

THE KING'S DESIRE FOR MERCY

Matthew 9:1-13

Key verse 9:13

“But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

The theme of this conference is the kingdom of God. A kingdom has a king and the nature and qualities of the king will tell us something of his kingdom. In this passage Matthew is revealing the nature of King Jesus and His kingdom. He is telling us who Jesus invites into his kingdom and what he hopes for in his subjects. Jesus is a king like no other. This is a king that welcomes people like no other. This is a king that parties like no other! In short the king desires mercy and calls sinners!

I. Take heart from the king

Look at verses 1-2: “Jesus stepped into a boat and crossed over and came to his own town. There some men brought to him a paralysed man, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man, ‘Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.’” We know from parallel accounts that there is a lot more drama to this story as the men smashed open the roof and lower the man down in front of Jesus. It’s dramatic, yet Matthew strips out these details and gives only the core parts of the story.

He tells us of the men’s impressive faith. Even today paralysis is often incurable and so it’s unthinkable that this would change but Jesus saw the men had faith. But what sort of faith did he see? He saw the faith that looked at Jesus rather than the man’s paralysis. When they saw the paralysis they despaired at the inevitability of his condition. But when they saw Jesus they had hope. They came to believe that Jesus could heal the man and so they brought him to Jesus. We see faith means seeing Jesus and trusting in him rather than seeing our problems. Faith finds hope in hopeless situations. Why? Because faith see’s Jesus.

But what did Jesus see? He saw sin. In those days, many people believed that the man was paralysed because of his sin. He might have believed this himself but regardless of the cause, this man, like all men, lived with the impact of sin in his life. As well as paralysis he was oppressed by a sense of guilt, fear, fatalism and anxiety that come from sin. Jesus saw the pain in this man’s life and he wanted to do something about it. Frankly in today’s society many paralysed people are ignored. After university I worked for a disabled man called Steve Cribb, who was effectively paralysed below the neck and I would act as his arms and legs. It was interesting how many people would talk to me,

pushing the wheelchair, and totally ignore Steve or would speak down to him in a patronising way. Steve and I often spoke about this because the irony was that he was highly intelligent. Jesus did not patronise the paralysed man but saw him and knew what he needed most.

Look again at verse 2b: “Take heart son; your sins are forgiven.” The King James version says, ‘Son, be of good cheer’. The greatest reason to take heart and be of good cheer is because our sins are forgiven. Very often we take heart in success, take heart in our career, take heart in our family or take heart in our exam results. There can be comfort in these but they are nothing compared to an invitation to the Kingdom of God. What is the reason that this man can take heart? He is paralysed. Even after Jesus speaks to him he is still paralysed so why should he take heart? Notice that Jesus did not say, ‘Take heart, son; your paralysis has gone’ rather he said, ‘Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.’ The reason that we can take heart and be of good cheer is because our sins are forgiven. If our sins are forgiven, we have entry into the Kingdom of God. If we have our sins forgiven, it is proof we are called to the kingdom of God and have his royal pardon.

Yet let’s face it, many today don’t take much heart in the promise of forgiveness of sin. For many sin is just a distant, religious word. But make no mistake, forgiveness of sin is the greatest blessing that God can give a person. Charles Spurgeon asks us to judge whether a parent with children escaping from a fire could be at ease if they were told that one child remained inside? Nothing would console them while that single child was in the burning house. A neighbour might say, ‘We saved your chest of drawers, we have saved your valuable books. We’ve got your iPad’. No parent would take heart in that! My child is in danger! When a soul is in danger nothing can content him. There is no consolation until the life threatening problem is gone. Sin is a life threatening condition that robs us of life and cuts us off from the King and the Kingdom.

It’s also important to notice the order. Jesus clearly thought forgiveness of sin is of first importance. Imagine a man sitting in a prison cell, condemned to death. Could you make the man comfortable by providing a great meal? Or giving a more comfortable bed or better furniture? Before him is condemnation and he will die tomorrow. But tell him that he is granted a free pardon and he would take heart! Only then can he really enjoy the food and good things around him. Only when let out of the prison can we really take heart. Such is the joy when this pardon comes from God and we have access to the kingdom of God.

Jesus encourages him to take heart but notice his heart behind this – he says ‘take heart, *son*’. I love this word. Where people ignored this man or saw him as a burden, Jesus saw his son. I have two sons and I love them with all my heart. They are fine sons and I am proud to call them sons. Only I get to say to each, my son. It is a word rich in love and tenderness. Jesus saw this man and his pain, confusion and paralysis and he called him son – my son. Personally I want to give my sons the very best. And so it is

with Jesus when he declares: “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.” This matters. Sin separates us from our father in heaven. Sin separates us from the Kingdom. But Jesus sees his deepest need and tenderly welcomes this man, no longer as a sinner, but as a son. Take heart son, your sins are forgiven.

