

Text:

Matthew 9.1-13

Big Picture:

Matthew presents a set of stories demonstrating Jesus' power and culminating with Jesus' instructions that we should be people who desire mercy, not sacrifice. While Jesus is speaking directly to those who oppose him most, the Pharisees, we should also pay close attention to his admonition. Which do *we* desire?

Preparing for the Lesson:

Although our text for groups this week begins in chapter 9 of Matthew, you need to be aware that this story is the last of a triad of stories that show Jesus having power over natural and supernatural beings and forces. The triad is a common literary device for Matthew; in fact, we have seen it previously within this section (8.1-9.38) in order to demonstrate Jesus' ability to heal (8.1-17). The entire section demonstrates Jesus' power in various ways, confirming in action some of the attitudes found in his first discourse (5.1-7.29).

Within each of these “demonstration of power” episodes, notice not only what Jesus does, but also how people react to his actions. In the first, he calms the storm and his disciples—those of little faith—ask the question “What kind of man is this?” In reality, this is being answered throughout all of the stories in chapters 8-9. The men are amazed at this power. In the second episode, the “whole town” pleads for him to leave the area. While their reaction would appear to be a negative one, the people are certainly affected by Jesus' power over demons; so much so, they do not want him around. Finally, in our story for today, the people are filled with awe and praised God, an element not in previous stories.

It has been noted that the friends of the man who is paralyzed (although one could argue that the man's faith should also be included in this group) are cited for their faith (“when Jesus saw *their* faith...”). There are some interesting implications about this, not the least of which is the importance of surrounding ourselves with people of faith. Once, when teaching this lesson to a group of Jr. High students, one reacted to my comment that the paralyzed man could do little with an insightful awareness of the power of this man's friendship. Although it is not mentioned specifically in the text, I have to agree that this man offered something beyond what we would normally look to as “desirable qualities of a companion.”

We understand Jesus to be talking to the paralyzed man when he commands him to get up and walk, but the original text does not contain these words. They are added to show the shift of focus of the speaker, something we cannot see just through the words on the page. The point, however, is certain. Comparatively speaking, it is much easier to say, “Your sins are forgiven.” We are to assume that if Jesus has the power to heal this man, it is a demonstrative proof of his ability to forgive, as well. The Pharisees would have been right, to speak forgiveness would have been blasphemous, but their objection carries little weight with the crowd watching a previously paralyzed man walking down the street.

The next story, which gives specific instructions that in many ways backs the actions of 9.1-8, contains the shocking imagery of a tax collector being called upon to follow Jesus. If fishermen were bad choices for disciples, then a tax collector was just down right rotten. Notice the often-used connection of “tax collectors and sinners.” For the religious elite of the day, there would have been little difference between the two. Tax collectors were those (Jewish) individuals who had been selected to collect the tolls and tariffs assigned to

the Jewish people. As if having to pay taxes to the Roman Empire were not enough for tax collectors to be seen in a disparaging light, the fact that tax collectors were notorious for padding their own pockets in the process added insult to injury.

The Pharisees, offended at Jesus' choice of dinner companions, found the closest person to whom they could complain. To eat with someone indicated an acceptance of that person and so table fellowship with sinners was strictly forbidden. The Pharisees, more likely trying to make a point rather than seek answers to a question, find a disciple (most likely one going to or from the house, not sitting at the table with Jesus) to quiz about Jesus' practice of eating with those who were unclean. Jesus turns their expectations upside-down by letting them know it is in fact those who are most unclean he is seeking.

The Jewish leaders and people of the day most certainly would have been familiar with Hosea's prophecy quoted here, but their application of it was lacking. As we seek people, Jesus says, we need to err on the side of mercy. Those who are sick, sinners, outcast, and poor in spirit (to use the Sermon on the Mount) are the ones who need to hear the message of Jesus. The implications for us today are almost as surprising as they were for the people hearing Jesus in that day.

Possible Lesson Outline:

Start your group discussion by asking people the following questions: If you could have a dinner party with just three people, living or dead, who would you invite? Now, who would be the types of people who would be last on your list? Ask if anyone has ever been to a dinner party or event where they ended up seated next to or having to interact with someone they had hoped would not be there, say an ex-boyfriend or girlfriend? How did they make it through the evening?

Ask discussion questions.

Consider using the "This Week" section for the upcoming week.

Close with a time of prayer.

For the Kids:

If you include the children in your group as a part of your group time, I would focus today on the importance of the paralyzed man's friends? Ask some of the following questions of the children?

- How hard would it be to be a friend to someone who was not able to go and play with you?
- How special were these people who were friends to this man?
- What can this man do for his friends?
- Jesus later says that it is important to show mercy to people, especially people who do not deserve it. Do you have any idea what mercy is? [You may need to help them out here.]
- How can we be nice to all people, even people who may not be the kinds of people others like to be nice to?
- What specific things can you do to show someone who is left out that God loves them?

Discussion Questions:

1. Jesus' healing of the paralyzed man is actually the last in a series of three stories that show the power of Jesus over natural forces, demons, and illnesses, specifically paralysis (see 8.23-9.8). What do we learn about Jesus through these stories? How do his actions confirm or contradict the people's expectations of a "Messiah?" How do they affect your expectations?

2. How does your faith affect your friends and vice-versa? Why would you think it significant that Jesus sees “their” faith (that is the faith of the friends and probably the man’s as well)?
3. How would you answer the question, “Which is easier...?” Why would you think this to be the case? What are we to assume is the correct answer to this question, or at least, the answer Jesus had in mind? Why is this significant for a proper understanding of what it means to be the Messiah?
4. Why do you think Matthew includes the response of those around Jesus as he tells these stories? What is significant about these responses in general and responses toward Jesus’ healing specifically?
5. We have already seen in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus call people to follow him as disciples. What is unique about the calling of Matthew?
6. Are the Pharisees trying to ask a question of Jesus or make a point in verse 11? Why do you think this is the case? In what ways did the Pharisees desire sacrifice over mercy? In what ways do we do the same?
7. What implications does Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees have on how we go about being the church? What things can we do to better ensure we as a One Group and South Plains as a congregation are focused on showing mercy and calling sinners to follow Jesus?

This Week:

I think we would be amiss if we did not spend some time this week showing mercy to those who need it most. In some ways this is difficult because you have to decide how to show mercy and whom you need to show that mercy to, but in other ways, this is simple. Let’s agree before the week starts that our goal is not to get a collection of cool stories to share with one another. In fact, if your group feels better about keeping these moments to themselves, agree to go show mercy, even if no one else will know about it.

Prayer Ideas:

In Luke 18.38, a blind man calls out a prayer that has through the ages been called the “Jesus Prayer.” He says simply: “Jesus, Son of David, has mercy on me.” For centuries, people have used this simple prayer as a way to keep them focused on praying continually. I want to adapt this slightly and ask that this week, you have group members pray not only this pray, but also add: “Lord, may we also show mercy to others.” You may perhaps want people to write this down so they can see it, but whatever the case, use this prayer to help remind us of the mercy we have been shown and the need for us to desire mercy, not sacrifice.

What’s Next:

Next week’s section is Matthew 11.1-13.52. One Groups will be looking at 11.1-19.