

## Sermon Sins Forgiven

Dan Neary

Here we are in chapter 9 of Matthew's Gospel, the 29<sup>th</sup> installment in this series we have entitled The Church in the Red. Not *in the red* as in some sort of financial trouble, but *in the red* as we immerse ourselves in these red lettered words, the words of Jesus, we find in the Gospel of Matthew.

Ted read this passage for us a few minutes ago; let's walk through these eight verses more deliberately to be sure we understand all that is here.

Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus was in a boat last week, presumably the same boat, when Steve spoke to us from chapter 8 recounting how Jesus calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee.

The Sea of Galilee really isn't a *sea* in terms of our current terminology; it is Israel's largest *lake*, a bit over twice the size of Lake Washington. At about 700 ft below sea level, the Sea of Galilee is the world's lowest fresh water lake. It is an important place to us since so much of what happens in the Gospels is set around the Sea of Galilee.

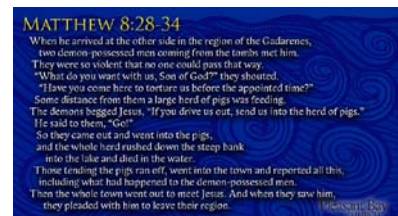
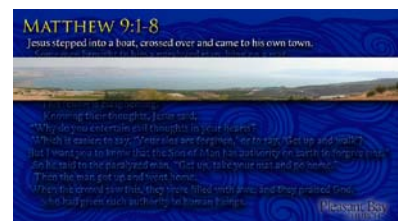
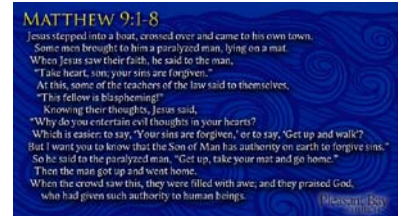
Last week we left off with 8:27. If you have a Bible open you can see that we skipped an episode there at the end of Matthew 8.

Since our series is on the words of Jesus, we can see that there is only one very short *red-lettered* word in that passage: **Go**.

<sup>28</sup>When he arrived at the other side in the region of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men coming from the tombs met him. They were so violent that no one could pass that way.<sup>29</sup>“What do you want with us, Son of God?” they shouted. “Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?”

<sup>30</sup>Some distance from them a large herd of pigs was feeding.<sup>31</sup>The demons begged Jesus, “If you drive us out, send us into the herd of pigs.”

<sup>32</sup>He said to them, “**Go!**” So they came out and went into the pigs, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and died in the water.<sup>33</sup>Those tending the pigs ran off, went into the town and reported all this, including what had happened to the demon-possessed men.



<sup>1</sup>The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 9:1.

<sup>34</sup>Then the whole town went out to meet Jesus. And when they saw him, they pleaded with him to leave their region.<sup>2</sup>

Even though there is only this one short word from Jesus, there is much revealed here about Jesus.

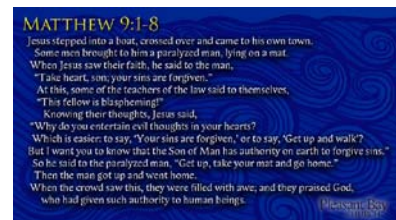
- He went to great lengths – Capernaum to Gadarenes is from one corner of the lake to the other... think Renton to Kenmore... with no motor.
- Demons knew that Jesus was the Son of God, and that there was an appointed time when he would affect their demise.
- Jesus had absolute power over demons.

It also teaches us something about the cruelty of **Society**. It appears that Society could accommodate a few *crazies* out in the tombs. But this spectacular disruption to the economy was more than Society could bear. I'm sure that the people who came out to meet Jesus were pleased that these men, driven insane by the forces of Hell, were healed... but the price was too high. The town's leaders may have taken a quick inventory of how many more homeless crazies Jesus would find, and at a 1,000 pigs per healing, they knew that the economy would be bankrupted in no time. So they pleaded with Jesus to go, and He did.

So "Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town," Capernaum.

<sup>2</sup>Some men brought to him a paralyzed man, lying on a mat.

When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man, "**Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.**"<sup>3</sup>



We know from already hearing the passage that this was a scandalous statement. It had to come as a big **surprise** too.

There is nothing here that would indicate that this man, brought by these friends, was there for a **spiritual** diagnosis. While it was common in the times of Jesus for people to associate sickness with sin, there isn't anything in this description, nor in the accounts in the other Gospels, that this paralyzed man sought anything other than relief from his paralysis.

