

Sermons on Matthew

Which Is Easier?

Matthew 9:1-8

With Study Questions

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Which Is Easier?

Matthew 9:1-8

So He got into a boat, crossed over, and came to His own city. ⁻²⁻
Then behold, they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed.
When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, “Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you.” ⁻³⁻ And at once some of the scribes said within themselves, “This Man blasphemes!” ⁻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 you,’ or to say, ‘Arise and walk’? ⁻⁶⁻ But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins”—then He said to the paralytic, “Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.” ⁻⁷⁻ And he arose and departed to his house. ⁻⁸⁻ Now when the multitudes saw it, they marveled and glorified God, who had given such power to men (Matthew 9:1-8).

The Harmony

Harmonizing all three gospel accounts, this event transpired something like this: After being asked to leave the region where He had cast out the demons, Jesus returns to His own city, Capernaum. Some days later Jesus is preaching in a house so crowded you couldn't get in. Four men, in their efforts to bring a paralytic to Jesus, decide to make a hole in the roof and lower their friend down. Upon seeing their faith Jesus forgives the sins of the paralytic. The scribes and Pharisees who witnesses this reason among themselves that Jesus had committed blasphemy. Perceiving their thoughts, Jesus asked them why they were thinking evil in their hearts. Jesus then asks the question, “Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Arise and walk’? Jesus then explains “But that you may know that the Son of Man has the power on earth to forgive sin” —He said to the paralytic, “Arise, take up your bed and go to your house.” The multitudes saw this and responded in fear and amazement.

Not To Be Missed

I tend to miss seminars and conferences, often asking for the tapes. Why drive two or three hours to sit uncomfortably in some auditorium when I can just get the tape and listen in the comfort of my own car? Sure there is the fellowship—but I enjoy the fellowship

of people in my own church. I don't need to hobnob and rub elbows with my fellow ministerial wizards.

One gets the impression that a tape of the event recorded in the above passage just wouldn't do it justice. Certainly the teaching was accurate, dynamic and life-changing. Jesus is the prophet of God. His words are sufficient to grant life (Romans 1:16) and hold us culpable on the Day of Judgment (John 12:48). Let us never underestimate the emphasis the Scriptures put forth regarding the teaching ministry of Christ. As we shall soon see, the spectacular healing ministry of Christ was merely designed to augment His teaching ministry.

Nonetheless there is something special about the real presence of Christ. The Bible portrays Jesus as walking in the midst of seven golden lampstands (Revelation 2:1) which metaphorically depict the church (Revelation 1:20). Perhaps you're beginning to get the picture. Although the Spirit of Christ is omnipresent (everywhere), the Bible indicates a special or sanctified presence of Christ in His church, where His word is preached, His sacraments administered, His praises sung and His victory proclaimed. We ought, therefore, to make every effort to be where Christ is, i.e. church. Tapes, television and radio just don't cut it.

Aggressive Faith

These men certainly realized this. We've already learned that Jesus could heal long distance (Matthew 8:5-13), yet these men were not satisfied with that. They loaded their paralytic friend on a couch and hauled him to the house. The house was crowded so they lugged him onto the roof and then committed vandalism—breaking through the tiles.

According to Jesus this is what saving faith looks like. Contrary to the Arminian home-made parables of Jesus breaking into the dungeon of our sinful captivity, shaking us to our senses and gently uttering, "Trust me, let me carry you out," the Bible portrays saving faith as aggressive. It breaks through tile roofs. It is insufficient to say that saving faith merely allows God into my life (not that that wouldn't be a wonderful act of submission and humility), saving faith seeks after Christ.

My point here is simple. True saving faith is so aggressive that if I don't confess that I have passively been granted the faith which

saves by the grace of God, faith becomes my saving work *magnum opus*.

Dovetailing a bit on last week's sermon regarding friendship, you may wish to inventory just who would carry your couch or whose couch you're willing to carry. This man had four faithful stretcher-bearers. Is there anyone you know who would be willing to come to church if you made the offer?

