

Introduction

Today we are going to consider the subject of forgiveness in Matthew 9.2-8.

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.

Again, we have the interplay between miracle and gospel. Thus, we want to keep the fact in mind that the miracles of Christ were provisional and temporary in nature. They are promissory; they embody the gospel Jesus came to secure. The nature of miracles is something that significantly colors how we apply these accounts to Christianity today (particularly, the gift of healing).

The topic of forgiveness obviously dominates the narrative because the miracle is almost a second thought. The paralytic and his helpers come for a miracle, but what they get is a pronouncement, a declaration about forgiveness (v. 2). Clearly, the miracle has a subordinate place in the event. Healing this man is subordinate to some lessons about faith and forgiveness that Jesus sought to teach and that Matthew recorded for our instruction. Thus, our title is "Forgiveness to people Paralyzed by Sin" and we will cover four areas regarding it: the means, the source, the fruit, and the certainty of the grace of forgiveness.

1A. The means of forgiveness

Seeing their faith (the faith no doubt of the entire group, paralytic and helpers, cf. Ridderbos), Jesus said to the paralytic, "Child, your sins are forgiven." The connection made here between the faith that Jesus saw and the forgiveness He granted shows us that faith is the means by which this sinner, and all sinners, hear the declaration of forgiveness with respect to their sins ("Your sins" typify our sins). Matthew is adding a new element to his report about restoration from all the effects of the fall that Jesus came to secure in His coming as son of Adam, Abraham, and David. This new element is additional to the power of Christ over demons, stormy seas, fever, terrible pain of body, and leprosy (Mat 8.1-9.1).

Specifically, we have insight into justification *by faith* displayed before our eyes in this context. In other words, we learn the important lesson that faith is the means through which God gives His declaration of forgiveness, which is justification on the negative side. The paralytic's sins are not imputed to him; He is declared not guilty in God's courtroom. Later Paul will expand on this point and call it justification. He will explain how people are justified apart from the works of the law but by faith in Christ. Of course, He can ground justification by faith without works in the OT by quoting David (Ps 32) for example, "Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute sin" (Rom 4.7-8). As in our narrative in Matthew, Paul will at times accent the negative side of justification, that is, that a person is righteous before God in the sense that he is not guilty; he is not liable to punishment for his sins. That is what it means to receive forgiveness, but this implies the positive fact of justification as indicated by how Paul introduces the quote from David: "faith is counted *for righteousness*, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works" (4.5-6).

Significantly, then, Jesus uses this occasion of the paralytic to teach justification by faith. Perhaps more significantly, He teaches this doctrine by making the declaration Himself. He straightforwardly declares that this man has forgiveness. Notably, He makes the declaration that God makes when He blesses someone. Thus, Jesus is confirming the truth announced by the demons at Gadara (cf. the previous narrative in Matthew 8.28-9.1), namely, that He is the son of

God and of one essence with God, that He is God the son. As God, He makes this unilateral declaration of blessing. As God, He can pardon sinners from *His* wrath against them!

The word of justifying grace comes through the means of faith; it is exclusive of any merit, efforts, or works of men. It cannot be by our works because the core issue is the reality of our sins. Although this man was a paralytic, he had many sins. His condition was not necessarily the result of some specific sin he committed (like a person getting drunk and becoming paralyzed by careless driving). We do not know how long he has been in this condition, but we do know that he was a sinner with many sins.

Forgiveness is a justifying grace administered by the Lord through faith. We can do nothing to right past wrongs. New resolutions do not do it. A new path or turning over a new leaf will not put us in the right. We must simply believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. We must trust Him and thus entrust our well-being body and soul, plagued by sins, to Him. We must simply give ourselves away to be His and under His care forever. This commitment, with all of its simplicity, carries with it God's declaration of forgiveness (i.e. not by faith but by God by grace *through* faith).

2A. The source of forgiving grace

Jesus indicates the source of forgiving grace by the way He addresses the paralytic. He calls him, "child" (v. 2, "take heart, my son"). Jesus calls the man His child in terms of endearment, warmth, and love. Remarkably, He calls the man His child before He declares his justification. It is not the case that the paralytic's justification makes him a child of God. In this context, the man is a child of Christ before he is justified (there must be more here than simply a warm fatherly-like greeting). Therefore, this saving of a sinner directs us to the coming of Jesus into the world to seek and save sinners. He came to save specific sinners, His covenant children from before the foundation of the world.

