

Matthew 9:9-17

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Date: 30 September 2018

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[0 : 00] Well, I too want to welcome you to this 11 o'clock service. My name is David Short and I have a broken foot.

What we do now is I invite you to open the Bibles back to the passage Sarah read for us, Matthew chapter 9, just eight verses in chapter 9.

And we do this because we believe the treasure is in the text. The treasure is not in us going toward the text, the treasure is in the text coming to us.

So we look at these verses from verse 9 to 17 and if you just dropped into the gospel for these eight verses, you would get two of the most wonderful pictures Jesus ever gives of who he is and why he's come.

In verse 12, Jesus is a doctor, a physician. And in verse 15, Jesus calls himself the bridegroom. And we're going to spend a bit of time on those two things.

[1 : 04] When you put it back into its context, this passage becomes very powerful and heart melting. Because in the context, these two pictures are about the forgiveness of sins and what it is to experience forgiveness, what it's like for us.

If you weren't here last week, and I forgive you if you weren't here last week, some of you have an excuse. You're at the retreat with 150 others. But we went through the last three miracles, the stilling of the storm, the casting out of demons, and then the healing of the paralyzed man.

And in that last miracle, Jesus explains his miracles, not just in terms of his power and authority, but specifically in terms of his authority to forgive sins.

So when the paralyzed man is placed before him, his friends, the paralyzed man's friends, want Jesus to heal his legs and give him back life. But Jesus has something far better. He says, just over the page, back in chapter 9, verse 2, he says to the man lying before him, take heart, my son, your sins are forgiven.

And in case we miss it, in case they miss it, in verse 6, Jesus says, he explains what he is doing. He says, but that you may know that the son of man, speaking about himself, has authority on earth to forgive sins.

[2 : 27] He said to the paralytic, rise, pick up your bed and go home. And he did. And Matthew's deliberately brought us to this point. Back in chapter 1, the angel said to Joseph, you'll call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

And as Jesus has demonstrated his authority, as we've looked at over the last four or five weeks, his core purpose is not just to demonstrate power for the sake of it, but to show how he is using his authority for this, for the forgiveness of our sins, which is a completely dangerous thing today, isn't it?

I mean, is it just me or is the whole cultural discourse become about contempt for other people? It's so easy to be contemptuous of other people. And if you forgive, it's a form of treachery.

Psychology today, recently the Canadian edition said, don't forgive, keep the rage going. But when you do, it'll be an act of self-compassion, choosing to love myself.

Well, I don't know what you make of that. But when you open the Bible, there is a rich variety of words describing forgiveness. Forgiveness is a word for covering over.

[3 : 43] There's a word for picking up and taking away, a long way away. It's pardoning and letting go and freeing a slave. And the richness of forgiveness comes from two places.

One is because the richness, the diversity of our sin, because of the intransigence and depth and breadth and infection of our sin.

Bible's view, our sin is always a violation against God. It's rebellion. It's a lack of trust. It's arrogance and pride. It's missing the mark. It's guilt. It's uncleanness by what we do and what we fail to do.

By the way, fantastic, the words of the confession that we said earlier this morning. You notice we confess what we fail to do before we confess what we do, because that's probably 99% of our sin.

The other reason why there's this rich vocab is because of the astonishing good news that God is a God of grace and forgiveness and kindness. So some people think that the Old Testament God is nasty and the New Testament God is nice.

[4 : 53] But God says back in Exodus, when he reveals himself to Moses, he calls himself the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, three little words, but who will by no means clear the guilty.

So when Jesus says he has authority on earth to forgive sins, now God will clear the guilty. That's why he's come. And what that means is that forgiveness is not a cold, hard deal with a distant God.

Forgiveness brings us into a new place, a friendship with God, peace with God. And it doesn't just take the load off our back and sort of leave us in a neutral place. It lifts us up to a new life.

This is the language of forgiveness. Jim Packer says, Forgiveness is compassionate, creative and costly. It's compassionate because God doesn't owe to us to forgive us.

It's creative because it restores broken friendship. And it's costly because ultimately it leads to the death of his son. And I would add, it's also completely unique to Christianity, that at the heart of the work of our saviour is forgiveness of sins.

[6 : 14] So let's look at the two pictures together. What is the experience of forgiveness like? How do we know we're forgiven? And the first picture in verses 9 to 13 is that of being healed by a doctor.

So in verse 12, Jesus calls himself a physician. Those who are well, they don't need a doctor, but those who are sick. And the end of verse 13, I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.

Now I reckon Matthew had been busting to write this story. He's been waiting to tell this story, all his gospel. This is his story.

This is his testimony. This is how he came to follow Jesus. And he was a very unlikely convert. Don't you love those stories of unlikely converts? I mean, some of you are here.

