

Forgiveness in the kingdom of Heaven

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[0:00] Please turn in me with your Bibles to Matthew 9, verses 1-8.!

At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, This fellow is blaspheming. Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, Which is easier, to say, Your sins are forgiven, or to say, But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.

So he said to the paralyzed man, Get up, take your mat, and go home. Then the man got up and went home. When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe, and they praised God who had given such authority to man.

This is God's Word. Let me pray quickly. Dear Lord, bless us today with your Word and the lessons from it. Bless me to preach, and help us all to receive in our hearts the wisdom which we have read. To bring us up to speed, so far in this series, we have seen the authoritative power of the Messiah and his kingdom power demonstrated. Jesus has shown himself to be the Messiah in word, through his teachings, and by performing many miracles.

[1:47] Now, a new stage unfolds. He proves he is the Messiah in action, demonstrating power over all Satan's strongholds. This shows the kingdom of God has truly arrived, and highlights Jesus' unique authority to forgive sins.

Following these demonstrations, Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over, and came to his own town. Once again, Christ passes over the water on his messianic, kingdom-hearkening mission, arriving in his own town, likely Capernaum.

Upon his arrival, there's a hustle and bustle. A familiar scene unfolds. People are being healed, scribes are watching, and big crowds are full of expectation. Amidst the crowd, a group of mates, no doubt having heard of Jesus' miraculous powers, approaches.

Jesus had cured paralytics, and performed many miracles, healing the sick, casting out demons, and cleansing a leper. Motivated by this, they come expectantly, demonstrating an act of faith. What we are about to see is Jesus doing something astonishing. By forgiving sins, he claims the authority that only God possesses. Let's look at how this is, and what we can learn from the response.

[3:11] When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man, take heart, son, your sins are forgiven. And Jesus responds to this act of faith for healing by forgiving the man's sins.

At first, it seems Jesus is promising the paralytic something other than what he asked for. There is perhaps a link between sin and sickness in this case. As Matthew describes in other passages, individual sin is not always the direct cause of a person's disease or illness.

nonetheless, ultimately, all corruption and death result from the entrance of sin into the world. But either way, this man has come for healing.

Although Jesus seems to address something different from the man's request, he highlights the main issue. Sin is the fundamental human problem. By forgiving sins, Jesus reveals his authority and clarifies the true nature of the Messiah's mission.

Forgiveness for us is an expected result. But what does it mean for this man? Indeed, what does it mean for everybody there? It's more than an unexpected result.

[4:22] Remember that Jesus is on a kingdom-hearkening mission. What have we learned about the kingdom of heaven so far? There is healing, blessing for the poor in spirit, and power over evil.

Even repentance. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. This is John the Baptist's call. People confess their sins and are baptized by him in the Jordan as a sign of repentance.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand, is what Jesus says to launch his ministry. In the mind of the crowd, to repent is to turn from sin and to seek God's mercy, to return to covenant faithfulness.

So what on earth is forgiveness? Often tied to atonement, death, and sacrifice, forgiveness is God's exclusive act. Human actors might facilitate forgiveness, as in the case of priests sacrificing animals.

Even then, the text describes how to do this process. And they simply say, and their sins shall be forgiven. There is no declaration from the priest. So understand just what an incredible break from normal life these people experience when they hear this teacher and miracle worker personally and directly declare the forgiveness of the paralytic sins beyond the day of atonement and temple sacrifice.

[5:44] Sacrifices, sorry. No man before Christ has personally declared the forgiveness of someone's sins. Only God from heaven. Even Christ has not done so before this.

This event marks a significant escalation in the unveiling of the nature of the incoming kingdom. Sins are forgiven. At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, this fellow is blaspheming.

Highly respected Jewish scholars and religious authorities who were experts in the Torah, the law of Moses, the teachers of the law or scribes, as they are often called, are expertly applying the law to the wrong person, accusing Jesus of slandering and dishonoring God by usurping his unique role.

A priest in the temple can look at a stranger and conceivably say, your sins are forgiven. But here it's Capernaum. Jesus is not a priest in their understanding and the sick man has brought no offering, scapegoat or guilt offering.

So because the scribes don't hold Jesus to be God, they hear only blasphemy in what he says. They are not wrong that Jesus has just claimed divine authority, but what does Jesus tell us about their response?

