

The Gospel According to Matthew

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CHAPTER TWENTY

MATTHEW 9:1-17

IN this study we have the third illustration in the second group showing the power of the King.

- It is that of the forgiveness of sins and the healing of the sick of the palsy.
- This is followed by the account of the call of Matthew; which is thus set in relation to the healing of the palsy and the forgiveness of sins, in a very striking manner.
- That in turn is followed by a record of criticism and inquiry.

Let us mark the lines of analysis before we give more detailed attention to the teaching.

In the first eight verses we have the story of Christ's crossing over into His own city, and His pronouncing forgiveness upon the man and healing him. Then in verse nine we have the story of the calling of Matthew; all told in the compass of one verse, and yet thrilling with suggestiveness. Immediately following, in verses ten to thirteen, we have the first criticism. "**Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners?**"

Then in verses fourteen to seventeen we have the inquiry, "**Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but Thy disciples fast not?**"

This, then, is the outline of our study.

We commence with the incident of healing, and notice first some of its points of beauty.

"Jesus seeing their faith."

That is the statement which first arrests attention on reading the story. Details are not given here, beyond that of the faith with which these men came.

One of the other evangelists tells us that they broke up the roof, and let the sick man down into the midst. The fact here standing out is, that "**He saw their faith.**"

There has been a good deal of speculation as to whose faith is referred to, but of one thing we may be perfectly sure, it was not only the faith of the men who brought him. "**Their faith**" demands some other interpretation; it demands the faith of the man, as well as the faith of the men who brought him, because Christ said to him, "**Thy sins be forgiven thee.**"

It would appear that our Lord saw that in his heart there was a desire for something deeper than physical healing; and that he was conscious that physical disability was the result of his own sin; and therefore with a great tenderness, in words thrilling with the music of the evangel He had come to create, He said to him, in effect: "Be of good cheer I am able to deal with the deepest matter; thy sins are forgiven."

That word was a response to faith.

And yet, while we believe there was faith in the heart of the man himself, we must not miss the important fact here that there is such a thing as vicarious faith. It is possible to help a man's faith. **"Jesus seeing their faith."**

Then notice that when they brought him, instead of first dealing with his disability, Jesus at once said to him, **"Son, be of good cheer, thy sins be forgiven thee."**

In a moment the suspicion of the crowd was evident, and their criticism was aroused, because He pronounced forgiveness with authority. The men who had been watching with curiosity became angry, and charged Him with blasphemy. It was then that the King for the first time in His process of revelation, defended an action. He looked at these men criticizing, and said to them, **"For whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins" (then saith he to the sick of the palsy), "Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house."** And he arose and left.

Then there came upon the people a great sense of fear, and they marveled. The fear was due to the fact that there was demonstrated to their consciousness the fact that somehow, in that Man, or through that Man, God was very near.

They had heard the great word of forgiveness, the word for which the heart of an honest man hungers, more than any other. They had heard this Man say, **"Thy sins be forgiven thee,"** and they did not believe it; they questioned it; they thought He was blasphemous; they felt that He was saying something easy, a word that was not capable of demonstration, and which therefore they did not accept as truth. And instantly, with a great tenderness, not because the Lord was anxious for His own defence, but that they might believe, He challenged the man to rise up and walk. And so in concrete and evident fashion He demonstrated His power. But there is more than that in the story.

Probably to all intelligent men who watched Him that day there was a clear consciousness of the connection between the man's physical disability and his sin; and that instead of touching the surface, Jesus went right to the root of the matter, when He pronounced forgiveness. The demonstration which the King gave these men in very concrete fashion, is the perpetual demonstration of the fact of forgiveness. With the forgiveness of sin, if it be a true experience, there pass away disabilities, which hold men in bondage while sin remains unforgiven.

When Jesus asked these people, **"For whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk?"** He suggested to them the relation between sin and suffering.

Again one is driven back to the prophecy of Isaiah. In Matthew 8:17 we read, **“That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet, saying, Himself took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses.”**

Thus Matthew claimed that the healing of all those who came to Jesus was in fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy in chapter 53:4: **“Surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows.”** Let us continue the reading in Isaiah: **“Yet we did esteem Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed.”**

Thus the prophet looking down through the centuries to the perfect Servant of God, the Great Healer, said of Him, first, **“He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.”**

He did not end there; but went on to tell how this One would heal, not in the local cases merely, but in the great issue of all His mission as the Servant of God: **“He was wounded for our transgressions.”**

That is to say that by the vicarious suffering of the Servant of God sin would be dealt with. Sin lies at the back of all human disability; and because sin is dealt with all its results can be dealt with. That is the whole mission of the Servant of God. This was so in the case of this man. He had palsy. Sin is the root of palsy. The King pardoned his sin by virtue of the fact that He would presently bear it in His own body on the tree. The Passion was the right and warrant for everything that Jesus did in this realm of healing physical disability. He healed by the mystery of the Cross, by bearing our transgressions and being bruised for our iniquity.