Be Of Good Cheer

Jesus sees their faith and utters the words which so often accompany these events, "**Be of good cheer**" or "Take courage." The faithful have good reason to be of good cheer—Jesus tells us to. It is one thing to entertain the empty platitudes of the frail and faulty whispering, "Everything will be all right." To which we could reasonably respond, "How do you know?" But when Jesus tells us to be of good cheer that in itself, is sufficient. Nonetheless, He also informs us why we are to be of good cheer—"**your sins are forgiven you.**"

Clearly the scribes and Pharisees took issue with this. But one must wonder how the five men who had wrestled through the roof must have responded. We are uninformed regarding the prior knowledge they had of Jesus. We are not given a flashback of their gathering together and their expectations. I must guess that they had some expectation regarding healing of their paralytic friend. So were they taken aback when Jesus merely makes a pronouncement?

Allow me to make a suggestion. They may have been temporarily disappointed, but, being full of faith, they would not be disappointed for long. Being faithful they would soon come to recognize that that which is most important to Jesus ought to be most important to them.

When churches (and I pray I am speaking for all churches) proclaim forgiveness of sin for those who put their faith in Christ, that should not be viewed as some peripheral, obligatory catwalk between the more profound aspects of the worship service. Of all the things Jesus must have been teaching on in this crowded house, He seized this hushed moment to herald forgiveness from sins.

And quite frankly, His subsequent healing of the paralyzed man did *not* appear to be the acme of the evening's events in the mind of Christ. It had a pedagogical purpose. Jesus healed the man

that those watching might *know* something—that they might know that the forgiveness which Jesus proclaims are not empty words—that He had the power on earth to forgive sins.

Highlighting healing over forgiveness is like children playing with the box rather than the priceless toy that came in the box. To push the illustration further, healing is akin to the picture on the box which informs us of its contents. In other words, physical healing served to illustrate God's forgiveness (Matthew 8:16, 17; Isaiah 53:5; 12).

This Man Blasphemes

Jesus is accused of blasphemy. After all, who can forgive sins but God alone (Psalm 32:5; 130:4; Isaiah 43:25; Mark 2:7)? Precisely! And truly it would be blasphemy (evil or profane words) to assign to men that which is the prerogative of God alone. But Jesus makes no bones about it. Prior to the apologetic of healing the paralytic the verdict of guilty asserted—“**Why do you think evil in your hearts?**”

So sure are the words of Christ—so self-evident—resting on their own authority—that to deny Christ's power to forgive is assessed as an evil act. And why shouldn't it be? Not only do His words carry an authority that cannot be denied, they are the words of man's only hope.

So two conclusions we can draw: It is unwise for the church to under-emphasize that which Jesus puts at the fore of His ministry—forgiveness— and it is a sinful act to doubt the redemption that is found in Christ or suggest that it can be found elsewhere.

Which Is Easier?

Of course the paralytic is healed and the people are filled with fear and amazement. Jesus once again accomplished that which is the chief end of man, the glory of God (Matthew 9:8). Truly the reason lampstands exist is for that express and ultimate purpose. But prior to finishing I would like to briefly ponder that statement made by Jesus, “**which is easier to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you, ‘or to say, ‘Arise and walk’?**”

If we are to pursue the mind of Christ in this meeting we must seek to make the connection between the simple assertion of forgiveness of sins as they proceed from His lips and the horrific

nightmare which He would soon confront as He would pursue that which was necessary for these words to have substance.

For the forgiveness of sins is no small thing. That which Jesus did to ensure that these words of pardon were justified caused Him exceeding **“sorrow even to death” (Matthew 26:38)**. He prayed earnestly till His sweat became like **“great drops of blood falling to the ground” (Luke 22:43)**.

Having the full picture, let us appreciate that when Jesus rhetorically ask, **“Which is easier...?”** we are hard-pressed to find a single action in the eschaton of human history more difficult than the securing of forgiveness from God. It was the emphasis of Christ in the house that night and it should remain the emphasis in the house of God through time immemorial.

Questions for Study

1. Why is church important (page 3)?
2. How is faith both aggressive and passive (pages 3, 4)?
3. What appears to be the message of emphasis in this passage (pages 4, 5)?
4. Why was Jesus accused to blasphemy (pages 5, 6)?
5. Why was their disposition evil (pages 5, 6)?
6. Which is easier, to heal or forgive? Explain (page 6)?