

Responding to Jesus

Matt. 9:33-38

Intro. This AM we come to the closing verses of **Matt. 9** and the threshold of a new section of Matthew's gospel account. As we begin to consider what these verses say, I want to take a moment to review what we've seen in **chaps. 8** and **9**. In these chapters Matthew listed 10 miracles which demonstrate the awesome power and authority of Jesus. Here's what Jesus did: He cleansed the leper of his incurable disease / He healed a centurion's young servant from a distance without going to the man's house / He healed Peter's mother-in-law by his touch / He calmed a raging storm on Galilee / He cast demons from two possessed men into a herd of pigs / He forgave and healed a paralyzed man / He healed a hopeless woman whose bleeding had lasted 12 years / He raised the 12 year old daughter of Jairus from the dead / He gave sight to two blind men / and He drove out a demon that impeded a man's ability to speak. That's all. I mean, that's all Matthew chose to record among thousands of miracles Jesus performed. In demonstration of divine power, Jesus restored a variety of people and things that had come under control of sin and the curse. We tend to define miracles as God interfering with natural law. But I've come to think about miracles another way. The miracles actually involved the restoration of law and order...God's law and God's order.

Can you imagine what happens to a classroom of teenagers when the teacher steps out? Within just a few minutes, the situation turns south. Noise level increases. Students whirl around in their seats or leave them altogether. Snack items appear. Aisles between rows are choked with flailing arms and legs. Unidentified flying objects careen through the airspace. I-pods and cell phones emerge from hiding. It's universally true! What happened to Miss McGillicuddy's quiet and orderly classroom? (she was the greatest teacher I never had!) In her absence, control is relinquished and chaos takes over.

Disease, deformity, demon-possession...even violent storms are not God's handiwork...there's nothing natural about these conditions! They're unnatural and the result of sin, corruption and mutation. Said another way, disease is lawlessness. It's God's creative order gone haywire. Disease is the result of corrupted micro-organisms and genetic information that developed as a result of the fall. A raging storm is nature turned savage. Even hunger is a violation of the self-sustaining world God created at the beginning. So the miracles of Jesus didn't interfere with natural law...they restored law and order. When Jesus moved from town to town, He made things right. And listen, He's coming again to restore order to every realm. Until Jesus returns He taught us to pray, "**Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.**"- **Matt. 6:10**

Now here's something we can be sure of...There's no disease / deformity / demon-possession / convulsions of nature / or death in heaven. Why is that? Because God has absolute control there! Antagonisms like these exist only on earth. For the time being and within certain sovereign limits, God has allowed nature and the human race to run wild. He stepped out of the classroom. That's **Rom. 1, 2**. God has given us over to our preferences. He has handed us the steering wheel of human affairs and said, "*Have at it.*" And we've made a mess of things, haven't we? Our bus is racing out of control and we're headed for the precipice. The decision to trust the Lord Jesus is essentially a decision to take our hands off the wheel and trust Heaven's King to guide us to safety.

So Matthew presents the power and authority of Jesus. He does this to prove Jesus has what it takes to retake control and restore order. 20 centuries ago Jesus stepped into our disorderly classroom. By His miracle working power, He proved He has the authority to make things right. He can correct what is broken in creation and He can correct the brokenness of our personal lives. Yet the question remains...How have we responded to Him? The most significant question ever asked is, "*What have you done with Jesus Christ?*" To believe and embrace Jesus is life eternal. Faith in Christ is what God requires for entrance into heaven's kingdom.

To reject Jesus, for whatever reason, is to remain in chaos for the duration of our lives. Then after this life, it's the decision that will force the unsaved to face God without the possibility of forgiveness or pardon. To delay or to postpone the decision is the ultimate risk because our sinful nature has already decided against Him. This morning we see people of that day encountering and responding to Jesus. In the middle of the passage, we see Jesus doing what He came to do irrespective of their response to Him.

