

**Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church (Columbus, OH)**  
**Trinity 19 – October 10, 2021**  
**Matthew 9:1-8: Jesus Has Authority to Forgive Sins**  
**By Peter Wagner**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Hear again from Matthew chapter 9, verses 1-8. “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.’” This is our text.

The theme of today’s gospel is the authority of Jesus – authority not just to heal, but even to forgive sins. In Matthew 8, the chapter right before this text, Jesus demonstrated his authority to heal the sick, cast out demons, and calm a storm – the unique power of the Son of God. Now he goes even further, showing that he is Lord not only over nature and demons, but over sin itself.

Saint Matthew’s account leaves out a lot of detail, compared to the accounts describing the same event in the other Gospels. Matthew doesn’t mention how the four friends were unable to bring the paralyzed man into the house because of the crowd. He doesn’t say anything about how they opened a hole in the roof and lowered the man to Jesus’ feet. Instead, Matthew gets straight to the point: “That you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...” In the whole episode, Jesus is the only person who says or does anything – his words are the only focus. The slanderous thoughts of the scribes are brief and unspoken, “This man is blaspheming!” The paralytic himself says nothing – he’s entirely passive. And as for the subject of the forgiveness of sins, that’s totally unexpected. Jesus forgave the paralytic without even being asked! Sure, the man and his friends had faith that Jesus could make him walk. But salvation and the forgiveness of sins? That probably never crossed their minds.

Sin is the root of all human suffering and need. Paralysis is an obvious consequence of sin infecting this world. But when the man rises and walks, there can no longer be any doubt that the words of Jesus have power to accomplish what he says. Jesus’ authority to forgive extends even over the effects of sin, to heal broken bodies. When God speaks, the heavens and the earth are created out of nothing. When God says, “Rise, pick up your bed and go home,” the paralytic rises and goes home. And most importantly, when God says, “Your sins are forgiven,” you are forgiven indeed.

However, when it comes to making purification for sins, the Divine Word does more than merely speak. He acts. He enters creation as a man, he enters time itself. He was born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He rose again on the third day and ascended into heaven for the forgiveness of your sins. Therefore, when he says, “Son, your sins are forgiven,” that word is not empty, but alive, grounded in real divine action.

It would have been nice if God had simply absolved everyone spontaneously, forgiving mankind by his powerful word. That would have solved the whole problem of sin so quickly and easily. No death of the Son of God needed, every human being saved. But Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.<sup>1</sup> The Lamb dies for the sins of the world. For his sake God has absolved the world. Without the death of the Lamb of God, no one is forgiven. Without the shedding of blood, God’s righteous Law cannot be satisfied. If God were to dismiss or ignore sin without punishment, he would be like a judge in a courtroom exonerating a murderer, unjustly letting him go free. But God’s forgiveness satisfies justice. It exacts the death penalty. In the most remarkable twist of history, the punishment for the sins of the world fell on the shoulders of the creator himself. The one who sustains the universe by his powerful word, he died for the sins of the world he created. And because he paid the penalty, he can speak true absolution.

Jesus can forgive sins because he has reconciled heaven and earth. Jacob dreamed of a celestial ladder up to heaven, with angels going up and down from earth to God’s throne – the doorway to heaven itself. That ladder is the cross, its base on the ground, raised up to heaven. Jesus hung there to bridge the divide, making atonement for our sins, opening the way for us to heaven.

The conclusion of Matthew’s account tells us what we should take away from this miracle. “When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.” Just as the crowds

---

<sup>1</sup> John 1:29

were afraid and glorified God, we should learn to fear, love, and trust in God above all things. We should fear him because he has divine authority to bind and to retain, to forgive sins and to withhold forgiveness to the unrepentant. We should also love and trust him because he has forgiven us for Jesus' sake. And we should glorify God, because he first loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.<sup>2</sup>

All this teaches that God forgives us not for anything we've done or deserved, but only for Jesus' sake. Jesus is the actor; we are passive recipients of his grace. We were so bedridden, so dead in our trespasses and sins, that we could not even sit up, much less persuade God to remember our sins no more! Like the paralytic, we too need to be carried into God's presence, drawn by the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, if God has truly forgiven you for Jesus' sake, if he truly loves you and remembers your sins no more, how much more should you also forgive one another from the heart? How much more should you glorify God for his wonderful salvation! When we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us," this means we should freely forgive even our enemies because our Heavenly Father has already forgiven us. And just as Jesus did not wait for the paralytic to ask for forgiveness, we don't need to wait for a satisfactory apology either. We can take the first initiative to forgive one another.

It's one thing to forgive your neighbor for sins against you, but to speak the absolution of God, totally blotting out transgressions, removing them as far as the east is from the west, so that God himself remembers them no more – that's a big deal! It's a very serious thing that we begin the Divine Service with confession and absolution. The pastor asserts the authority of Jesus, saying, "In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all of your sins." To many Christians, his words sound unbelievably presumptuous. How can the pastor, a mere man, speak as God and say, "I forgive you"? If all sin is ultimately committed against God, shouldn't the pastor say, "God can forgive your sins"? Anything more sounds offensive, even blasphemous!

This reasoning is the same logic of the scribes against Jesus. "Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"<sup>3</sup> And the scribes were right! Their accusation of blasphemy would have been perfectly justified, if he were not truly the Son of God. But God has given this authority to the divine Son of Man. Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..."<sup>4</sup> So Jesus can also give of his authority to his representatives, to pastors, through the calling of the church. In the great commission, he sent out the apostles to baptize and teach. In the same way, he gives the church the authority to call pastors. The pastoral office is a gift to the church, for the purpose of delivering true forgiveness of sins in Word and Sacrament.

Therefore, when a man appointed by Jesus speaks under the authority of Jesus, his word is as effective as the word of Jesus. This is what St. John the Evangelist writes in chapter twenty: The Lord Jesus breathed on His disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."<sup>5</sup>

But in holy absolution, you never see any visible proof that your sins are really forgiven. The pastor speaks; nothing happens. You might feel no better off. You're like a paralyzed man, still lying in the same place. Are the pastor's words an empty farce?

No. Of course not. For when we hear the pastor's absolution, we hear Jesus himself. And when we hear Jesus, we hear the gospel. Forgiveness of sins is the beginning and the end – the very definition of Christ's ministry. Before he was born, the angel said, "You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."<sup>6</sup> And in his final will and testament, Jesus said, "This is my blood of the covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."<sup>7</sup> He purchased and won forgiveness for you by his innocent suffering and death. And today it's applied to you in his body and blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. This authority is founded on the payment Jesus already made, once for all, for the sins of the paralytic, for the sins of all mankind, and especially for you.

So when you hear these words, take heart. Take heart because your sins are forgiven. And take heart because where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.<sup>8</sup> To Christ alone be the glory! Amen.

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 4:10

<sup>3</sup> Mark 2:6-7

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 28:18

<sup>5</sup> Small Catechism, Office of the Keys; John 20:22-23

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 1:21

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 26:28

<sup>8</sup> Small Catechism, Holy Communion