

“According to Matthew”

A study of the Gospel of Matthew
Part 10: Authority and the Son of Man

As we continue to study Matthews Gospel let us recap where we have been. Matthew pictures Jesus as the Servant King, proclaiming a new way of life; ‘Kingdom Living’. We have seen how Matthew contrasts the Kingship of Jesus with that of earthly potentates such as Herod. We have heard a Kingdom manifesto in the sermon on the mount. As we moved to chapter eight we saw how the authority of Jesus, (in Greek the word ‘EXOUSIA’) was being expressed through works of healing and casting out of evil.

In the ninth chapter we will see more examples of how the 'EXOUSIA' authority of Jesus, the Servant King, is demonstrated, alongside further challenges to consider what discipleship really requires. We will hear Jesus using the term ‘Son of Man’ to describe Himself. We shall also see how resistance to both the acts and teaching of Jesus continue to grow.

We shall look firstly at verses 1 through 13 where we find Jesus forgiving sins and eating with sinners.

Matthew 9:1 Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town. ² Some men brought to him a paralytic, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." ³ At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, "This fellow is blaspheming!" ⁴ Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, "Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? ⁵ Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? ⁶ But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..." Then he said to the paralytic, "Get up, take your mat and go home." ⁷ And the man got up and went home. ⁸ When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to men.

⁹ As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. ¹⁰ While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" ¹² On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ¹³ But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Matthew has already demonstrated the power of Jesus over sickness, demons and nature. Now he tells us that Jesus also has the power to forgive sins. This was, of course, considered by the teachers of the law as blasphemous. Only God had the power to grant atonement for sins. Who did this Jesus think He was?

Reading their thoughts, Jesus lays before them a challenge; ‘Was it easier for Him to heal the man or to tell the man his sins were forgiven?’ They don’t get a chance to answer as the man is told to pick up his mat and go home, which he does.

The passage connects sin and sickness. We use today the term ‘holistic medicine’ to describe the process where the whole person is treated rather than just a particular symptom. Sin is seen here

as a sickness that needs healing, just like any other ailment. Such a diagnosis receives further support at the end of the second passage when Jesus comments, whilst eating with tax collectors and sinners, *'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.'*

We talk about illness as being dis-ease. We use the religious term 'salvation' to describe Christian experience. A 'salve' is something that heals. The authority of Jesus (the 'exousia') is an authority that impacts the whole person.

There is a traditional Black-American spiritual that speaks of the "Balm in Gilead"

*" There is a balm in Gilead
To make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead
To heal the sin-sick soul. "*

In the Old Testament, the balm of Gilead is taken from Jeremiah chapter 8 v. 22: *"Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wounds of God's people?"* The lyrics refer to the New Testament concept of salvation through Jesus Christ. The Balm of Gilead is interpreted as being both physical and spiritual medicine, making the same connection as we see here in Matthew.

Through eating with tax-collectors and 'sinners' Jesus demonstrated that not only was His concern for the whole person, but that His concern was for all peoples wholeness, including those that the religion of the Teachers of the law sought to exclude. Elsewhere in the New Testament 'sinners' are identified as being Gentiles or Heathens.

(e.g. Matthew 11:19, Matthew 26:45, Mark 2:15-17, Mark 14:41, Luke 5:30-32, Luke 6:32-34, John 9:31, Romans 5:8, Galatians 2:15, Hebrews 7:26, 1 Peter 4:18.)

It is probable in this passage they were simply friends Matthew had invited to dinner. As a tax collector, and by implication a collaborator with Rome and enemy of the Jews, his associates would not come from the same circle as the religious teachers. We have seen already in Matthew, through the welcome of the Wise Men and the healing of the Centurions servant, that Matthew is quite deliberate in expanding the circle of acceptance beyond traditional boundaries. The Kingdom is for all, and the authority of Jesus includes that of forgiving all people of their sins.

The contemporary relevance of this passage is to ask ourselves; 'Whom do we exclude? Through prejudice? Through economics? Through fear?' Our denomination wrestles with questions such as health care and housing for those who cannot afford it, immigration, sexuality.... to name but a few. Often these debates come down to how wide a net of welcome we are willing to extend towards those who are different.

Another significant thing in this passage is that Jesus uses the term 'Son of Man' to describe Himself. Verse 6: *'But so that you may know that the **Son of Man** has authority on earth to forgive sins...'*

This is the first time Matthew uses the term. It is used 94 times in the New Testament and almost always by Jesus speaking about Himself. On the one hand “Son of man’ emphasizes Jesus humanity. Yet the sense in which it is used in this passage is to emphasize His redemptive work and mission of salvation.

