

Real Authority, Real Power

Matthew 9:1-13

Some years ago a popular book was written as an encouragement to Deacons to help them develop both insight and wisdom in the difficult labor of mercy ministry; the difficult diaconal labor of determining if, when and how to give financial or other material to people who are in need. The title of the book was aptly chosen, “When Helping Hurts,” and the basic premise is that we often hurt those whom we are seeking to help by increasing and magnifying their sense of failure and despair. So often the helping, financially speaking, actually hurts the recipient in the long run. It is a dilemma that every faithful and compassionate deacon has faced, and probably quite often.

It is also a dilemma made obvious by our current national political and cultural approach to public welfare, often called entitlements, when the long-term effect of a so-called war on poverty has been to institutionalize poverty and create generation after generation of dependents. Rather than help people in their quest for independence and self-sufficiency, our welfare system too often seems to have the effect of entrapping them in the very system intended to help. Again, the book title, When helping hurts...

I use that illustration this afternoon as an introduction in order to point out that Jesus seems to do in reaction to this paralytic is anything but what you would expect in this day of emphasis upon social justice. The call today, from almost every corner, is to promote social justice. In the worst cases, that call has all but replaced the call of the gospel, and providing food for the hungry has become more important than providing hope for their eternal salvation. Providing for a person’s material well-being now often overshadows the concern for the well-being of their soul. But not for Jesus.

Jesus’ response might actually appear cold and heartless to some. He certainly seemed to be entirely lacking compassion, as he failed to meet this man’s most obvious felt needs. The man was a paralytic. Verse 2 tells us he was lying on a bed, so you can assume the likelihood that he was a quadriplegic. He couldn’t walk, so his friends brought him to this new miracle worker who healed a leper and calmed a storm. But Jesus seemed to simply ignore that physical problem. He showed no interest in addressing that obvious handicap, made so obvious, of course, by the example of paralysis. He simply said to the man, v.2 “Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you.”

Maybe Jesus should write a book entitled, “When Hurting Helps.” For he is hurting this man, at least by failing to help, or so it seems. Jesus failed to do anything that would help him walk, he failed to do anything to alleviate his suffering and his deprivation. He seemingly failed to do anything in response to what he was being asked. He apparently turned down the request for help, in the form of healing.

But Jesus did help. That’s the whole point, isn’t it? The whole obvious point. Jesus helped in the best possible way. What Jesus did was to announce and proclaim to this man,

I. THE GREAT BLESSING OF THE GOSPEL.

Forgiveness of sins. I was tempted to use the word “greatest,” but I didn’t want to provoke and useless debate about which blessing actually was the greatest, but surely, surely, the blessing of forgiveness is at the very heart of the gospel. This is what the gospel is all about, the blessed promise of the forgiveness of sins.

There is no greater help that Jesus could have offered this man, no great blessing that Jesus could have pronounced upon this man, no greater promise that he could have given to him.

And he meant it as a blessing, speaking so tenderly and personally, “Son, be of good cheer.” Don’t miss those simple words. Jesus addresses the paralytic with the most intimate of words, with the most pastoral of intentions, “Be of good cheer.”

Be of good courage. Jesus uses that same word in other places, such as,

John 16:33 “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

So we begin today with that same encouragement Jesus gave to this paralytic. People of God, take heart. Be of good courage. Whatever the circumstances of life might be, take heart, for Jesus has overcome the world. And, in particular, as the blessing was pronounced to this paralytic, there is forgiveness of sins. So take heart, you who struggle with your sins. There is forgiveness with Jesus. It is the great blessing of the gospel.

1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Psalms 103:10 “He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities. 11 For as the heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; 12 As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.”

That is the blessing this paralytic needed most, and that is the blessing he received. That is the great blessing of the gospel, and it is received by faith. Verse 2 tells us that “Jesus saw their faith.” He saw their hearts. He responded to their faith, for they believed in him. And he gave the paralyzed man a far greater gift than merely allowing him to walk again. So great was Jesus’ mercy.

v.2 “Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you.”

What is clear with Jesus’ willingness to help this man is his mercy, his compassion upon those in need. And,

A. Forgiveness is a gift of mercy.

He saw their faith, and he had compassion upon the paralytic. Indeed, as Psalm 103 would continue,

Ps. 103:13 “As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. 14 For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.”

Often we think of forgiveness only in terms of God’s justice and wrath, the releasing of that debt. It is that, of course, but forgiveness is not merely judicial. It is not merely the declaration of a judge. It is personal, for forgiveness is the act of a father’s compassion. It is an act of mercy, a gift of mercy. And that is what should be emphasized here in Matthew 9. Jesus really did help this man. He really did show him compassion. Not by healing his paralysis, giving him what he so obviously wanted, but by giving him what he really needed, most of all.