In other words, this account directs us to the teaching of passages like John 17 where Jesus speaks of those given to Him by the Father. Therefore, they belong to Jesus before they know Him (before they meet Him). They became His (per our text, His children). They became His children by the Father's giving with a particular purpose in mind, namely, so that Jesus may give them eternal life that comes by knowing God. In other words, they were the children of Jesus in order that Jesus may introduce them to God so they can meet Him, meet God, know God, and receive eternal life. Thus, we belong to Jesus, we are His, and we are His children, before He meets us and gives us the knowledge of God and eternal life.

Jesus grants forgiveness at points in time in history out of a great resource of covenantal love that reaches back to the great fountainhead of grace in the counsels of God before the creation of the world. Granting forgiveness is a special occasion. This is a special meeting in history between Jesus and one of His covenant children, one for whom He took flesh and blood.

Thus, the source of forgiveness is love, covenant, eternal, tender, warm, and enriching love. We learn a marvelous truth from the order of things in this text. We learn that Christ loves us as His children long before He meets us and we meet Him at the time of our salvation. From this narrative, I conclude that this encounter of Jesus with one of His children typifies how each believer comes to know the Lord. We meet Him when He meets us and this meeting occurs because He already knew us as His children because the Father gave us to Him. He took flesh and blood in the incarnation because His covenant children "share in flesh and blood":

For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one origin. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers,¹² saying, "I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise."¹³ And again, "I will put my trust in him." And again, "Behold, I and the children God has given me."¹⁴ Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil,¹⁵ and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery (Heb 2.11-15).

3A. The Fruit of forgiveness

Jesus says, take courage, be of good cheer, cheer up and have a good heart because your sins are forgiven. In other words, the fruit of forgiving grace is joy.

Note some of the dimensions of this joy. Unexpectedly, or at least, distinctively, Jesus gave no word of healing. There is no request stated. The concern for healing is obvious in the bringing of the man through the roof and to the feet of Jesus (as we know from the parallel accounts). So there he is at the feet of Jesus in great need of healing, but Jesus declares his justification and encourages him to be of good cheer while still lying there in the eyes of all observers. The timing of our Lord's encouragement is like His timing when the disciples were paralyzed by fear in the storm (Mat 8.23-27); right there while the winds and waves overwhelm them, Jesus encourages them not to fear (because He sleeps in the storm).

Can we appreciate this stage in the incident (this being in the middle of a storm regarding bodily health)? How can he rejoice in the gospel while still paralyzed? How can he have a good heart? He can rejoice and the reason he can accents again the provisional nature of the miracles in the first place. Just think for a moment. Healed or not healed, history is unfolding, time is running its course, and death is closing in on us all. The paralytic, healed or not healed, will die because sin and death entered the human family in the fall. This man is guilty and so are we, of a multitude of sins.

Thus, what is more important than a temporary healing? Ah, yes, it is the saving of the whole man. It is forgiveness now and forevermore before God's holy bar of judgment. No wonder he has joy as the fruit of forgiveness, healed or not healed. It is because by the forgiveness of Christ by means of His work as whole, he will be saved body and soul in the day of redemption. Thus, Jesus tells him to be of good cheer because life is much more than food and the body is much more than clothing (Mat 6.25). That is, life is much more than temporary health and the body is much more than temporary comfort.

Here is a direction of the mind to focus our thoughts on the gospel that gives us a reason to rejoice whatever our state may be in life and in relation to dying and death. Our comfort and joy is to know that we belong to our faithful savior, Jesus Christ. The *Heidelberg Catechism* puts the question like this: What is your only comfort, in life and in death? The answer is,

“That I belong-body and soul, in life and in death-not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready form now on to live for him” (QA 1).

One question might be briefly touched on here regarding the fact that this fruit of joy comes as a command. How do we think through the idea of a command to be happy (to be of good cheer or to rejoice)? Obviously, as a command it is a soft command since it is something you might not think would come as a duty. Further, the idea of command is more in the backdrop as an encouragement. Jesus points out and accents the basis for joy and contemplating that is the way to the joy. In effect, the command is to meditate on the basis for joy, on the fact of forgiveness! We should think this way about the “duty of rejoicing”; it will help us keep the matter of our joy and emotional highs in balance and perspective. It shows that joy is a by-product of other things. Joy is something that we should not over exaggerate (like saying that our pleasure is *the* way we glorify God; that is no more true than the fact that by our gentleness we glorify God; the *Christian life should not be reduced* to something governed by our sense of joy). Still, and important, the fruit of forgiving grace is joy (at the astounding fact, an objectively cheerful fact: forgiven).