We saw in a previous passage demons using the term ‘Son of God’ to describe Jesus. The two terms ‘son of man’ and ‘son of God’ are used by Matthew to develop a picture of Jesus as the one who was fully man yet fully God, the implications of which later received expression in our creeds.

The Nicene Creed in particular deals with the struggle to understand how Jesus could be both human and divine.

“We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.”

Matthew at the start of his gospel gives the infant Jesus the title “Immanuel’ which means “God with us”. One commentator writes; “In Jesus the very power of God entered the mainstream of humanity, and in Jesus authority as the Son of Man, you and I can find an anchor for our hope” This was something new and, as our next passage reveals, not always welcome.

¹⁴ Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" ¹⁵ Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast. ¹⁶ "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. ¹⁷ Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.

John the Baptists followers show that they are not so sure about Jesus. They knew that John had singled Him out, but His life seems so different. John's way was rigorous and severe and Jesus way was... well... different. In reply Jesus explains that in the first place these were exciting unparalleled days. He compares His presence amongst the disciples as being like that of a bridegroom at a wedding party. But the second thing is that ‘these days’, like all parties, would not last. There would come a time for his followers to fast.

Jesus then gives the picture of new wine needing to be placed into appropriate wine skins. The problem of putting new wine into old wine skins was that the skins would split and the wine would be wasted. New wine skins had the ability to adapt and change and bend! They were flexible.

It is a phenomena in church history that new insights often cannot be accommodated by the established church. From the Reformation through the Methodist revivals to the Pentecostal fervor of the last century and the growth of today’s large independent non-denominational mega

churches, a common theme is that something new was happening amongst God's people and the only place it could develop was outside of traditions that frowned upon their development.

Thankfully the establishment sometimes has its own dinosaur like way of eventually accepting that maybe they should have been paying more attention and eventually those new insights can enrich the whole church. Or, sometimes, the new thrives and the old dies away. As part of an old established historic denomination, we do well to pay attention to the wine skin phenomena!

Placing the illustration into a personal setting another commentator remarks that 'We simply cannot stuff Jesus or our experience of Him into old ways of thinking and living'. Discipleship is a journey into new and exciting areas of change and transformation. The Holy Spirit is not a static force but a wind, a fire and an energizer.

Just how new and dynamic was this 'exousia', this majestic authority Jesus carried with Him? It extended to sickness, to demons, to sin, even to creation. But there's more! Three more miracle stories are found in verses 18-31.

¹⁸ While he was saying this, a ruler came and knelt before him and said, "My daughter has just died. But come and put your hand on her, and she will live." ¹⁹ Jesus got up and went with him, and so did his disciples. ²⁰ Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. ²¹ She said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed." ²² Jesus turned and saw her. "Take heart, daughter," he said, "your faith has healed you." And the woman was healed from that moment. ²³ When Jesus entered the ruler's house and saw the flute players and the noisy crowd, ²⁴ he said, "Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep." But they laughed at him. ²⁵ After the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took the girl by the hand, and she got up. ²⁶ News of this spread through all that region.

²⁷ As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, calling out, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!" ²⁸ When he had gone indoors, the blind men came to him, and he asked them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" "Yes, Lord," they replied. ²⁹ Then he touched their eyes and said, "According to your faith will it be done to you"; ³⁰ and their sight was restored. Jesus warned them sternly, "See that no one knows about this." ³¹ But they went out and spread the news about him all over that region.

William Barclay's commentary precedes a detailed description of each of these events with a section he titles 'The Imperfect faith and the Perfect Power'. He points to common features in each story.

In the healing of the ruler's daughter Barclay points out that the ruler was a man of considerable influence who would be expected to side with those who opposed Jesus. One suspects that it was sheer desperation that drew him to seek for Jesus' help. The ruler comes to Jesus, not out of love or devotion, but an altogether more basic need. He was not so much faithful as desperate.

The woman with the issue of blood creeps up behind Jesus and touches His cloak. There seems to be an element of magic or superstition in the story. 'If only I can touch His cloak' is not the informed cry of a mature faith. Again there is an element of desperation, as though this lady will try anything to be rid of her cursed condition.

Likewise with the blind men who are crying out at the tops of their voices "Have pity on us!"

They call Jesus neither Son of Man nor Son of God but Son of David, a title that held strong nationalistic overtones. A successor to the throne of David was the peoples hope to drive the Romans from the land and restore the nation to a level of prosperity long since lost. Though they are really not sure who this Jesus guy is, they shout out for help because they are desperate.

