

The Greatest Miracle

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Matthew / Matthew 9:1–8

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INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

› **Matthew 9:1–8 (2016 ESV)** — **1** And getting into a boat He crossed over and came to His own city. **2** 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.” **3** And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, “This man is blaspheming.” **4** But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? **5** For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’? **6** But 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.” **7** And he rose and went home. **8** When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.

Jesus came from the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee to His adopted hometown of Capernaum, “His own city.” Over the past few days He has been healing, casting out

demons, and calming storms.

TRANSITION: But how far does Jesus' authority and power really go? Are there any limits on Him? Is there anything that He can't do? We, of course, know the answer, but His disciples did not yet know. So Jesus continues to demonstrate His power and authority over the greatest enemy known to man – sin – by performing what I think might be the greatest miracle there is.

THE PARALYTIC

› **Matthew 9:2 (2016 ESV) – 2** And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed ...

We know nothing about this man, other than that he was paralyzed, and that he had friends who cared enough about him to get him to Jesus. Mark and Luke tell us that there were four friends, who could not get their paralyzed friend into the house because of the crowd. So, they went up on the roof, dug down through the tiles and structure, and let the bed down on ropes, placing their friend right in front of Jesus.

The paralyzed man's need seems to be obvious to everyone: he's paralyzed and bedridden, after all.

But God looks at the heart, doesn't He? He is not limited to seeing the outside, or to what we tell Him. He knows everything there is to know about everything there is:

1 Samuel 16:7 (2016 ESV)

“... For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”

1 Kings 8:39 (2016 ESV)

... for you, you only, know the hearts of all the children of mankind ...

Jesus looks at this man's entire being, and knows his deepest need, which is not his physical condition, but his heart condition: sin.

FORGIVENESS

› **Matthew 9:2 (2016 ESV) — 2** ... And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.”

PASTORAL. It's interesting to me that Jesus saw THEIR faith, not just HIS faith. We have the privilege, and even the responsibility, to bring people to Jesus, not physically through the roof of a house, but in prayer.

Do you see the love of Jesus for such a man as this? **Take heart, My son; your sins are forgiven.** Be encouraged by this truth: your guilt before God has been erased; your debt to God has been paid; the penalty God imposes for sin has been fully met. God's justice has been fully satisfied, and you have been fully delivered from all the tyranny of the devil.

PASTORAL. The Old Testament provided for a covering for sins; the blood of the sacrifices concealed a person's sins. But on His cross Jesus bore ALL of the sins of His people, every last sin, every last transgression, every last trespass. The debt is fully paid; not a penny remains. It's as though Jesus reached into this man's entire being, withdrew the terrible, crushing, hideous weight of sin, and slung it across His own holy shoulders.

Notice what Jesus says to this man: **your sins ARE forgiven.** Not, **your sins WILL BE forgiven,** or **your sins MIGHT BE forgiven, IF you do this or that.** Your sins ARE forgiven.

PASTORAL. Is Jesus your Savior? Do you trust Him? Is HE all your hope, body and soul, in life and in death? Well then, all of your sins are fully forgiven. Holy God is at peace with you, because His Son has fulfilled His redemptive sacrifice. The Father continues to sanctify you by His Holy Spirit, and will not stop until His work of making you just

like Jesus in His perfect humanity is complete. But your sin, the guilt that separated you from God, is gone.

THE COMPLAINT

› **Matthew 9:3 (2016 ESV) — 3** And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, “This man is blaspheming.”

As we often see in the Gospels, there are scribes and Pharisees present. The majority of them had a genuine hatred for the Lord Jesus, for a few reasons. For one thing, Jesus had no respect for their traditions, especially since they preferred their own traditions to the clear teachings of Scripture. For another thing, the crowds often responded very, very positively to Jesus, especially in terms of His miracles. The scribes and Pharisees could not compete with Him on that basis, and they became jealous of His influence over the people. But more than anything else, the scribes and Pharisees were self-righteous, self-approving men, who deeply resented the suggestion that they needed a Savior. **Abraham is our Father, and we have never been enslaved to anyone! How dare you say that we need to be made free!** (John 8:33, GPL).