"**Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.**" That had to be a surprise to the paralyzed man, and a surprise to his friends who brought him. **Was it a pleasant surprise?** While we don't know for sure, I suspect that it wasn't; I suspect that the man was actually disappointed when he first heard Jesus say "your sins are forgiven" rather than "your paralysis is gone."

Sometimes we don't really understand what we need, or even want.

<sup>2</sup>The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 8:28-34.

<sup>3</sup>The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 9:2.

It puts me in mind of an episode we experienced several years ago downtown in Seattle. We've always made a point of being tourists in our home towns. When we lived in Boston, for example, we took the guided tours and did the *touristy* things. We are constantly amazed that lots of folk, friends who travel great distances and pay lots of money on their vacations to experience other places, so often fail to enjoy their own cities as tourists. So here in Seattle we've ridden the Ducks, been to the top of the Space Needle several times, taken the various boat tours, and explored the Underground Seattle Tour.



It was on that Underground Seattle Tour, deep below street level in Pioneer Square, that we heard a guy, in a thick New England accent, ask "does anybody know where I can get a good cup of coffee around here?"

We all thought he was joking. Here we were in Seattle, and this guy is asking if there is anyplace to get good coffee? Is the Pope Catholic? We were sure he was kidding, and when we all began to chuckle, he became incensed. "No," he said, "this is no joke. I need a good cup of coffee. All of this stuff you drink out here tastes burnt!"

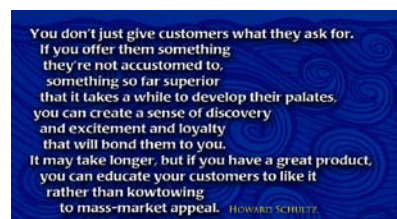
Laurie and I began to understand because of our experience in Boston. This guy wasn't looking for a **grande drip with room**, or even a **double tall mocha**; he wanted **coffee regular** from Dunkin Donuts. In Boston, Dunkin Donuts is as ubiquitous (maybe even more so) as Starbucks is here... and Dunkin Donuts is as much about coffee as it is about donuts. Most people, upon reaching the counter, order coffee regular (actually coffee regulah), at which point the faithful purveyor grabs a Styrofoam cup and walks over to a bucket of sugar where she shovels several scoops into the cup with an artful flick of the wrist. Then she pivots to a specially engineered contraption that shoots a serving of cream into the cup with each crash of the lever... a lever that gets several rapid whacks. Then the remaining space in the cup (which seems only slightly more than half now) is topped off with fresh coffee, poured from a familiar glass container.



We don't make **coffee regulah** here. We encouraged the traveler to try a grande vanilla latte with a just single shot.

My favorite quote from Howard Schultz, founder of the Starbucks empire, comes to mind:

"You don't just give customers what they ask for. If you offer them something they're not accustomed to, something so far superior that it takes a while to develop their palates, you can create a sense of discovery and



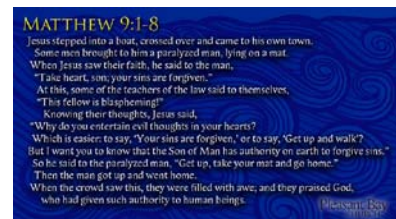
excitement and loyalty that will bond them to you. It may take longer, but if you have a great product, you can educate your customers to like it rather than kowtowing to mass-market appeal.”

Schultz knew that it might take a while to win over the folks who liked their Folgers and Maxwell House and Sanka... but he thought it would be worth it. And it turns out he was right... billions of dollars right.

I'm sorry... the best part of waking up in not Folgers in your cup!

This paralyzed man was looking for a cup of Folgers, or even coffee regulah, but got something far superior when Jesus said, **“Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.”**

The religious leaders *listening in* were shocked and surprised to by this declaration by Jesus.



<sup>3</sup>At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, “This fellow is blaspheming!”<sup>4</sup>

Blasphemy: scandalous, irreverent words or actions with that which is divine or holy.

In many societies, like the one in which Jesus was operating, blasphemy was a serious crime, punishable by death. One could make a case that this was the crime that led to the crucifixion of Jesus.

These days, it doesn't seem that blasphemy will get you in much trouble with Christians. Say what you want about Jesus; while it may offend, it won't draw any real punishment. These days, the blasphemy that makes the news is blasphemy in regard to Muhammad... this is the blasphemy that leads to fatwa and jihad... and even the scorn of the politically correct.

It was a dangerous thing to make claims about forgiveness of sins. By saying such a thing, Jesus was declaring that He was God.

Had these religious leaders been with Jesus on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, they would have charged those two demon possessed men with the same crime. When those demons identified Jesus as the Son of God, they were making the same seemingly blasphemous claim.

