

The Essentials of Disciple-Making
Session One: A Vision for Discipleship
Commentary

Matthew 9:1-38

9:1. Jesus and his disciples retraced the journey they had taken south across the Sea of Galilee (8:23–27). This time they traveled from the southern tip to the northern tip, to Capernaum, which was now Jesus' own town, his base of operations since 4:13. Note also that, in crossing the lake, Jesus was honoring the request of the Gentiles in 8:34.

9:2–3. The men who brought the paralytic to Jesus were the companions of the paralytic. (Matthew chose not to record the extent to which their faith took them; that is, tearing through the roof of the house, as Mark 2:3–4 and Luke 5:18–19 did.) All three Gospel writers note that Jesus saw their faith—not just the faith of the paralytic but the faith of the man's friends. This is significant today. We must realize that our faith or lack of faith has an impact upon the lives of others.

Jesus' words to the paralytic were probably even more surprising to the Jewish listeners and readers of the first century than they are to us today. We would expect his words to have something to do with the man's physical healing, but instead he started by talking about the man's spiritual healing. We might be surprised and puzzled, but the Jewish bystanders, especially the religious leaders (9:3), were shocked and offended. In claiming to do what only God could do, Jesus was blaspheming, in their opinion. To blaspheme was to insult God's name and honor by laying claim to an attribute or action that could be attributed to God alone.

The most fundamental tenet of the Jewish faith is found in Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one." The Lord is a jealous God, unwilling to "yield [his] glory to another" (Isa. 48:11). The Jews would have been justified in their condemnation of Jesus, if not for the fact that he was indeed the Messiah-King. His miracles and authoritative teaching had already testified to this fact.

Jesus' compassion was evident in his encouraging words, Take heart, and in his reference to the man as son (literally "child"). The man was probably feeling intimidated in the presence of the great teacher and feeling unworthy of the attention, due to the humiliation of his physical condition and the sin in his heart.

Jesus did not say, "Your sins will be forgiven" (future tense), which would amount only to an exhortation of hope, looking ahead to God's future forgiveness. Nor did he say, "Your sins have been forgiven" (past tense), separating the forgiveness from this encounter. Jesus confidently used the present tense, your sins are forgiven. Jesus was boldly proclaiming his word as the means of forgiveness. This was an incredible claim to deity.

The scribes' thoughts about Jesus were said to themselves, that is, probably only silent thoughts in their own minds. This sets the stage for our appreciation of Jesus' insight in 9:4. It

also emphasizes the fact that sin is not only what comes out of us, but also what is within our minds and hearts. An attitude can be as much a sin as an action or a word. Attitudes will inevitably come out as actions and words. This was already happening at least through the scribes' nonverbal expression.

9:4. We need not assume that Jesus literally read the minds of these scribes. He certainly had the capability to use supernatural mental powers when it was appropriate. But Jesus temporarily gave up the exercise of his divine omniscience during his visit to earth (e.g., recall his surprise at the centurion's faith; 8:10). It is not necessary to be a mind reader to know a person's thoughts under the right circumstances. When a pro-life advocate is in the presence of a pro-choice advocate, or a staunch Democrat is with a staunch Republican, both know much of what is on the other's mind. Jesus, the God-Man, was an astute student of humankind. He had at least as much insight into people as the wisest and most perceptive people do today. He knew his opponents would be thinking hostile thoughts when he claimed the authority to forgive sins.

Jesus was justified in declaring the scribes' thoughts evil. To conclude that Jesus was blaspheming ignored the significance of his authenticating miracles. They had hardened their hearts against God's truth.

9:5. Having confronted their obstinate disbelief, Jesus prepared them for proof that he had authority to forgive sins and to heal paralysis. Neither spiritual healing nor physical healing is "easier" than the other. But physical healing is easier to authenticate than spiritual healing, because physical healing happens in the visible realm. Spiritual healing occurs in the invisible spirit realm. If Jesus could prove he had authority to heal physically, he could also prove that he had authority to heal spiritually—to forgive sins.