When Jesus forgave this man’s sins, the scribes and Pharisees were outraged: **This man is blaspheming!** Mark and Luke put it even more strongly:

Mark 2:6–7 2016 ESV

Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, “Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

Luke 5:21 2016 ESV

And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, “Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

Now, their rhetorical question – **Who can forgive sins but God alone?** – was correct. Only God can forgive sins. That’s absolutely true. Jesus truly forgave this man’s sin; therefore, Jesus is God in human flesh. But while they believed that only God can forgive sin, they denied that Jesus is God in human flesh, and being God, can forgive sin.

The word **blasphemy** means to insult or slander someone. If I claimed to be God in human flesh, or claimed to possess the power of God, then I would be blaspheming Him, by claiming to be Him. As far as the scribes and Pharisees were concerned, Jesus committed blasphemy when He forgave this man’s sins; after all, **who can forgive sins but God alone?**

But the truth is that because Jesus Christ IS both God AND

Man, He can forgive sins in complete and utter righteousness.

PASTORAL. Brothers and sisters, we must wrap our minds around two truths, and get both of them into our hearts.

The Lord Jesus Christ has always been fully God, self-existent, infinite in being and perfection, pure spirit, immortal, unchangeable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, holy, wise, free, absolute.

With the incarnation, the Lord Jesus Christ became a man. From the moment of His conception He has been, and remains, a perfect, holy, righteous Man, who has always lived in such a way that He pleased God, and kept the Law of God without fail, without error.

It is through the Man Christ Jesus that we come to know and love God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit.

It is through the incarnate Son of God that the throne of judgment, from which we shrink back in terror, became a throne of grace, before which we come to receive grace and mercy to help in time of need.

THE LORD KNOWS THEIR

THOUGHTS

› **Matthew 9:4–5 (2016 ESV)** — 4 But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? 5 For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’?”

Let’s not miss the fact that Jesus knew what they were **thinking**. He could hear their words – **some of the scribes said to themselves** – but He also knew what they were thinking. He knew that their thinking was evil thinking. This doesn’t just mean that their conclusion was evil, but that the very thought process was evil. Their thinking could not lead them to a holy conclusion.

They accused Jesus of the sin of blasphemy, but in truth, that was THEIR sin. They reasoned and spoke in ignorance of the purposes of God; ignorance is no excuse.

TALK IS CHEAP

› **Matthew 9:4–5 (2016 ESV)** — 4 But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? 5 For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’?”

Several years ago a man asked me what Matthew 9:5 meant. He was confused. As far as he was concerned, it was equally easy to say either sentence. But Jesus isn't talking about relative difficulties in pronunciation. He's talking about the results.

Any person can say to any other person, "Your sins are forgiven," and there is zero evidence as to whether or not that statement is true. No one can tell whether "your sins are forgiven" is true. That's why false religions abound, and most of them pronounce some kind of forgiveness or absolution. Martin Luther climbed the *Scala Sancta* in Rome, which are allegedly the steps Jesus climbed at the palace of Pontius Pilate during His trial. Roman Catholic superstition promised Martin that praying on each step could release a soul from purgatory. At the top Martin cried out in anguish – he was not yet saved – "Who knows whether it is true?"

The scribes and Pharisees heard Jesus say the words, but they could not see the result. Forgiveness is a spiritual activity that people can't see. Even the person being forgiven will not experience the perfect fulness of experience in this life. In that sense, talk is cheap.

Rise and walk, on the other hand, will immediately prove itself to be either true or false. The results are instantly obvious. The person who says to a crippled man or

woman, rise and walk, will either be confirmed by the miracle, or proven a fake.

PROOF OF POWER

› **Matthew 9:6–7 (2016 ESV) — 6** But 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.” **7** And he rose and went home.

