

Sovereign over Sin

Matthew 9:1-8

To what extent would you go to get someone's attention if you knew by getting his/her attention your life would be substantially better?

When I first met Mindy (my wife) I was immediately attracted to her, and I went to great lengths to get her attention so that she might notice me. When I knew she was going to be at a certain event or activity I made certain I was at that event or activity. When I found out she had a particular problem or need I tried very hard to be part of the solution. If she was interested in something, that something became my interest as well. And, of course, you know what happened. I was arrested for stalking.

If we want something bad enough and it is in our power to secure that thing by getting someone's attention, I dare say most of us will find a way to do it—even if it means risking our reputation or doing something outlandish; even if it requires sticking our neck out or climbing out on a limb.

There is a wonderful story in the gospels about some men who went to great lengths to capture Jesus' attention. What they did was risky. It could have been perceived as rude or presumptuous, even criminal. But Jesus responded with sheer delight. And it not only accomplished for them their desired result; they got far more than what they wanted.

Matt. 9:1-8. *And getting into a boat [Jesus] crossed over and came to his own city. ² And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven."*

I want to stop here for a few moments and provide some context and then fill in some details. As I told you last week, Matthew has a specific purpose for writing his Gospel and recounting the words and events of Jesus' life. Writing to a Jewish audience, he is trying to prove that Jesus is qualified to be the Messiah, the Ruler of God's kingdom. So Matthew is interested in asserting Jesus' supreme authority. He wants his audience to know that Jesus has authority over everything, including the things in this fallen world that threaten the safety and security of mankind. So in chapter 8 he asserted Jesus' authority over sickness, disease, creation, and *evil* spirits. In chapter 9, he begins by asserting Jesus' authority over sin. That's big, and we will explore it in a few minutes.

But because Matthew's focus is so singular, because he wants to set forth this propositional truth that Jesus is absolutely sovereign, he does not include many details as he relates these stories. We get those details from Mark's and Luke's Gospels, both of which have a different purpose than Matthew. Before we talk about the significance of Jesus forgiving this man's sin, I want to fill you in on some of the details that Matthew intentionally left out, so that we can get a better sense of what was going on in this story.

First, what Matthew describes as Jesus' "own city" is not Nazareth, but Capernaum. Capernaum was a relatively small village on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee and was the base of operations for Jesus. It was also home to several of His disciples who were fishermen, including Peter, James and John. Peter's home is usually where Jesus stayed when He was in Capernaum, so most scholars believe this event took place at Peter's home.

If Peter's house was typical of most Palestinian houses in these days, it was a simple, one room structure with a flat roof. There was a single door, and perhaps one or two small windows. On one side of the exterior of the house was a stairway which led to the roof,

because in the evenings it was customary for folks to sit on the roof and enjoy the cool, sea breezes. That roof was made of poles or beams overlaid with branches and thatch, packed with clay, and covered with tiles.

Though Matthew is silent about this, we are told in Mark's Gospel that when the people found out that Jesus was at home, they rushed to this house to see Him. In other words, they closed their shops; docked their boats, hung up their tools, and made a beeline for Peter's house, because no one wanted to miss a word He said. So they packed themselves in like sardines, and those who could not get in crowded the doorways and windows straining to hear, hoping to at least catch a glimpse of Jesus (Mark 2:2). Of course, it was first come, first serve. Those who arrived late would have encountered an impenetrable mass of people—people who were not about to step aside and let a latecomer get closer to Jesus than they were.

That's where we come to the paralytic and how he got Jesus' attention. We know from Mark and Luke that he was carried to the house on a mat by four men, and by the time they arrived there were so many people they could not make their way past the crowds to see Jesus.

None of the Gospels record the precise nature of this man's affliction, or how long he had been afflicted. We know he could not walk, and we can assume on that basis that he was a beggar, for people in that day and culture who were not able to earn an income had no options other than to beg. They would spend each day on a street corner or in the marketplace, holding out their hands, pleading with passersby to be gracious and generous.

As you know, not everyone takes kindly to beggars. Many people would just as soon not have to be bothered with someone else's infirmity when they've got enough troubles of their own. So beggars are often treated with indignity and scorn, or considered a blight on the community; especially because many in this day believed that a handicapped person was responsible for his condition. God was judging him or his parents for their sins—so it was commonly thought.