Beloved, forgiving this man’s sins was the greatest blessing Jesus could have possibly bestowed upon him, and if we communicate anything differently today, even when we help people, it will hurt them. If we give people money or any kind of material assistance to people, and fail to offer to them the promise of the forgiveness of their sins through the power of the gospel, then we are actually hurting them. And if we would follow Jesus’ example, it is not compassionate to help someone with their felt needs if we leave aside the deepest need of their soul.

In that context, let me state the obvious.

B. Forgiveness requires authority.

I can't grant the forgiveness of sins, for I have no such authority. I have no right. No power. And the great foolishness of the Roman Catholic system of religion is just that, believing that they, the church, the priests within the church, have such power to remit sins. Ultimately, that was the issue that brought about the Protestant reformation, with the horrific practice of the sale of indulgences. The church offered forgiveness for sale, as if the performance of a humanly imposed penance wasn't bad enough. Now you could purchase your forgiveness for an appropriate contribution to the building of the cathedral.

No beloved, I have no authority to forgive sins. Only God does. No church has the authority forgive sins, only God does. And Jesus makes that abundantly clear.

v.6

Do you see the purpose of Jesus' miracles? They are to validate his authority as God. The miraculous signs were attestations of the sovereign, divine power which Jesus possessed as the second person of the Trinity. Jesus' healed the man, granting him a secondary blessing, in order to demonstrate outwardly that he also had the authority to grant the primary blessing.

And we are told that the crowds didn't miss that point!

v.8

One more obvious point, for your encouragement!

C. Forgiveness is a work of God.

Only God can forgive sin. So when Jesus pronounced this blessing of forgiveness, the unbelievers around him accused him of blasphemy, for claiming to be God.

v.3

They were right, of course, in assuming that the declaration of forgiveness was a claim to deity, and Jesus does claim that position and authority. Their error was in assuming that Jesus was making that claim wrongly, so they accused him of blasphemy. Jesus then demonstrates more of his divine nature by the ability to know and understand their hearts. He rebukes them for the evil that is in their hearts.

v.4

Then he challenged them.

v.5

Which is easier? In terms of authority, certainly the physical healing. Healing a paralytic is easy, relatively speaking, for forgiveness requires atonement. It requires propitiation. It requires a sacrifice, the blood sacrifice of death. With the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

So healing, or forgiveness? Both are acts of God, and Jesus performed the one in order to prove he had the power and the authority to do the other, the one more important.

v.6

All of that is to say, the forgiveness of sins is the great blessing of the gospel. It is the path by which your relationship with God is restored, and the only way for that to be accomplished is by faith in Jesus Christ. If I may use the words of Peter preaching on the day of Pentecost, earnestly inviting his hearers to believe the gospel and be saved.

Acts 2:38 "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."

So we who believe join our voices to sing his praise.

Eph. 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.”

And what are those spiritual blessings which we have in Christ?

Eph. 1:7 “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace 8 which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence.”

That’s power. That’s authority, authority to forgive sins. And that is the great blessing of the gospel. In Matthew’s gospel, that is immediately followed by,

II. THE GREAT CALL OF THE GOSPEL.

The author of this gospel, Matthew himself. Matthew the tax collector.

v.9

No doubt this is the same man as is called Levi in the parallel account in Luke 5, and having two names was certainly not uncommon. What is important, however, is the nature of the call. It was,

A. A call to follow.

The simplicity of this call is so useful, and so profound. Follow me. Interestingly, as with the other disciples, we read simply, “And he rose and followed him.”

Follow me. Remember Simon Peter and Andrew, the fishermen? And James and John?

Mat. 4:19 And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” 20 Immediately they left their nets and

followed him. 21 And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. 22 Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.”

There is something to be said for this call of discipleship, for ultimately it is the call given to every single believer. Follow me. We will see it with more detail in,

Mat. 10:38 “And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

So the call to follow Jesus is the call to die to yourself. That’s the point. The call to follow Jesus is to give up following yourself, or to give up directing the affairs of your own life. It is to give up your life itself, to die to yourself, to “take up your cross.”

Again,

Mat. 16:24 Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul.”

So you, as a Christian, are called to die. You are called to give up your own life, and follow Jesus. You can’t do both, you can’t cling to your own life and to the priority of your own life and still be a follower of Jesus. Remember the words we used in the confession of sin this morning, “We have lived for our own glory, for our own imagined kingdoms, rather than for the glory and the kingdom of God.” Beloved, it’s one or the other. A call to follow is a call to leave behind your life, it is to die. So the call comes to

everyone of us. Jesus says to you, even today, “Follow me.”

