

The Gospel of Matthew

Lesson 11: Forgiveness, Mercy, and New Wine -- Matthew 9:1–38

Some friends carry a paralyzed man to Jesus, and before Jesus says a word about the man's legs, He says something about his soul: "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven" (9:2). The religious leaders are scandalized, and rightly so by their own logic, for only God can forgive sins. That is exactly the point. Jesus heals the man's body to prove He has authority to do the greater thing, to forgive. Matthew 9 opens with a claim so large that everything else in the chapter unfolds from it: Jesus does what only God can do.

From there the chapter becomes a series of collisions between the new thing Jesus is doing and the old assumptions of the religious world. He calls a tax collector named Matthew, a man everyone despised, and then sits down to dinner with a houseful of sinners. When the Pharisees object, He answers with words that ought to be written over every church door: "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice. For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (9:13). The doctor goes where the sick are. The Savior goes where the sinners are.

Then come the questions about fasting, and Jesus reaches for two homely pictures that turn out to be enormous. You do not sew a new patch on an old garment, and you do not pour new wine into old wineskins, or both are ruined. Something genuinely new has arrived with Jesus, and it cannot be poured back into the old forms. The bridegroom is here. The age of the New Covenant is breaking in, and it will not fit inside the structures of the old.

The chapter races on, a desperate father, a woman who only dares to touch His garment, blind men crying for mercy, a mute man set free, until Matthew lifts the camera and shows us Jesus looking at the crowds. He sees them "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd," and His heart breaks (9:36). "The harvest is plentiful," He says, "but the laborers are few" (9:37). The same authority that forgives sins and inaugurates a new covenant now looks out over a weary world and calls for workers. Mercy has come, and mercy is recruiting.

Group Discussion: When the paralyzed man is lowered before Him, Jesus first says, "your sins are forgiven," and only then heals his body to prove He has authority to forgive (9:2–6). Why do you think Jesus dealt with the man's sin before his paralysis, and what does that reveal about what Jesus considers our deepest need?

Personal Reflection: Jesus said, "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice. For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (9:13). Be honest: do you tend to see yourself as one of the "righteous" who has it together, or as one of the "sinners" Jesus came to call? How does your answer shape the way you treat people whose lives are visibly broken?

Read Matthew 9:1–38

Study Questions

1. When the paralytic is brought to Him, Jesus says, “your sins are forgiven,” and then heals him so that they may “know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” (9:2, 6). The scribes were right that only God can forgive sins, so what is Jesus claiming about Himself, and why is His authority to forgive the most important thing in this account?
2. Jesus dealt with the paralytic’s deepest need, his sin, before his obvious need, his paralysis (9:2–6). In your own life, where are you tempted to ask God mainly to fix your circumstances while overlooking the deeper work He wants to do in your heart?
3. Jesus calls Matthew the tax collector, then eats with “many tax collectors and sinners,” and answers His critics, “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice. For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (9:9–13). What is Jesus teaching here about the heart of God toward sinners, and what does it mean that He desires mercy more than mere religious performance?
4. Jesus deliberately spent time with the people the religious crowd avoided. Who are the “tax collectors and sinners” in your world that you find it easiest to look down on or stay away from, and what would the mercy of Jesus look like in the way you treat them?
5. When asked about fasting, Jesus says the wedding guests cannot mourn while the bridegroom is with them, and that He is that bridegroom (9:14–15). What is Jesus revealing about who He is and about the new joy that has arrived with Him?
6. Jesus says no one patches an old garment with new cloth or pours new wine into old wineskins (9:16–17). Where are you tempted to try to pour the new life Jesus offers back into old habits, attitudes, or self-made religion, and what needs to be made new instead?

7. Through the parable of the new wine and new wineskins, Jesus signals that He is bringing something that cannot be contained in the old forms (9:16–17). What is the “new wine” Jesus came to bring, and how does the New Covenant in Christ differ from the Old Law it fulfills and replaces?
8. A ruler whose daughter has died, and a woman who had bled for twelve years, both come to Jesus in raw desperation, and He honors their faith (9:18–22). When you are desperate, do you tend to bring your need boldly to Jesus, or to hide it and try to manage alone, and why?
9. Matthew says that when Jesus saw the crowds, “he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd,” and He said, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest” (9:36–38). What does this reveal about the heart of Christ for lost people, the urgency of the harvest, and the responsibility this lays on His church?
10. Look back across the whole chapter, the forgiveness, the mercy at Matthew’s table, the new wine, the desperate faith, the plentiful harvest. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you to receive His mercy more deeply or to carry it to others this week, and what is your next concrete step?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Hosea 6:6, the word Jesus quotes, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice”; Jeremiah 31:31–34, the promise of a new covenant written on the heart, with sins remembered no more; Hebrews 8:6–13, Christ as mediator of a better covenant that makes the first obsolete; Luke 5:27–39, Luke’s fuller account of Matthew’s call and the new wine; Romans 10:13–15, the call to send laborers so the lost may hear and call on the Lord.