

# Commentary on Matthew 9:1-17

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## VIII. JESUS' AUTHORITY OVER SIN. 9:1-8.

### A. The First Exchange. 9:2-3.

1. Jesus' response to faith. "When Jesus saw **their** faith...." In all probability, the plural embraces both the paralytic and the men who brought him to Jesus.

2. Jesus' declaration of forgiveness. The paralytic may "take heart," for his sins "are forgiven." Matthew, like Mark, employs the present passive **aphientai** (Lk uses the aorist). The present tense carries the connotation "at this moment" (Gundry, 163). The passive voice points to the activity of **God**. This twofold significance of Jesus' words, the scribes recognize, v. 3; they accuse Jesus of blasphemy because he, a mere man in their eyes, claims to act as God. "The Jews of Jesus' day expected forgiveness in the messianic age..., but did not expect the Messiah himself to forgive sins or to be divine" (Gundry, 163).

### B. The Second Exchange. 9:4-7.

1. The scribes' response. Their thoughts (**enthumēseis**) are evil, because, having correctly perceived the meaning of the pronouncement of 9:2, they deny rather than affirm Jesus' deity - and not merely deny, but positively accuse him of blasphemy in making such a pronouncement. Moreover, Jesus' challenging question in v. 5, coming as it does immediately after the statement of v. 4, strongly suggests that the scribes' evil is compounded by the suspicion that Jesus deliberately speaks of sins rather than of paralysis in order to avoid exposure as a fraud.

#### 2. Jesus' declaration of healing.

a. Sin and disease. "The Jewish view of illnesses as direct results of particular sins (cf. John 9:2) contributed to Jesus' pronouncing the paralytic's sins forgiven. In the opinion of the onlookers, only a cure could confirm the pronouncement of forgiveness. Continuance of the illness would mean persistence of guilt" (Gundry, 163).

b. "Which is easier...?" v. 5. The question reflects Jesus' awareness of the Jews' concern about the relation of sin to disease, and the scribes' evil

inference from the fact that Jesus has spoken of sins rather than of disease. From a human standpoint it is far easier to speak of forgiving sins than of curing disease: the former is unobservable and thus unprovable; but if one's pronouncement of a cure has no visible confirmation, the "healer" is exposed as a fraud. But from God's standpoint, the forgiveness of sins is much harder (20:28). Jesus first goes to the heart of the matter, 9:2. By addressing the larger need (forgiveness), he embraces the lesser (healing).

c. The authority of the Son of Man. Mt's word order in v. 6 is significant, both because (like Mk) he places "authority" (**exousia**) first in its clause (immediately after **hoti**), and also because (unlike Mk, and like Lk) he places the phrase "upon earth" immediately after "the Son of Man" rather than after "to forgive sins," so that "earth" is principally identified not as the place where sins are committed (this is obviously true) but as the place where the Son of Man exercises authority. He is a heavenly figure (Dan 7), but his authority extends to earth (Gundry, 164). The forgiveness of sins remains the central theme. Jesus consents to address the man's disease (v. 6b) that his opponents "may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (v. 6a). As in the preceding story (8:28-34), Matthew's main concern is Jesus' **authority** (Mt says much less about the paralytic, his friends' efforts, and the effects of his cure, than does Mk). Jesus' manifest authority to heal the paralysis witnesses to his - God's - authority to forgive sins. Are not the closing words of v. 8 ("who had given such authority to men") ironical?

## IX. THE CALLING OF MATTHEW. 9:9-13.

### A. Matthew.

This is the first reference to this man in the Gospel. Matthew was a Jew (his name in Hebrew means "gift of Yahweh"), a tax collector of Capernaum (cf. 9:1), whom Jesus now calls into discipleship (9:9) and later appoints as one of the twelve apostles (10:1-4). On Matthew as the author of this Gospel, see **INTRODUCTION**, IV.

### B. Matthew the Tax Collector.

"The publicans in the gospels seem to be Jewish customs officials (working under Herod Antipas in the area of Galilee) rather than Roman tax collectors.... [the Latin **portitores** describes the former, **publicani** the latter: Carson, 159]. Jews despised publicans for collaboration and contact with Gentiles, for the handling of currency with pagan inscriptions and iconography, and for dishonesty" (Gundry,

167). See Otto Michel, TDNT 8: 88-105. For reflections of the Jewish view of tax collectors, see Mt 5:46; 9:10-11 & 11:19 ("tax collectors and sinners"); 18:17 ("a pagan [**ethnikos**] or a tax collector"); 21:31-32 ("the tax collectors and the prostitutes"). Matthew probably engaged in the taxing of fishermen like Peter (Gundry, 166).

### C. Matthew the Sinner.

The identification of Matthew as a tax collector (v. 9), marks him as a "sinner" in Jewish eyes. This identification is strengthened, in that the call of Matthew is placed directly after the healing of the paralytic and Jesus' pronouncement of his right to forgive sins (9:1-8), and directly before the dinner for "tax collectors and sinners" (9:10-13), thus identifying Matthew as one of the sinners (9:13) to whom Jesus offers forgiveness. In 9:13, and in the couplet of 9:10-11, "sinners" (**hamartōloi**) is a technical term; it "partly means those who live a flagrantly immoral life (murderers, robbers, deceivers, etc.) and partly those who follow a dishonourable vocation or one which inclines them strongly to dishonesty" (K. H. Rengstorf, TDNT 1: 327). Cf. Joachim Jeremias, "Zöllner und Sünder," ZNW 30 (1931), 293-300.