Many of you are here, truth be told. Well, Rosaria Butterfield has written a wonderful book called The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert. She was a tenured English prophet at a university in the States, openly identified as a lesbian and worked for the cause of LGBT equality.

[7 : 23] It's a great story where she says she came to see her sinfulness in trying to find an identity in something other than Jesus Christ. Well, here is Matthew.

He's also a very unlikely convert. In verse 9, we find him at the tax booth. We are polite Canadians. This is not CRA. He's not a CRA accountant.

This is not a nice thing. Israel were occupied by Rome. And one of the ways Rome exercised its authority was by employing local Jewish people to tax Jewish people, knowing they would abuse their power.

You were able to rip off your fellow countrymen with the backing of the Roman military. It was lucrative and deeply despised. And here is Matthew. He's at the top of the Lake of Galilee.

That's where this takes place. And there were three Roman territories that edged onto each other. So that every boat that sailed up the lake and went down the lake, every farm, every business, they could tax.

[8 : 28] He could choose what they should pay. And that's why there's so many tax collectors up there. This was like tax collecting central. So if you sat in a tax booth, basically you could impose tariffs at your whim.

So here is Matthew. He'd given himself to money. That's what he lived for. And I think in verse 9, wouldn't you love to know more of the conversation between Jesus and him? There's only one thing Matthew wants us to know.

In the conversation, Jesus says to him, he calls him and he says, follow me. We don't have any idea about whether Matthew felt sinful and guilty. But the point of this is that conversion is not about volunteering.

It's not about putting your hand up and saying, I'm going to really be a very serious Christian now. Conversion is about hearing something, something working on you from outside of you, hearing the voice of Jesus calling you to follow him through the word of forgiveness.

And this is exactly where the healing and the cure begins for Matthew. And the sign that the healing has begun for him is that instead of taking, he starts to give.

[9 : 42] And in the very next verse, the very next sentence, he puts all his resources and property at Jesus' disposal. And he throws a great big party because he wants all his friends and his family to come to know this Jesus Christ as well.

And this very book that we're looking at here, this Matthew's gospel is testimony to the cure in Matthew. He wants us to know. He was there. He wrote this for us.

And in verse 10, we find Matthew is part of a wide network of fast money makers. They're called tax collectors and sinners. And he uses his swanky mansion to have all his friends come and meet Jesus.

He doesn't sell his home, but he opens it up to the underbelly of Galilee. And it's a huge group. And who is right at the center of the group? It's Jesus.

And here is the mark of what it means to be forgiven. You want other people to be forgiven as well. This week, Bron and I had dinner with a couple of friends who go to a different church.

[10 : 47] And she said, I've got one foot in the church and one foot out. And I said, as a minister would, what do you mean by that? And she said, well, I'm involved in the church, but I don't want to be so involved.

I want to be free so that I can tell more of my non-Christian friends about my precious savior. I felt like saying to her, come to St. John's, but I didn't.

I think it's a great attitude. Now, how do we know this is all about forgiveness? So I think that's partly the reason why he introduces why the Pharisees come next in verse 11. The Pharisees are completely stumped by what Jesus is.

They just do not understand why Jesus is not more interested in righteous people and holiness and clean living and all those sorts of things. And I think it's easy to misrepresent the Pharisees.

I might have said this before. When I was a kid, I was in a church where we had a very clever man who was a puppeteer. And he would do the children's things week by week.

[11 : 46] He was a genius. But whenever the Pharisee puppet would speak, he had a German accent. And it was like he was a bad guy.

And we knew that by the accent. That's not right. There are lots of lovely Germans. And that's kind of melodrama.

These are moral and upright people. They were experts. They studied the Old Testament. They tried to live out. They tried to obey every part of it. They were very strict with themselves. They were kind of a spiritual health inspectors for Israel.

And the basic principle on which they obeyed was separation. Separation from everything unholy. And it's good to be separate from unholy actions. But it's not good to be separate from unholy world.

But Jesus' principle was connection and association. And in the same way that he reached out and touched the leper and healed him, he eats and spends times with those who would never come to church to bring the forgiveness of sins.

[12 : 48] So they asked Jesus' disciples, Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners? They're obviously outside. They're not going to go inside and ask Jesus this. So they asked the disciples.

And they're genuinely mystified. And the way verse 12 is written, Jesus overhears them. And he says to them, Those who are well have no need of a doctor, but those who are sick.

He said, I haven't come to hang around with those who think they're spiritually healthy. I've come as a doctor. I've come to bring healing to the sick. You'll find me amongst the sick. Jesus is saying, I'm not content to just live a perfect and holy life.

I want to bring healing to those who know that they're spiritually sick. And then he turns them back to their Old Testament scripture, verse 13. He says, Go and learn what this means. I desire mercy and not sacrifice.