Notice the response to that invitation in,
v.10

Jesus had a problem, humanly speaking. He was getting a bad reputation, after all, he was associating himself with bad people. Sinners! Even the worst of sinners, tax collectors. The self-righteous Pharisees simply could not bear that offense.

v.11

You can rightly and well imagine the tone of voice of that question. You can properly assume the attitude that is behind the question. The Pharisees considered themselves good. They considered themselves righteous and law-abiding. They considered, therefore, their standing before God to be secured. And they considered other people to be sinners, wretched and horrible sinners. So they thought to rebuke Jesus, as it were. It came in the form of that question, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners.”

He shouldn’t, of course, so why does he defile himself so with such personal contact with actual sinners? Jesus’ answer is so great.

v.12

Jesus came to heal the sick, not to exalt the self-righteous who believed themselves to be well. He is the physician, and in those days there was no imagination of a healthy baby well-check! Taking well children to the doctor is the modern novelty. The point of Jesus is that it is the sick who need a doctor.

More specifically, to be sure you understand the meaning of what it is to be sick, we read the end of,

v.13 “For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.”

The call of the gospel doesn’t go to those who think themselves good. That was why I remained dead in my unbelief for nearly 13 years of my life. I thought myself good. I went to church. I even read the Bible. It lived a decent moral life, though I must admit, not as decent and not as moral as I thought it to be. When the Lord saved me as a young teenager, it was with this realization, that I was a sinner and I needed a savior.

The call of the gospel is,

B. A call to sinners.

Jesus did not come to validate the self-importance who thought highly of themselves. He did not come to affirm the self-righteous in their self-proclaimed declaration of moral goodness and purity. No, he came to tell sinners that there is a way to be forgiven your sin. And the gospel must still be presented that way.

The gospel is not for white, upper middle class, suburban families who are achieving and accomplishing all that the American dream has to offer. The gospel is not for the professionally successful who are able to bring their business savvy into the realm of the church so that they can successfully establish the next great mega-church. No, the gospel is the one who is broken hearted about his sin. The gospel is for the one who is broken in his sin. And the typical examples Jesus used were prostitutes and tax collectors. Those were the ones he call to salvation, not the pretentious and arrogantly self-righteous Pharisees.

So why did Jesus eat with tax collectors and sinners? So that

he could call them to himself through the invitation of the gospel. As Paul puts it so concisely and so eloquently,

1 Tim. 1:15 “This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.”

One more thing in all of this, the quote from Hosea 6, recorded here in,

v.13 “But go and learn what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice.”

In the context of Hosea, God is lamenting the foolish unfaithfulness of his people. The broad image of the book of Hosea is the certificate of divorce which the Lord files against his covenant people, for their unfaithfulness. Yet, in the midst of their unfaithfulness, he appeals to them to return to him. And the point of this particular verse is that God cares far less about external ordinances than he does matters of the heart. It is not the mere outward obedience to the ceremonial regulations of the Old Testament that brings him glory, but rather the commitment of the heart of his people.

Thus the call to follow Jesus is,

C. A call to the heart.

David understood that as well, when he confessed his sin with the words recorded in,

Psalms 51:10 “Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me....[Then he continued] 15 O Lord, open my lips, And my mouth shall show forth Your praise. 16 For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart—These, O God, You will not despise.”

People of God, our God doesn't delight in the mere external conformity to his commands. He doesn't delight in mere external performance of our religious duties. He doesn't delight in the mere form of our worship. Rather, he delights in the sacrifice of your heart. Especially the broken heart, the heart broken by sin. “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart—these O God, you will not despise.”

So this call to follow Jesus is a call to follow him with your whole heart. Indeed, it is the call to love him with your whole heart. It is the call to serve him with your whole heart. It is the call to mercy, the call to a deep and devout love for God. Not the performance of outward rituals, but the offering of the whole of your life as a living sacrifice.

That has such a contemporary application, for our situation is, in a certain sense, no different than when Jesus called his first disciples. The call of the gospel is the call for you to follow him, love love him, with all of your heart and soul and strength and mind. The call of the gospel is the call to worship him because of the great blessing you have received in the forgiveness of your sins. And you who have been forgiven much love much. So we declare what David declared in Psalm 51,

Psalms 51: 15 O Lord, open my lips, And my mouth shall show forth Your praise. 16 For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart —These, O God, You will not despise.”