Jesus ended the argument there and then. He invites them to observe Him very closely – **But that you may KNOW that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.**

He then turns to the paralyzed man and says, **Rise, pick up your bed, and go home.**

The man sat up. He moved his legs to the edge of the bed. He put his feet on the floor and stood up. He bent down and picked up his bed. He straightened up and made his way out of that crowded house.

No one missed it. They all heard Jesus speak. They all saw the immediate response in the man; we can't call him the paralytic anymore, can we? He was healed, instantly and perfectly.

PASTORAL. Now, which was the greater miracle? Forgiving this man's sins, or healing him of his disability? I believe that it was the forgiveness of sins. We are all born with a sin nature, and that sin nature makes us unacceptable to God, before we have ever committed even one sin. And then we add to that sin nature by committing acts of sin, adding guilt to guilt, compounding guilt, multiplying guilt.

Forgiveness means that our legal guilt before God, the guilt that had already condemned us to eternal judgment, is taken away by Jesus Christ in His death on the cross. That terrible weight, that burden of judgment, was borne by Him on His cross. Our sins are forgiven by Jesus' death on the cross, and we receive a new nature by means of His resurrection.

Here's the miracle: Jesus puts our sin to death, and not only leaves us alive, but leaves us "aliver" than we've ever been before. Because the Father loved us, He sent His Son to take our place in judgment, and to give us His love. And nothing can separate us from that love. That means that nothing can stop our God – our Father in heaven, our Savior Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit – from loving us perfectly for all eternity.

THE PEOPLE WERE AFRAID

› **Matthew 9:8 (2016 ESV) — 8** When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.

Which miracle really impressed the crowd? Physical healing.

Which miracle actually changed this man's life? Forgiveness.

Beloved, if the Lord physically heals someone in front of us, like Jesus healed this man in front of the crowd, then we should rejoice, we should glorify God. But, we shouldn't give that healing more meaning than it has. Jesus healed many, many people, many of whom never truly believed in Him for eternal life.

But to be forgiven was truly to enter into a new existence. It meant being reconciled to God. The Righteous Judge becomes Loving Father, Gentle Savior, Tender Spirit.

Do you notice that it is the crowds who feared and glorified God?

The scribes and the Pharisees, hard-hearted enemies of

God, remained outraged and offended. It was bad enough that Jesus knew what they were thinking, but then He healed this man just to humiliate them!

The enemies of God are always, always, always narcissists. Whatever other flaws they have, their first and greatest love is for themselves. They deeply resent God rebuking that sin, and calling for them to love HIM with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength.

BRINGING IT HOME

I've already brought out the application of this passage.

Forgiveness is, I believe, the greatest miracle God performs. It is the means by which we sinners are reconciled to our Creator, washed clean, given new hearts and lives, and joined eternally to the Lord Jesus Christ. He does that, like a surgeon removing a cancerous tumor, without destroying who we are, but rather remaking us in His image.

This morning you might be one of the friends. You can't physically bring someone to Jesus, because He has ascended to heaven, and has not yet returned. But you can bring someone before Jesus in prayer; what a privilege that is, and yet how little we make of that privilege.

This morning you might be the paralytic. You might find yourself with burdens and brokennesses of all sorts, things beyond your strength, beyond the strength of people, and perhaps even beyond hope. You can bring yourself to the Lord in prayer, and you can also let a few, trusted brothers and sisters carry you in prayer to the Lord.

Did you notice that when the friends brought the disabled man to Jesus, none of them said anything to the Lord? They made no specific request. They simply set him there before the Savior, and trusted that the Savior would glorify the Father and do the righteous thing. I have to tell you, I really don't know what to pray most of the time. I see the need, but what's the perfect answer to that need? How would I know? So I bring those people before the Lord, set them there before Him, and rest in His love, wisdom, power, glory, and kindness.

We usually don't know what to do. Jesus always knows what to do. He doesn't need us to figure it out for Him. He just asks that we trust Him, and let Him do what He will.