A PHYSICIAN FOR THE SICK

Matthew 9:1–13

Key Verse: 9:13

“Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Do you like to admit you’re sick? It depends, right? In some situations, if we *admit* we’re sick, we won’t be able to do what we really *want*. In others, we *pretend* to be sick to get out of doing what we *don’t* want. Admission of sickness isn’t just a personal issue. Some go to an emergency room claiming to be sick, but when tests are run, there’s nothing wrong, and the precious time of very busy medical professionals is wasted. Not cool. Others are walking around very sick and in denial, and recklessly infecting others. Also not cool. But what’s most crucial is the biggest step in healing: *realizing* we’re sick. In today’s passage Jesus interacts with a paralytic, a tax collector and some religious people. They all represent some form of sickness. Jesus says he’s a physician for the sick. And he tells us to go and learn that God desires mercy, and not sacrifice. What does it all mean? What does it have to do with our real lives today? May God speak to us through this passage.

In chapter 8 Matthew begins a section describing Jesus healing people. Jesus heals a man with leprosy, a centurion’s servant, Peter’s mother-in-law, and many others who came to the house in the evening. Finally, at the country of the Gadarenes, he encounters two men living among the tombs who are very disturbed, and he heals them at the cost of the town’s entire herd of pigs. In the midst of all this, Matthew writes in 8:17, “This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: ‘He took our illnesses and bore our diseases.’” Matthew is out to show us that Jesus came to be with us as our healer.

Now in chapter 9 he continues recordng Jesus’ healings: a paralytic, then his own personal story, next, a girl who died, a woman suffering from chronic bleeding, two blind men, and finally, a mute man. Today we’re looking only at the first two: the story of the paralytic and of Matthew himself. In both cases, what stands out is that what Jesus does creates controversy. He tells the paralytic, “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven” (2b). It’s weird because the man is *paralyzed*. Then he tells the tax collector Matthew, “Follow me” (9). It’s like reaching out in friendship to the most despicable person you can think of. Jesus even goes to Matthew’s house where there are a group of despicables and has a meal with them (10). It was like a bombshell to see somebody supposedly representing God hanging out with such people. In both these events the religious scribes and Pharisees are freaking out. What does it mean to us? To understand, we need to discover Matthew’s purpose. Obviously, his own story tells us that this is *not* about just physical healing, because Matthew wasn’t physically sick at all. Matthew wants to highlight Jesus’ forgiveness of sins and his mercy. They’re still shocking, and still the source of real healing.

First let’s think about the paralytic’s story. Look at verse 2. It says some people brought this man to Jesus, lying on a bed. The guy couldn’t help himself at all. It also says that these people had faith, faith that Jesus could heal him. Maybe the paralytic did, too. In any case, these people worked together to get him to Jesus. It’s kind of like the African proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child.” Matthew wants us to understand that healing takes place where there is faith, and, in the context of a community.

Next let’s think about Jesus’ words to him: “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.” In those times, as now, paralytics were not the most popular people. At best they were an afterthought, and often they were abandoned to beg. This guy was lucky to have such people bringing him to Jesus. His own parents might have been ashamed of him because he wasn’t the promising son they had wanted. Living in this hard world with many demands, people might have treated the man harshly, impatient that he always needed help. But Jesus’ words to him stand out: “Take heart, my son…” Jesus understood how this man felt. He could see how discouraged he was. He even called him “my son,” words of affection and acceptance. He wanted to lift him up with his words. Proverbs 12:18 says, “There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.” In light of this, how do *we* talk to people?

Jesus goes on to say “your sins are forgiven.” This is the controversial part. Jesus is *not* saying that this man had committed some sin, and as a result, he got paralyzed (Jn9:3). He’s speaking to something deeper, something more urgent even than paralysis. He’s speaking to the man’s broken relationship with God. That’s what sin does—it cuts us off from God our Creator, the one who loves us more than anyone else. We may not be aware that we’re in this state. We may not feel broken, or lost, or in any danger. But to Jesus, whatever else our human problems may be, being cut off from God is the worst.

Look at verse 3. The scribes interpret Jesus’ words to this man as blasphemy, because only God himself can forgive sin. In response Jesus says it’s not his words but *their* *thoughts* that are evil (4). Then he asks a tough question: “For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’?” (5) For us, both are hard. We have no authority to tell people their sins have been forgiven. We have no power to tell a paralytic to rise and walk. But in terms of our inner experience, one is easier than the other. It’s easy to want someone to get well, isn’t it? But it’s much harder to forgive somebody who’s done something wrong. It’s much harder to talk about the problem and address it. Jesus has the courage to go there, and the love to do it tenderly.

Verses 6 and 7 are the dramatic climax to this. In this public healing what Jesus wants to stand out most is not that he has miraculous powers, but that he has authority on earth to forgive sins. Why does he want us to believe and be sure of this? It’s because, first of all, though we’re all different, though we all have varying degrees of wrongdoing, we all share this fundamental problem of sin, of being cut off from God. Everyone needs to hear the good news that Jesus came to save us from our sins (1:21b).

The other reason Jesus stresses this so much is because it’s hard for us to believe. Sin is not just a state of being; it also affects our behavior. Sin causes us to do things we know are wrong. Sin is also chronic. We keep on sinning, even though we know it’s wrong and we don’t want to do it. The more we struggle with our sin, the more we feel defeated and doubt there’s any hope. Guilt starts gnawing at our souls. We feel meaningless. But the good news is, Jesus has authority on earth to forgive our sins. God gave him this authority when he shed his blood on the cross. Through his shed blood he made a covenant with us to forgive all our sins (26:28). Only when we taste his forgiveness can our souls be healed. His forgiveness breaks sin’s power over us, and takes away all our guilt, our fear, our anger, our bitterness. It makes us free, happy and gracious.