9:6–7. Jesus put this reasoning into words: But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. He proceeded, with the authority of his word, to reveal a visible truth—that he was able to heal the man's paralysis.

9:8. The crowd's reaction was awe and praise to God. There was no mistake that Jesus' authority came from God. What they praised God for was that he had given such authority to men (*italics added*). The crowd apparently saw Jesus as a God-ordained prophet, like Elijah or Elisha. They had not yet recognized Jesus' deity. They had heard the human side of the "Son of Man," but they had not recognized the divine implications from Daniel 7:13–14.

God's glory is the physical, visible demonstration of his nature and character. To "praise" God is to make him visible or to make him known to others. This was what the crowd was doing in their praise. They proclaimed what they had witnessed of God's nature and character, that he might be made known more fully.

9:9. Again Matthew showed Jesus violating a cultural taboo by associating with a tax collector. The Roman Empire's practice was to recruit tax collectors from among the people they had

conquered. These natives worked for the hated oppressor. This made them traitors and outcasts among their country-men. But it was common practice for tax collectors to demand more from their countrymen than was actually due in order to line their own pockets. If the people refused to pay, the tax collector had the threat of the Roman military to back him up. Tax collectors, in general, were known for their greed and lack of conscience, so they were thought of as the lowest form of humanity.

Not only did Jesus speak to such a vile sinner, but he invited Matthew, a tax collector, to become one of his closest followers. Implied here is the ultimate in forgiveness and unconditional acceptance. Matthew's conscience must have been in torment for him to accept the Master's invitation to spiritual cleansing and restoration, giving up the wealth and privilege of his position. Again the Messiah-King manifested the compelling authority of his word—turning the worst of sinners into disciples.

This brief passage is Matthew's only mention of himself. It is natural that he should hold up—as an exhibit in his case for the identity of Jesus as Messiah—the key turning point of his own life. Matthew placed this account at the heart of Matthew 8–10, possibly as the crowning miracle authenticating the authority of the Messiah-King. This passage also links directly with 9:1–8, because it demonstrates the king's authority to forgive sins.

9:10–11. Jesus proceeded to violate the cultural standards of acceptable behavior even further by visiting Matthew's home and by eating with him and many of his tax collector friends as well as many other sinners. Eating together was the deepest form of social intimacy. Normally no "sinner" was welcome at a righteous man's table, and no "righteous" man would consider eating at a sinners table, Jesus had no such misgivings; he displayed his unconditional acceptance and impartiality by participating in this meal.

The Pharisees did not address Jesus directly. Perhaps they were trying to use the disciples' limited understanding to drive a wedge between them and Jesus. Their use of the title teacher may have been sarcastic. It was generally assumed that such a righteous man as a Jewish teacher would refrain from associating with society's undesirables. Their question was mocking and critical.

9:12–13. When he became aware of the question, Jesus rose to confront the hypocrites and their self-righteousness with righteous indignation. Jesus portrayed himself here, in the context of so many healing miracles, as a doctor for the human spirit. He defended his lack of association with the Pharisees (the healthy) by alluding to the fact that they saw no need for spiritual healing in themselves. He was not implying that the Pharisees were righteous, but only that they saw themselves that way, and so were not open to receiving his healing (forgiveness). It is safe to read some irony into Jesus' use of the word healthy in referring to the Pharisees. Jesus also defended his association with the tax collectors and sinners by their own self-awareness regarding their spiritual illness (sin) and their hunger for his healing (forgiveness). Also implied in Jesus' words was an affirmation of the basic equality of all people, a truth the Pharisees failed to grasp. This basic lack of understanding is why they needed to go and learn the lesson of Hosea 6:6. This Old Testament passage does not belittle sacrifice, but it elevates

right treatment of the poor above it. By quoting the Old Testament, which the Pharisees knew well, Jesus shamed his opponents by confronting their misunderstanding of the spirit of the Lord's Word. The word sacrifice here represents all the religious motions and rituals the Pharisees observed that were meaningless and empty. But accompanied by a heart after God, particularly a heart of mercy and compassion, righteous deeds take on positive significance before God (Matt. 6:1–18).

