

“Take Heart”

Introduction: Over the past few weeks we have been talking about and observing the authority of Jesus. And we’ll do a little more of that today. But first, I wonder: How are you hearing that word, “authority?” I ask because it’s not always a positive word. It can bring to mind its misuse by coaches, teachers, spouses, and even pastors. Depending upon where in the world you might live, authority might bring to mind a knock on the door in the middle of the night and being hauled away for no good reason. Or you might have heard authority being misused by our own politicians, led by our former president, who just last week suggested that the joint chief of staff of our country should be executed. The attempt to use their authority to incite their followers to violence was unmistakable.

Is there a different kind of authority for us to follow, a different kind of authority for us to learn and to benefit from? Hopefully you have been seeing such in the picture of Jesus Matthew has been sketching for us. It’s an authority that does not seek to coerce, use, abuse, or promote itself but which seeks to meet the needs of others, to free, to heal, and to restore. We’ve heard that life-giving authority of Jesus in his teaching, we’ve seen it in his healing people from leprosy, paralysis, and fever, and we’ve observed it in his calming of the wind and the waves, as well as the spirits of a couple of demon possessed men.

Now, Mathew has one more place he wants to take us, a place that will reveal the ultimate freedom that the authority and healing power of Jesus bring. Let’s hear the text and then explore what Jesus sees.

I. Jesus sees the faith of the friends.

A. First, Jesus sees the faith of this paralyzed man’s friends. Mark in his account gives us a little more description of the persistence of these fellows. Having arrived back in Capernaum, on the Jewish side of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus is probably staying at Peter’s house (8:5-15). There, you may recall, just days earlier, Jesus had healed a great number of people. Paralysis, we read in several places, was one of the conditions Jesus had touched (4:24; 8:6) and so this paralyzed man’s friends wanted to get him to Jesus as soon as they heard he was back. Trouble was, they weren’t the only ones who wanted to see Jesus. In fact, such large numbers turned out that there was no room left, either inside or right outside the house. Not be deterred, these men carried their friend on his mat through the crowds on the street, then, when they discovered the door to the house was blocked, they carried him up an outside staircase onto the thatched roof, through which they proceeded to cut a hole and lower their friend down to a spot right in front of Jesus (Mk. 2:1-4). It’s a great scene. There’s a picture in every Children’s Bible!

B. The question is, when Jesus sees faith, what does he see? It seems that he sees not only what these fellows believe – that Jesus can heal their friend. He also sees them putting that understanding into action. Faith, as we’ve said before, is not only hearing but doing. What’s also noteworthy is that Jesus heals the man based not on his faith but on the faith of his friends, just like he healed the centurion’s servant based on the centurion’s faith. And just to add to the mix, sometimes Jesus heals where there has been no obvious expression of faith, by anyone, and sometimes he doesn’t heal at all! Maybe the important thing to recognize is that there is no magic formula for healing, that Jesus cannot be pinned down to act in the way we’d like him to act. The best we can do when it comes to physical healing is to bring ourselves, or our friends, to Jesus, call upon his grace, and trust in his wisdom.

II. Jesus sees the soul of the man.

A. Where Jesus does heal every time has to do with the healing we all need. Jesus sees this need as he says: "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." In many ways, what a surprising thing to say! Everyone can see that this man needs to be able to walk. But Jesus sees more than just this man's body; Jesus sees the soul of this man. Jesus sees his need to be forgiven, the need to have his relationship with God healed. Jesus knows that he can indeed make this man walk again, but unless his soul is healed he'll just eventually walk right into his grave with no hope for an eternal future. Further, his walk in this life will be purposeless unless his vocation as an image-bearer of God is renewed.

B. "Take heart, son..." not only a surprising thing to say but also what a gentle thing to say! Jesus sees this man's deepest need and declares that he has come to meet it, that he need not worry, that the ultimate relationship for which he has been made, and which sin has broken, can be restored, that his sin can be "hurled into the depths of the sea," as the prophet Micah promises. Where might you need to hear Jesus say, "Take heart _____, I am making all things new, including you."

III. Jesus sees the anger and jealousy of the religious leaders.

A. A third thing Jesus sees is the anger and jealousy of the religious leaders. These teachers of the law were the scholars and gatekeepers of the word of God and they knew, rightly, that no one could forgive sins but God alone, as all sin is ultimately against him. And they also heard rightly, in his declaration of forgiveness, that Jesus was claiming authority that belonged to God alone, which was blasphemy. What they couldn't do, or at least refused to do, was connect the dots which led to the picture Jesus was drawing that he was not just a miracle worker who had authority over disease, nature, and demons, but also over sin. He was claiming to have the authority of God, come in the flesh.

B. Jesus sees the trouble these men were having and so offers a demonstration of the authority he had just claimed. "Which is easier," he offered, "to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'?" Of course, anyone can say, "Your sins are forgiven," and who would know? So, enabling this man to get up and walk away seems like it would be the harder thing to do. But perhaps Jesus knew that to really offer forgiveness, to this man, as well as to you and to me, would require a cost. Forgiveness requires justice and justice requires that a payment be made, a payment Jesus would make on the cross, on our behalf. Though Jesus backed up his claim to authority by enabling this man to walk, we might say that offering forgiveness was really the harder thing. And it is forgiveness that truly enables our guilt and sin to be lifted and for us to rise to new life.

IV. What does the crowd see?

A. Jesus saw the faith of the friends, he saw the soul of the paralyzed man, and he saw the anger of the religious leaders. What did the crowd see? Matthew tells us: "When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to man." They saw something but would still need to move beyond just seeing Jesus as a "man" who had somehow been given authority to understanding that in Jesus, God was with them and an entirely new era had dawned.

Several years ago, a man named Oral Roberts, a preacher and founder of Oral Roberts University, claimed that Jesus had appeared to him. What's more, Roberts reported that when he appeared, Jesus was standing shoulder to shoulder with a 900-foot building! Upon hearing this report, a theologian for the east coast replied: "That's impossible, we all know Jesus wasn't that tall!"

I don't know if either of these men has ever really seen Jesus, but in a manner of speaking, they raise an interesting question. How tall is Jesus? Not in terms of feet, but in terms of stature? Matthew sketches a Jesus whose stature reaches to the heavens, whose stature is divine. He has authority over disease, over storms, over demons, over sin, and even over death. It's an authority that does not seek to coerce, use, abuse, or promote itself but which seeks to meet the needs of others, to free, to heal, and to restore.

How tall is your Jesus? Are you trusting him in the challenges and storms of your life? Are you allowing him to show you where you need the healing of his forgiveness? Are you asking him to restore your relationship with God, and/or with your neighbor?

May his authority to do all of these things encourage us as we come to the table to see him.