

“What Did He Say?”

Matthew 9:1-17

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • May 19, 2013

39-year-old Chris Simpson, a garbage man and former Marine, knows a thing or two about hate. According to an article in the *Washington Post*, three years ago Simpson was involved in a white supremacy movement and leading a so-called “white pride” parade. His anger and hate really began to grow in 2000. Chris and his wife Misty were still newlyweds, struggling to get by, when their first child was born with severe birth defects. She only lived a couple of hours. Simpson said, “I was feeling a lot of anger and hatred, and I was confused.” So he directed that hatred toward people of other races. His many tattoos include swastikas and other Nazi emblems, but maybe the most obvious is the word HATE tattooed across his knuckles.

But last year something happened. Chris Simpson changed. He gave up hate. He became a follower of Christ and was baptized. Chris and his family had watched the movie, *Courageous*, a Christian film about four police officers who succeed at their jobs but fail at fatherhood. He found himself connecting with the characters. After seeing a sign outside a local church inviting people to watch *Courageous* for free at the church, Chris and Misty Simpson and their three young children were in a church for the first time in years. Within a month, he was baptized. Now he attends a Bible study. His family prays together at home. He said, “When we accepted Christ, it was like this whole house was transformed.”

This is the kind of transformation that our passage is about today. Remember from last week that Jesus and his disciples had sailed across the Sea of Galilee to a Gentile area where Jesus healed the men who were possessed by the demons. Now Matthew tells us that they got back into the boat and

sailed back to “his own city,” which is Capernaum. At first glance it looks like this is three separate stories but what we will find is that they are all about the same thing.

Matthew, inspired by the Holy Spirit, has been building his case for Jesus’ authority and therefore his true identity. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount we’re told that the people were amazed at Jesus’ teaching because he taught “as one with authority.” Then he heals a man with leprosy, showing his authority over disease, even an incurable disease. Jesus demonstrates his authority over nature and the weather by calming the storm on the sea and he shows his authority over demons by healing the possessed men.

Now in chapter 9 we reach the ultimate authority – Jesus has authority over sin and death. Verse 2 says, “some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed.” The gospels of Mark and Luke give us a little bit more detail. Jesus was in a house teaching and there was a large crowd that had gathered to hear him. Some men bring their paralyzed friend hoping that Jesus will be able to heal him. They discover that they are not able to get to Jesus because of the crowd. But they are not easily defeated. The men carry their friend up onto the roof where they make a hole and lower him down in front of Jesus. The Bible says, “Jesus saw their faith.” Did these friends of the paralyzed man have some kind of super faith in Jesus? Probably not. But they had enough faith to believe that Jesus could heal their friend. So they did whatever they had to do to get the man to Jesus. This makes me wonder. Do I live in such a way that someone could “see” *my* faith? How about you? Do you consider faith to be a private

matter or is it visible? Can people who don't know Jesus see your faith?

These men went to great lengths to get their friend to Jesus and then Jesus responds in kind of an odd way. He says, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven." What did he say? I'm fairly certain that's not what they were hoping to hear at that moment. That's also not what the religious leaders were expecting to hear either. "Some of the scribes said to themselves, 'This man is blaspheming.'" According to the Old Testament and to other Jewish teachings, God is the only one who has the authority to forgive sins. By telling the man, "Your sins are forgiven," Jesus is making a bold, direct claim to be God. These scribes obviously did not understand who it was that was there teaching. Ironically, by accusing Jesus of blasphemy the scribes are the ones blaspheming, which is why Jesus says, "why do you think evil in your hearts?".

Jesus then sets out to prove his claim to be God and therefore able to forgive sin. A common belief in ancient Israel was the idea that sickness was punishment for sin. The crowd that was gathered, including the scribes, would have assumed that the man was guilty of something. Jesus is clear in other places in the gospels that this is not necessarily so. Sometimes sickness *is* the consequence of sin, but not always. When Jesus was about to heal a man who was born blind, his disciples asked him, "Who sinned that this man was born blind? Was it him or his parents?" Jesus told them that the blindness was not the result of sin but instead so that they could experience the power of God.

He means the same thing here when he says, "For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk?'" Jesus is about to prove his ability to forgive sin by healing the paralyzed man. He says, "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." Either the man will be healed and everyone will know that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, or the man won't be healed and Jesus will be exposed as a fraud. The man got up and went home and the crowds were afraid and glorified God.