Barclay comments: 'Here is an astonishing thing. The ruler came to Jesus with an inadequate motive; the woman came with an inadequate faith, the blind men came with an inadequate theology of who He was, yet each found His love and power waiting for their needs... It does not matter how we come to Christ, if only we come. No matter how inadequately and how imperfectly we come, His love and His arms are open to receive us' Jesus meets our imperfect faith with His perfect power.

There seems to be something else going on in this passage as we draw to an end of this section on the authority, the 'exousia', of Jesus. After demonstrating Jesus has power over untouchables and the ceremonially unclean (such as the woman with the issue of blood) and power even over death itself (as in the raising of the rulers daughter), through the healing of the blind men it is as though Matthew is challenging us, 'Well, do you see it?' or as Jesus questions the blind men; "*Do you believe that I am able to do this?*" *"Yes, Lord," they replied. Then He touched their eyes and said, "According to your faith will it be done to you"* (verses 29-30)

The faith that Jesus looks for in the blind men is quite specific in that He asks, "Do you believe I am able?" It is focused very much on what they believe about Him. It is not a vague faith in a higher power or even in the presence of God but in what He, the Jesus who proclaimed Himself the 'Son of Man' could do in their lives.

Christian faith is distinctly about faith in Jesus Christ. In an age where we are daily confronted by many different expressions of faith we do well to remind ourselves that Christianity does not call us to have faith in 'faith', as some kind of talisman and divine secret, but faith in Jesus Christ as the one true mediator of God's promises and agent of God's work.

The work of the Holy Spirit is not the action of some vague Star Wars like 'the force be with you' but the presence and ministering love of Jesus Christ Himself. So we find in Scripture the work of the Holy Spirit is described as being that of the "Spirit of Christ" (*1 Peter 1:11, Romans 8:9*)

Of course there are those in every age who would rather that miracles not happen at the hands of Jesus and indeed, no matter what good is done will seek to twist it to their own ends. Such is the case in the healing and deliverance that now follows, verses 32-34.

³² While they were going out, a man who was demon-possessed and could not talk was brought to Jesus. ³³ And when the demon was driven out, the man who had been mute spoke. The crowd was amazed and said, "Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel." ³⁴ But the Pharisees said, "It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons."

It's the final political card to be played. When everybody sees that something is plainly good, then agree with them that it is a great thing that's happening. But then question the persons motives for doing it. And if you can make it even seem as though they were up to something evil or involved in some sort of dark conspiracy, then even better. So the Pharisees make no comment on the event but instead start spreading a rumor; *"It is by the prince of demons that He drives out demons."*

From their perspective how could it be anything else? The people listened more to Him than they did to them. He kept breaking laws and overstepping boundaries. He hung out with the unclean. He offered people forgiveness from sin. This was blasphemy. No matter what clever tricks He could do, He had to be a deceiver and deceivers were the product of only one master, Satan the prince of demons.

Opposition continues to grow to His mission. That's probably one of the reasons why He keeps telling the people he has healed and delivered to keep quiet. The less people knew about His work, the more freedom He had to continue with it. The less who knew, the fewer who would oppose. Yet regardless of the opposition, and regardless of whether people kept it to themselves or told everybody they met, the work continued. And Jesus is the first to acknowledge that the task ahead was enormous and required all the energy He could muster from His disciples. Verses 35-38.

³⁵ Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. ³⁸ Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."
(Mat 9:1-38 NIV)

The mission field before us remains vast. There are many people who are truly lost sheep. And our motive for keeping on keeping on has to be the very thing that is mentioned in these verses. *'When Jesus saw the crowds, He had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless'*

When we feel harassed and helpless He has compassion on us! But He doesn't just leave us there and say "Get back to whatever you were doing". No. He reminds that there is much yet to be done. That the harvest is enormous and there are not enough workers to tend to it. So Jesus bids that we pray. And prayer is always a great place to begin any adventure with God!

So we finish our section on the authority, the 'exousia' of Jesus. We have seen how He has authority over nature, sickness, evil, even death itself. We have seen how opposition to His authority continues to grow. We have heard the call to work with Him in the task of bringing God's love to all people.

Chapter Ten offers us a further invitation to share in the work, but it also tells us that this is a work like no other and one that is defined by service rather than results. Indeed this work involves a cross. We will be reminded that though the lost are described as sheep they can also be like wolves. But more of that next time!