<sup>4</sup>Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, **“Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? <sup>5</sup>Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’?”<sup>5</sup>**

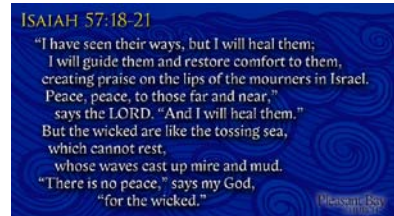
First Jesus asked “why the evil thoughts?” These men had determined that Jesus was evil, a blasphemer... but Jesus turned it right back around on them.

<sup>4</sup>The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 9:3.

<sup>5</sup>The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 9:4-5.

When God is doing good it often causes some to be agitated, to not be at peace, it is those who are not at peace who are wicked.

Recall the Old Testament passage Ted read today from Isaiah 57. When God, by His mercy, does a good thing, there is peace for those who turn to Him, in their sorrow and mourning, for healing.

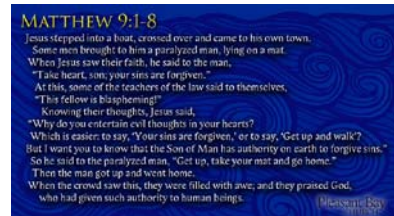


ISAIAH 57:18-21  
"I have seen their ways, but I will heal them;  
I will guide them and restore comfort to them,  
creating praise on the lips of the mourners in Israel.  
Peace, peace, to those far and near,"  
says the LORD. "And I will heal them."  
But the wicked are like the tossing sea,  
which cannot rest,  
whose waves cast up mire and mud.  
"There is no peace," says my God,  
"for the wicked."

- <sup>20</sup>But the wicked are like the tossing sea,  
which cannot rest,  
whose waves cast up mire and mud.  
<sup>21</sup>"There is no peace," says my God, "for the wicked."<sup>6</sup>

The religious experts' thoughts were angry, not peaceful at all, and wicked.

Jesus then asks a second question: <sup>5</sup>Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'?



MATTHEW 9:1-8  
Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town.  
Some men brought to him a paralyzed man, lying on a mat.  
When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man,  
"Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven."  
At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves,  
"This fellow is blaspheming!"  
Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said,  
"Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts?  
Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'?"  
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 human beings.

It is an interesting question. While it was blasphemous to **say** "Your sins are forgiven," it was ridiculous, in the minds of the religious leaders, for Jesus to assert that he could actually **do** it.

Truth is, it is generally easier to **say** anything than to actually **do** it. Among some of my friends we refer to some people as "big talkers." We all know folk who *over promise and under deliver*; they are *all talk... big hat, no cattle* kinds of cowboys.

It would be easier for any of us to **say** "sins forgiven" than to actually **do** a miraculous healing. Jesus, of course, could do both.

<sup>6</sup>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."<sup>7</sup> Then the man got up and went home.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus healed the man, not merely out of His compassion for this suffering child of God, but as a demonstration of power. Jesus healed the man, not merely to demonstrate that the Son of Man could cast out sickness, but to demonstrate that He was the Son of God with authority to forgive sin.

With this act, Jesus reminds us that He is concerned for our infirmities suffered in this life, but, more importantly, Jesus is ultimately concerned for the condition of our sin stained souls. Jesus changed this paralyzed man's life... and this man's eternal life.

<sup>6</sup>The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Is 57:20-21.

<sup>7</sup>The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 9:6-7.

<sup>8</sup>When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to human beings.<sup>8</sup>

This was truly awesome on every level.

- It was awesome that Jesus miraculously healed this man. We don't know what caused the paralysis, but it was likely that it came on slowly over the course of months or probably years (maybe decades). Disease likely took years to ruin this man's life; Jesus cast out the sickness in a mere moment with His simple command.
- It was awesome that Jesus stood in defiance of the religious leaders. This righteous act of healing was an affront to the self-righteous who called Jesus a blasphemer.
- It was awesome that Jesus proved that He had authority to forgive sins. The crowd was convinced, and now acknowledged that this man was not only healed of his paralysis, but forgiven of his sin because of the Word of Jesus.

What about us? What do we take away from this remarkable story? What is the "so what?" for us today.

I want to ask us a simple question: **Who are you?**

In this story, with whom should we identify?

Do we identify with the **paralytic**? Do we find ourselves in a desperate condition today? Are we sick? Maybe paralyzed? Possibly emotionally paralyzed with fear? Do we find ourselves not exactly sure how we got here or why we are here? If you are here identifying with that paralyzed man, you are in the right place. He found His answer from Jesus; I believe you can meet Jesus here and find your answers too.



