

Matthew 9-11: The Mighty Deeds of Jesus

The Healing of a Paralytic (9:1-8)

Matthew 9 continues the string of miracles from chapter 8, beginning with the famous story of the healing of the paralytic in Jesus' hometown, Capernaum. The scribes charge Jesus with blasphemy, which usually referred to dishonoring the name of God (see Exod. 20:7), but here refers to Jesus' claim to be able to forgive the man's sins (9:2; Mark 2:7 makes this explicit). An overlooked detail in this story is that Jesus "knows their thoughts" (9:4). Here (and again in Matthew 12:25), Jesus has the privileged knowledge of what others are thinking. This knowledge reflects a prominent theme in ancient Jewish literature: what one says in/to one's soul conditions and reflects one's relationship with God, especially indicating wisdom or foolishness. Inner speech in the Old Testament commonly appears in Wisdom literature, where self-talk often characterizes the wicked. For example, the fool says "in his heart" that there is no God (Ps. 14:1), and the one who turns away from God blesses himself "in his heart" (Deut. 29:19). Jesus' knowledge of the teachers' thoughts in Matthew 9:4 picks up on this important theme, and practically speaking, puts him in the right position to be able to ask his pointed question: "Why do you think evil in your hearts?" (9:4), and later to insist that what is in our heart makes us clean or unclean (15:19-20).

The Call of Matthew (9:9-13)

In Matthew 9:9-13, Jesus calls Matthew the tax collector, traditionally the author of this Gospel, to be his disciple. Tax collectors in the Roman Empire were typically viewed as

morally suspect; they collected taxes on behalf of the imperial government, but often took more than required and pocketed some for themselves. Despite this negative stereotype (see Matt. 5:46), Matthew responds to Jesus by immediately rising from his tax booth to follow him (9:9).

Lest Matthew's readers suspect that Matthew is an exception – the one good tax collector in Capernaum – Matthew extends Jesus' association with tax collectors into the next scene, where “many tax collectors and sinners” join him for dinner (9:10). In the story about the healing of the paralytic, the scribes are upset that Jesus is “blaspheming” (9:3). Here, Jesus' willingness to associate with “tax collectors and sinners” (a stock expression in the Gospel for social and moral outcasts) leads the Pharisees to question him merely for the company he keeps (9:11). Jesus responds with a familiar saying: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick” (9:12), and then a quote from Hosea 6:6, which reads, “For it is loyalty that I desire, not sacrifice, and knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”

It is important to remember that Jesus makes the comment about the sick needing a physician in a context of urban life; many were living in squalor, with a high prevalence of disease, poor nutrition, and limited knowledge about health and illness. At that time, many associated these kinds of conditions with sinfulness, or with some error on the part of the sick person. But in Matthew, God blesses the poor and the sick. Jesus' healing miracles point toward God's power and transformation, in both a somatic, material sense, and in terms of forgiveness and the spiritual life.

A Question about Fasting (9:14-17)

When John's disciples approach Jesus with the question about fasting, Jesus responds with three brief parables, all emphasizing how inappropriate it is to combine the old and the new. Fasting is associated with mourning, which Jesus contrasts with the new age that he has inaugurated. It is time now to leave behind the old and embrace the new – the in-breaking of the kingdom of heaven – even as a time of mourning will return when Jesus is no longer physically with them, the time of Matthew's church.

The Official's Daughter and the Woman with a Hemorrhage (9:18-26)

The next section relates a series of miracles, beginning with the healings of the official's daughter and the hemorrhaging woman. Following his Markan source, Matthew has kept these stories intercalated, or sandwiched, one within the other. The official, or ruler (Mark has "synagogue official," Mk. 5:22) comes to Jesus because his daughter has just died (Matt. 9:18). Matthew intensifies the situation from what we find in Mark, since in the latter, the official says only, "My daughter is at the point of death" (Mk. 5:23).

As Jesus is following the official, that story is put on pause, as a woman who has suffered from hemorrhages for twelve years touches the tassel on Jesus' cloak, hoping that she will be cured. The tassel (possibly "fringe") on Jesus' cloak might be one of those prescribed in Mosaic law, which stipulated that tassels were to be worn on the corners of a garment as a reminder to keep the commandments (see Numbers 15:37-39; Deut. 22:12). Jesus' power passes through the tassel, for the woman is healed "that very hour," and Jesus commends her for her faith (9:22).

Jesus then continues on his way, as the story returns to the case of the official's daughter. The crowd at the official's home is mourning the girl's death, likely as paid

mourners in the normal ancient custom. In a narrative illustration of Jesus' earlier teaching that the time for mourning has ceased (9:14-17), Jesus tells them to leave, provoking their ridicule (9:24). Of course, their ridicule, as with all opposition to Jesus in the Gospel, is unfounded. Jesus takes the girl by the hand and raises her to life (9:25).

