

**Matthew 9:2-13: Christianity is for the weak**  
**Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool (Incomplete)**

If you work for the NHS, an education authority, police force, multinational company, local council or any other large organisation, you'll know that *goals* can be a big problem. Most of the time, most people have plenty to do to fill 35, 40 or even 50 hours a week in their job performing tasks that have been assigned to them by others or things that you have decided yourself are important. But it's easy, especially in an organisation with lots of people, not really to have any idea what the overall point is. Or for maintaining your own status even if that's at the expense of what the company as a whole is meant to be doing. The best illustration of this, of course, is the Dilbert cartoon. A sort of comic strip version of "The Office" Scott Adams' cartoons depict a company where avoiding redundancy, gaining prestige for "your" project and becoming a "manager" are the only goals worth thinking about.

The same is true, of course, at a personal level. I am one of those obsessive characters who keep lists of things to do – 142 items on the list at present. Of course making lists can easily become a displacement activity from doing any actual work. And people work in different ways. But the simple fact is that unless we have goals – things we are aiming at and wanting to do – both as individuals and organisations – it's likely we'll never achieve very much with our lives.

But, as Dilbert shows, it's not enough to have goals. Dilbert and his colleagues all, I am sure, are proficient in using Microsoft Project and Outlook. They can mind map, strategise and write reports with the best of them. The problem is that they have the wrong goals. We don't just need goals – we need the right goals.

And for a Christian, or a church, having the right goals means aligning ourselves with what Jesus is about. You see there are all sorts of people who want to impose an agenda on the lives of churches and of individual believers. People who would like us to believe that no cause or subject is more important to the true follower of Christ than theirs.

Throughout history many of the causes for which people have tried to co-opt the power of churches have been wicked: the Catholic inquisitions; the African slave trade; apartheid; and environmental destruction.

But many too are good causes. Things that Christian people ought to feel sympathy for: building hospitals, relieving 3<sup>rd</sup> world debt, trade reform, befriending people from other nations, environmental protection, keeping young people

out of trouble, and housing the homeless to name but a few.

The question we need to ask, though, is always what is central to Jesus' concerns. What were his goals? What, therefore, are the right goals for us as his people? Of, if you're not a Christian here this morning, if you were to become one what are we saying it's all about? What is the centre of the Christian faith and life?

Well in these verses we learn that:

**1 Jesus came to forgive sin**

It's remarkable how little we know about most of the people that Jesus met. Who was this man? How did he come by his paralysis? Was it the side effect of a disease or illness? Was he born like that? Was there some horrible accident? All we know about this man is the he was so badly disabled he needed to be carried everywhere on a mat – a kind of primitive stretcher probably, and that he had people, friends, to carry him.

The man is placed in front of Christ, his friends looking on expectantly. Everybody knows why the man is here. He has come to Jesus, the miracle maker, for healing. The scribes, and no doubt many other people in the crowds around, cannot have been in any doubt that Jesus could make this man well again. And Jesus is pleased with this action.

*"He saw their faith"*, Matthew records in v2.

Jesus sees in the action of this man and his friends an attitude that is commendable, worthy and honourable. So he leans over the man, with an unmatched air of tenderness, says: *"Take heart, son."*

No doubt this man had been used to all sorts of insults, abuses and discouragements in his life. But that is not how Jesus treats him. Here is a man of genuine compassion.

*"Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven."* Now to our ears that sounds completely bizarre. After all we know this bloke has come to Jesus, that he is obviously in need of healing and Jesus PREACHES at him. Here is this guy, in this tragic state lying before Jesus. Everybody knows that he has come for healing. He and his friends had faith – they trusted Jesus to do something spectacular. And Jesus, rather than seeing the man as a victim, says he is a sinner who needs forgiveness.

It's obvious what the man wants. Has Jesus momentarily lost the plot? Has he lapsed from compassionate healer into weirdo religious guru?

Well the first thing we need to know is that this probably didn't seem as strange to the people who were there at the time as it does to us. We've already noted over the last couple of weeks that as far as the people of Jesus' day were concerned there was a very strong and specific connection between sickness and sin. Most people thought that great sickness was normally the result of personal wickedness. That's why when Jesus encounters a man who was born blind in John's gospel chapter 9, the disciples are puzzled. Who sinned, they ask, this man or his parents that he was born blind? Their presumption is that somebody must be responsible. But who? Since the man was born like this was it a sin he committed in the womb? Or was it his parents fault? Well in John 9 Jesus says there is no specific link in that case between the man's sickness and his sin. With the paralysed man in Matthew 9 we simply don't know whether his condition was a result of some wickedness. Whether it was in some way his own fault or not there would certainly have been plenty of people ready to tell him that he wouldn't be in this mess if he had been faithful to God just as Job's friends did for hour after endless hour in the Old Testament.

So Jesus' words must have come to this man as a wonderful reassurance. Whatever had happened, whatever anybody might say, Jesus, the man whose voice has authority to calm storms and cast out demons says that it is done with. All this man's sin is forgiven. It is in the past. It is over.

We were told right back in chapter 1 that Jesus would save his people from their sins. And now we see, for the first time, Jesus actually directly claiming that this is what he is doing. And the more I've thought about it this week the more I've realised just what a massive priority this was for Jesus.