This comes from the book of Hosea, where the people of God were offering, they were deeply involved in lots of religious exercises. They did all their rituals thoroughly. But it was not based on forgiveness.

[13 : 51] They were trying to save themselves and prove to God how good they were. And that's why it's always a mark of self-righteousness, that there's a great focus and attention on outward forms, on the externals of liturgy.

We think that we can heal our spiritual life or cure our souls by religious observance. But the only cure for us is the forgiveness of God through Jesus Christ.

And the infallible sign that we have been experiencing this healing is not the number of my sacrifices, but my attitude toward other people, particularly those who don't know God's forgiveness. I desire mercy, not sacrifice.

And that's why Jesus rounds it up in verse 13 by saying, I came to call the righteous. Sorry, I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.

And by righteous, he means those who think they're righteous. And sinners are those who know they need forgiveness. And I imagine, you know, where are they, Pharisees?

[14 : 54] They're inside the house. It's an amazing statement, isn't it? I mean, Jesus gathers all humanity. And he says, there's no categories of sin here. He said, there's no big sin and small sin.

There's no big sinner or big sinner. We're all of us cut off from God. He says, your sins create an impassable barrier, a disease and a deadly wound that nothing can cure.

I have the cure. That's why I've come. And to truly experience forgiveness is to begin to forgive others, as we prayed in the Lord's Prayer, and begin to desire that they come to Christ's forgiveness as well.

This is a great healing for us. It is the splinting of our spiritual bones. That's high on my list right now. It's the repairing of relationships. It's the remission of the disease of death.

It's the elixir to begin healing us from self-righteousness, to replace our contempt of others with mercy, and a profound sense of my deep unworthiness and untrustworthiness and unwellness.

[15 : 55] But for the free gift of God in Christ Jesus. This is what we're trying to do every time we meet, you know. This is why, as Anglicans, we always confess our sins when we meet together.

The problem is, you all look very nice. You all look very clean and washed and together and above average.

Really. But, I mean, the truth of it is, when we say that confession, we are saying that our hearts are full of deadly viruses. They're roiling with idols that we bow down and serve and lie about, that we're arrogant beyond our wildest guesses, even after we begin to follow Jesus.

And every time we come together, there is this moment where we say, actually, we are in terrible need of God and his forgiveness. That's what it means to belong to this church.

And this is not like a 10-step program where we get forgiveness by being terribly honest about ourselves. It's Christ that our forgiveness comes from.

[17 : 04] And that's the first picture that Matthew gives us. It's a picture of forgiveness. It's healing by Dr. Jesus. Now, doctors are great. And I've been spending a lot of time with doctors in the last couple of weeks.

And they're very efficient and effective, but they don't want to start a long-term relationship with you, for which I'm, I know, I'm grateful. I think that's absolutely, I want diagnosis, I want some decisions.

And I think as believers, when we look at Jesus, doctor is not the full picture. And that's why Jesus gives us a second picture, a second picture of the experience of forgiveness.

And that is in verses 14 to 17. So firstly, forgiveness is being healed by the doctor. Secondly, forgiveness is feasting with the bridegroom.

And here in verse 14, some of the followers of John the Baptist are there. And they too are surprised at Jesus by what he's doing. They are discombobulated.

[18 : 06] Because John the Baptist, who was a holy man, he didn't go to feasts. He had the whole food diet. But he went out in the wilderness and he ate locusts and wild honey. And I'm guessing that his disciples probably did the same sort of thing.

So they come to Jesus and they say, why do we and the Pharisees fast, verse 14, but your disciples not fast? And Jesus answers by making one of the biggest claims he makes in all his ministry, verse 15.

He's not talking about fasting.

He's claiming to be God. Throughout all the Old Testament, this is how God pictures himself. God pictures himself as a husband who gives himself to us and desires that we give ourselves to him.

God pictures himself as a husband to his people. His people, it's an audacious metaphor, isn't it? Of course, we're not equals with him. And yet God desires to share intimacy with us, communion, mutual love, mutual care, mutual affection of giving and receiving.

[19 : 20] It's astonishing. It's astonishing. God desires us. God pursues us. God takes pleasure in giving us life. He delights in showing us kindness and bringing us back to him by the forgiveness of sins.

And Jesus says, I'm the bridegroom. I'm God. In Jesus' day, they did weddings in reverse. The way we do them today, we wait for the bride.

Those days, they waited for the groom. I used to work in a church. We did four or five weddings on a Saturday. And when I'd meet with the couples in preparation, I'd say to the brides, if you're over an hour late, we'll have to wait till the end of the day to do your wedding.

And do you know how many brides were later than an hour? In four years? Zero. Yeah, that was great. I'm distracted. Where are we?

So yes, this is what happens. The groom and the men come to where the wedding party is taking place. And then it gets underway. And it could last a week. There's dancing and feasting and eating and drinking and there's joy.

