

Who Can Forgive Sins?

Luke 5:17-26

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In this study of the Gospel of Luke, we come to another healing miracle of Jesus. He was healing people who were afflicted. It is called “the healing of the paralytic.” We last saw Jesus cleanse the leper; the man was full of leprosy. The disease of leprosy was a picture of the uncleanness of sin. But our story today is a picture of the paralysis of sin. So sin not only pollutes us; it cripples us. So these two healings are complementary; He cleansed the leper, because sin is a defilement, and He heals the paralytic, because sin cripples us and keeps us from walking in the ways of the Lord. Jesus wants to cleanse us, forgive us, empower us and enable us to walk in His ways.

In this text, we learn that Jesus is God. There are a multitude of lessons we learn in this study. I can't touch them all, but we clearly see the deity of Jesus shining through and His authority to forgive sin. So Jesus is God and He is able and has the authority to forgive sins. And we also see He has the power to give us the ability to walk in the ways that are pleasing to Him.

I want to take this text and consider it in the eyes of Jesus as He looked around. What did He see in this miracle? In looking at this story through His eyes, we'll see that He looked in three, different directions.

First Jesus looked up and saw the four persistent men or friends of the paralytic. He saw their faith, in verses 17-20. “Now it happened on a certain day, as He was teaching, that there were Pharisees and teachers of the law...” or “scribes” “...sitting by, who had come out of every town of Galilee, Judea, and Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was present to heal them.” Notice that God's power to heal was present in this packed-out house. “Then behold, men brought on a bed a man who was paralyzed...” He was a paralytic or crippled. “...whom they sought to bring in and lay before Him. And when they could not find how they might bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the housetop and let him down with his bed through the tiling into the midst before Jesus. When He saw their faith, he said to him, ‘Man, your sins are forgiven you.’”

This story is also recorded for us in Matthew 9 and in Mark 2. So this is a synoptic story. In Mark 2, Mark tells us where the story took place: in Capernaum. The city of Capernaum is on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. It became the headquarters of Jesus' Galilean ministry and operation. It also was the home of Peter, James, John and Andrew. So some feel this miracle happened in Peter's house, but we don't know for sure, because the Bible doesn't say. And some scholars feel it might have been in the synagogue.

But it was in a house or building where they tore off the roof and let down this lame man before Jesus as He was teaching and preaching. The other Gospels tell us that not only was Jesus teaching; He was also preaching. And Mark 2:2 tells us that there were “many gathered together, so that there was no longer room to receive them,” because of the press of the crowd.

So Luke 5:17 tells us, “as He was teaching, that there were Pharisees and teachers of the law.” This is the first time in Luke’s Gospel that the Pharisees are mentioned. And we learn in verse 21, that the “teachers of the law” are scribes.

What are the Pharisees and what are the scribes? Starting at verse 17 to the end of chapter 6 in Luke’s Gospel, we see the beginning of the conflict between Jesus and the religious establishment. That will be led by the Pharisees. So they are mentioned all the way through this section of Luke as they come into conflict, and it culminates with them turning Jesus over to the Romans and having Him crucified.

The word “Pharisee” literally means “separate one.” After the Babylonian captivity, the Jews came back to their homeland, and there was a Jewish sect of men who gave themselves to nothing but keeping every “jot and tittle” of the Law. This group became synonymous with hypocrisy, only because they were so devoted to the Law and so picky about all their rules and regulations that they became legalistic. They didn’t even keep all of their own rules, but they looked down on and despised others who didn’t keep their standards.

Today you might call someone who is a legalist a “Pharisee,” based on their picture in the Scriptures. That doesn’t mean every one of them were hypocrites; many of them may have been sincere. But as a group, they were opposing Christ and coming against Him.

Then the scribes, mentioned as “teachers of the law,” were the theologians. They studied the Scriptures, they translated the Scriptures and they wrote the commentary on the Scriptures. Then the Pharisees came in and tried to do all that the scribes had told them to do.

So this establishment of the Jews is there in Capernaum in this crowded house when Jesus was there teaching and preaching, and God’s power was there to heal.

