

Thinking the Worst, Thinking the Best

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[0 : 0 0] This morning I'd like us to turn back to the passage which we read as we continue our study in the Gospel of Matthew. I want us to look at the whole section that we read, but we can read again from verses 16 and 17. Jesus said, No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made.

Neither is new wine put in old wine skins. If it is, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wine skins, and so both are preserved. Our title today is Thinking the Worst, Thinking the Best. And I've chosen that title for two reasons. One, because as I hope we'll see, I think that this title sums up one of the key emphasis of this passage. And two, because in life, the way we think is incredibly important. And whether it's in regard to ourselves, or to others, or to our circumstances, or even to God, it's crucial that we ask ourselves, am I thinking the worst, or am I thinking the best? So that's what I want us to think about today. And because in this passage in Matthew 9, one of the things that we see is people coming to Jesus who are thinking the worst. But at the same time, we also see that the Christian message gives us reason not to think the worst, but to think the best.

So that's our title, and these are our two headings. Thinking the worst, thinking the best. In verses 1 to 17 of Matthew 9, we have three examples of people who are thinking the worst. In verses 1 to 8, a paralytic is taken to Jesus. And in verse 2, we have that remarkable moment when the paralysed man is lying before Jesus. But instead of Jesus saying rise up and walk, Jesus says, your sins are forgiven. And that's reminding us that our need for our sins to be forgiven is more urgent than any physical or material need that we have. But in terms of verification, someone could say your sins are forgiven.

And there's no really obvious way of knowing whether that has actually happened or not. But to say to somebody who's paralysed, rise up and walk, is in a sense a lot harder because the validity of the statement is immediately put to the test. If you say rise up and walk and nothing happens, then your words are undermined. Jesus therefore uses this miracle of healing to powerfully show that the even greater miracle of forgiveness of sins is actually true.

But in the process, the scribes think the worst of Jesus. In verse 3, we see that their immediate response is to say, this man is a blasphemer. To them, Jesus is saying the wrong thing.

[3 : 3 2] And as Jesus's ministry continued, even though the religious leaders saw the miracles happening in front of them, in front of their own eyes, they still thought the worst of Jesus. And they even accused him of using demonic power to do these miracles. And they refused to recognize his authority. In verses 9 to 13, Jesus calls Matthew, a tax collector, to follow him as one of his disciples. Now today, when we think of inland revenue, we think of it as a really important and a very well respected part of our society. But back in 1st century Judea, it was not like that at all. Judea was under Roman rule, and they resented that imperial rule greatly. But the tax collectors worked for the Romans to gather their money.

Therefore a tax collector to the Jews was a traitor because they were working for the enemy. And on top of that, the tax collectors were often very corrupt, and they would exploit their role in order to enrich themselves. And the result of that was that tax collectors were despised by the general public. But Jesus goes and has dinner at this tax collector's house, and a group of other sinners come along too. And these are people whose lives did not match up to the religious expectations of the community. Yet Jesus goes and eats with them. The Pharisees, however, think the worst. In verse 11, they say to the disciples, why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners? To them, Jesus is mixing with the wrong people. And throughout his ministry, Jesus was accused of being a glutton, a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors, and sinners. And then in verses 14 to 17, we have the question about fasting, which comes from the disciples of John the Baptist. Now, it's hard to know whether that question is just a simple inquiry. Why do we fast, but your disciples don't?

Or is it more of a kind of veiled criticism, where they're saying, why aren't you fasting in the way that we are? I'm not actually sure which one it is. Maybe it's a bit of both.

But what is clear is that the question itself arose from a negative mindset. For the disciples of John and for the Pharisees, fasting was associated with sorrow and calamity. You see that back in the Old Testament, when something awful happens, people fast in response. So these disciples of John who came to Jesus, they fasted because they could see everything that was wrong with their circumstances. And that's confirmed by what Jesus says to them, because he describes their fasting in terms of mourning in verse 15. To these people, Jesus had the wrong mindset. They thought that he should have been mourning and fasting instead of rejoicing. In each of these situations, then, we see people who are thinking the worst.

