyed, blonde, looking far more Scandinavian than Middle Eastern. The gentle Jesus, meek and mild, beloved of liberals, a nice little man who went around talking platitudes and telling people to be nice to each other.

Now, we can be certain that's not true, because nice little men who go around talking platitudes never end up on crosses, do they? Nor do they introduce kingdoms.

And we are looking at the advance of Christ's kingdom. And Christ is so far different from these conventional pictures.

So, his life, his ministry, his words, his death, his resurrection, they all show us that life is about change.

His message is about transformation. And here he is calling sinners. That's what the emphasis of this particular passage is. And, of course, sinners means everyone.

[5 : 12] We are all sinners, and Christians are forgiven sinners. We must never forget that, actually. Otherwise, we will become worse in a state of grace than we are in a state of nature.

Christians are forgiven sinners. Christians need continual forgiveness, which is why every time, every day, we need to ask for forgiveness. The Apostle John says, if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

And the focus is still on his authority. And in this passage, it's his authority to change, to transform. The kingdom, when it comes, will change everything.

You know how sometimes it's easy to get into a gloomy mood and saying nothing can ever change, nothing can ever alter. Well, the gospel, its point, is a gospel of change, of transformation.

And when believed in, when accepted, it changes lives. And the focus is, once again, on Jesus himself, the universal king to whom all the world owes allegiance.

[6 : 23] Now, Mark tells these stories in much greater detail than Matthew does, but let's look, first of all, at verses 1 to 8, which is, Jesus changes lives.

Now, this story is told in greater detail than Mark. We learn there that the friends of this paralyzed man brought him, brought him, and actually dug a hole in the roof and let him down to the feet of Jesus.

I often wish, sometimes, there's a kind of authoritative supplement to the Bible that would tell us the reaction of people to events like that. Imagine, as they gazed up into the roof, what must the owner of the house have thought?

And as they gazed and gawked up into the roof, I hope they didn't have their mouths open because all sorts of unmentionable things could have fallen into them. But he does show their desire, their desperation to get their friend to Jesus.

Now, Matthew, however, cuts the story down to its basic elements and he tells us two things. First of all, he tells us who Jesus is.

[7 : 36] And Jesus says and does two things. One of which has visible proof. Jesus said, which youth, at verse 5, your sins are forgiven and to see, rise and walk.

Now, when Jesus said that, the result was going to be obvious. If the man didn't rise and walk, then he would be exposed as a charlatan. But when he said, your sins are forgiven, then, that was something which no one present could actually see happening.

It was an invisible transaction. But after all, it was the more important of the two, wasn't it? Just imagine, as this man looked back, on his life.

We don't know how long he lived after this. He would say something, I will never forget the day I met the Lord Jesus Christ. He said two things to me and one of them was what I've been waiting for for many years, get up from my bed and be able to walk and use my limbs again.

But the other thing was ultimately more important because the other thing was to last for eternity. That's why forgiveness is more important than healing.

[8 : 57] Now, don't misunderstand me. When I say forgiveness is more important than healing, don't hear me saying that healing doesn't matter at all. It's a lesson I learned long, long ago from my mother.

I learned many things from my mother. One of the things I learned was if you say something is more important than something else, people will hear you saying the other thing is not important at all.

My mother was a very good cook and sometimes I said to her, why haven't we had such and such? And she would say, well, I thought you said you didn't like it. What I actually said was, I don't like it as much as something else.

So, healing is very important. It's right to pray for healing. It's right to use the medical care available.

The reason forgiveness is more important is because healing is only for this life. Forgiveness is for eternity, for the life to come as well as for this life.

[10 : 01] And in the life to come, there will be no illness, of course. We'll be enjoying the life of resurrection life in changed bodies.

So, the priority always must be the forgiving of sins rather than the healing of the body. But the healing of the body matters. And Jesus is showing by doing this, you see, by showing that he did have the power to heal, he was challenging people as to whether they believed he had the power to forgive.

And notice how he discerns both the belief of the friends, verse 2, Jesus saw their faith and then the unbelief of those standing around, verse 4, Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, why do you think evil in your hearts?

You see, we may fool others, but we can never fool Jesus. No one can look around here, no one can look at other people and tell how much faith they have.

That is something that's not visible and not given to us to know. And the point is, Jesus is challenging us, do we realise who he is? And sometimes we forget this, you know, in our proclaiming of the gospel.

[11 : 25] Sometimes we present the gospel something like this, wouldn't you love to meet Jesus? And he'll transform your life. Well, that's perfectly true.

But, that's not the way the New Testament does it. The New Testament doesn't say, would you love to meet Jesus? And I suspect, if you walk down the street just now and ask people, would you love to meet Jesus? They would probably shake their heads and think, it's unstruck.

The point is, the Bible says, you are going to meet Jesus whether you want to or not. And the good news is that before that happens, he came to forgive our sins.

That is the gospel, not do you want to meet him, but you are going to meet him and you've got to be ready when you meet him. So, Jesus changes individuals, a radical conversion.

Jesus saves and Jesus heals. But secondly, Jesus changes society and I think that's the point of putting the calling of Matthew here in verses 9 to 13.

[12 : 29] Now, we mustn't divide these rigidly. obviously, unjust structures are evil and they ought to be got rid of.

Injustice, discrimination of the wrong kind, all these sort of things are bad. They need to be got rid of. But unless human hearts are also transformed, these are going to fail because as we well know, any structure, indeed any organization, anything at all is only as good as the people who are delivering it.

So, here, Jesus is showing himself as somebody who is going to transform society, the friend of sinners, the call of Matthew.

