

The Authority of the King

Date: 15 February 2026

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Series: Matthew - Following the King

Texts: Isaiah 35:1-10, Daniel 7:13-14, Matthew 9:1-13

What kind of people are Christians?

If you asked your friends or workmates this question, I wonder what kinds of responses you'd get back.

You'd like to think you'd hear things like kind, generous, gracious, but maybe they would say that so as not to hurt your feelings. You might get a bit of an awkward cough if you did pop the question. Replay the scenario. You're at a party and your friend has had one too many and you ask the question - "So what kind of people are Christians", and she forgets that you happen to be a Christian, and says, "Hypocrites! Those judgmental bigots! They're so high and mighty strutting around thinking they're better than everyone else!"

Sadly that seems to all too often be the impression of Christians - at best out of touch, at worst self-righteous, judgmental hypocrites.

While this impression may be largely unfair, I think it has some important insights. First, the common idea is that being a Christian is mostly about being a good person, a moral person. But second, we're a bit wary of being too good or too moral because, all too often those who are very moral, consciously or unconsciously pride themselves on being good people and certainly better than most others. And there is something very ugly about this self-righteousness. And third, there is a hypocrisy that goes along with self-righteousness, both in the pride that tarnishes the squeaky clean image, and in the inevitable failures which the self-righteous person is either blind to or deliberately tries to hide.

If being a Christian is being a moral person, well, I don't know if I want to be one because I don't want to become one of those self-righteous bigots.

We're studying Matthew's Gospel and our series title is Following the King. And today we're asking what kind of person do you need to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus?

And we're looking at two stories of two people who meet Jesus - a paralysed man and Matthew, a tax collector. As we look at these 2 stories we'll find an answer to that question - what kind of person do you need to be to a Christian.

1. Healing of the Paralytic

We pick up the story in Matthew chapter 9. Have a look with me.

Since Jesus began his ministry we've seen him call his first disciples, heal the sick and free people from demonic possession. Last week we heard a snapshot of Jesus' preaching the good news of the kingdom in the Beatitudes. We sadly don't have time in this series to study Jesus' rightly famous Sermon on the Mount, but it really is worth meditating on. In my weekly Tricky Conversations spot on ABC radio I'm amazed by how much I come back to Jesus teaching in that sermon! Anyway, we pick up the story just after Jesus has calmed a storm with a word and released two men who had been under the power of demons. These are powerful demonstrations of Jesus' authority to command natural and supernatural forces. Now Jesus returns home to Capernaum and some friends bring him a paralyzed man.

Matthew has a short account of this event. In Mark and Luke we learn that there was such a crowd who had come to see Jesus for healing that the friends dug a hole in the roof and lowered the paralyzed man down before Jesus on his mat. But then Jesus does something no one expects.

The man, the friends and no doubt the crowd, in fact everyone there expects Jesus to heal this guy. After all that's what he's been doing all around Galilee. That's the presenting issue. He's lame, paralyzed. Surely if there's one thing Jesus should do for him it's heal him. Instead Jesus says, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven."

This is a curve ball for the teachers of the law, the theologians / community leaders. They know their Bibles.

God says in Isaiah

I, even I, am he who blots out
your transgressions, for my own sake,
and remembers your sins no more.¹

What is this man Jesus doing? Only God who can forgive sins.

But Jesus knows what they are thinking, and so he says,

'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 I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.' So he said to the paralysed man, 'Get up, take your mat and go home.'

You can't see when someone is forgiven, but you certainly can see when a paralyzed man gets up and walks! And the point that Jesus makes is that forgiving sins is in fact harder than healing, but if he has the authority to do the external healing he also has the authority to forgive, the authority of God himself. And so the man gets up and walks home. It's an astonishing moment.

¹ Isaiah 43.25

The exchange once again confirms who Jesus is - the Christ, the Son of God, God come in the flesh.

Jesus adds another layer to his identity - *the Son of Man*. It's Jesus' preferred way to speak about himself.

The title comes from our second OT reading, Daniel 7.13-14.

“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

Biblical scholar Tom Wright comments

[The] ‘one like a son of man’ is the representative of God’s true people. He is opposed by the forces of evil; but God vindicates him, rescues him, proves him to be in the right, and gives him *authority*. In Daniel, this authority enables him to dispense God’s judgment. Here, in a fascinating twist, he has authority to dispense God’s forgiveness.²

This exchange between Jesus, the paralyzed man and the teachers of the law reveals to us something crucial about following Jesus - he knows the heart. Not only did he know what the teachers of the law were thinking, he also knew what the paralyzed man needed forgiveness for.

2. Calling of Matthew

We now turn to our second story. In verse 9 Jesus meets Matthew, a tax collector and says to him, “Follow me”.

Back in chapter 4 Jesus had called Simon, Andrew, James and John to follow him. They left their nets and their father, their livelihood and their family, their old life as it were and followed Jesus.

These fishermen were working class boys, if you like, and now, Jesus calls Matthew, a tax collector, a white collar professional to follow him. Like the others, he leaves his desk, and follows Jesus. It's a picture of the radical departure from the old life, and the start of a new life when Jesus calls us to follow him.