[7:04] Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? What's so evil about a little skepticism? The scribes' eagerness to slander led them to reach a conclusion without investigation.

They had every right to question the grounds on which Jesus was claiming this kind of authority, but instead of inquiring or giving him a chance to explain, they jumped to the conclusion that he was nothing more than a regular person and rushed to pronounce him guilty.

Jesus' miracles and teachings so far should be evidence enough of his authority. Remember, in previous weeks, when hearing about the nature of the coming kingdom of heaven, Jesus has been there when people have been healed.

Jesus has been there as storms are stilled. Jesus has been there when demons have been cast out. more than just being there, though, Jesus also, in a never-before-seen way, has personally and directly healed, calmed, and cast out by his own word.

Jesus has already exercised divine authority over nature and the demonic. To understand the scribes' guilt, we must understand how these are also God's prerogatives.

[8:23] Only God heals. Even as we heard of Elijah's involvement in healings as evidence of his authority as a prophet, he prescribes actions and routines to facilitate God's healings.

Do this and God will heal you is how he can think about it. Always, only God heals. And yet, this Messiah heals. Always, only God has mastery over nature.

And yet, this Messiah has mastery over nature. always, only God has control over demons. And yet, this Messiah has control over demons.

Jesus has already exercised divine authority over nature and the demonic. And miracles are evidence of authority. The evil lies in rejecting the clear evidence of Jesus' divine authority. It stems from pride, envy, or hardened unbelief plotting against the obvious manifestation of God rather than humbly accepting it. The scribes here illustrate one of the main takeaways from this passage.

[9:28] Hardened unbelief and pride, especially religious pride, can blind even knowledgeable people to clear evidence of who Jesus is. False

religion or self-righteous skepticism is one of the biggest obstacles to truly encountering Christ.

The scribes should have turned away from their ways and believed. Or since coming to repentance can take time, they should have questioned themselves enough to start moving towards real faith. Today's skeptic may be very different from the scribes in most ways, but everyone should stay open to the evidence of Jesus' godhood, authority, and grace, and all should repent and believe.

If you're wrestling with who Jesus really is, don't harden your heart. Look at the evidence he's already given in scripture and in the changed lives of the people around you. We should take a hard look at our own hearts for evil thoughts, like the ones the scribes had, judging ahead without proof, refusing to check the evidence, or holding tight to our own ways and ideas instead of bowing to Jesus' word.

After all, he speaks with the authority which only God possesses. But Jesus doesn't leave the claim to God's authority hanging. He knows the scribes' thoughts and confronts them.

[10:52] Rather than destroy them, he graciously offers proof. Jesus proves his authority with visible power. Jesus provides this proof clearly and deliberately to unveil his godly nature to us, and we'll explore what that means and consider some implications of healing the man second.

Describe the scribes' evil, Christ deals graciously with them, saying, which is easier, to say your sins are forgiven or to say get up and walk?

He asks a rhetorical question, one which is far gentler than the rhetorical rebukes we see earlier in Scripture. When Job doubts God's justice, he is asked, where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me if you have understanding. It's a completely legitimate response, but Christ now simply asks, which is easier? An opportunity for the scribes to reflect, perhaps?

Let us reflect together. Well, which is easier to do? And what would it mean? For us, neither is really easier. Achieving either is an impossibility.

[12:03] For Christ, both are declared easily. He has the authority. forgiveness. But for which is easier to say, for Christ under scrutiny, the scribes can easily deny that forgiveness has happened.

They can't deny that a man with no use of his limbs gets up and walks before their very eyes.

Therefore, the implication is saying your sins are forgiven is easier.

If the man's sins are forgiven, then there is no usurpation or blasphemy. Likewise, if the man gets up and walks when told, Jesus is the one who did it.

The healing miracle is proof of Christ's authority to forgive sins. What we don't get is a technical analysis of precisely which mechanism enables what.

That's why, at first glance, Jesus' argument might be confusing. After all, since the soul is more mysterious than the body, forgiving sins should make maybe or obviously be a bigger, more impressive miracle than healing someone's body.

[13:09] Sorry, forgiving sins should be a bigger, more impressive miracle than healing someone's body. But here's the simple explanation. Jesus is meeting them right where they are.

These people were so focused on physical, visible things that a tangible miracle like healing hit them much harder and felt more real than the deeper spiritual work of forgiveness and eternal salvation.