In the long outworking of the mission of Jesus, by the way of that Cross, every tear shall be wiped away, all diseases shall be dealt with and cast out, and His ultimate victory in the physical realm, based upon His bearing of sin, the cause of disease, will be the perfect physical salvation of the race that puts its trust in Him.

The mission of the Son of Man is that of dealing with sin; and, secondly, that of healing disease; so that here again is manifested the fact that the miracles of Jesus were wrought by the restoration of a lost order, rather than by violation of existing law. Men who had seen Him Master in the realm of the physical; Master of the elements; Master of the surrounding spiritual world; now saw Him King in the moral realm, pronouncing absolution, and giving the evidence of the absolution, in the curing of a physical disability.

Now it is not without suggestiveness that the next thing we read is that Jesus called Matthew.

Matthew was a tax-gatherer, and we know how unpopular the Roman tax-gatherer was, and how far more unpopular was the Jew who lent himself to the work of Rome. Matthew was of such a lower caste of Jew; not necessarily the poor Jew; but the man who, in the opinion of his compatriots, was of blunted moral sense, and of dead national aspiration.

The King saw this man, one of a class supremely despised by the people, and as He passed said to him, **“Follow Me,”** and thus immediately included one outcast of the nation, in the inner circle of His Kingdom.

He had claimed the power to forgive sins. Here in the eyes of the people was a sinner above all men, and the King called him, and he followed.

The way Matthew himself tells the story is full of beauty: **“And as Jesus passed forth from thence, he saw a man, named Matthew, sitting at the receipt of custom: and he saith unto him, Follow me. And he arose, and followed him.”**

“As Jesus passed forth from thence He saw”

- What did He see? The man.
- What did they see? The tax-gatherer.

The world sees all sorts of things in us the accidental things. Christ will not see them, although He sees everything. He sees the man. We may be bruised and broken and scarred, and it may be all our own fault; but in each case He sees the man; and He calls us in the same sweet voice that Matthew heard: **“Follow Me.”**

Is not this a new exhibition of the King’s power and authority in yet another sphere? Here the King is seen exercising His authority, so far as He can exercise it, in the realm of human will, by expressing the demand of a paramount claim, **“Follow Me.”**

Perpetually one is being startled at the Master’s method.

Only once in the four Gospels can we find any occasion when He asked advice. He once asked Philip what they were to do to feed the crowd. But notice the parenthesis. **“This He said to prove him, for He Himself knew what He would do.”** He always knew what He would do; and He came to this man, sitting there in the midst of custom and toll, and He said to him, **“Follow Me.”** There was no argument, no apology. He did not even suggest to him that it might be well if he first considered His claims. It was a quiet, strong, musical, mystical demand; and everything for that man, depended upon his answer.

But if there is here a note of great authority, mark its limitation.

Yes, the King is limited. **“Follow Me,”** He said; but the **“I will”** of the man was needed to complete the relationship. One stands appalled with the tremendous fact that a man can say, No. These chapters reveal it. He went to the country of the Gadarenes, and they said, Leave us, and He left them. The King is limited by human will. But thank God for the issue of this story, for we want to live in the light of it. **“He arose, and followed Him.”**

So the despised tax-gatherer became the royal chronicler, and has given us this great Gospel of the Kingdom.

Now let us turn to the paragraph of criticism and inquiry.

The first criticism circles round the question of the Pharisees: **“Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners?”**

The occasion of the criticism was the action of Jesus in sitting familiarly and eating with publicans and sinners.

It was in Matthew’s house that He thus sat down; and the occasion was a special one. The first thing Matthew did was to make a great feast for Jesus and invite to it all the publicans and sinners of his acquaintance. That is the way to entertain Jesus. It is very beautiful. Everybody else despised the publican and the sinner. Matthew gathered them together, the people of his own despised class, and Jesus sat down - *“reclined”* is the word with them.

Now the Pharisees came and said to the disciples, **“Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners?”**

We have referred to their philosophy on a previous occasion. They objected because they believed if a man sat down among publicans and sinners to eat, he would be contaminated. What they failed to appreciate was the difference between this Man and themselves. His answer was again a vindication of His action: **“They that be whole have need not a physician, but they that are sick. But go ye”** - ye Pharisees, ye men of the false philosophy, ye men that do not know God - **“Go ye and learn what that meaneth; I will have mercy, and not sacrifice; for I not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”**

It is as though Jesus said: “Why do you criticize me? I am a physician, and therefore I must be where the people are who need Me. They that are whole do not need a physician, but they that are sick.”