Compassion or mercy is an attitude toward a need that is compelled to take action to meet that need. A compassionate and merciful heart finds it impossible to remain neutral when it sees a need of any kind.

Jesus was not blind to the faults of the sinners with whom he dined, but his mercy caused him to withhold judgment. The Pharisees had no right to exercise judgment, since they were just as sinful themselves. They should have been the first to withhold judgment and accept the other sinners. But in their pride, they were unmerciful, demonstrating they had no grasp of Jesus' statements in 6:14–15.

Finally, Jesus clarified his "physician" analogy by saying, for I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. Again, we can read some sarcasm and irony into his use of the word righteous when referring to the Pharisees. They were not truly righteous, but they saw themselves as such. Thus they were not willing to accept his forgiveness and respond to his call. The sinners, on the other hand, were aware of their sin (Matt. 5:3, "poor in spirit") and hungered for forgiveness. They responded to his call to true discipleship. Jesus' disciples were not perfect, but they accepted his forgiveness with humility and moved on toward maturity.

In this passage, Jesus made another bold assertion that is supported by the context of validating miracles.

9:14. Both John the Baptizer's disciples and the Pharisees built fasting into their standard regimen, far beyond the requirements of Old Testament law. Although this was not bad in itself, they began to believe that any person who fell short of this standard of righteousness was less devout in his or her faith. Some Christians today do the same thing with "spiritual tests" of their own.

9:15. Jesus' response to John's disciples was that fasting while he—the bridegroom, the guest of honor—was present would be inappropriate. But a time would come when fasting among his followers would be appropriate—after he was taken from them. Jesus liked to use the analogy of a wedding or marriage to describe his relationship to his people (22:1–14; 25:1–13). This is a theme used elsewhere in both the Old and New Testaments (e.g., Hos. 2; Eph. 5:22–33; Rev. 19:7–9; 21:2, 9; 22:17). Jesus is the bridegroom.

Jesus' statement about being taken from them is an early indication in Matthew that the king would not reign in this first coming. His choice of words, "taken from them" (also in Mark 2:20;

Luke 5:35), provide a foreshadowing of his own suffering and death, as well as the loss and despair his followers would experience.

9:16. An old garment has shrunk after it has been worn a while. A new patch of cloth, when first washed, would shrink and pull away from the older cloth. Jesus was saying, “Something new and unusual is happening. A new era is dawning, and the old methods do not apply. They are inappropriate while I, the Messiah-King, am here.”

By the use of these miniparables (unshrunk cloth and new wineskins), Jesus was alerting his disciples to the fact that he was about to move further away from Israel as the chosen recipient of his message. Jesus indicated that his message of the new covenant was too fresh and vital to be attached to an old garment. His new wine of the new covenant was too vibrant and potent to be placed in an old wineskin that is rigid and inflexible. The situation demanded a new vessel. Matthew recorded Jesus hinting at his coming announcement (16:18) of a new approach. He will deposit his message into a new wineskin—the church.

9:17. Jesus used this second parable to underscore the same message as the old garment. When wine ferments, it gives off gasses that stretch the wineskins. The fresh leather can stretch and expand, but older leather has already stretched as much as it can. Fresh wine in old wineskins would burst the old leather. Jesus indicated that pharisaical Israel will not be able to handle Jesus’ truth. Israel was too rigid and unresponsive to carry his message to the world. God would use the church to accomplish that goal.

After a stretch of non-miracle narratives in Matthew 8–9, Matthew recorded a flurry of miracle activity in 9:18–34.