The Healings of Two Blind Men and a Mute Person (9:27-34)

Whereas Mark tells of the healing of one blind man, Bartimaeus, just before Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (Mk. 10:46-52), Matthew has two separate accounts in which Jesus gives sight to the blind; and in each case, there are two blind men rather than one (see also Matt. 20:29-34). The following scene, in which Jesus heals a person who has been rendered mute by a demon (9:32-34), appears again in 12:22-24 (see also Lk. 11:14-15). In both Matthean versions, the Pharisees who witness the exorcism conclude that Jesus' power must come from the "prince of demons," i.e., Satan (9:34, also called Beelzebul in 12:24).

The doubling tendency is common in Matthew (he also describes two demoniacs being healed in 8:28-34, and two animals at Jesus' entry into Jerusalem in 21:2). Notice that the blind men of chapter 9 call out to Jesus using the messianic title, "Son of David," which Matthew repeatedly associates with Jesus' healings (see also Matt. 12:23; 15:22; 20:30-31).

Jesus' Compassion (9:35-38)

Jesus looks on the crowds with compassion because they are "harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd" (9:36), a common image in the Old Testament for people

without godly leadership. Numbers 27:17, for example, asks:

who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep without a shepherd?

Matthew implies what John 10:11 makes explicit: Jesus is the Good Shepherd, the one God has chosen to tend and care for his flock (see Ezek. 34:23). The elite Jewish leadership, on the other hand, are depicted as illegitimate leaders of God's people. They oppose Jesus, and they perpetuate structural violence and oppressive systems.

In Matthew 9:37, Jesus switches metaphors. Instead of sheep and shepherd imagery, he uses another common image from the Old Testament: the harvest. In Matthew, the harvest holds both hope and threat: hope for abundance and restoration, but also the threat of judgment for those who deserve it (see also Matthew 13:40). The reference to laborers anticipates Jesus' upcoming missionary discourse.

The Commissioning of the Disciples (10:1-42)

Chapter 10 relates Jesus' second major discourse in Matthew: the commissioning of his disciples. Matthew begins by identifying the Twelve (10:1-4), and then describes Jesus' instructions regarding the nature of their mission (10:5-15), the persecutions that will inevitably result from their actions (10:16-25), exhortations to have courage and endure the costs of discipleship (10:26-39), and a promise that they will be rewarded (10:40-42). Though the speech begins with the Twelve, Jesus' teachings for most of the discourse are applicable to later disciples, as well. In fact, some think this section of Matthew may have been part of an early missionary handbook.

Introduction and the Nature of the Mission (10:1-15)

This is the only place in Matthew where the disciples are called “apostles” (literally, “the sent-out ones”). Jesus sends them out “to the lost sheep of Israel” (10:6), explicitly forbidding them from going to Gentiles or Samaritans (10:5). This seems somewhat strange, given Jesus’ own recent travels into Gentile territory in 8:28 and his later Great Commission to “make disciples of *all* nations” (28:19). The injunction might reflect Jesus’ limited sense of his own mission (see 15:24), or Matthew may be challenging a reticence to embrace the Gentile mission that remained amongst his own community.

Jesus sends the disciples out to “proclaim the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near” (10:7), and to continue Jesus’ manifestation of the Kingdom of Heaven through exorcisms and healings – precisely what we have just seen Jesus doing in chapters 8-9. They are called to imitate Jesus and continue caring for the needy and powerless, embracing humility and vulnerability themselves. Jesus gives them authority, empowering them to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those with skin diseases, and drive out demons. Essentially, he says: “Go, do the work of the Messiah yourselves.”

Jesus’ instructions in 10:8-11 not to take money or unnecessary clothing with them on the journey paints a picture of voluntary poverty, which was already well-established by the Cynic philosophers, who wandered around from village to village; some scholars think that Jesus’ instructions not to bring a bag might refer to the Cynics’ practice of carrying a bag for begging. Certainly, Jesus’ commands require the disciples to be vulnerable, to rely on and trust the hospitality of the ones who receive them. If those recipients are not worthy, however, the disciples are told to “shake the dust from your

feet,” a gesture that indicates disassociation and coming judgment (10:14).

Persecutions (10:16-25)

Jesus warns that pursuing the mission of the Gospel is risky; they will be as “sheep among wolves,” which means they will need to be “shrewd as serpents, innocent as doves” (10:16). Still, they will not face persecution alone. Jesus promises that the Spirit of God will speak through them (10:19-20).

How to understand Jesus’ assertion in 10:23 that the disciples “may not finish going to all the cities of Israel until the Son of Man comes” is a matter of debate. Most scholars take this to be a reference to the second coming of Christ (called the *parousia*), which would mean Jesus is prophesying his own imminent return. And yet, this reading is hard to reconcile with Jesus’ claims elsewhere that he does not know when the end will come (24:36), and that the time of the *parousia* will be delayed (24:48; 25:5, 19). Another possibility that fits with the Matthean literary context is that Jesus is promising that the Twelve (the “you” of 10:16 and 10:23) will not complete their mission to Israel (the mission begun in 10:1) until Jesus comes to help them.