And Jesus, in many ways, sums it all up in verse 9 when he says, why do you think evil in your hearts? And the consequence of that mindset is that all of these people are missing the amazing truth that's in front of them. So with the healing of the paralytic, we see a very clear demonstration of Jesus' authority. He's the Son of Man. He has power and authority to forgive sins, and he proves it by healing the paralysed man. With the dinner at Matthew's house, we see that Jesus has come to help people who are in need, to help people whose lives are in a mess, and he wants to extend his friendship to everyone, even to the outcasts of society. And in regard to fasting, Jesus uses the image of a wedding to speak of the joy and the celebration that we should be experiencing, because Jesus, the Savior, has come. All of these great theological truths are being set before the people in this passage, and yet they are being missed because people are thinking the worst. And often we can fall into exactly the same trap. So like the disciples of John, we can think the worst of our circumstances.

[8 : 39] That's true in lockdown, but even without that, we can have a very negative view of our circumstances. That doesn't mean that our circumstances are never bad. Often they are, and that can be incredibly difficult for people in so many different ways. But what I mean is that whatever our circumstances are, often our mind and our attention is drawn to everything that's bad, and we can easily forget about the good. Like the Pharisees at Matthew's house, we can easily think the worst of others. So we can look at politicians and think that every action is bad. We can look at colleagues and be convinced that they're out to hurt us and give us a hard time. We can look at drivers on the road and think that they're just an enormous collection of idiots. And we can even look at other churches and find a hundred things that are wrong with them. It's so easy to view other people as a threat, as a problem, or as an inconvenience. But we can also very easily think the worst of ourselves. And I'm quite sure that many of the sinners who were eating with Jesus at Matthew's house would have felt a huge sense of failure and regret about how their lives had turned out. And it's so easy for that to be true of us. We can look at ourselves and see somebody who has mucked up in the past and somebody who's probably going to fail again in the future.

And like the scribes who are watching the paralytic, it's also very easy to think the worst of Jesus. We see that around us just now because we live in what's more or less a non-Christian society, or certainly in lots of ways it's become a non-Christian society.

Jesus is seen as irrelevant. His name is used as a swear and a lot of people don't want Jesus to have any influence in our society. But it's not just at a kind of national level, at a personal level, it's also easy to think the worst of Jesus. So you might be thinking about whether or not you want to be a Christian. And in that situation, it's so easy to think that Jesus is going to make your life worse. But equally, even as Christians, we can have a negative view of Jesus. So we can easily think that he's like a really strict headmaster who's always verging on being angry with us. Or we can think of him as a kind of scary personal trainer who's only going to be impressed if you're pushing yourself beyond your limits.

Or maybe even we can think of him as like a kind of embarrassing relative who we're connected to, but we don't really want other people to know. Jesus is none of these things, but it's easy for us to think the worst of him. It's very easy to have a negative mindset towards our circumstances, towards others, towards ourselves, and towards Jesus. And all of that, of course, is a direct result of sin. Central to the fall of humanity, central to sin coming into humanity's experience was a mindset that thought the worst. That's how the serpent deceived Eve all the way back in Genesis chapter three. He got her to think the worst of God. And you can read Genesis three to see how he did that. And ever since then throughout history, people have been continually drawn towards thinking evil in our hearts, just as Jesus speaks of in Matthew chapter nine. And many massive problems have arisen in the world because of this. So racism thinks the worst of another ethnic group. Xenophobia thinks the worst of another nationality. Bullying and exploitation thinks the worst of people because you think, well, they don't really deserve to be treated well. I can just use and abuse them. Gossip and tabloid media looks for the worst in people's lives. And the result of all these things is that precious people who are made in the image of God get hurt. And that makes perfect sense because that's exactly what sin wants. Sin wants to damage you. Sin wants to destroy humanity. And one of the best tactics it uses is to get people to think the worst. So you take things like war, terrorism, bullying, corruption, exploitation, self harm, hatred. When you think about all of those things, if you think about the chain of events that leads up to all of these things taking place, what's the first step in that chain? The first step is thinking the worst of either yourself or of others.