[20 : 29] And Jesus says, forgiveness is like that. It opens the door for intimacy with me. My presence with my disciples is like the coming joy of God.

The experience of forgiveness is like entering into the banquet of God. Now, there is a form of mourning, which is right for us as Christians, isn't there? Jesus said, blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

And he's talking about mourning for our sins and the consequences of our sins and all the results of our sins. But here, Jesus is talking about the comfort. It is that as the bridegroom, Jesus brings this comfort, the word of forgiveness and grace, the love that will not let us go.

This is what the experience of the forgiveness of Christ is like. It's like coming to something that you've waited a long time for, where our mourning is turned into dancing.

It's being bound in covenant union with the God who knows us. It's being naked to each other. It's living in the light of his love and seeking to give love.

[21 : 39] Jesus says that his presence with his disciples, this groom, is going to be interrupted, verse 12. He says the bridegroom will be taken away. And it's a word for violent, physical dragging off.

It's a reference to his death because it's through his death that the forgiveness of our sins comes. He lays down his life for the bride, but we know he comes back to be present. This has all sorts of implications, this second picture.

Let me just mention three, this bridegroom picture. The first thing it means is that forgiveness is not just wiping the slate clean so that we can go off and do things on our own and start making Jesus points again.

Forgiveness means being united with Jesus Christ in a bond as close as marriage and the beginning of the wedding feast. God forgives you and God forgives me so lavishly and willingly and delightedly.

He supplies a banquet for us for eternity and we enter into that now through the forgiveness of sins. The second implication is this picture is for every believer.

[22 : 47] It doesn't matter if you're single. It doesn't matter if you're married. It's for every single believer. Some churches emphasize marriage so much that you think if you're a single person, you're a bit of a second class Christian.

Here's the thing. God didn't invent marriage and look at it and go, you know, that's not a bad picture of my relationship with my people. It's the other way around. The best human marriage is a pale reflection of the reality of the eternal covenant bond of love between Christ and his people, between Christ and you.

There's no such thing as a second class citizen and the bride of Jesus Christ. There's, if you like, one table at the banquet. And the third implication is that it means newness, newness.

And I think that's the reason why Jesus includes these two little stories about garments and about wineskins. Because in forgiveness, Jesus creates something completely and entirely new.

When we are forgiven by God, it's not just the old a little bit better and cleaner. It's a de novo creation, a different thing.

[23 : 56] He doesn't just take our debts and leave us with a zero balance in the bank where we start earning. Forgiveness is a completely different order of things. And as we taste that new wine of forgiveness, it wells up to eternal life and we savor the life of Christ and the life of heaven, even now.

And if you feel weary and if you feel bored in your own spiritual life and you feel the need of this newness, Jesus keeps saying, come to me, come to me. So here are two pictures that Jesus gives us of himself.

Doctor, bridegroom. But only one of them is eternal. The other is temporary. And one of them is the source of the other. Because you see, the bridegroom picture is the permanent one.

Jesus has loved us with an everlasting love. From eternity past, he has bound himself to us so that we might be one with him. He's utterly committed to sharing everything he is and everything he has with us.

That is the intimacy that we were made for. That's the eternal plan of God. He's made us for himself. And the healing work, in a way, it's temporary.

[25 : 08] Because one day we will be free from the penalty of sin and the power of sin and the presence of sin. Wasn't that an astonishing verse we read in the first reading, which says, that Christ will keep us to the end, guiltless in the day of his coming.

Blameless, perfect, sharing his glory at the marriage supper of the Lamb. And his work of healing was called out of him because of his need and because of his great grace.

And I think as a Christian community, I don't know what it's like if you come into this church. It ought to feel a bit like a hospital that has banquets from time to time. You know, a safe place for healing of moral failures.

We welcome moral failures. Where the joy of Christ's love renews us and renews us. Where we try and use our resources to give little glimpses of the great banquet in heaven.

Where we don't confuse the outward forms for the reality of Jesus Christ and his mercy. Where we learn and we try and encourage each other not to flagellate and whip ourselves when we fail.

[26 : 14] But to remind each other week by week of the practice of the forgiveness of sins. Where we learn not to treat each other with impatience and contempt. But to look for the signs of the love of Christ and be committed to mercy.

And instead of trying to deal with our sins and our failures by ourselves. We bring them to Christ. We bring them to Christ. He takes all our guilt and shame. He draws us into this taste of intimacy.

Which is the foretaste of heaven. Until the day when Jesus Christ will ultimately come. And present us to himself as a bride. Radiant without stain. Without blemish or wrinkle.

Holy and blameless. Ready to enjoy the consummation of the eternal feast. Christ. That's why we pray after hearing this.

We enter into Christ's presence. Our bridegroom. Our lover. So let's kneel and pray. Amen.