But there's another perspective on the kind of person Matthew is, verse 10,

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?”

² Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, 17

Matthew is one of the proverbial “tax collectors and sinners”. Matthew probably worked for Herod Antipas, one of Herod the Great’s sons and a puppet king, subject to Rome. Tax collectors were the sub contractors hired by corporations who had won the contract to collect the taxes in a province for Rome. Naturally not only Rome, but also the corporation and the sub contractor had to get a cut of the money collected. Tax collectors were the face of imperial domination and exploitation, along with the soldiers they were given to ensure people paid up.

Sinners was a catch all category for those who didn’t measure up to the exacting moral and ritual requirements of the Jewish Law. Although lumped together with sinners, tax collectors enjoyed the dubious honour of being named as a category of undesirables on their own. They were social, moral and spiritual outcasts.

For a “righteous” person to eat with “sinners” would leave them ritually unclean and having to go through the elaborate cleansing rituals before they could approach God. And yet here is Jesus delighting to wine and dine with tax collectors and sinners. The “righteous” Pharisees, those bastions of the truth, guardians of public morality, are scandalized.

Jesus’ response in verse 12 is one of those great one liners that sum up his ministry.

“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Notice how Jesus describes himself.

He is a doctor. He has the skills and expertise to diagnose the problem and the power to offer the cure.

We’ve already seen his power to cure the sick and heal the disabled. But his encounter with the paralyzed man turns out to be a demonstration of these words. Jesus’ diagnosis is that we have a heart condition that means we are walking dead. That’s our greatest problem. But he’s the one with a cure - forgiveness.

You see there’s something that the Pharisees, for all their self-righteousness, do understand: sin excludes you from the presence of God. Their problem, and the danger for all of us who are concerned about holiness and obedience to God, is that you can become so fixated on doing the right thing that this becomes a source of pride and you become blind to your own failings.

And actually, this isn’t just a problem for people of a conservative moral persuasion (though God knows it’s often a big problem for the church!). It’s also a problem for those of a more progressive bent. You see there are 2 kinds of self righteousness. The conservative who says, thank God I’m not like those godless, immoral pagans. And the liberal who says, thank God I’m

not like those bigoted, judgmental, narrow-minded conservatives. The two have a different set of moral values, but underneath they have the same problem. An identity and self-regard is based on their moral performance.

Actually, the problem is one we're all prone to. When we're performing up to our own standards - professionally, in relationships, according to our moral standards, even in our own spiritual practices - then we can feel we're ok, good about ourselves. But we're likely to be proud and unsympathetic to failing people. If we're not living up to those standards we can be crushed by failure, guilt and a sense of worthlessness.

To this Jesus says: "It's not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick. I've not come to call the righteous, but sinners." Jesus' words are such good news to us, because he welcomes not those who pretend they've got it all together, or worse still think they do have it all together, rather he welcomes those who know they need help. In Christ we're accepted by grace not despite our flaws, but because we're willing to admit them. The good news of God's kingdom says that I'm so flawed that Jesus had to die for me, but I'm so loved that he was glad to die for me. That leaves no grounds for feelings of superiority, and yet at the same time I need not feel worthless. It's a message of grace that leads to deep humility and deep confidence at the same time.

Jesus' words, "Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy, not sacrifice," shows how God's forgiveness transforms how you treat others. The question I was asked on ABC radio this week was this: "How can I talk to someone I love who supports a political cause I find offensive?" The question implies the desire for relationship in conflict with a moral outrage that wants to cut the other person off. It made me think of something musician Nick Cave wrote a few years ago.

Mercy is a value that should be at the heart of any functioning and tolerant society. Mercy ultimately acknowledges that we are all imperfect and in doing so allows us the oxygen to breathe — to feel protected within a society, through our mutual fallibility. Without mercy a society loses its soul, and devours itself. Without mercy society grows inflexible, fearful, vindictive and humourless.

As far as I can see, cancel culture is mercy's antithesis. Political correctness has grown to become the unhappiest religion in the world. Its once honourable attempt to reimagine our society in a more equitable way now embodies all the worst aspects that religion has to offer (and none of the beauty) — moral certainty and self-righteousness shorn even of the capacity for redemption. It has become quite literally, bad religion run amok.³

³ <https://www.theredhandfiles.com/what-is-mercy-for-you/>

Nick Cave is drawing on Jesus' words here. We're all sinners. We all need God's forgiveness and mercy. And this is exactly what he has shown us in Jesus. So we've got to show that mercy and grace towards others, no matter who they are.

What kind of people are Christians? Jesus says Christians are those who let the doctor both give the diagnosis and the cure. To be a follower of Christ is to be someone who he has forgiven. It's not to be superior over others, but rather to know you only stand because of him.

Forgiveness and healing go together here in Matthew 9, and so often it's like that. On a personal level the more we grasp the depth and extent of God's forgiveness for us in Christ, the more we can be released from the wounds that bind us. But so too on a social level. The more we rest in God's forgiveness, the more we can forget ourselves and how people see us, and get on with the business of being agents of Christ's grace and forgiveness in a world in desperate need of mercy.