And this stooping down to their level is our first hint that Jesus cares to show himself to us, uncovering his true nature. He continues to do so plainly.

To the scribes he continues to speak, saying, but I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. Very clearly here, Christ states his intention.

He is about to show his power and right to forgive sins. He will give everything, this is no simple claim. Son of Man is a messianic title, the one who comes to redeem God's people.

[14:15] But even with all the intense implications that come with it, the claim to the authority to forgive sins on earth is a new development from the point of view of the scribes.

Indeed, the Messiah might intercede for forgiveness or atone via temple rituals or end-time restoration. But not like this. It's not just new, it's shocking.

And it's shocking for a reason that we as Christians ought to take great comfort in. Because it claimed for a human figure, the Son of Man, what belonged to God alone.

And it bypassed the temple's sacrificial systems as the scribes understood it. Jesus shows that there is no higher court to appeal to you. No extra step needed.

No room for doubt. When Jesus says your sins are forgiven, it carries the full weight of God's own pardon. You can have full assurance of forgiveness, not based on how you feel, what you've done, or what any temple priest says, but on the sure word of the Son of Man, who proves he has the right to say it.

[15:24] Be encouraged because Jesus is fully God and fully man. He perfectly bridges the gap that sin made between God and us. That means we can draw near with confidence to the throne of grace without any fear of being turned away, without needing go-betweens or special rights.

His work as our go-between, our middleman, gives us bold, close prayer and true fellowship with the Father. Be encouraged because with these words, Jesus makes it clear that he's not just a messenger or a witness to this grace, he's the very source of it.

But why does he add on earth? What good would it do us to get forgiveness here if it's not backed up in heaven? Is this what this means? No, rather the opposite. His point is simple, we don't have to look far off for forgiveness of sins, he holds it right there in his own person, as if it's in his hands for us to take.

Jesus came down to earth to show us that God's grace is right here among us, present and real. That's why we talk about him forgiving sins visibly, because in him and through him, God's true will was laid open for all to see.

Before that, to our fleshy eyes, it had always been hidden, far above the clouds. There is so much grace and blessing for us here. And beyond the grace, essentially Jesus affirms that he does claim Godhood.

[16:58] He has forgiven the man's sins. He claims it is his right as the son of man, a title formulated in a way which incidentally is very formal.

Son, in this sense, shows identity and is similar to the concept of an heir, which is a legal identity, much different from how he has just addressed the poor but faithful paralytic, calling him my son, my child, tenderly.

Let us see now how he deals tenderly with him. From the scribes, he then turns back to the man lying on the floor. There is the grace of God before their very eyes.

Then the man got up and went home. The healing is complete. And the man shows total obedience to the command, carrying that which carried him.

The less easy thing to say is verified quickly, giving assurance of his forgiveness. A man destitute of all the use of his limbs, lying on a bed and lowered by cords, suddenly rises again in health, vigor, and agility.

[18:09] The scribes are silenced. The man has been faithful and obedient. And remember that he was forgiven first, with what felt, to me, like a lot of suspense in between.

By healing him physically last, Jesus gently reminds the man where his trouble really came from, and how he should shape his prayers. Most of us don't stop to think that the hardships and illnesses we suffer are ultimately due to sin.

Shown in earlier narratives is moved with a feeling of sorrow and compassion in the face of suffering. But sometimes we ask for nothing more than some relief in the body while staying completely unconcerned about our sins.

Like a sick person who ignores the actual disease after it has been clearly diagnosed for him. And just wants pain to ease for now.

Again, it is good to hope for relief from pain. But we can ask for more. Jesus ranks forgiveness first because the only real way to be freed from every kind of evil is to have God at peace with us.

[19:21] Christian, we must pray for forgiveness and reconciliation to God above all else. And do so with confidence because Jesus has proven his authority with visible power.

And because the Holy Spirit has given us faith and has witnessed to our hearts the truth of Christ's words when he says to us, my child, your sins are forgiven.

There is a right response to proven authority to forgive sins, which is all faith and worship. If we look at the responses from the people in the passage, we can reflect on ours.

So the scribes are silenced. It is they who have slandered God after all. What about everyone else? When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe and they praised God who had given such authority to man.

The crowds reached the realization which the scribes had not, of the authority of God vested in man. The awe and fear are a holy, trembling wonder at something divine breaking into the ordinary. [20:33] Glorifying God is the right response and is almost the opposite of the scribes' evil thoughts. They do all this without yet fully grasping his divine identity.