And for Jesus, it was actually no different because the evil that these people began to think in their hearts in Matthew chapter nine, that went on to a chain of events that culminated in his crucifixion. Thinking the worst is incredibly easy and it's incredibly dangerous. And the question I have to ask myself is, do I default to thinking the worst? And for me, I think far too often the answer is yes. So the next question I have to ask is, how do I evolve thinking the worst? And what I want us to see is that I think the answer to that question is found in the little illustration that Jesus gives in verses 16 and 17. Now you might be thinking to yourself, what on earth has this got to do with all that I've been saying?

[15 : 25] Well, what I hope that we're going to see is that these verses, verses 16 and 17 highlight the fact that the Christian faith is not about thinking the worst, it is about thinking the best. In these verses, Jesus uses two very simple illustrations and in it he's saying that he talks about putting a patch on clothing and he talks about putting wine in wineskins.

And he says, you can't put a new patch of cloth onto old clothing. And that's because when the new patch shrinks, it's going to tear away from the old material that's long since already shrunk and that can't move with it. Likewise, you can't put new wine in old wineskins because as the new wine ferments and as it releases gas and causes expansion, the old wineskins will crack because they've lost the flexibility that a new wineskin has.

Now, within these verses, Jesus is drawing two important comparisons and I want us just to think about these together for a moment. First comparison is old versus new. Jesus is using this illustration to say that in terms of God's plan of salvation, something new has come. So if you take the image of wine and wineskins, you see that at one level, there's similarity and continuity. Both the old and the new are wine. But there's also a difference. One is old, one is new and therefore you need to act appropriately to each. And that image is very helpful in terms of understanding how the Old Testament and the New Testament fit together, which is really what Jesus is talking about. At one level, there is continuity.

It's not that the Old Testament is being completely abandoned by Jesus and radically replaced by something different. There is continuity, but at the same time, there is also change.

And now that Jesus has come, things are different. And the key difference is that the shadow of the Old Testament is now a reality in the new. The expectation of the old is now being fulfilled in the new. In other words, the Old Testament said, a Savior is coming. The New Testament is saying the Savior is here. And the point that Jesus is making is to say that you can't take the message, the Savior has come and put it back into the old wineskin that says the Savior is coming. When fulfillment comes, expecting stops and that inevitably means that you have to approach things differently. And that shift in mindset was very relevant to these disciples of John and to all the people who lived at the same time as Jesus' ministry on earth. They needed to recognize that an amazing change has taken place right in front of them. They have gone from waiting for the Savior to come to realizing that He has come. The old has passed, the new is here. And the fact that the new has come is incredibly good, positive, wonderful news. And the fact that the coming of Jesus and the fulfillment of all the old promises is good news is reminding us that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the very opposite of thinking the worst. Because if you think about God and think about how

[19 : 28] God could view humanity, He can see a million things that are wrong. He can see all the ways in which humanity has rejected Him as Creator. He can see every single way in which we have failed Him. In other words, God has every reason to think the worst of us. And yet the whole reason that Jesus has come is because God looks at a broken humanity and He sees people who are so precious and who need to be rescued. In other words, the whole gospel is motivated by the fact that when God looks at you, He sees the best in you.