9:18–19. Not all religious leaders were hostile toward Jesus. We do not know the attitude of this synagogue ruler before his daughter’s illness and death, but desperation can soften even the strongest critics. This man, like the rest of the seekers in Matthew 8–9, was at the end of his resources. He had no place to turn except to the king. The official showed reverence for Jesus. Recognizing him as a prophet from God, the official knelt before him.

His request revealed great faith. To this point, Jesus had performed all of his healing miracles on people who were still living. This is the first instance in Matthew where he ministered to a dead person. The official’s confidence in Jesus is evident in his bold assertion that Jesus’ touch would bring her back to life.

Touching a dead body was considered the most defiling kind of uncleanness (Num. 19:11–22). Most religious leaders and teachers would have refused to come anywhere near the dead.

9:20–21. Even as Jesus made his way to touch a dead girl, he came into contact with another threat to his ritual purity. According to Old Testament law, a woman having her monthly menstrual period was unclean for seven days, and anyone who touched her would be unclean “till evening” (Lev. 15:19–33). This woman, with her continual bleeding, would have been

considered continually unclean, and was probably a social outcast. She acted boldly to come into close contact with a revered teacher. But she also limited her action, touching the edge of his cloak to minimize the likelihood of making Jesus unclean. In fact, she did not even want Jesus to know she had put him at risk.

This woman was another of the desperate, helpless people cataloged in Matthew 8–9. She was willing to go beyond the bounds of culturally acceptable behavior to draw on help from outside herself.

9:22. Jesus detected her presence and touch. The fact that he had to turn around and look for the woman further emphasizes that she tried to do this secretly.

In Jesus' initial words of comfort, Take heart, daughter, notice the parallel to his words to the paralytic, Take heart, son (9:2). Rather than becoming angry at an unclean woman for touching him, Jesus showed compassion toward the woman's need and expressed affirmation for her faith. She displayed both components of faith: she recognized her helplessness and she went to the appropriate person for help.

The power of Jesus' touch and the power of his word are highlighted in this account. From that moment, with his declaration of her healing, she stopped bleeding. Both the touch and the word of Jesus were instrumental in her healing.

9:23–24. Having postponed a mission of healing to deal compassionately with the bleeding woman, Jesus resumed his walk to the synagogue official's home. When he entered the official's house and saw the flute players (hired as part of the mourning process) and the noisy crowd, Jesus spoke to the mourners as though they were not necessary. They laughed at him as though he was crazy. The girl was dead, but death was no obstacle to Jesus. Because the girl would be alive soon, Jesus told the mourners she was asleep. He would awaken her.

9:25. Jesus was not interested in masses of witnesses for this miracle. As usual, he seemed to be most interested in the training and education of his disciples (9:19). In taking the hand of the dead girl, Jesus would have been seen as defiling himself, according to Old Testament law. But instead of death defiling him, he defied death: she got up. This is one of the most powerful examples of Jesus ministering through touch.

9:26. This miracle serves as a climax for Matthew 8–9. None of the enemies Jesus had conquered so far in these two chapters (illness, demons, nature) had been as formidable as death. The resurrection of a child would have reminded people of similar miracles by Elijah (1 Kgs. 17:17–24) and Elisha (2 Kgs. 4:18–37), and the prophecies about the return of the prophet Elijah (Mal. 4:5–6). It is no wonder that news of this miracle spread through all that region. Jesus' growing notoriety set the stage for the first major grumblings of the Pharisees (9:34). Things were going to get a bit rougher.

Healing of both the blind and the mute were given in Isaiah 35:5–6 as signs of the Lord’s coming redemption. This and other Old Testament passages were in Matthew’s mind as he chose these two miracles to report in quick succession at the end of Matthew 8–9 (cf. 11:2–6, Jesus’ response to John’s doubt). Messiah-King is here!

9:27. Jesus’ reputation had spread throughout the region. In their helplessness and faith, two blind beggars persisted in crying out to him. There is irony in this verse. It was two blind men who recognized Jesus as the royal Son of David.