Surely we don't identify ourselves with the **religious experts**! We, of course, would be full of mercy and grace in a situation like this. We wouldn't condemn Jesus because He didn't follow our rules. We wouldn't be so tied down to the way we had everything figured out. We wouldn't call this whole transaction *out of order* because it didn't happen according to our plans, our rules, our way of seeing religious things.

While we would not likely identify ourselves with these religious experts, these teachers of the law, I wonder if those who have been walking by on that sidewalk today might think we have a lot in common with the villains in today's lesson.

Face it. To the guy who just jogged by on that sidewalk, in clear view of us here through these windows, we likely seem to be a lot like those religious types that Jesus called wicked. We probably don't see ourselves that way, but could we possibly get a glimpse of ourselves through the eyes of the passerby?

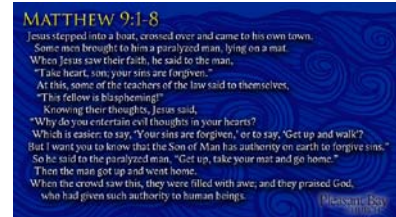
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<sup>8</sup>The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 9:8.

Maybe we best identify with the **crowd** that stood there amazed, convinced that something remarkable had occurred, convinced that Jesus had, indeed, not merely healed the man's disease, but healed the man's sin.

Were they even right about this? Had God given such authority, the power to forgive sins, to human beings? Was this a case of mistaken identity, or at least incomplete identity?

Who in this story had the authority to forgive sins?  
Who was the agent of mercy and grace?



Certainly Jesus was the primary agent of mercy and grace in this account, He healed and forgave sin... but was He the lone agent of healing here?

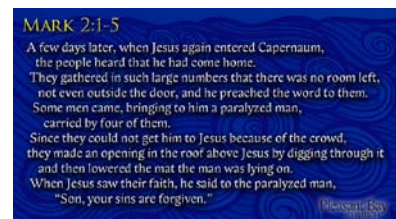
While we might identify with any of the players in this story, and might likely be able to identify with each of these in various ways, I hope we can clearly identify with this last group... the **friends of the paralyzed man**.

Jesus identifies these friends as part of the answer for this man. We see it there in verse 2:

<sup>2</sup>Some men brought to him a paralyzed man, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw **their faith**, he said to the man, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven."<sup>9</sup>

Jesus acknowledged the role of these men.

In The Gospel of Mark, we see the account of all this in chapter 2, and it gives us a few more details:



A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. <sup>2</sup>They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. <sup>3</sup>Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. <sup>4</sup>Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. <sup>5</sup>When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."<sup>10</sup>

These men went to extraordinary lengths to bring this suffering friend to Jesus. Knowing that Jesus had the answers, they stopped at nothing, dismantling the roof, so that this man and his need would be presented at the feet of Jesus. Both accounts

<sup>9</sup>The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 9:2.

<sup>10</sup>The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mk 2:1-5.

report that Jesus acknowledged **their** faith. We don't even know for sure if the paralyzed man had any faith... but surely his friends did. By going to these extraordinary lengths, these friends played an important part in this man's life being entirely changed.

Can we identify with these friends?

If I were to go out to the door and drag the mat in and tell you that I was going to somehow get this mat right to the very feet of Jesus... who would you put on the mat?



We'd put *each other* on the mat. We do that all the time as we respond to one another's needs, taking each other to the feet of Jesus in prayer. It is pretty easy for us to put each other on such a mat.

Who else? Who would be harder to get on the mat? What are the tough cases? Are they worth going to extraordinary measures to get to the feet of Jesus? Are we convinced that Jesus has the answers for our friends? Will we take risks, possibly seeming foolish or even crazy to do unconventional, even unruly things to bring our friends to Jesus?

The religious experts wouldn't dare to take such risks?  
And the onlookers, amazed as they are, wouldn't bother either?

Are we willing to be those kinds of friends? Knowing that Jesus has the answers, the power and the authority, will we do anything to be part of this sort transformation in the lives of our friends?

We need to be those kinds of friends. It could be that we are only those kinds of friends to folk that are already in the house. When that is the case, we need to ask God to help us get out of the house and become those kinds of friends to those who need to be brought to Jesus.

In all of this, Jesus reminds us that He is in the business of redemption. He calls us to Himself, forgiven our sin, so that we can be with God for eternity. He heals us, changing our lives in these days too, so that we can be among those who have true peace... so that we can be among those who can wholeheartedly sing His praise.



This is the sort of stuff we were made for... to be God's, loving Him and worshipping Him, being at peace.

And once claimed by Him, we are called to be involved in His work too... His work of redemption, bringing others, especially those who have no power to come themselves, to the feet of Jesus.

It is to this task we are called to pray.