II. The challenge of the King

The forgiveness of sin is an amazing declaration but don't miss the enormity of what Jesus is doing here. Jesus is deliberately challenging those present to think about who he is. It's a bit of a shock. The first shock is to those carrying the paralysed man. They brought him to Jesus to be healed but after all their hard work he remains paralysed. The second, and deeper shock, is to the teachers of the law. They know how explosive Jesus is being and said to themselves, ‘This fellow is blaspheming!’ (3). They know that only God can forgive sins. Only the King can issue a royal pardon and allow people into his kingdom and they are absolutely right. When Jesus declares, ‘your sins are forgiven’ he is standing there saying, ‘all sins are against me. When you lie, it's my commands you are breaking. When you hurt people, it's my creation you are hurting’. Jesus is taking to himself things that only God can do. He is declaring that the King is here and He is using his powers.

But, why do this? Notice Jesus did not *have* to do any of this. At no point do the men ask Jesus to deal with sin. The paralysed man never even speaks. Nobody knew the thoughts of the teachers of the law, yet Jesus called them out asking ‘Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts?’ (4) Can you imagine the shock of these men when Jesus suddenly says, ‘I know what you are thinking. I know what is on your hearts about me and your thoughts are evil. Your hearts are evil.’ Clearly Jesus is not happy with their view of him and wants them to know something.

It's in verse 6: “But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.’ So he said to the paralysed man, ‘Get up, take your mat and go home.’ Then the man got up and went home. What a miracle! A man paralysed immediately gets up and walks! Yet Jesus is doing far more than healing. Jesus is challenging them to ask, ‘who is this Jesus?’ In particular Jesus wants us to know ‘that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’ (6). Jesus is demonstrating that He has authority here, on earth, to forgive sins. It means sin is not something that can be put off until the day we meet God. It's not something we deal with at death. Rather Jesus wants us to know that he has authority on each to forgive sins and allow access to the Kingdom of God right now. No other religious leader says this; Mohammed, Krishna, Buddha. No other religious founder says, “Your sins are forgiven.” Rather they say, “I can point you to God.” “I can teach you to live so that perhaps God may someday forgive you.’ Jesus is unique. He is the King that has authority to forgive sins and bring people into the Kingdom of God. Jesus is not just a great moral teacher. He is not simply a wise man, or a prophet. None of this will do. Jesus wants us to know that He is the Son of Man, the

messiah, the King who alone can forgive sins and welcome people into the Kingdom of God.

III. The call of the King

Jesus has authority to forgive sins but how will he use this authority? Matthew turns the spotlight onto himself to see what a forgiven sinner looks like. First, how wide is this authority to forgive sins? Look at verse 9: “As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector’s booth. ‘Follow me’ he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.” You know about tax collectors, hated for collaboration with Rome. They could not give evidence in court. They were barred from the synagogue. Of course Matthew knew all this when he made the choice but he was materialistic. He did not care about the spiritual world. He was prepared to do whatever it takes to make money even if it meant certain hardships. It’s no exaggeration to presume Matthew was the most hated man in Capernaum. Every society has its untouchables that nobody wants to associate with. I am in no way condoning him, but a parallel today would be if Jesus went up to Harvey Weinstein. Here we see something of the nature of the Kingdom of God. The kingdom of God has room for the despised, the rejected, the hated. Jesus desire to forgive and expand his kingdom extends to the lowest, ugliest traitor. In short Jesus kingdom extends to the worst of sinners.

How does he apply this? Notice Jesus simply tells Matthew, ‘Follow me’ (9). Jesus does not say, ‘Follow these rules. Follow this teaching or doctrine.’ Rather the call is by Jesus and to Jesus. The words, “follow me” meant ‘be my disciple and learn from me.’ The impact of this call is strong and Matthew was clearly so overwhelmed that he left his tax booth and decided to throw a party. We can see the guest list in verse 10: “While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples.” It’s quite a guest list! It’s quite a party! But others were not so happy. The Pharisees saw this, and asked his disciples, ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?’ (11). The Pharisees did not like the guest list.

Before we look at Jesus’ response, I want to warn about a danger here. We are familiar with the Pharisees as the straw men, bad guys: ‘Oooh these guys are nasty! How foolish! I thank God I am not like them!’ Be careful. The Pharisees prided themselves on their bible study and devotion to God. Josephus described them as the most accurate exponents of the law. They met together to pray, study the bible and to encourage each other in a godly life. They tried hard. Hang on....they sound like me! These are not examples, but warnings. The warning is in verses 12-13: “On hearing this, Jesus said, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. But go and learn what this means: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.’” Jesus knows they have a lot of sin and mess in their lives. He looks at the guest list and is saying ‘absolutely they are sinners’. Jesus doesn’t excuse or minimize their sin

but the issue is how to respond to the Kingdom? There is not time to look at all of this but notice what Jesus wants. He tells them ‘go and learn what this means: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”’ (13a). To tell a Pharisee to go and learn what this means is a rabbinical rebuke saying that they should go and study the bible. Jesus is saying that they have missed the point. They knew the *law* of the king but not the *heart* of the King.