### D. Matthew the Disciple.

As with the fishermen, Jesus takes the initiative. That he summons such a person, accords with his mission to save people from their sins (1:21) - a purpose confirmed in the pronouncement of 9:13. The words "Follow me" indicate that Jesus is calling for a commitment to his person and not merely to his teaching (cf. comments on 4:18-20). Matthew's response is obedient and decisive ("Matthew got up and followed him"), also (according to Lk 5:28) sacrificial. There is no indication that Matthew was previously acquainted with Jesus, though this is not ruled out in principle. On (1) the name "Levi" (Mk 2:14 and Lk 5:27) in place of Mt's "Matthew" (9:9), and (2) on the possibility that "Matthew" is a **Christian** name, see the INTRODUCTION, IV.

### E. Jesus' Dinner with "Tax Collectors and Sinners." 9:10-13.

1. Matthew's evangelistic outreach. V. 10 is most naturally understood as a reference to Matthew's house, not Jesus' (against Gundry, 167); see INTRODUCTION, IV. That Matthew serves as host to "many" (9:10), suggests that he has prospered in his profession (not uncommon for tax collectors). More significant is the identity of the "many" whom Matthew invites - namely "tax collectors and sinners." Matthew invites (i) his associates, i.e., persons with

whom he is well acquainted, and (ii) persons who, like him, desperately need the forgiveness of sins that Jesus offers.

2. Jesus' table fellowship. For the Jews of Jesus' day, this was the most intimate form of socializing. That he dined with the religiously unclean and the socially disreputable, naturally made Jesus the object of the Pharisees' suspicion (the question of 9:11 is more an accusation than a request for information; cf. Carson, 225). This practice is of course quite deliberate on Jesus' part; it is one of his favorite ways of identifying with the sinners whom he came to save (cf. comments on 3:15).

3. The salvation of sinners. Vv. 12-13 are full of irony. There is a valid conceptual difference between "the righteous" and "the sinners." But we may doubt that those here identified as "healthy" and "righteous" are truly so. The quotation from Hos 6:6 ("I desire mercy, not sacrifice") is most significant. The Pharisees insist that sinners become righteous ("I desire sacrifice") in order to gain the approval of the religious leadership. Jesus insists that they be accepted as sinners ("I desire mercy"). To fail thus to accept them is to be guilty of the worst kind of sin. Moreover, the absence of the merciful heart shows that one is insufficiently aware of his own sinfulness and need of forgiveness (cf. 18:23-35). In Jesus' view, the truly healthy person is the one who is "poor in spirit," i.e. one acutely aware of his need of God (5:3); and the truly righteous person is the one least inclined to boast of his own righteousness, least inclined proudly to place himself above others. Matthew, by reaching out to other sinners and bringing them to Jesus, provides an example to the Pharisees.

## X. THE QUESTION ABOUT FASTING. 9:14-17.

### A. The Inquiry. 9:14.

1. The Pharisees' fasting. "Under Mosaic legislation, fasting was commanded only on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29-31; 23:27-32; Num 29:7); but during the Exile regular fasts of remembrance were instituted (Zech 7:3-5; 8:19)" (Carson, 175). In Jesus' day the Pharisees fasted "twice a week" (Luke 18:12).

2. The fasting of John's disciples. The practice accords with that of their master (11:18, "For John came neither eating nor drinking") - John's practice being in keeping with his **expectation** of Messiah (11:3b). Is the disciples' fasting partly to be explained by the fact that John is now in prison (4:12; 11:2)?

## B. Jesus' Response. 9:15-17.

1. The principle. The disciples' failure to fast, vying as it does with accepted practice, raises a question (9:14). Jesus' answer in v. 15 presupposes the dawn of the End by the coming of Jesus (4:17, 23). This glorious inaugural calls for celebration, not for mourning! Surely one expects **feasting**, not fasting, at a wedding reception (note the figure of "the guests of the bridegroom," v. 15). But when the bridegroom is "taken away" (v. 15b), fasting will become appropriate. The passive of **apairō** (which could be rendered, "be snatched away") alludes to Jesus' death and its sequel (cf. 16:21). But NB that even then, one's fasting must express the joy that is appropriate for the citizens of the Kingdom (see comments on 6:16-18). On the most natural reading of v. 15, the fasting that begins with the "taking away" of the bridegroom, lasts until his return in the Parousia (16:27; chs. 24-25); so also Gundry, 169. Despite the promise of his presence with them "to the very end of the age" (28:20), only when he is again fully present with them (as was the case between his resurrection and his ascension, Mt 28) will their joy have been made complete and their fast of longing, of mourning and expectation, made obsolete.

2. The illustration. To be understood properly, verses 16-17 must be viewed as a twofold illustration of the principle of v. 15 (note the term **parabolē** in the introduction to the Lukan parallel, 5:36). Each of the actions commonly avoided, 9:16-17, would **ruin** instead of **preserve**. The principle of preservation is rather obscured if one insists on allegorizing, i.e. seeing the "new wine" as the Age of Fulfillment, and the "old wineskins" as the Age of Preparation. (On this showing, 9:17 bemoans the destruction of the old wineskins as much as the loss of the new wine.) Jesus' point is that recognition of the dawn of the New Age does not render a practice such as fasting obsolete. Indeed, Jesus seeks here, not merely to permit fasting but actively to preserve it. But in doing so, he insists that a disciple practice it intelligently (i.e. in light of the fact that the New Age has indeed dawned); cf. again on 6:16-18; 5:17-20.