1. The crowds: Overwhelmed with amazement – v. 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."

Richard Lenski suggests that all the miracles of **Matt. 8, 9** were performed during the span of a couple days. He then makes this observation...*"In all the history of Israel nothing has ever appeared comparable to all that Jesus has just done."* When we consider the plagues imposed on Egypt at the time of the Exodus / the crossing of the Red Sea / the miracles of Moses, Elijah and Elisha / as well as those reported in the books of Joshua and Judges...what Jesus accomplished in a few days was off the charts remarkable! The kingdom of heaven or the rule of God had in fact come near! So the common folk of Galilee were overwhelmed with amazement. They were emotionally aroused. They were excited and energized. The **crowd said, "Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel."**

My earliest memories go back to a time when my family lived at Vale homes, an apartment complex in Shrewsbury, NJ. Behind the apartments on Barker Avenue was a large undeveloped tract of land. One summer afternoon we saw commotion back there. Tractor trailers drove right out in the middle of the field and parked. Large tents were set up with the help of listen...elephants! We rubbed our eyes in disbelief...Ringling Bros., Barnum and Bailey Circus had parked in our back yard! Can you imagine the thrill? Circus tents / lion cages / clowns / high wire acts / elephants / side shows / popcorn / cotton candy / thrill rides. And the whole menagerie was parked in my back yard. We could step out our back door and walk a few hundred feet to the circus! Since I wasn't even in school yet and the story seems so fantastic, I had to confer with family and Google a map to convince myself it happened as I remember. But can you even begin to imagine the excitement of having a three ring circus in your own back yard? The circus stayed for 3 or 4 days and then it was gone. The field was empty again. Before long, the story grew distant and we forgot the circus had ever been there.

I think the thrill experienced by the Galileans was like that. As Jesus moved from town to town, His miracles generated incredible excitement. Crowds gathered around Him and people were miraculously healed. Those healed by Jesus were beyond ecstatic for awhile. But the day came when Jesus moved on. As life returned to normal, the stories grew stale and the excitement began to wane. Forgetfulness began to settle in. Though it may seem inconceivable to us, even those Jesus healed eventually returned to "business as usual" equilibrium. Of the many Jesus healed, only a handful were impacted spiritually.

I wish I had the gray matter needed to explain this more adequately. The short of what I want to say is this...seeing isn't believing! Fascination and admiration is not the same as saving faith! Faith is the response God requires of every human being, but repentance and saving faith are not the automatic consequence of amazement and emotional stimulation. Biblically, this is illustrated by the parable of the soils where, despite the initial response, a large percentage of seed sown is wasted and unfruitful. Historically, we know this from the fickleness of the crowd who praised Jesus on Monday and said "**Away with him**" a few days later. How could these same people who said, "**Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel**", fail to recognize and embrace Jesus as their Messiah? The answer will continue to elude us until we acknowledge the spiritual dynamic involved in salvation. Our fallen state can't be corrected by a few moments of excitement.

The saving work of God isn't the same as reformation or a new outlook. We witnessed this after 911 when so many returned to church ...for a few weeks. The fact that enthusiasm is often short-lived is seen in the response to John the Baptist. Jesus said, **John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light.** - Jn. 5:35 Note those words.... **you chose for a time to enjoy his light.** John's message, manner, and appearance were revolutionary and titillating. (I have to admit, I've wondered if the preaching at MBC could be more provocative and effective I wore jeans and grew a go-tee? Do you think?) In John's day, people got caught up in a wave of excitement **for a time.** But the novelty of John's rough exterior and turn or burn message, soon wore off and things settled down...especially after he was arrested.

We need to understand that the fallen sinful nature inherent in every human being is hostile toward God. It takes a miracle of grace to open eyes and ears that are closed to Him. God isn't hiding. He hasn't made Himself hard to find. To the smart guys of Athens Paul said, **He is not far from each one of us.** Acts 17:27. But God does require something...He requires sinners to earnestly seek Him. Isa. 55:6, 7 say, **Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him, and to our God, for He will freely pardon.** Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. But very few actually sought Him in a saving way. In fact, very few kept seeking, kept asking, and kept knocking. Very few were willing to turn from their wicked ways and come to Jesus on His terms. So "NO"...seeing...even seeing the most spectacular miracles, is not the same as believing.

