

Prayers

Opening prayer

Praise the Lord for the way that He reveals Himself to His people! Praise the Lord for the great wonder and power of His resurrection! Praise the Lord for the love He has shown to all people everywhere! Praise the Lord for the forgiveness He has shown towards us all! Praise the Lord for the eternal future that He opens up before us! Thanks be to God, for the glories of the Gospel! AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: The Future

1. For yourself

Pray out loud, making your requests to God verbally, and where people cannot hear you. Tell the Lord what you think about His plans for your future

2. For your friends and family

Pray for the particular circumstances faced by each of your friends and family, and ask God for their protection from all evil

3. For the church and its work

Pray out loud for the church and for all that it has set itself to do in the coming months and years. Pray earnestly for God's wisdom and counsel to prevail in all things.

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray for the leaders of industry in your country and pray that they will seek to drive industry forward according to humanitarian as well as financial principles

Meditation

The glory of God is incredible,
It is impressive, and beyond our understanding;
For we see it in His total command of all things.

The glory of God is revealed,
It is made known through the empty tomb at Easter,
The good news of eternal life for all who believe!

The glory of God is essential,
It is established in the moral nature of our world;
And enshrined in Jesus' victory of good over evil.

The glory of God is prophetic,
It is certain that the purposes of God will prevail;
And the destiny of our world lies in truth and love.

The glory of God is a mystery,
It is a wonder that can never be defined or grasped;
Yet He allows us to see just enough to be sure ...

That the glory of God is Himself, and much more!

Bible Study

Bible passage – Matthew 9:1-8

¹ He then got into a boat, crossed the sea and came to His own town. ² And just then some people carried a paralyzed man to Him, who was lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the sick man,

‘Courage, child; your sins are forgiven.’

³ At this, some of the scribes said to themselves

‘This man is blaspheming.’

⁴ Jesus knew what they were thinking, and said,

‘Why do you think evil in your hearts? ⁵ Which is easier, to say,

“Your sins are forgiven,”

or to say,

“Stand up and walk”?

⁶ But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’
(He then said to the sick man)

‘Stand up, take your bed and go home!’

⁷ So He stood up and went home!

⁸ When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they gave glory to God, who had given such authority to people.

Review

The healing of the paralysed man in our passage today is one of the more memorable of Jesus’ healing miracles. It is a wonderful story of faith, the forgiveness of sin, and healing, all surrounded by a fascinating description of those who were present amongst whom were some scribes who took great exception to everything that happened!

One of the intriguing factors in this story is the fact that it took place in Jesus’ own ‘home town’ (9:1). Matthew does not give us much by way of detail; for that we have to look at the same story as told by Mark (2:1-12) and Luke (5:17-26). The bare bones of the story, however, are impressive. A sick and paralysed man is brought to Jesus on a bed (9:2). Jesus, at this point, is aware of the faith of those who have brought the man to him, but addresses the man directly by offering a blessing of the forgiveness of sins. This was usually the job of a priest, and those around him were shocked that Jesus should offer such a blessing. Jesus picked this up, if He did not already anticipate it, and challenged his critics, knowing that if the man was healed, then everyone who saw what was happening would know that Jesus’ words to forgive sins were effective. What he said deeply offended his opponents, the scribes! But without delaying, and for the sake of the poor man at the centre of the whole incident, Jesus commanded his sins forgiven and also his healing, to which he immediately responded!

It is tempting to look into the story with the sole intention of finding guidelines for the healing ministry, but we will find these guidelines, paradoxically, if they are not our primary goal. It is much better if we approach the story by reading it exactly for what it is, an illustration of the power and authority of Jesus. If we do this, then we will find later on that it does indeed give us good guidance about how to care for people, and how we can offer a genuine ministry of healing in Jesus’ name

This story is focussed primarily upon Jesus, people’s faith in Him, and who He was. The friends of the paralysed man were possibly more than friends, perhaps family, and they had seen enough of Jesus to have faith that He could and would heal the man. What they did highlighted the same kind of faith that had previously impressed Jesus in His healing ministry (Matt 8:1f., 5f. etc); which was an unfettered and complete trust in Him which led them to do things which put their own credibility at risk if Jesus did not respond to their faith. In total contrast with this outstanding faith, the scribes could not see any cause for trust or faith in Jesus. They only saw His words and deeds as a threat to their own religious practices, and they failed to understand Him at all. Even when He healed the paralysed man who was in obvious need, they interpreted His actions as blasphemy. However, the crowd were beginning to understand more about Jesus; and at the end of the story, they praised God for everything they had witnessed!