Courage and the Costs of Discipleship (10:26-39)

Jesus’ promise to assist the Twelve applies to discipleship more broadly, as well. Matthew 10:26-39 gives three reasons not to fear persecution: 1) Public vindication is coming (10:26-27); 2) Jesus’ disciples are precious to God (28-31); 3) Jesus will intercede on their behalf (10:32-33). Despite the anticipated dangers and hardships, Jesus

assures his disciples that if they endure, even to the point of martyrdom (10:28), they will be vindicated. God's Spirit will sustain them during persecution; they can stand without fear because God is in control, and Jesus will return.

The next section returns to warnings. Jesus' language about division in families strikes us as harsh, but it is best understood as hyperbole. Jesus is demanding ultimate loyalty. In fact, Matthew's Jesus often pushes back against the ancient priority of kinship and family ties, repeatedly discounting biological families in order to emphasize spiritual kinship (Matt. 10:21, 35, 37; 12:46-50; 19:29; 23:8). Notice how often he refers to disciples as his "children," reorienting their kinship ties toward himself and toward God (Matt. 5:9, 45; 10:42; 13:38; 15:26; 18:6, 10, 14; 19:14; 23:37).

Rewards (10:40-42)

Using the metaphorical language of "little ones" (see also Matt. 18:6, 10), Jesus again returns from warnings to promises. In a strong expression of solidarity, Jesus insists that welcoming his disciples is the same as welcoming Jesus himself. In Mediterranean antiquity, this emphasis on hospitality would have been heard as a way to honor the one(s) received, as well as a reflection of the honor of the host.

Responses to Jesus (11:1-30)

Shifting from discourse (10:1-42) to narrative, this section begins to depict some of the responses to Jesus' ministry that Jesus has just described to his disciples, starting with the one who first proclaimed his coming: John the Baptist, who has been imprisoned by Herod Antipas (see 14:1-3). Just a few years earlier, John had proclaimed that Jesus was

the expected Messiah (Matt. 3:1-3). By this point in the story, John seems to have lost his confidence in Jesus' Messiahship. Perhaps John's doubt stems from the fact that the Jewish prophets had taught that the Messiah would set the prisoners free, but Jesus was not breaking John out of prison. Whatever the reason, John sends his disciples to ask whether Jesus truly is the "one who is to come" (11:3).

In 11:4-5, Jesus responds by summarizing the miraculous deeds described throughout chapters 8-9, using language from Isaiah 35:5-6: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news proclaimed to them." By appealing to his deeds, Jesus implicitly associates himself with Old Testament prophets like Elijah and Elisha, who had performed similar miracles (see 1 Kings 17:17-24 and 2 Kings 5:1-14).

Once Jesus has sent John's disciples to testify to his identity, he speaks to the crowd about John's identity, this time making his allusion to the prophet Elijah explicit: "For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came . . . he is Elijah who is to come" (Matt. 11:13-14). Both John and Jesus are prophets; both are more than prophets. Both face unjustified rejection. Both suffer violence. This section illustrates the solidarity in suffering that Jesus has promised his disciples in the preceding speech.

Questions for discussion:

1. Who gets Jesus' attention in the healing miracles of chapters 8-9? There is an emerging discipline in New Testament scholarship – disability studies – that focuses on honoring the challenges of those who struggle with physical

- impairments, and recognizing Jesus' call for compassion and justice (9:13). Who might be comparable in our society, and what can we offer them?
2. The Greek word for compassion in 9:36 ("Jesus had compassion for them") actually means "well-boweled." Compassion is supposed to come from our deepest, most inward places, from our guts. How do you understand compassion?
 3. Jesus' instruction to his disciples not to rely on material things (10:9-10) is an important corrective for many of us in today's society, where status, power, and comfort are paramount. The Jesuit priest Henri Nouwen called this the "path of downward mobility": Jesus chooses pain, rejection, persecution and death rather than the "path of upward mobility" toward power, authority, influence, and wealth. What are your reactions?
 4. John the Baptist needed his disciples to tell him about what they saw Jesus doing. This is the gift of Christian community: we don't have to look for God's work in the world alone. Just before German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was thrown into a Nazi prison after conspiring to assassinate Hitler, he wrote, "The Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged." When have you experienced this in your life?

Suggested Readings:

Carl Holladay, "Jesus' Ministry in Galilee in Matthew 8-10," *Gospel images of Jesus Christ in church tradition and in biblical scholarship: Fifth International East-West Symposium of New Testament Scholars, Minsk, September 2 to 9, 2010* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 337-347.

Patricia Sharbaugh, "The New Moses and the Wisdom of God: A Convergence of Themes in Matthew 11:25–30," *Horizons* 40 (2013): 199 – 217.

Joel Willitts, "Matthew's Messianic Shepherd-king: In search of "the lost sheep of the house of Israel," *HTS Teologiese Studies* 63 (2007): 365-382.