The circus came to our backyard. The neighborhood was supercharged with excitement for a couple of days. But when the tents came down, the excitement wore off and the event was down-graded to suburban legend. The same was true in Galilee. I've seen this scenario play out in ministry many times. Some get excited about God...excited about church...excited about a program...for a time. They catch a vision of a clear conscience and a better life. But when the tents come down, their enthusiasm dies off. Do you know what discipleship is... *"It's a long obedience in the same direction."* It's trusting Christ to save us from sin and then setting out to follow Him day after day after day after day...until He comes to take us home. Is that your response to Jesus? It's the only response that provides assurance through the ups and downs of life.

2. The Pharisees: Denounced as blasphemy – v. 34 - But the Pharisees said, "It is by the prince of demons that He drives out demons."

The Galileans were momentarily exposed to incredible light. In Matt. 4:14 he quotes the prophecy of Zechariah...**the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.** The crowds responded to this light with unprecedented amazement and enthusiasm. But in v.34 sheer darkness shows up in the response of the Pharisees. The minds of these clerics were made up. Jesus was a threat to their theology...their religion. They maintained an iron grip on their traditions and refused to hear anything new. Driven by the venom of jealousy and hatred, they sought an explanation for the miracles Jesus performed. Since they couldn't deny His miracles and couldn't stomach the thought that He was their Messiah, they attacked the source of the power behind the miracles. They said, **"It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons."** For the first time in the Gospels, we hear their ugly blasphemy. When Jesus forgave the paralyzed man, evil thoughts came into their minds...thoughts they muttered under their breath. But now under increased pressure, the evil thoughts gushed out and they didn't care who heard them. **"It is by the prince of demons that He drives out demons."**

In chap. 10 Jesus sent out His 12 apostles. He prepared them for adversity saying, **It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!"** - Matt. 10:25

Beelzebub means “*lord of the flies*.” It was a title from Egyptian paganism and a name for Satan. I’ll save the exposition for a Sunday when we get to that chapter, but this same accusation comes up again in **12:22-27** where it represents a turning point in Christ’s ministry. Concerning the blasphemy of this accusation, here’s what Jesus said...**And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come. - 12:31, 32** Israel’s religious leaders were on the brink of a decision that would have irreversible consequences.

By attributing the miracles Jesus did in the power of the Holy Spirit to the power of the devil, these men committed a sin that is unpardonable and beyond forgiveness. This act of blasphemy is the sin commonly called “*the unpardonable sin*.” It’s a sin that can’t be committed today because it involved the actual presence of Jesus performing miracles in the power of the Spirit. Yet there continues to be a sin beyond forgiveness or pardon. It’s the sin of rejecting Christ during the course of our lives on earth. There is no second chance after death. To enter eternity without Christ is to be beyond forgiveness and pardon. And here’s a fact every person must come to terms with...to admire Jesus while refusing to submit to Him, is the same as denouncing Him. To be fascinated by His story without trusting His salvation is to remain unforgiven. The condemnation is the same either way.

3. The Lord Jesus: Ministered with compassion – vs. 35, 36 - 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. When He saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

So the common people, though amazed and emotionally stimulated, remained unconverted. A few embraced Jesus, but the majority was merely amused by Him. In stark contrast, the Pharisees and religious leaders reacted with bitter hostility. When they accused Jesus of being in league with the devil, they crossed a line that can’t be uncrossed. So while people were looking Him over and drawing conclusions about Him...while His enemies were beginning to conspire against Him, what was Jesus doing? He continued to do exactly what He came to do. Jesus knew the work His Father had given Him to do. He said in **Jn. 20:21** “**As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.**” Unmoved by applause and undeterred by accusation...**He went through all the towns and villages.** The region of Galilee was 40 miles wide and 70 miles long. It had not less than 200 towns and villages. Based on estimates by Josephus, Jesus may have come into direct contact with as many as 3 million people!

v.35 is a summary of Jesus’ ministry. He taught in the synagogue / He preached the good news of the kingdom / and He healed every disease and sickness. The message Jesus preached **...the gospel of the kingdom...**connected closely to His miracles since He was still offering Himself as Israel’s Messiah and King. Like “show and tell,” the powers and conditions of the **kingdom** Jesus proclaimed were demonstrated by His miracles. When He commissioned the Twelve in **chap. 10**, they were given the same message and the same authority over disease, demons and death.