We notice here particularly how the physical and the moral necessarily merge in the thinking of Jesus. He used the figure of the physician, in connection with His presence in the midst of the moral depravity of which the Pharisees were so afraid. The very thing that kept the others away drew Him irresistibly. There is yet a deeper note: **“Go ye and learn what that meaneth; I will have mercy, and not sacrifice.”**

This He quoted from one of their own prophets (Hosea 6:6). We ought to read the whole prophecy to catch the meaning of it. The prophecy of Hosea deals with spiritual adultery, spiritual harlotry. The great agonizing emphasis of the prophetic message is that God is wounded in His love, because of the infidelity of His people to the Covenant. And this is the cry of God, **“O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee?”**

Then he tells these people that their goodness is as the morning cloud, it vanishes and is gone. You bring Me sacrifices as though I wanted them. Ephraim, Judah, it is not sacrifice that I want from you; it is mercy toward you that I want; and I would fain find a way unto you in love and mercy.

Jesus looked at these men who thought they knew the law and the prophets, and said to them: You do not understand the God Who is revealed in your own writings. He was talking to the teachers, to the men who were interpreting the prophets, and He said, **“Go ye and learn what that meaneth; I will have mercy, and not sacrifice.”**

Go and learn what the heart of God is; go and find out, that according to your own writings, God is far more anxious to have mercy than He is to receive any offering that a man brings to Him. When you have learnt this, then you will understand why I sit down with publicans and sinners, why I recline and eat in the midst of them.

After the criticism of the Pharisees came the inquiry of the disciples of John. **“Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but Thy disciples fast not?”**

Sometimes this has been treated as though it were a question inspired by the Pharisees, and part of the criticism. But I am inclined to think that this was not so, but that it was a perfectly honest inquiry.

There are really two questions here:

- **“Why do we and the Pharisees fast?”**
- **“Why do Thy disciples fast not?”**

These men came to Christ; and they said in effect: The religious ideal which we have believed to be true, and which the Pharisees have evidently believed to be true, seems to be utterly different from the religious ideal of Thy disciples; we fast, we mourn, but these men that Thou hast gathered about Thee seem to be pre-eminently happy; they make no place for fasting and mourning.

Christ’s answer gives color to that explanation of the inquiry. He said, **“Can the sons of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the Bridegroom is with them?”**

Christ defended that which puzzled them, by taking a figure that was more full of rejoicing than anything else could be.

A wedding ceremony in an Eastern country lasted for seven days. It was a week of unbounded and unceasing rejoicing, of songs and music and mirth. And Jesus, said, These men are the sons of the bridechamber, and you must not expect them to fast while the Bridegroom is with them, but, **“the days will come, when the Bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast.”**

This is Christ’s defence of the right of His people to be merry; and that right to be merry is the fact that He is with them. If that be true, then we have the right to be merry always. What He said about sorrow was fulfilled. He was taken away from them, and they fasted and were sad through those days of darkness; but He came back, and, standing on the slope of Olivet, He said, **“Lo, I am with you alway.”** Then there is no more room for mourning; no more room for the sad face of agony; but there is room for mirth, room for joy, and room for gladness.

Then the Lord uttered the final word of illustration in this connection.

You cannot put a piece of undressed cloth upon an old garment. It will pull and tear the old garment to destruction. You must not put new wine into old wine-skins; the old are not strong enough to hold it; it will break them and the wine be wasted. Thus the King said in effect to these questioning men, Do not attempt to measure this new thing by that old thing. The old was right as long as it lasted; but this is new. There are new motives, new forces, new impulses coming into play; and you must not try to place the new within the narrow limits of the old. It is Christ's clear declaration that the new covenant which He had come to initiate, demanded new methods of expression; the purple of royalty, instead of the sackcloth of sorrow; the laughter of triumph, instead of the weeping of defeat; Easter morning instead of the day of Crucifixion.

Yet we can never get to the purple, but by the way of the sackcloth; never triumph save through defeat; never reach Easter morning, but by the way of Good Friday.

The whole genius of Christianity is in this. He went by the way of Good Friday, and He gives us Easter forever. He wore the sackcloth, and turned it into purple for us. He trod the winepress alone, and we have the cup filled with the new wine of the Kingdom.

There is in this study a great sequence of revelation. Sin is forgiven; a despised man is included in the inner circle; God's heart is revealed, "**I will have mercy**;" God's answer is affirmed in those figures of the new forces.

What, then, shall we say? Let us trust His heart, let us trust His power, by leaving all and following Him, knowing that in Him we shall find all we need.

~ end of chapter 20

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