Going Deeper

In order to understand this story, we will begin our study by looking at the differences between how it is told in Matthew, Mark and Luke. This brings to light one or two phrases which help us to interpret the story hopefully more accurately. Much of the rest of the story depends on how we understand the connection between the forgiveness of sins, and healing. For Jesus, there was certainly a connection on this occasion, but on others, there was not.

The paralysed man – in Matthew, Mark and Luke

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke have many similarities, and many stories of Jesus are common to these three Gospels, but by no means all of them. For that reason, they are called the 'synoptic' Gospels (from Greek 'syn' – together, and 'opsis' – meeting). John is a very different Gospel, written from a different perspective and containing much unique material. I know this may sound very technical, but when studying the Gospels it is really helpful to have a clear understanding of what stories are in which Gospels, and what the differences are. This helps us gain a feel for the different characteristics of the Gospels and also a more accurate understanding of each story within a Gospel we may be studying.

The passage we read today is common to Matthew (9:2-8), Mark (2:1-12) and Luke (5:17-26), but is not found in John. If you were to read the accounts in Mark and Luke you would find they were very similar, and contain all the well known details of the story. However, the other Gospels start the story differently from Matthew. Mark has Jesus sitting in his 'home' surrounded by a large crowd (Mark 2:1), and Luke says that he was talking with scribes and Pharisees, and had 'the power to heal' (Luke 5:17). Mark and Luke both describe a man being brought to the house on a matt, and because they were unable to get the man directly to Jesus, they made a hole in the ceiling of the house to let the sick man down into Jesus' presence (Mark 2:3,4; Luke 5:18,19).

This fascinating detail, from our point of view, is not there in Matthew, who starts the story with the paralysed man simply being presented to Jesus on his bed. In each Gospel, Jesus comments on the faith of those who have brought the man, and then all the remaining features of the story are very similar in all three accounts. The one other place where Matthew's account is shorter than the others is in the conversation between Jesus and the scribes. Crucially, he misses out a quote from the scribes when they take offence. All three Gospel writers have 'This man is blaspheming' (see Matt 9:3), but Matthew omits 'who can forgive sins but God alone?' which is included by Mark and Luke (Mark 2:7, Luke 5:21).

Why do these differences matter? Clearly, we can all appreciate that the Gospel writers each had their own perspective and were conveying different information about God and Jesus. This was clearly God's purpose in Scripture. Now, if you read Matthew by itself, without knowing the story from Mark and Luke, it would be reasonable to assume that when Jesus said 'your sins are forgiven' (9:3,5), He was offering a general blessing to the paralysed man. Because of this, offence would be taken by the scribes because Jesus was attempting to do the job of a priest. In their opinion, forgiveness was offered through the sacrificial system set down by Moses. However, we know from the stories recorded in Mark and Luke that the scribes accused Jesus of doing what God 'alone' could do. By this they clearly meant not the general blessing of forgiveness, but the ministry of healing through the forgiveness of sins. They all believed that this was something God alone could do, and the scribes were not only offended by Jesus' presumption to do the work of a priest, but by His saying and doing things which they believed God alone could do!

Forgiveness, or healing, or both?

This was very important, because there was a powerful belief in those days that sin and sickness were closely related, and so when sins were forgiven then it was expected that a person might well be healed. Jesus went on to challenge the scribes about just this. For Him, He was not trying to call the scribe's bluff or indeed to challenge them to call his. When Jesus said 'which is easier, to say, "Your sins are forgiven", or to say "Stand up and walk"?' He was confronting the whole religious system that the scribes had built up around the laws of Moses which purported to offer people God's forgiveness and blessing, and yet in reality it had no power to effect any real healing of body mind or spirit, or make any substantial change in people's lives.