So teaching, preaching and healing was the three aspects of Christ’s ministry. But **v.36** states His method and motive. **v.36 - When He saw the crowds, He had compassion on them.** The word translated **compassion** is *splanchnizomai* in Greek. It’s a word that denotes *intense emotion that arises from the deepest part of our being*. It means *to yearn, to pity, or to have deep sympathy*. Besides this occasion, the word appears 11 x’s in the NT. In Jesus we see the power of God, but we also see the character of God. The small “g” gods pagans serve are unmoved by human suffering and misery. They could care less! But the God of the Bible is a God of love and compassion. The God we serve agonizes over His broken creation. He’s the Shepherd with a missing lamb who leaves the 99 to search for that lost one.

He's the father of the prodigal who day by day scans the horizon hoping to someday see his child's return. He's merchant who sold everything to have a pearl of great price. And He's the Samaritan who cared enough to rescue the man beaten and left for dead.

Peggy and I listened to the news while driving back to Flint last Tuesday AM. We heard the report of the Grand Rapids man who murdered his 2 year old daughter. Hearing that story, Peggy turned to me and said, *"Who could kill a 2 year old baby girl?"* Forensics aside, I know why that question arises because I know Peggy. The question proceeds from a mother's heart...a mother who has enormous compassion for her children and grandchildren! Yet God's heart beats with compassion that defies definition or measurement. The songwriter Frederick Lehman put it this way. *"The love of God, is greater far, than tongue or pen could ever tell. It goes beyond the highest star, and reaches to the lowest hell. The guilty pair, bowed down with care. God gave His Son to win. His erring child, He reconciled. And pardoned from his sin."* So how does Jesus see and respond to the human race and to individuals like you and me? Despite all the brokenness and disorder...despite the messes we've made...despite the fact that so many remain undecided about Him...He responds with compassion.

v. 36 goes on to describe what Jesus saw when He saw the condition of the crowds. He saw them **harassed** and **helpless like sheep without a shepherd**. The word **harassed** is a graphic term which means to skin, mangle, flay and strip the flesh. Jesus sees people like sheep that have been ripped open and skinned alive...people victimized by Satan and by oppressors who used them and tossed them aside. The word **helpless** means to be cast down by a mortal wound. Like the man rescued by the Samaritan, they were wounded and left for dead. The world is full of people who are wounded / bruised / mangled / cast down / bleeding / and slowly dying. Since Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever, Jesus sees us too. He knows our actual condition and He feels compassion for us. Without Him, we are like sheep without a shepherd. We'll discuss this further tonight, but sheep are leaderless without a shepherd. They can't find food or water nor can they find their way home. We may think we've got the world by the tail, but apart from Christ, our vehicle is out of control. So with eternal compassion, Jesus continues to seek and to save. He invites us to join Him in this mission.

4. The disciples: Entrusted with a mission – vs. 37, 38 - Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

How many here this AM consider yourself a disciple of Jesus? Listen closely...Jesus is speaking to us. The verse begins, **Then He said to His disciples...** The King whose authority is absolute and unmatched is giving us instructions that call for an obedient response. He said, **"The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."** If v. 36 represents the way Jesus views the world in all our fallenness, v. 37 views the world in relation to His Gospel. In **Jn. 4:35** Jesus compared the world to an enormous field that is ripe and ready to be harvested. Surrounded by soy and corn, we can visualize this...especially the past few months. The analogy here is drawn from the ancient world where crops were hand-picked. Many workers were needed. And notice...the analogy isn't drawn from a field that was freshly planted or a field where tiny shoots were beginning to protrude. No! The analogy was drawn from a field where cultivating, planting and watering have already been done. The crops are mature and the field is ready to be harvested. So what is our task?...to enter the field and bring in the crops. As co-laborers together with God, we called to bring in those in whom God has already been at work.

Since many hands are needed for such a great a task, Jesus calls for a response from His followers. He instructs us to pray. He said, **"Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into**

his harvest field.” Now these verses beg a more thorough explanation and we’ll attempt to do that next time.

But I want you to think about this...We won’t pray until we care / we won’t care until we know / we won’t know until we feel / and we won’t feel until we see. In the previous verses, we see this progression in the example of Jesus.

How have you responded to King Jesus? Have you embraced Him as your Savior and enthroned Him as King? Have you submitted your life to Him in obedience?