He sees someone who is worth saving. Now, that doesn't mean that God ignores our sin and everything else that's wrong with us. That's not the case at all. God knows better than any of us that we are sinners and that we are broken. But the key point is that God recognizing our sin is not a criticism. It's a diagnosis. And the difference is crucial because a criticism is aiming to harm you. A diagnosis is aiming to heal you. And the amazing truth of the gospel is that God's thoughts of you are so good and so positive that He gave His only Son to die so that you might be saved. Now, when you think the worst of people, you'll find any reason you can so that you can give up on them. But when you think the best of people, you will find any reason you can so that you'll never have to give up on them. And that is exactly how God thinks of you. And that's the mindset that lies at the heart of Jesus' mission. In many ways, the Old Testament is a story of failure. God's people kept on mucking up. And even the good times and good things in the Old Testament never lasted long. But that's because the Old is only ever at best a shadow of what God's plan of salvation is really going to be. And when that plan of salvation is fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, when the shadow of the Old becomes the reality in the new, we see the incredible, wonderful, positive, good news of Jesus Christ. And it's all grounded on the fact that when it comes to you, ultimately God does not think the worst. He thinks the best. Because the whole reason He gave His Son to be born in Bethlehem and to walk among us on this earth and to be arrested and beaten and betrayed and ultimately to die on a cross, the whole reason that God gave His Son to do all of that is because to God you are worth dying for. And that brings us to the second comparison that Jesus makes in this parable. He compares the Old and the New, but He also compares rigidity and stretchiness.

Now, what do I mean by that? Well, in both examples that Jesus gives in these verses, a key point in the illustration is that the Old is rigid. So for the patch that gets put on the piece of clothing, as the new bit shrinks, the Old can't stretch because it's rigid.

And so as the new piece shrinks, the Old just tears because it can't move along with it. With the wineskins, it's the same. The new wine needs to go into a new wineskin because as the wine ferments, it needs to be able to stretch. Old wineskins have become rigid.

So instead of expanding, they just crack and all the wine will fall out and both wine and wineskin are ruined. Now, I think that this comparison between rigidity and stretchiness is very important. That's because the negative mindset of the people in these passages arose from a rigidity in their minds. So the scribes were rigid in their opposition to the idea that Jesus could forgive sins. The Pharisees were rigid in their opinion that you should not be friends with tax collectors and sinners. And even the disciples of John were rigid in their view that their circumstances were bad and that we should not be celebrating, we should be fasting and mourning. And I think that Jesus is telling them and he's telling us that if we want to really understand the gospel, we need to resist the temptation to be rigid and instead we need to be ready to stretch. In other words, if we want to stop thinking the worst and start thinking the best, then we need to stretch our minds.

[25 : 25] So when Matthew 9 talks about Jesus having the authority to forgive sins in verses 128, we need to stretch our minds to see how amazing that is. Think of your own life. Think of every way in which you are conscious of your sin. Think of every failure in your life, every mistake you've made as a child or as an adult, all the things that you wish you hadn't said or wish you hadn't done. Think of everything that weighs heavily on your conscience. And all of these things can be lined up together into this big panorama of failure in our minds. And all of these mistakes that seem to just stretch out further and further and further, we bring all of that before Jesus and he says, forgiven. And the whole lot is wiped out. It's like on a computer when you do select all, delete and it's gone.

Jesus looks at that massive list of mistakes in your life and he says, forgiven. If you are a Christian or if you become one, every mistake you have ever made in your past or that you will ever make in your future is forgiven. And Jesus has the authority to do that. So your forgiveness is not just based on the kindness of Jesus or on his patience or his niceness. It is based on his eternal, unchangeable authority. Now that authority of Jesus is the authority under which every other authoritative structure in the universe lies. So think of all the different authoritative structures that are in existence. You think of political, financial, cosmological, biological, intellectual, spiritual, all the different areas of authority that we can see around it. At the pinnacle of that authority is Jesus. Every other knee bows before him. Nothing can threaten him. His authority is the highest, the greatest, the strongest. He is at the top. He has authority that no one else has. And it is his authority that looks at you and says forgiven forever. Matthew nine speaks about Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners. And again, we need to stretch your minds to think about this. So often we can look at ourselves and we can feel worthless and inadequate. We can think that God would not want to be anywhere near us. Matthew nine is telling you that no matter who you are, no matter what failures or mistakes you've had in your life, Jesus wants your friendship. Now stretch your mind to think about that. That means that Jesus doesn't just want to be that it means that Jesus that he doesn't want to just have some kind of acquaintance of you. He wants to be your friend. He wants to be associated with you. He is not ashamed of you. He actually really likes you. Now for anyone who has been on the receiving end of rejection in their life, which is probably all of us at some point or another, for anyone who's experienced that we need to understand this, Jesus wants your friendship. He wants to eat with you and he doesn't care for one second. Supposing there's a thousand people watching on saying, why is he eating with him or with her? And if you think that you are outside the circle of friends that Jesus wants to have, then you need to stretch that circle because no matter who you are, you are in it. No matter your circumstances, no matter what mistakes you've made, no matter who you are, Jesus thinks the best of you and he wants your friendship. So we need to stretch our minds to see that, but maybe we also need to stretch our minds to see how much value Jesus places on everyone else. So when we look at colleagues at work or people at school or people in society or people of other faiths, people who have no faith, people who are in a mess, people who think completely differently to us, maybe we need to stretch our minds to see how precious they are to God as well. And finally in verse 15, Jesus describes himself as a bridegroom.