The synoptic Gospels all record Jesus' perception of what the scribes were thinking; for they were outraged at His challenge to their whole belief system, and offended by His presumption to heal and to claim God's authority (Mark and Luke say more about this than Matthew – see Matt 9:4,5, Mark 2:8,9 Luke 5:22,23). Jesus continued even more forthrightly by using the term 'Son of Man' for himself to justify His authority to heal; 'so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins' (Matt 9:6 Mark 2:10 Luke 5:24). He went on to address the paralysed man with a dramatic word; 'stand, take up your bed and go home'. All three Gospel writers record what happens next, which fully justifies Jesus' claim. The paralytic was healed, to the amazement of the people.

This was evidence of several things: firstly, that Jesus was God's Messiah with all authority to forgive sins on earth and therefore to heal; and secondly, that Jesus was replacing the old religious system of forgiveness that the Jews had constructed around their understanding of the sacrificial laws of the Old Testament. We

should not be surprised at this, particularly in Matthew's Gospel, as they are entirely consistent with everything Jesus had revealed about Himself, both in the Sermon on the Mount and in the miraculous signs which followed it.

It is interesting to see how our knowledge of the same story in Mark and Luke helps us to find out more accurately what was going on, and pick up features not there in Matthew's story. This works with the story about the paralysed man because there is little doubt that it is the same story in each Gospel. It was a truly remarkable event, and a turning point early on in Jesus' ministry.

The response

Luke describes the man going home 'glorifying God' (Luke 5:25), Mark says the man took up 'his mat' and left (Mark 2:12) and Matthew simply records that he stood up and went to his home. However, the effect on the crowds was electric. In all three synoptic Gospels the crowds respond by 'praising God' for what they have seen; something that must have warmed Jesus' heart! However, I believe He was also very glad to see, as everyone did, that the man had changed and his healing was proof to all of God's work. For him, to go home healed meant that he could regain his place in society and function as a man and possibly as a husband again, providing for a family and also bringing them out of poverty. Healing is often as much about such consequences as the fact of healing itself!

This story is one of three which occur at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in all three synoptic Gospels (along with the healing of the leper and the healing of Peter's mother-in-law), just as people were beginning to respond to Jesus' ministry in a positive way. The combination of the forgiveness of sins and healing was yet more evidence to the crowds that Jesus was the Messiah for whom they hoped and prayed. Whilst Priests dispensed the forgiveness of sins through their rituals in the Temple (and sometimes outside in the community), and itinerant healers offered spurious forms of healing for those who so wished; here was evidence of God doing a work of healing in people's lives which both dealt with sin and was also life changing.

In all three synoptic Gospels this story also marks the beginning of serious opposition to Jesus from the scribes and Pharisees. In each of them, this was the first time that they raised their voices in direct opposition to Jesus and spoke out their concerns. Jesus took them on in full public view, and defeated them. The crowds may have rejoiced, but the scribes and Pharisees went away embarrassed and angry, and it would not be long before there would be more serious confrontation.

Discipleship

Questions for groups

1. What other points about the healing ministry of the Church do you take from this study?
2. What do you think that Mark and Luke add to the story of the paralysed man? Does this add anything further to your answer above?
3. In what ways does the 'healing' divide people today, both inside and outside the church?

Discipleship challenges

- *Are you conscious of any sin you have committed which may be causing you some illness, through stress, or because of sexual excess or promiscuity? We do not talk about these things very much, but each of us needs to, so that the Lord can break through to bring us healing.*
- *Fast from a few meals and give the time to prayer so that you can submit yourself for the Lord's forgiveness and healing power. If you do this regularly, you may well feel the benefits of it far more than an occasional effort to do this.*

Final Prayer

Forgive me, Lord, for I often do not take into account the full consequences of my sin. Help me to be always ready to confess the wrongs within my life, and through this, ask for your healing of my body, soul and spirit. So make me whole in Your sight, Lord Jesus. AMEN