

# A Seat at the Table

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] This evening's reading is from Matthew chapter 9, verses 1 to 13. So it's page 973 on the church Bibles. So Matthew 9, chapter 1, Matthew chapter 9, verses 1 to 13.

Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over, and came to his own town. Some men brought to him a paralyzed man lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man, Take heart, son, your sins are forgiven.

At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, This fellow is blaspheming. Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts?

Which is easier, to say, Your sins are forgiven, or to say, Get up and walk? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. So he said to the paralyzed man, Get up, take your mat, and go home.

Then the man got up and went home. When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe, and they praised God, who had given such authority to man. As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth.

[ 1 : 1 0 ] Follow me, he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples.

When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners? On hearing this, Jesus said, It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill.

But go and learn what this means. I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. Thank you, Amy.

And let me add my welcome to Jamie's. It would be a great help to me if you'd keep your Bibles open at Matthew chapter 9. But let's pray again and ask God for his help.

Lord Jesus, as Joe's already prayed, you know each one of us here. You know our hearts.

[ 2 : 1 2 ] You know where each of us are at spiritually. You address us through your words and by your spirit. Awaken those of us who are slumbering and call to yourself those who are lost.

For we ask it in your name and for your glory. Amen. Your waiter will be with you shortly in four years' time.

An unassuming pub in Bristol made headlines around the world this year for being the world's hardest place to get a reservation with a four-year waiting list for its Sunday roast lunch.

Now, if you're licking your lips and salivating at the prospect of a 30-day aged rare roast beef, top-sided beef with Yorkshire puddings and all the rest of it, and pondering whether you should put your name down on the list and weighing up now that we've got the 9.30 a.m. option, whether you could realistically get down there in time in four years, then think again.

Their website now clearly states, bookings for Sunday roasts are closed for the foreseeable future. So how do you get a seat at the places that are impossible to get into?

[ 3 : 36 ] And by the way, pretending that you're a restaurant critic doesn't really cut the mustard, not that I would know from experience. But according to those in the know, getting a seat at the right table isn't all about who you are.

It's more about who you know. And in verse 10 of the Bible passage we just read together, Matthew describes a scene where Jesus is enjoying a dinner, an intimate meal with a bunch of sinners.

And this scene, I think, gives us a foretaste of the promised future feast in heaven. So what does it take to get a seat at Jesus' table?

How do we get admitted to his banquet? Well, in the first part of what we read, we're going to see that Jesus has come to deal with the thing that is preventing us from joining him at the table.

And then in the second part, we're showing the kind of people who are on his invitation list. So we've got two headings this evening. They're in your information seat.

[ 4 : 46 ] Firstly, dealing with sin. Jesus, the forgiver of sin. And then secondly, dining with sinners. Jesus, the friend of sinners.

So our first heading then, dealing with sin. Jesus, the forgiver of sin. Jesus has arrived, so we're told, back to his hometown, Capernaum, at the north of the Sea of Galilee.

And if you're new to our evening service here at St. Silas, then we began this series in Matthew back in chapter 8 a couple of weeks ago, where Jesus had come down from the mountain, where he'd been teaching the crowds about the kingdom.

He'd come to proclaim and usher in the kingdom of God. And he'd been teaching what's required of those living in his kingdom.

And then when he comes down from the mountain in the chapters that we've been studying in our current series, Jesus shows us who's admitted to his kingdom.

[ 5 : 49 ] And as we're finding out, it's not always the people we'd expect. It's often the marginalized, the social outcasts, the outsiders. And so it is that some men brought a paralyzed man to Jesus, a paralytic lying on a bed.

Now remember this is first century AD Israel. There's no welfare system, no disabilities benefit. The man presumably can't work, can't easily fend for himself. But he's got this going for him at least.

He's got some good mates who are willing to go to all sorts of lengths to bring him before Jesus. These guys had likely heard of the amazing miracles that Jesus had performed and which had drawn such crowds around Galilee.

His power to heal sickness, his amazing authority over nature, his ability to drive out evil, the kind of things we've been hearing about over these past couple of weeks.

And perhaps reports had even reached him of Jesus miraculously healing the centurion's servant, healing him from paralysis, no less.

[ 7 : 01 ] So this was their big chance and they seized it. They brought their friend to Jesus. By the way, isn't that what good friends do? Bringing our friends to Jesus.

Which of your friends are you bringing before Jesus in prayer? Which of your friends are you inviting to come to church? Jesus saw their faith.

And then he says something completely unexpected. He says to the paralyzed man in verse 2, he says, Take heart, your sins are forgiven. Your sins are forgiven.

Now this is an astonishing thing to say in all sorts of levels. But imagine if you're one of the friends who's busted a gut to bring him there out of breath and dripping in sweat. You might be scratching your head a little bit and wondering what on earth Jesus is on about.

Your sins are forgiven. Can't he see? We're here to get his legs fixed. He's on a mat. He's lying there on a mat. The clue is he's not moving.