Imagine having to live with the stigma, the shame, the stares, each and every day. Imagine having to plead with people, many of whom would try very hard to ignore you, pretend not to notice, give you a look of disgust, or perhaps give you something, but do so reluctantly or begrudgingly.

I wonder what went through the mind of this young paralytic when he heard that Jesus was in town. Surely he had heard about the miracles he had performed on behalf of people in similar conditions. It is apparent he was convinced that if only he could see Him, if only he could get His attention, Jesus would help him. So he was determined to get to that house and have an audience with Him, and so were his friends.

But after trying, unsuccessfully, to make their way through the dense crowd they decided to do something rather daring. They carried the paralytic up the stairs to the roof and then proceeded to dig a hole. Using their knives and hands they cleared away the tiles and tore away the mud and thatch and palm branches. And when that hole was big enough they tied the corners of the paralytic's mat to ropes, then began to lower him down.

And Matthew tells us (as does Mark and Luke) that when Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, *"Take heart my son, your sins are forgiven."*

Before we look at this astonishing, unexpected statement from Jesus, I want to focus for a few minutes on the faith of these men, for Matthew tells us that before Jesus said anything to the young man He *"saw their faith."* I believe we can infer from this comment that

He was impressed by their faith, for it was a faith that *compelled* them to do something audacious, risky, and over-the-top.

I'd like to call it a "through the roof faith", and perhaps the most obvious thing about it is that it had a singular focus. These men had *one* thing on their minds, an audience with the One who could heal their crippled friend, and they would stop at nothing until they had it. They wouldn't give up. They wouldn't let a few obstacles deter them. They wouldn't let other people's perceptions or opinions slow them down. They wouldn't take the first 'no' they heard as the final answer.

Jesus was in town. Jesus had proven that He could heal sickness and disease. Jesus could help. Jesus was their only hope. They *had* to see Him, for this was an opportunity that may never present itself again. The time to act was now. And they persevered and persisted until they got what they wanted.

What do you think about this kind of faith that led to such bold behavior? What did the people who were *present* at this event think? I'll bet there were a number of reactions.

"Hey, you guys are being rude. You're interrupting the sermon of a very special guest. You're turning a perfectly orderly meeting into a circus. And, for heaven's sake, look what you've done to poor Peter's house! You've torn it apart! You've vandalized it! You've got a lot of nerve to think that Jesus would respond favorably to this kind of intrusion! Who do you think you are?"

The paralytic and his friends probably hadn't made the best impression on the folks that were gathered that day. But I don't think they really cared. On this particular day they weren't trying to win friends and influence people, they were trying to influence one Person, and they knew that if they could just get *His* attention they *might* influence Him to act on their behalf.

How many blessings do we miss out on—how many opportunities do we forfeit because we're afraid of what other people think? We're afraid we might get a few cold stares or some scornful looks. We're afraid we might ruffle some feathers, or rock the boat, or make some waves.

You know what that kind of fear proves? It proves we don't want the blessing bad enough. You see, our persistence—our willingness to keep pursuing His blessing no matter what—reveals the sincerity and intensity of our desires. It proves that we are *desperate*.

And I want to declare to you that Jesus delights to respond to those who are so desperate for him that they won't stop pursuing him until they have him and what he has to offer, even if it is interpreted by some as pestering. Jesus doesn't mind being pestered. He rewards those who keep after him.

Sometimes, I fear, we give up too quickly and our desires are too weak. We see a barrier or two and we quickly conclude that God has closed the door on that opportunity. "It must not be God's will that I be healed or that I move forward or that I get out of my stuck situation. I guess God just wants me to make the best of my present circumstances."

By the way, I'm not saying that God always wants to heal—I know He *doesn't* always want to heal. I'm not saying God always wants to change our circumstances to make them more pleasant or tolerable. But I want to give you some principles about God that ought to bolster our faith. First, He loves us more than we know and wants to bless us more than we think. God wants to astonish us with His goodness. There's nothing He would not do for us that is for our best, and He loves a persistent faith.