Tax collectors were not popular. Well, tax collectors are never popular even now, are they? Apologies to anyone who works for the inland revenue. I'm sure if you do, you don't like paying your own tax either, but one thing I've always found about inland revenue, when you're trying to get them, the person you want is always at lunch.

If they want to get you, of course, they get you immediately. However, tax collectors were especially unpopular in the world of Jesus' earthly life because they were agents of the Romans, the occupying power.

[13 : 55] They were people who were seen as quizlings, as in league with the Romans, and obviously, of course, they were also used to keeping accurate records, and so on.

So, the call of Matthew shows Jesus reaching out to this most unpopular set of society. Actually, it's fascinating, and we'll see this on the last week, the variety of people, even in the twelve apostles, the variety of people, and we'll look at that in a couple of weeks' time.

Matthew met Jesus, Jesus met Matthew, and everything was changed, and then a dinner takes place at which Jesus is invited to.

Now, this isn't necessarily immediately follow the call of Matthew. If you read the version of the story in Mark, and Luke, they put some incidents between them, but Matthew has put it here for deliberate reason.

And the reason is that the establishment are attacking Jesus for his friendships. You are, they say, why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?

[15 : 11] Very obvious they didn't regard themselves as sinners. It's very obvious they regarded themselves as righteous. Jesus having table fellowship with sinners and with the occupying power as well.

The point that Jesus is making is everybody needs the gospel. It's not just for notorious sinners. It's not just for murderers and drug addicts and people who flout all the social conventions.

It's for the respectable, the venerable, the respected. The gospel is for everyone. It is wonderfully true that the vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

Let's not forget that the most respectable person who truly believes also that moment from Jesus a pardon receives. The point as I said already is that Christians are not perfect.

They are forgiven. That is why the genuinely righteous, let us say those right with God, are most conscious of being sinful.

[16 : 26] See, if my righteousness comes from myself, if my righteousness depends on my personality and my behavior, inevitably I'm going to become conceited.

Inevitably I'm going to look down at other people. Inevitably I'm going to say things like, oh I know I'm maybe not all I should be but I wouldn't do such and such and such.

Remember nobody is tempted to every sin there is. It's always easy to condemn people who indulge in sins that we're not tempted to. Isn't it so easy?

We condemn people for certain things and we are totally tolerant of them if we are doing them ourselves. So it's a question of forgiveness. That is what ultimately changes society and implications are spelled out here in verses 13 and 14.

Once again Jesus uses the theme of healing. Those who are well have no need of physician but those who are sick. And he quotes from the prophet Isaiah, I desire mercy and not sacrifice.

[17 : 33] Isaiah, like so many other prophets, is attacking formal worship without any change of heart. People who carry on with formalities, have no life, no warmth, no compassion.

But those who need salvation, those who are conscious of their need of salvation, realize that when they are forgiven, they live a lifestyle that will correspond to that.

Quite some time ago in these services, we looked at the change of attitude that these beatitudes involve.

But Jesus changes individuals, but he also changes society. And that is the point, in the fellowship of the church, it came to not to be anticipated.

The relationships, change relationships, and so on. We're not always very good at that, are we? Because so often we carry into the Christian community, the kind of attitudes of the worldly community.

[18 : 42] And that is the point of the third section, verses 14 to 17. Jesus changes fundamental attitudes.

And that's where the whole question of fasting comes in. We'll talk about that in a moment. Jesus says he's come to introduce a completely new kingdom.

The disciples of John said, that's John the Baptist, why do we and the Pharisees fast? But your disciples do not fast. And Jesus said, can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?

Jesus is the heavenly bridegroom who is married to his people and later in the parables, this is going to become clearer. The wedding is one of the pictures of the Christian life and of its fulfillment in time to come.

And what Jesus is saying is not that fasting is wrong. In other places, he taught, in the Beatrice, for example, he says, when you fast, not if you fast.

[19 : 55] But what he's attacking here is fasting as a kind of show. people who look as if they've been fasting and make sure everybody knows about it.

Fasting is something private with us and the Lord, not something to talk about to others. And now, the picture he goes on to is the picture of the cloth and the picture of the wineskins.

The picture of the cloth basically says you can't patch up the old clothes. Now, old clothes are very comfortable, very comforting, aren't they? But sometimes they get to such a stage that they are no longer mendable, and you have to throw them out.

That's what Jesus is saying, the old cloak of your righteousness. It's not, you can't mend it, you can't patch it, because it will simply unravel.

What he's saying is you need a new one. You need a new cloak, you need a new garment. And similarly, wine skins. If it's old wine, which has gone bad, then fair enough.

[21 : 04] But if you put new wine into an old wine skin, it's simply going to burst. See, this kingdom is bursting all the boundaries. This kingdom is challenging individuals, challenging society, and challenging basic attitudes.

And what Jesus is saying, are we willing to change? It's amazing, actually, how many people are not willing to change. Sigmund Freud, the psychologist, said, I've examined myself, and I've come to the conclusion that I don't really need to change very much.

Oh, dear. I'm afraid when I examine myself, I come to the conclusion I need to change almost everything, and that's what the gospel is about. change. And it's also not just one change.

It's continual changing, as Wesley said, change from glory into glory till in heaven we see your face. The kingdom, when it comes, challenges our individual lives.

The kingdom, when it comes, challenges our communities, including our Christian communities. And the kingdom, when it comes, challenges our structures. Structures are fine, structures are good, we can't do without structures, but the important thing about structures is that they help the gospel, that they sustain the gospel, and not that they smother it with red tape.

[22 : 32] I know that's a mixed metaphor, but we'll have to do. And that is what the kingdom coming does. Let's pray. Lord God, we realize how resistant we are to change, change that will make us become different people.

And so Lord, speak to us day by day. Make us willing to receive the grace of your kingdom. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.