[ 8 : 07 ] So why isn't Jesus doing the healing thing? But if what Jesus says is unexpected for the paralytic and his friends, then it's also a stunning development for us, the readers of Matthew's gospel.

Because you see, what sets it apart from the other healing miracles we've been hearing about so far is that it's the first time in this gospel that Jesus has declared someone's sins to be forgiven.

So this is big. Now if you're new to church, maybe the idea of sin is unfamiliar. So when Christians talk about sin, we're really talking about our rebellion against God.

You see, we're made for relationship with God, but we've broken that relationship. Sin prevents us from being in relationship with God.

Sin is the cause of all that's bad and sad in the world. It's why the world's not the way it's supposed to be. And all our sins are ultimately against God. So when Jesus tells the man that his sins are forgiven, it's an astonishing claim for who has authority to forgive sins?

[ 9 : 24 ] But God. The teachers of the religious law get that. They understand how out there Jesus' claim is. The boldness, the audacity, and they do not like it.

Not a bit. At this, verse 3, the teachers of the law murmured to themselves, this man is blaspheming. Blasphemy alarms are going off left, right, and center. And it's striking, isn't it, that the first real Jewish opposition to Jesus' ministry in Matthew's gospel comes when Jesus first forgives sin.

And Jesus sees what's going on in their hearts. And he says to them, Look, which is harder to say? Your sins are forgiven or get up and walk? The teachers of the law know as well as anybody else that your sins are forgiven is easier to say.

Since how is anybody going to know one way or the other? So Jesus demonstrates his authority to forgive sin by healing the man's paralysis.

Get up, take your mat, and go home, Jesus says. And up he got, and off he went. But the crowd, filled with awe, in verse 7, acknowledge what the teachers of the law cannot accept, that Jesus has indeed been given authority on earth by God to forgive sin.

[ 10 : 45 ] That's what he came to do. Right back at the beginning of Matthew's gospel, in chapter 12:1, And we're told that he was to be called Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.

And really, this is our deepest need, the forgiveness of sin. Maybe you didn't realize that. This is our deepest needs. Let's notice that when the man is brought before Jesus, he sees a man with two desperate needs.

One, his paralysis, and two, his need for forgiveness. Notice that Jesus doesn't explicitly connect the two. The connection's more symbolic than anything.

In other words, the paralysis is not necessarily to be seen as a direct result of sin, but rather provides a good picture of the effects of sin in our lives.

Both the paralysis and the sin are real and pressing needs. And in his kindness, Jesus will attend to both, but he deals with the greatest sin first, the forgiveness of sins.

[ 11 : 53 ] So do you realize that this is your greatest, deepest need? And this applies to all of us, whoever we are. Brothers and sisters, sometimes we can lose sight of that, can't we?

Sometimes in our thoughts, in our prayers even, we can be so preoccupied with the one thing we think we need that we lose sight of the bigger picture.

Lord, if you would only do this one thing for me, if you'd only sort out this one thing in my life, this job, this marriage, this child, this relationship I long and crave for. Lord, if only you'd just sort this one thing out.

And we can become so preoccupied with it that we're prone to forget that Jesus has already done the one thing we actually do need.

He's already dealt with our deepest need, dealt with our sin. And as Christians, we need to be reminding ourselves of this. And if you're not yet a Christian, the offer's there.

[ 12 : 56 ] Jesus is ready to forgive you. There's no waiting list, so don't delay. And we're going to move on to our second heading in just a moment.

But first, I want to let you in on a conversation I had with someone a number of years ago. And yeah, we had a conversation in the streets.

He said, I know that I need Jesus. I want to come to church, he said, but I need to sort out my life first. It was a conversation I had with a guy a while back, we'll call him John.

He used to spend the time reading books, sitting outside one of the bars on Socky Hill Street, near to where I used to live. He wasn't physically paralyzed, but in effect, he was paralyzed by drug addiction.

His life was basically going nowhere. He told me he'd got clean. I wasn't sure. He might have. I don't know. Certainly had his regrets.

[ 13 : 56 ] He kept some bad company. Made some poor decisions. I could have said that about myself when I first met him. Every time I saw him, he'd always be reading. And so, sometimes I'd start to chat to him and find out what he was reading.

And one time, I gave him a book about God's love for his prodigal sons. Once he'd finished reading it, we had another chat. And I told him about what a difference Jesus had made in my life and how there was hope for him too.

When I invited him to church, that's when he turned around and said, I need to sort out my life first. Well, John was wrong about that, as we're going to see from Matthew's encounter with Jesus.

So, second heading, Dining with Sinners. Jesus, the friend of sinners. Let's pick up in verse 9. As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth.

Jesus saw Matthew the same way that he saw the deepest need of the paralytic, the same way that he saw the faith of the paralytic's friends, the same way that he saw the evil thoughts in the hearts of the teachers of the law, the same way that he searches us and sees the depths of our hearts and sees your innermost thoughts and deepest needs.