In the next scene, Jesus is passing the tax office and he sees Matthew there working. Jesus says to him, "Follow me." He's saying much more than just, "come here a minute." Jesus is asking Matthew to become one of his followers, a disciple. This creates quite a stir. Tax collectors were not well liked by the Jews. The tax collectors worked for the Roman government and were often corrupt. They would collect more taxes than were due and would keep the difference. Tax collectors were considered traitors and not allowed to participate in the Synagogue. They were as bad as you could get. Pious Jews wanted nothing to do with tax collectors.

Jesus, on the other hand, cared deeply for Matthew and for the other tax collectors and sinners. James Boice said, "Though politically, religiously, and socially unacceptable to the self-righteous leading Jews of his day, Matthew was not unacceptable to Jesus and therefore not unacceptable to God, which is what really mattered." Jesus went so far as to eat with these sinners. In that culture, eating together was a sign of acceptance and friendship. This, of course, didn't sit well with the religious leaders. "When the Pharisees saw this, they said to Jesus' disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?'"

Jesus loved those sinners enough to accept them and welcome them. Yet he also loved them enough to call them to leave their old way of life. Acceptance leads to transformation. "Jesus first loved Matthew,

then he transformed Matthew.” That’s unconditional love; no strings attached. “It is the way of Jesus first to offer loving acceptance, then loving transformation.” Jesus answers the Pharisees by saying, “Go and learn what this means,” and he quotes from the prophet Hosea, “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.” Jesus is telling them that redeeming people is more important than maintaining religion.

It seems to me that this is a great model for a church in our world. Instead of condemning people for their beliefs or actions we should love them enough to accept them as they are, unconditionally. The reality is that in God’s eyes every one of us is a sinner. We are the sick who need the Great Physician. You and I are the ones Jesus came to call. To each one of us Jesus says, “Follow me.”

As we learned last week, following Jesus is costly and dangerous. But it’s the most rewarding thing in the world, too. Matthew considered the cost and decided it was worth it. First of all, when Jesus said, “Follow me,” Matthew got up and followed him. His faith wasn’t passive. His faith was visible. Second, Matthew left *everything* to follow Jesus. Once he left his position as tax collector there was no going back. It cost Matthew something personally to become a follower of Jesus. It’s the same for you and me. If following Jesus doesn’t cost you something you are probably doing it wrong. Third, Matthew arranged to have his friends meet Jesus. The forgiveness you experience is something you want to share with others.

The passage ends with the disciples of John the Baptist coming to Jesus and asking about fasting. They are asking why almost everyone else in Israel is fasting except for Jesus and his disciples. Although the Old Testament only commanded fasting once per year on the Day of Atonement, the custom had developed to fast twice a week.

Fasting was associated with mourning and repentance. In contrast, a wedding feast was a time of celebration and joy. In several places in the Old Testament God calls the nation of Israel his bride. Isaiah 62:5 says, “as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.” And in Hosea 2:16, “And in that day, declares the LORD, you will call me ‘My Husband.’” God sent his Son to be the bridegroom. Jesus again claims to be God and tells them that since the bridegroom, the long-awaited Messiah, is here that it would be inappropriate to fast. It’s a time for celebrating.

He then gives two illustrations to make his point. He says that nobody patches an old garment with a piece of new, unshrunk cloth. When washed the patch will shrink and tear the garment. Similarly he says that nobody puts new, unfermented wine into old wineskins. Wine was fermented in skins made out of animal skin which were able to stretch as the wine gave off gasses. With these illustrations he’s pointing out that his coming represents something new. The old structures of religion are not adequate. The arrival of the Messiah means radical change in the world.

So what have we learned? First of all, like the paralyzed man *our* sins are forgiven. Even if you don’t feel forgiven. Forgiveness doesn’t depend on our feelings, it depends on the reliability of God and he tells us in 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” If you are not experiencing God’s amazing forgiveness, why not turn your life over to him today?

Second, Jesus calls us to follow him. That means he loves us and accepts us where we are and as we are, no matter what. But it also means he loves us too much to leave us there. God wants us to give up our sinful desires and actions and replace them

with godly desires and actions. Following him also means loving others in the same way – with an accepting love as well as a transforming love. What have you given up to follow him?

Finally, it means introducing other people to the transforming love of Jesus. It means going where the pain is in our community because that's where Jesus

went. It means going out of our way to make friendships with people who don't know him. That's scary and hard and I'm really speaking to myself here because I'm not very good at doing that. But it's what Jesus wants us to do to help transform his world. So who will you invite to come hear about Jesus this week?

Amen