And the reason Jesus calls himself a bridegroom is because he has a bride. And the bride is the church. In other words, if you are a Christian or if you become one, the bride is you. Now there's two amazing things about that image. The first is that the bridegroom loves his bride. Now you've maybe heard that a thousand times, but please stretch your mind to try and grasp a little more of this. Jesus loves you. He's always loved you and he always will love you and he loves you so much that he died for you. And in Ephesians chapter three, Paul prays that we might have strength to comprehend the height and breadth and length and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. So you need to stretch your mind as far as you can to understand Jesus' love for you. So let's try and do it.

Let's stretch our minds. Try and think of a tank or a bath and make it as big as you possibly can. Make it as big as Edinburgh, as big as Scotland, as big as the world. Make it as big as the solar system. Make it as big as the universe. Stretch out your mind. Make it huge in width, in length, in depth. Now in that massive tank is the love of Jesus Christ for you. And you can picture in your mind that tank being filled with something that represents Jesus' love for you. I don't mind what you think. You can think of it as water. You can think of it as hot chocolate.

You can think of it as strawberry sauce, whatever it is that comes to your mind. But as you think of that image of that massive tank that stretched out as far as your mind can possibly imagine, as it's been filled with the love of Jesus, there is one thing that has to be in your image for it to be accurate. The tank has to be overflowing because that is how much Jesus loves you. And the only way to get a glimpse of that is to stretch your mind. The bridegroom loves his bride. But the second thing that we see in the bridegroom image is celebration. And at the heart of our lives as Christians, there should be massive celebration because Jesus has come and Jesus has risen. And in him, if we trust in him, we can have eternal life and we will be with him and we'll be with one another forever because through Jesus, all the brokenness of sin will be healed.

[33 : 29] Everything that's wrong is going to be fixed. Every tear will be wiped from her eyes and everything that makes us think the worst will be gone. In the gospel of Jesus, there is so much to celebrate.

And the amazing thing is that to Jesus, you are a reason to celebrate. So often, our minds are imprisoned in a rigid box of negativity. Jesus is saying, I have news that is so good. You need to stretch your mind as far as you can if you're going to grasp it. All of that means that in a world that so often thinks the worst, Jesus gives us every reason to think the best. And in response to that, I look at myself and pray, Lord, when I look at my circumstances, when I look at others, when I look at myself and when I look at you, please help me to always think the best. And if you're not yet a Christian, I really don't know what else I can say. Jesus thinks the best of you.

And Jesus wants the best for you. And all you have to do is put your trust in him. And the only thing that can spoil it is if you think the worst of him. Please don't do that. Amen. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we rejoice in everything that you have done for us and for the fact that you give us every reason to think the best. And we just acknowledge that you have given us such good news, such amazing hope, such wonderful joy. And we are so thankful to you for everything that you've done for us. And we pray that we would think the best of our circumstances, of one another, of ourselves, and above all of you. Help us all to see just how incredibly good the good news of the gospel is. Amen.