We, therefore, who do grasp this union of godhood and humanity in Christ's person should glory all the more. But the crowd who glorify God are only partly right here.

Yes, they saw a man standing in front of them, but they should have sensed in their hearts something far greater than just a man. They're spot on that human nature was lifted high in Christ for the good of humanity, for the good of everyone.

But because they didn't yet see that he was God made flesh, this praise still carries a bit of a mistake. In short, yes, God really did give this authority to a man.

But they hadn't yet grasped how that the full majesty of God had been joined to human flesh. Is this a fair critique of the crowds?

[21:41] Historically, we might not expect an ordinary crowd to uncover the full truth right away. But if you read Matthew's whole gospel as one big story with its deeper teaching in mind, the crowds and the scribes really ought to have seen that Jesus wasn't just someone with special authority.

They ought to have known from his teaching that they're amazed by him, but they never step into true, deep belief. When Christ was later to be innocently crucified, they chose to free Barabbas, not him.

And the guilty silence of the scribes as religious leaders will grow into doubt, then open hostility, and finally murder. I'm going far forward in the book for a reading, for a warning.

When reading this passage, I'm tempted to make the scribes in the crowd into a nicely packaged juxtaposition. How unlike those hypocritical scribes are those jolly trusting fellows in the crowd? Again, glorifying God is the right response, and it is almost the opposite of the scribes' evil thoughts. They recognize something special. But if you are here and you do not believe in the God-man Jesus Christ, even if you enthusiastically recognize something special in Christ, something prophet-like, somewhat virtuous, somewhat powerful, quite forgiving, even quite loving, you are missing something like the crowds are missing something.

[23:10] And you will go on to do as the crowds later do. When push comes to shove, you will crucify Christ in your heart. There is nothing somewhat goddish about a quite loving Messiah.

There is only an absolutely sovereign God-man with a finished work on the cross and a complete forgiveness for those who have faith and repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This is the good news, that even whilst there is enmity between God and humanity, God the Father sends God the Son to take on flesh and to be like us, the Son of Man.

And the Son of Man, as it says in Daniel, will be lifted up. How? By willingly being raised onto a cross in excruciating pain, despite being innocent, having completely and perfectly kept the law, the law that we break daily.

And on that cross, he feels in his humanity the weight and wrath the Father has for sin. So excruciating is the pain that it is described as God forsakenness.

Jesus suffers and dies at the cost for sin. And that great cost pays for the sins of anyone who by faith believes it is theirs. Even those who in that moment jeer and spit and torture him.

[24:32] Even we who have jeered and spat on and offended Christ in our hearts. Even for you, who still do so by denying him as the scribes did, can see and accept Jesus for who he has shown himself to be, God and Savior, and be forgiven.

Jesus died and rose again, ultimate proof of his truthfulness. Those who believe, sustained always by God the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, live in fullness of life, and have a sure place in heaven for all eternity.

So do not deny the scriptural evidence of Christ's authority as the scribes did. Learned as they were. The takeaway is this. Jesus perceives our faith and is moved to action by it.

He grants what we need most on earth from the kingdom of heaven. Forgiveness. Therefore, he is surely a worthy object of all faith and worship.

To finish, let me end with these words of encouragement. Christian, we must be encouraged by this wonderful assurance. And in gratefulness and love, worship God as often as we can.

[25:53] And let us never doubt or be discouraged. This voice of authority from Christ is the voice of God. It speaks creation into existence.

It comes from the cloud, bringing God's good law. And when we fail to keep that law, Christ here uses it to bring the gospel, to forgive. The same voice with the same authority, though we die, calls us to newness of life and will raise us up in a new creation.

Jesus personally declares, your sins are forgiven. Martin Luther, in his sermon on the same passage, says, these words show and contain in brief what the kingdom of Christ is, namely this sweet voice, these motherly and fatherly words penetrating our inmost soul.

your sins are forgiven. God shows himself to us and teaches us about himself, coming to earth and so clearly and beautifully telling us he is here to forgive us.

We can indeed draw nigh to God, but so mighty is our mistrustfulness that we never risk believing God is kind to us till he draws nigh to us and speaks to us as one who is well known and dear to him, saying, my child, your sins are forgiven.

[27:20] Let us pray. Amen.