9:28–31. Jesus questioned their faith in his ability to heal them. The men were convinced of his power. Again Jesus ministered through touch, emphasizing their faith as the key to his ability and willingness to heal their blindness. According to your faith is not a statement of the quality of their faith (so much faith = so much sight) but of its presence.

Matthew recorded Jesus’ warning to the men not to spread the news of their healing to others, much as he did with the leper in 8:4. However, with the leper account, we are not told whether the man obeyed Jesus; we can probably assume he did. In contrast, now that Jesus had established a sound basis of miracles to validate his identity, the men who had been blind could not contain themselves: they went out and spread the news about him all over that region. This heightened the stakes for Jesus’ opponents, who began to voice their slander against Jesus just a few verses later (9:34).

9:32–33. Again Jesus faced the evil forces of the spirit world. But this time Matthew’s purpose for recording the account, together with the preceding healing of the blind men, was probably as an allusion to the messianic ministry of Isaiah 35:5–6. And, as in 8:27, the witnesses were amazed. The crowd’s words emphasized the uniqueness of Jesus and his actions: Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel. The advent of the Messiah-King was a one-time, historical event. And the growing momentum was beginning to force the opposition’s hand.

9:34. The implications about Jesus’ identity were plain to the Pharisees, who tried to explain away the miracles as Satan’s work rather than God’s. This verse represents the early grumblings of the religious leaders. This would soon grow into a full-blown conflict.

This short but powerful passage provides insight into Jesus’ motivation for extending the training of his disciples to the next level (their public preaching) in chapter 10. Jesus’ compassion, evident throughout chapters 8–9, came to a great crescendo. Jesus saw beyond the physical diseases to the deeper tragedy of the people’s spiritual aimlessness.

9:35. This summary statement of Jesus’ ministry amounts to a repetition of 4:23.

9:36. As Jesus conducted his itinerant ministry, he saw many crowds. He felt compassion for their lack of spiritual shepherding and the presence of spiritual abuse. A shepherd feeds, comforts, heals, guides, and protects his sheep (Ezek. 34). But Israel’s religious leaders were harassing and abandoning their sheep, leaving them harassed and helpless, like sheep without

a shepherd. “Harassed” is from a verb meaning “to trouble, distress.” “Helpless” is from a verb meaning “to throw down.” The past tense used here implies the thoroughness of their oppression and its persistent effect on the people. These people were completely and perpetually discouraged.

Remember from 9:13 that compassion or mercy is an attitude toward a need that grows into action in an effort to meet the need. Here Matthew used a different word, whose root meaning is “intestines, bowels.” Jesus was physically moved by a stomach-wrenching empathy for the plight of his flock. He was literally sickened by the poor leadership of Israel’s hypocritical religious leaders. We can read his words in 9:37–38 as an impassioned plea to his disciples, whom he proceeded to equip and commission to meet the people’s need.

9:37–38. In these verses, Jesus’ disciples begin to take a place of greater prominence in Matthew’s narrative. Until now, Jesus had been training them primarily through their observations of his ministry, but his focus turned increasingly toward intensified teaching directed at them. These men and their spiritual offspring were Jesus’ plan for continuing his ministry to a lost world. If he failed to prepare his workers, his ministry would die when he left. This is instructive to every spiritual leader today—mentor and multiply. Do not just “perform.” Jesus’ passion for the needs of the crowds caused him to ask his disciples to pray for workers to go out into the harvest. Christ’s workers gain courage from his assertion that the harvest is plentiful. The hurting people whom he saw and whom we see all around us are like fruit ripe for the picking. Christians today seem to view non-Christians with fear, but Jesus saw them with compassion. And so should we. If we hold out the truth—Jesus himself—they will come to him, for they hunger for guidance.

The workers are few, said Jesus as he turned from the distressed masses to the dozen men around him. Our job is to pray fervently for more people to come and help, as we are moving boldly to be involved with the harvest.¹

¹ Stuart K. Weber, *Matthew*, ed. Max Anders (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000).