You see it is obvious what this man wants and needs isn't it? But as far as Jesus is concerned this thing he can really offer to this man is to have his sins forgiven. And we are certainly not told nothing to suggest that this man was particularly morally worse or more evil than anyone else. The only difference between this man and the next man or woman was that his need for healing is so much more obvious.

If Jesus' priority when faced with a paralysed man is to pronounce his sin forgiven surely that must be his priority for every human being on the face of the planet.

Think about the power of Jesus that we have seen demonstrated in chapter 8 over the last three weeks if you've been here. We've seen his power cleans leprosy, heal a man miles away from him, heal many people in a single evening, still storms and cast out demons. There is no shortage of things in our world that could usefully be done with power like that is there?

But as he looks around and sees all the potential needs Jesus is determined that his mission is about forgiveness. Now it goes without saying that this has pretty significant implications for every individual and community that claims to follow Jesus. Because his priorities ought to be our priorities.

Christian people ought to be people who both proclaim the forgiveness that Jesus says he brings and who demonstrate that forgiveness in their attitudes and actions. Christian churches ought to be groups of people who both proclaim the forgiveness that Jesus says he brings and who demonstrate that forgiveness in their attitudes and actions. And those things must always remain at the centre of what we do, as people and as a local church.

Because history is full of Christians and Christian organisations who have lost their way in this matter. And it would be tragic if you, or our church, were to join that list. It's possible that you, or our church, might get sidetracked into making central a view or action that is actually wicked. Those groups in America for example who have made campaigning against the undoubted evil of abortion so central that they are willing to encourage people to kill abortion doctors.

But it's much more likely that we will get sidetracked into good things. Things that we ought to be involved in. Things that we ought to be committed to: Relieving 3<sup>rd</sup> world debt, trade reform, befriending people from other nations, environmental protection, keeping young people out of trouble, and housing the homeless to name but a few. Things that we ought to be committed to – but which ought never to be our ultimate goal.

The religious people of the day, however, the "teachers of the law" as they are called here in v3 have a different problem with this to the one I guess we tend to have. They were quite certain that forgiveness of sin was absolutely the most important thing in the world. It was so important, in fact, that only God could do it. That's why they say, v3 that Jesus is blaspheming. Technically speaking, then as today, blasphemy was to do with misusing God's name. In fact Jews were so afraid of blasphemy that they tried not to use the name

that God gives himself in the Old Testament (Yahweh) at all and called him "Jehovah" instead. But the teachers of the law here extend their definition of blasphemy a little.

And it's quite easy to understand why they do that. The universal understanding of the Jewish people was that sin was always, basically, an offence against God. No matter who else gets hurt or damaged it is always God who is most offended by sin – because it is always his moral laws that are broken. That didn't mean that the Jews didn't think people who had done wrong could get away without seeking forgiveness from other people. It just meant that they recognised that this is God's universe. That God created all that there is. That he set in place the moral laws of right and wrong that define our universe and our world. That morality is not something made up by women and men. It is given to us by God.

And so when we sin, when we break God's standards what we are doing is turning our backs on God. It is his universe. So when we sin we sin against God. The teachers of the law, recognise, rightly, that only God can forgive sin. And what they hear Jesus saying is that he can do something that only God can do. Jesus is claiming for himself a power only God possesses – he is claiming to be God. And he's prepared to back it up.

V4. Jesus, who has either read their minds or worked out what their not very subtle whisperings are all about, challenges them: *Which is easier: to say "your sins are forgiven" or to say "get up and walk"?*

Now we might think that it's pretty obvious what the answer to that question is. In one sense clearly it's easier to SAY "your sins are forgiven". It's not verifiable is it? You can't tell just by looking at someone whether their sins are forgiven or not. So it's harder to say "get up and walk" because whether Jesus is able to do it or not will be instantly verifiable or not by every single person present.

In fact Jesus is saying something a bit more subtle than just that. Because as far as the teachers of the law are concerned there is a sense in which it's easier to **say** "Get up and walk." After all numerous Old Testament characters had performed miraculous healings. It wasn't by any means commonplace – it was a miracle. But it was certainly easier than forgiving sin – because only God could do that.

Jesus is issuing a challenge. If he can do the impossible but verifiable – make the man walk – it is a remarkable piece of evidence that he can do the **even more** impossible and **unverifiable**

job of forgiving his sin. And the teachers of the law are in trouble. If Jesus really can forgive sin then they need to acknowledge his divinity and start listening to him. But if he can't forgive sin and he's blaspheming then surely God wouldn't allow him to have the supernatural power to heal people? They only come up with an answer to this conundrum in 9:34 where they start saying that the power that Jesus is exercising comes from the Devil.

And Jesus says to the man: "Get up, take your mat and go home". And with no more difficulty than you or I this cripple gets to his feet and walks past the astonished and speechless crowd before mayhem breaks out.

If I told you I had put a million pounds in your bank account you probably wouldn't believe me. In any case without access to a bank you certainly couldn't verify it.

But if I then took you outside and gave you the keys to a brand new Rolls Royce you might start to believe me on the basis of the available evidence. It wouldn't be absolute proof that I had put the million pounds in your account but you'd certainly start taking my claims to be an incredibly rich person seriously wouldn't you?

Jesus doesn't offer definitive proof of who he is here. But he does demonstrate that his mission is to forgive sins and that that is mission that we must take seriously. But of course if you're going to forgive sin you're going to have to hang out with sinners – which is exactly what we see Jesus doing in v9-13.

## 2 Jesus came to call sinners (9-13)