I'm pretty sure that some of us are not experiencing the blessings God would like to

give us because we're not going after them hard enough. Oh, we pray about them...two or three times. We think about them...every once in a while and imagine how much better off we'd be if we had them; but then we get back to our routines, resigned that this is our lot in life and things will never change.

May I suggest to you that sometimes God waits to bless us until we demonstrate the kind of persistence these men had. Faith is not fatalistic. If we run into an obstacle or two or ten it doesn't *always* mean God is closing the door. It might just be a test to see how badly we really want it.

I'm not saying we should manipulate the circumstances so that "God's will" conforms to our will. Nor am I saying that God helps those who help themselves. What I'm saying is that obstacles and barriers are not *necessarily* closed doors. I don't always know when God is saying "no" and when He's saying "keep asking," "keep seeking," and "keep knocking," do you?

Look at these men. They did something that very few would have had the audacity to do. But they did it because they believed Jesus would respond.

And He did. In fact Jesus gave the paralytic much more than he asked or imagined. When he was lowered from the roof the first words He said were, "*Take heart, my son, your sins are forgiven.*"

When Jesus looked at this young man lying there, He knew why he had made this desperate attempt to get His attention. He wanted to be healed of his paralysis. But when Jesus saw his faith—when he saw that he was putting every ounce of his trust in him—Jesus gave him far more valuable and far more beneficial than physical healing. He healed his heart. For his greatest need was spiritual.

And I'm pretty sure this man knew it. Because anyone who has sincerely and authentically encountered Jesus knows that their greatest need is to be right with Him. Our greatest need is to be reconciled to Him—to be His friend—and we can only be His friends when He forgives our sin.

Therefore, our *most* desperate need is for God's forgiveness. Here, Jesus provides that forgiveness. What love! What mercy! What power! And it proved that Jesus was more than what everyone thought He was. Look at **verse 3**. *³ And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, "This man is blaspheming."*

Why did they think He was blaspheming? Mark tells that it was because they knew that only God can forgive sin (Mark 2:7). They were right. No one *can* forgive sins but God. And so, even though up until this time they were willing to consider that Jesus might be the promised Messiah, they certainly did not recognize Him as *God*. Their theology left no room for them to believe that God's Messiah *could* be God, which is why they accused Him of blasphemy.

By the way, Luke tells us that these Pharisees and teachers of the law had come from "every village of Galilee and Judea and Jerusalem" (5:17). In other words, all the Who's who in the Jewish religious community were there, listening to Jesus' words and observing His actions. But when He said, "Your sins are forgiven" it raised a huge red flag for them. "Wait just a minute. This is getting out of hand. Who does this guy think He is?"

Look at **verses 4-5**. *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,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'?"*

Jesus accused the Pharisees and teachers of the law of thinking evil in their hearts.

And that's not because He condemns critical thinkers. He knew that the statement, "your sins are forgiven," would lead people to conclude that He was claiming to be divine. And that would have produced cognitive dissonance for any thinking Jew—not only in the first century but even today. Jesus doesn't mind if people wrestle with that profound assertion. He doesn't mind if they are initially troubled or shocked by that assertion.

But these religious leaders had been around Him for a while by now. They had heard Him teach with supernatural authority. They had seen Him perform miracles that displayed supernatural power. And yet they were completely dismissive of His assertion. They weren't even open to the possibility of considering that it *might* be true. Instead they closed their minds and dug in their heels and concluded that Jesus was an imposter. And that's what is evil, for they are conclusions that are void of faith.

But Jesus went on to say something a bit confusing, at least for us. He said, **verse 5**, *"Which is easier, to say 'your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'?"* Neither is easy for any man. But they are equally easy for God. However, it would have been easier for one of the Pharisees or teachers of the law to say, "Your sins are forgiven," because there was no way to verify its fulfillment. But to say, "Get up and walk" could indeed be verified.

So, in order to verify what cannot be seen with the human eye, Jesus continues in **verses 6-7**. *⁶ But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he then said to the paralytic—"Rise, pick up your bed and go home."* ⁷ *And he rose and went home.*

When He said these words something that would have been visible occurred in the legs of this young man. They were changing their form, the muscle mass, the bone, the tissue. Jesus was re-creating the legs, the spinal cord, and whatever other body parts that were necessary for him to walk.