4A. The certainty of forgiving grace (we need assurance!)

An emphasis on the certainty of forgiveness arises from the opposition of the scribes (teachers of the Law in Israel). They weigh His declaration and think that He is a blasphemer. The certainty here has two roots.

1B. First, we are certain of forgiveness because of the knowledge of Christ.

The one who says, “Your sins are forgiven” is the one who looks into your very thoughts. He knows you and your sins down to each detail just as He knew the thoughts of these scribes and could identify them as evil (v. 4).

Per Psalm 139, we can seek a place of escape from the eyes of the Lord, but there is no place for us to hide from Him. However, the Lord who knows our thoughts and all the sins of the heart is the one who says, “Your sins are forgiven.” Thus, as we seek to flee with a sense of guilt and fly away with rays of the morning sun, even if we speed our way out into the uttermost part of the Mediterranean Sea on the wings of the morning, even there shall the hand of Christ lay hold of us and uphold us!

Wonderfully, the one who knows and who is offended in the first place by our sins is the one who has the ability and right to grant forgiveness. His word is certain when He says, “Your sins are forgiven.” He knows and being the one we have sinned against (and He knows it!), He is the best person to grant forgiveness; a word from Him is the best word we can hear (and that is a cheerful point). This is a word of assurance: He knows our sins...and forgives!

2B. Second, we are certain of forgiveness because of the power of Christ.

He demonstrates His power in the visible sign of healing. When He says, “Which is easier to say...the word of forgiveness or the word of healing,” He is speaking about doing these things by the power of His word. That is, He is asking, “Which is easier to do, to forgive by a word or to heal by a word?” (Mat 9.5).

It is fitting to compare forgiveness and healing in this way because it is by His death that He heals us of all of our diseases (cf. 8.17). These things go together because our diseases are the effects of the fall into sin and the remedy for sin is the work of Christ.

Thus, He says that we may know and have assurance of forgiving grace as a certainty in heaven for sinners here on earth. Accordingly, He spoke the word of healing to the paralytic: rise, take your bed and go home.

This narrative in Matthew anticipates commitment to Christ *as risen Lord* (Rom 8.9-10). The faith of these people regarding man’s physical well being despite the reality of the fall, sin, dying, and death anticipates resurrection faith. Simply put, if the paralytic has forgiveness by faith in Christ, *then his sins will not defeat him in any way, much less, physically*. Enclosed in this victory is his resurrection, and his resurrection, we know from the rest of the NT, is part of the harvest with Christ’s resurrection as the first fruits. The words to the paralytic promise justification by faith in Jesus Christ the risen Lord. They anticipate that teaching in Paul by saying in effect, “You have forgiveness and victory over all the physical effects of sin by faith in Jesus who is the conqueror of sin and death by His own death and resurrection.” Therefore, believe in your heart and confess with your mouth that Jesus is risen Lord and you shall be saved.

Here is the certainty of forgiveness in the fullest sense. Jesus grants pardon and the salvation of the whole man, body and soul, by His effectual word. He is truly the Lord of the universe as our Sabbath king. By the gospel, in due time, He will save us entirely, finally, and eternally.

Conclusion

Give glory to God. Give glory to God exclusively without seeking to share in the credit that is due to Him alone.

The knowing of the scribes is objective. By that, I mean that they did not know the power of the word of Christ in a saving way. Truth came to them like the sun bursting through the clouds so that they feel its warmth even though they cannot see its brightness. Thus, what Jesus

is doing is making the point plain, objective, clear, and unquestionable in the light of day, even though the people to whom He spoke could not understand His word. Many did not grasp the truth proclaimed here in both word and deed (v. 8, “authority to *men*” is glorifying in humanity, cf. Ridderbos, “they felt exalted and flattered as men...the real meaning of the miracle escaped them).

The right response to these things is to acknowledge our sins and their paralyzing effects, to ponder God’s eternal covenant love, to cling to the Sabbath Lord Jesus, and to glorify God in our praises and our getting up every day from our beds to walk about serving Christ.