What happens next? Let’s read verse 9. Jesus still has this message of forgiveness on his mind. It’s written in such understatement that we can miss how radical this is. Jesus goes to the man who’s considered a traitor and a scoundrel, and calls *him* to be one of his disciples. It’s none other than the author Matthew himself. His former name, the other Gospels tell us, was Levi (Mk2:14; Lk5:27). Matthew is recording these events not just as an eyewitness but as someone who personally experienced forgiveness. Tax collectors worked for Rome and extorted money out of their own people for their own gain. People who chose to collaborate with the Roman oppressors were despised by their own people and treated like outcasts. When Jesus encounters him, Matthew is sitting at the tax booth. It’s a metaphor for the trap he’s gotten himself into. When he first started out, he never imagined it would turn out like this. He probably thought it would mean big money and the party lifestyle. He never thought it would lead to painful isolation, or that he would get so sick inwardly. Putting himself first and living for money robbed him of his humanity and left him empty and lonely.

Just as Jesus understood the paralytic, so he understood Matthew, so he helped him with a simple invitation: “Follow me.” It was a call to leave his old life and make a new start. Jesus didn’t focus on his past but on his future. In calling him, Jesus was, in effect, forgiving all his sins. Jesus was giving him a new direction. “Follow me” meant more than something literal. “Follow me” meant to learn from Jesus and find rest for his soul (11:29). “Follow me” still means to imitate the life of Jesus. “Follow me” means to put our hope not in this world but in God’s eternal kingdom, where Jesus is now. “Follow me” means to find our security only in Jesus, to put him first in our lives and to pay the cost (8:19–22). We may not think we’re followers. We’d like to think of ourselves as “influencers.” But we’re all following someone or something. It’s not bad to follow; the problem is, who or what we’re following. Many are following money. Many are following pleasure. Many are following trends, not knowing what else to do. Many are following seemingly strong people, in order to feel secure. But none of these things or people will bring us healing and happiness. As we accept Jesus’ words of forgiveness, we also need to accept his words, “Follow me.” These words give us hope to grow and change.

Look at verse 10. We know from the other Gospel accounts that this was in fact Matthew’s house. Matthew was so happy Jesus called him that he decided to have a party to celebrate. He invited the only people he knew would come—the other tax collectors and sinners. And many showed up. It was surprising that Matthew was now spending money on a big dinner party. It was even more surprising that Jesus was there with his disciples, reclining at the table, sharing the food and drink and fellowship. The joy in the room was palpable. People were probably laughing and opening their hearts for the first time in a long time.

But there were some unhappy people. Look at verse 11. It’s interesting that they speak to the disciples, not Jesus. Evidently they’re trying to sever their relationship. The disciples may have been wondering why Jesus chose a man like Matthew, and why he was joining a meal at his house. Jesus speaks up right away. Read verse 12. He’s explaining his purpose in being there. Jesus sees the people there as “sick.” He’s not being derogatory; he’s saying this in a compassionate way. He’s saying they urgently need a physician—not physically, but spiritually. Jesus is the spiritual physician for all of us who know we’re sick. He understands us. He sees us with compassion, patience and hope. But our healing doesn’t happen instantaneously; it takes time, sometimes a long time, maybe even a lifetime. It takes allowing Jesus to be with us constantly, and us being with the community of his people. Living among people who welcome, accept and love us in Christ’s name brings healing. It’s not always easy. There will be misunderstandings and conflicts. But as we gather in his name, pray in his name, and forgive in his name, he promises to be with us (18:15,19,20,35).

Jesus says more. Read verse 13. The Pharisees thought God desires sacrifice—offerings, tithes, fasting, and so on. But what God really desires is mercy—mercy towards the weak and the sick and those in desperate spiritual need. Jesus being with Matthew and his companions wasn’t wrong; quite the contrary, it was expressing what God really wanted, to show his mercy. The Bible teaches us that mercy triumphs over judgment (Jas2:13b). But showing God’s mercy is not easy for us. The verse Jesus quotes from Hosea (6:6) says we have to “go and learn” it in real life, especially in how we interact with sinful people. God told Hosea to go and marry Gomer, a woman engaged in “whoredom.” Even when she kept going back to her old ways, God told Hosea to go and take her back again. God was teaching him to grow in his mercy. God was also showing his people through Hosea what his mercy to them looked like. His people were just like Gomer spiritually. In our sinfulness, so are we. Who deserves God’s mercy? No one. But God is merciful to us, in spite of ourselves. And as Jesus taught elsewhere, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” (5:7).

Jesus concludes, “For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (13b). Jesus focused his ministry not on the Pharisees—those who *thought* they were righteous—but on the tax collectors and sinners—those who *knew* they were sinful. It may seem kind of strange—a ministry focused on spiritually sick people, public sinners. But it’s still what God desires.

Read verse 13 again. Learning God’s mercy means realizing what a sinner I am, that I’m spiritually sick, and then, experiencing God’s forgiveness in Christ deeper and deeper. After that, learning God’s mercy means learning to show his forgiveness to real people, sometimes very sinful people, even those who may have hurt us. This is what Jesus’ healing is all about. May God help us to experience his forgiveness and mercy and grow as healers. May God make our church a place where the spiritually sick can come and find healing in Jesus.