And think about this: Here is a man who may have never taken a step before in his life, standing up, balancing himself on two legs that had never held his body weight, bending over, picking up his mat, and then walking out of the room. Here is a man who couldn't have bribed his way into this house, but I'm pretty sure he was having no trouble walking out. People parted like the Red Sea.

And, **verse 8**. *⁸ When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.*

Two reactions by the crowd who had witnessed the miracle of healing and, more importantly, the miracle of forgiveness: Fear and worship. Fear because they recognized that Jesus had the authority to forgive sin, which meant that He was someone extraordinary. Even if they did not yet recognize Him as the *divine* Son of God, they certainly knew that He was God's special envoi, and that God had delegated that exceptional responsibility to Him, which made Him a one-of-a-kind.

But they also worshiped. They glorified God. Not just because they saw a man healed from his paralysis, but because he had also been forgiven of his sin. And there is, I believe, an innate sense in every person, that forgiveness is our greatest need. We desperately need relief from the guilt of our wrongdoing. And when we encounter the One, Jesus Christ, who can provide that relief, we cannot help but worship. Because being relieved of our guilt, being pardoned from our sin, being reconciled to God enables us to have *inner* health—peace, fellowship, and joy. And inner health is far more important and far more beneficial in the long run than physical health—being healed from sickness and blindness and paralysis.

So if Jesus can heal the heart—if He can make the heart clean—then He is qualified

to be the Messiah and the ruler of God's kingdom. And that's what Matthew wants us to know.

I began this message by asking you a question: To what extent would you go to get someone's attention if you knew that by getting his/her attention your life would be substantially better? Then I said that if you want something bad enough and it is in your power to secure that thing by getting someone's attention, I dare say most of you will find a way to do it—even if it means risking your reputation, even if it means doing something outlandish; even if it requires sticking your neck out or climbing out on a limb.

I'd like to ask you another question: Have you captured the attention of Jesus? Have you come to Him, as this paralytic came, and allowed Him to give to *you* what you desperately need?

Some of you, if you were honest, are desperate this morning. You need His healing touch. You need His comfort. You need His forgiveness. You need His peace. You need His intervention. But you're holding back. Your pursuit of Him is half-hearted because you're trying to preserve your reputation, or you think there are too many obstacles that prevent you from reaching Him.

I want to tell you something. Jesus knows who you are. He created you. He died for you. He rose from the dead for you. He loves you. And what Jesus did for this man He wants to do for you. He wants to demonstrate His love and power on your behalf. He wants to forgive you. He wants to bless you. He wants to reward your faith.

You simply need to trust Him. You need to be willing to put it all on the line for Him. You need to step out in faith, step over the obstacles, until you have His smile and His touch and hear His gentle words, "Son, daughter, your faith has made you well".

Sovereign over Sin **Matthew 9:1-8**

Main Idea: Because Jesus is sovereign over sin, He has the authority to forgive sinners, which is our greatest need.

The Hottest Ticket in Town (Mark 2:1-2)
Standing Room Only

Peter's House?

Dropping in on Jesus (Mark 2:3-4)
A Beggar with no Other Options

A Daring Decision

Desperate for Jesus

Jesus' Astonishing Declaration (2-7)
Addressing his greatest need (2)

Accused of blasphemy (3)

Jesus the mind reader (4-7)
Thinking evil in their hearts (4)

"Which is easier to say..." (5)

Validating his authority over sin (6)

Paralysis healed (7)

The Crowd's Reaction: Fear and Worship (8)

Application

Family Life Groups

Sermon Discussion Questions

Sovereign over Sin” Matthew 9:1-8

Main Idea: Because Jesus is sovereign over sin, He has the authority to forgive sinners, which is our greatest need.

Jesus obviously knew why the paralytic was let down through the roof and laid at His feet in the middle of His sermon. Why did Jesus address his sin rather than his paralysis?

How might this passage and its focus on the problem of sin have relevance to *your* personal, day-to-day relationship with Jesus?

There are numerous ministries and mission agencies that focus their attention on relieving human suffering (poverty, hunger, disease, injustice, contaminated water, etc.) How might this passage influence those kinds of ministries?