The law involved sacrifice. They offered sacrifices in the morning and in the evening. They sacrificed time, money and effort for God. But they did not have mercy toward the sinners, the weak, and the poor. They were proud of themselves but were cold and indifferent to people. God did not want their sacrifice because God desires mercy, not sacrifice. Ultimately God does not want sacrifice because he has given the perfect sacrifice and made the perfect offering in giving us Jesus. It means we have nothing to be proud of! Having mercy means being broken hearted toward sinners, the weak, and toward those with problems. Having mercy means seeing others, not from my point of view, but from their point of view and understanding them. It means accepting other’s pain as mine. Where there is mercy there is warmth and love.

Second, a warning to the healthy. Jesus kingdom is merciful enough to embrace the dirtiest of sinners those that are healthy won’t come to the king and his kingdom. Jesus has not come to call the righteous but sinners and so if you don’t think you are sick you won’t hear the call of Jesus. This is a painful warning. Jesus is speaking of people that think they are fine and have no need of him. These are the ones that think they are OK and doing well. The worst thing? Many of them are moral religious people. My real worry today, is that we don’t know how sick we are. We don’t hear the news of the kingdom of God and that Jesus can forgive our sins as the greatest news ever. Why? Because we don’t realise how serious this illness of sin is. My father was diagnosed with advanced cancer fairly recently. One of the more painful aspects for me was to find out that he had this for years and yet all the time, he never knew. He felt no pain. He appeared healthy and was active and yet the truth was that all the while this illness has been working to kill him. The cancer is serious but the fact is its nothing compared to the illness of sin.

I want to end by asking how can we gain this heart of mercy? In a sense every religion will tell you to be kind. That’s easy. The issue is how do we have this heart? The answer is by receiving mercy. Matthew’s heart was changed when he received mercy from Jesus. The fact is nobody went near Matthew. They had no mercy for him. And yet Jesus saw him, Jesus came to him and called him, ‘follow me’. Rather than condemn Matthew, Jesus would die for him on the cross. Rather than rejection, Jesus embraced and forgave his sins and showed mercy. To those that are in need of this healing, to those that know the mess, confusion and pain that sin has caused I have good news! The Kingdom of God is near! The kingdom of God is a place of mercy and embrace!

Now I realise that these are religious words so let me be personal. Frankly I am always surprised to be standing in a place like this. I grew up as a firm atheist. I never went to church or read the bible. In my late 20's I found myself in Norway at a new year camp with Christians. It was the first time in my life I read the bible. I read 3 whole pages. It was about Mary pouring perfume on Jesus's feet and about Judas' anger. I was shocked because I agreed with Judas. A year's wages on the floor was a waste! Even I knew Judas was the bad guy and this so shocked me, that I accepted an invitation to study the bible.

At some point I came to face Jesus' question 'who do you say I am?' Alone in my room I thought about this question and came to realise, 'oh no, I believe. Jesus is the Christ.' I realised I had no choice but to kneel down and accept him. I had no desire to be a Christian but felt like Jesus had trapped me to believing in him. But as I went on I started to reflect on my life and how as a child I had stolen money from my parents – perhaps \$5000 in today's terms. Some money was found and I blamed my best friend. My parents never knew the truth and for decades I had lived with the shame and guilt. I came to realise that I was Judas. I had betrayed my best friend who got the blame for my wrong. It was then that I read Jeremiah 31:3, 'I have loved you with an everlasting love'. I could not have mercy on myself. I could not love or forgive myself. I carried the shame of betrayal, of violence and yet Jesus loved me with an everlasting love. Jesus had mercy on me. Not because I am good man. Not because I am lawyer. Not because I was clever enough to work out that he was God. He loved me with an everlasting love because he is merciful. I deserved condemnation and yet he loved me with an everlasting love. I was shown mercy. Yet today I hear Jesus telling me 'I desire mercy'. Jesus is not in the Pharisee manufacture business. He is not raising religious people but those that share and know his heart of mercy. He goes after my judgmental thinking, my criticism of the party guest list and says Paul – "I desire mercy. I desire mercy just as you were shown mercy." When I remember the mercy Jesus has shown to me the Kingdom of God looks an incredibly wonderful place to be! We have it all in Jesus and in him there is forgiveness and mercy!