[ 15 : 17 ] Jesus saw Matthew and called him to him, exactly as he called his first disciples, the fishermen. Follow me, says Jesus.

And Matthew's response, he simply got up and followed Jesus. He became a follower of Jesus. This is faith in action, friends.

And that's what you do when you hear Jesus call on your life. You don't delay, you don't wait till you've sorted everything out yourself. You follow him. Now Jesus' calling of this tax collector is remarkable.

We said in the beginning that those whom Jesus calls into his kingdom are very often not those who we'd expect. If a paralyzed man's disability meant that he was on the fringes of first century society, then a tax collector would have been absolutely despised by his fellow Jews.

And we don't really get that, do we? If you're an employee of HMRC, then that's a respectable and legitimate profession. But to the Jewish people, the tax collector was absolutely reviled.

[ 16 : 28 ] They were collaborators with the Roman occupiers. They took money from fellow Jews and were often greedy and corrupt. They were ritually unclean because of their frequent interactions with Gentiles and so were excluded from temple worship.

If a tax collector stepped into a Jewish home, the house and everything else in it became defiled. So that's why what Jesus does next in verse 10 is so shocking.

Jesus, we're told, is having dinner at the tax collector's house along with many other tax collectors and sinners. We're not told what the occasion is for the meal, whether it was Matthew's coming out as a Christian party or a dinner in honor of Jesus, but it's worth our noting the following things.

Number one, that Matthew had the means to put on such a feast for so many people is an indication of the wealth that he'd accumulated.

It's also an indication, therefore, of the cost of what he gave up to follow Jesus. Secondly, whatever the occasion of the meal, it is a mark of a transformed life, a faith that issues not only in the act of following Jesus but in extending hospitality to fellow disciples and sinners alike who are very much in need of Jesus.

[ 17 : 56 ] And thirdly, then, as such, it provides us with a pretty good model for evangelism. It's not a bad idea, is it, to host up dinner party for friends and colleagues and mixing it up with some friends from church who'd be happy to talk about Jesus.

Who would you invite if you were hosting such a dinner party? And as we said at the beginning, I think this scene at Matthew's house gives us a bit of a foretaste of what heaven's going to be like.

Jesus is dining here with sinners at Matthew's banquet. There's coming a day when Jesus will himself host a banquet for all the sinners that he's redeemed, all those who have accepted his offer of forgiveness.

Just as there was opposition to Jesus' proclamation of forgiveness of sin from the teachers of the law, so there is opposition here from another group of religious leaders, the Pharisees.

And they're appalled, verse 11, when they saw this. They asked his disciples, why on earth does your teacher eat with sinners?

[ 19 : 14 ] In their eyes, Jesus is associating with the wrong sort of people. When it comes to social standing and religious respectability, the Pharisees were the very opposite of the tax collectors.

They were the religious people, the ones that seemed holier than thou. But Jesus' words are as damning of the self-righteous as they're filled with hope for those who know they're hopeless.

When hearing the Pharisees, verse 12, Jesus said, it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. In other words, Jesus is like a trauma doctor in A&E;, come to treat critically ill spiritual patients.

But if you don't realize how desperately sick you are, then you're not going to be attending the treatment that you need. and so Jesus tells them to go and read their Bible.

Go and learn what this means. I desire mercy, not sacrifice. Jesus is quoting Hosea, an Old Testament prophet who was writing at a time when God's people had gone astray.

[ 20 : 27 ] Outwardly, they were going through the motions, going to church and performing their religious duties. But inwardly, their hearts had gone astray. Their hearts weren't in it.

They turned away from God. Jesus was equating the religious Pharisees with them. They'd had all the cosmetics done. They'd papered over the cracks and they had all the outward appearance of godliness.

But by thinking that they are righteous in their own right, they've excluded themselves from the table. Well, listen to what Jesus says.

I've come not to call the righteous, but sinners. Jesus has not come to call those who think they're good enough, but to call those of us who know that we're beyond the pale.

What qualifies you for a seat at Jesus' table? It's the self-confessed sinner who's admitted to the table.

[ 21 : 32 ] The self-righteous person will be turned away. In fact, it's not so much that they'll be turned away, they don't even want to come in. The self-righteous person excludes themselves from the feast.

Getting a table at Jesus' banquet isn't about our performance. It's all about whether you're a friend of Jesus. Jesus' mission was to save desperate people from their sins.

And that's what gets us a seat at the table knowing we're sinners in need of his forgiveness. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we marvel in your presence, conscious that you do search us and see us. You know our shortcomings, our sinfulness and our shame. we do wonder how you could love us.

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you came to save us, your people, from our sins. What a savior. What a friend.

[ 22 : 42 ] we will gladly follow you and serve you until we see you face to face when we're seated amongst the sinners.

Seated amongst the redeemed sinners at that final feast. Amen. Amen.