And in verse 18, it says, “Then behold...” or “look” “...men brought on a bed a man who was paralyzed, whom they sought to bring in and lay before Him.” Luke doesn’t tell us, but the other Gospels tell us that there were four men who carried the paralytic. These men were famous, because they brought their friend, who needed to be healed and forgiven, to Jesus, who was their only hope. They are a reminder to us that we should bring our spiritually “lame,” unable to walk in the ways of the Lord, needing Christ, to Jesus, so that He can forgive them and heal them.

Thank God for them! When I get to heaven, I want to meet these four guys. I want to find out their names, what they were thinking when they tore the roof off and I want to shake their hands. They came to this house, it’s packed out, there’s no way they could even get near the house, so they went up on the roof, verse 19. In those days, the roofs were flat, which makes good sense, because they could put a patio on the roof. And there would be stairs on the outside of the house to get to the roof.

So they got through the crowd somehow, got to the stairs and went up on the roof. They tore a hole in the roof and lowered their friend down into the house.

Years ago the church I previously pastored, Calvary Chapel, San Bernardino, started in the home. This week we will celebrate 50 years of ministry at the church in San Bernardino. What a glorious thing that is. We used to get almost 100 people in the living room. We would open the windows, and people would sit outside on the grass listening through the windows as I taught the Bible. They were also down the hall, in the kitchen on the counter, in the bedroom, on the back of the couch and even in the bathroom. They packed out this house, and it reminds me of this story—just the energy, power and presence of the Lord. So we would gather to worship and pray and study God's Word.

So the paralytic's friends showed up carrying him. They must have said, "How are we going to get through the crowd?" I would have said, "Forget it! It's too crowded. Let's go home. It isn't going to happen." But these four men had determination, faith, confidence and love that motivated them to get their friend to Jesus.

Then they took the paralytic up on the roof, and tore it up. If it is Peter's house, he's probably freaking out. "Somebody's going to have to pay for this!" He's probably calling his insurance adjuster. "Get over here right away! I need your help!" And as Jesus was preaching, all this debris began to fall.

I've preached for many years, and I've had many interruptions. But I've never had anybody break through the roof to get into my Bible study.

When I was in the Philippines years ago, I'll never forget the first time I was in this jungle church preaching. In the middle of my sermon, coming right down the center aisle was this great, big dog. It walked down front and stood there and looked at me while I was preaching. Then it walked back and forth. And I'm thinking, Where are the dog ushers around here? We never got rid of the dog. It paced back and forth the whole sermon looking at me. I thought, Well, this sermon's gone to the dogs! I'll never forget that interruption; it was amazing.

No doubt Jesus wasn't bothered or disturbed by this interruption. I believe He had a big smile on His face, had debris in his hair, the dust was in the room and He was so pleased at the faith of these four friends and the paralytic as they lowered their friend down.

Verse 19, "And when they could not find how they might bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the housetop and let him down with his bed through the tiling into the midst before Jesus." So either they tied ropes to the four corners or they tied their clothes, but they lowered this man down.

And verse 20 says, "When He saw their faith...." You can see real faith, because faith goes into action. Faith works. If your faith does not manifest itself in works or corresponding action, it's not a real, authentic, genuine faith. So Jesus saw their faith.

There are lessons we can learn from these four friends. Number one, they had love for their friend, because he needed healing and forgiveness. They overcame great obstacles because of that love. Someone said, "They vandalized another's property to achieve their end." I like

that. They were willing to shred the roof of this house, because they loved their friend so much to get him to Jesus.

How much do you love the lost? How much do you love your family? Your friends? Your coworkers? Do you ever invite them to church? Do you ever share the Gospel with them? Do you ever tell them about Jesus? We should be busy bringing our lost, "lame" friends to Jesus.

Number two, these friends had conviction or hope, coupled with the love for their friend, that Jesus was their only hope. Why go to Jesus? Because only Jesus can forgive sin. And only Jesus can heal the paralyzed, lame man.

In Acts 4:12, it says, "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." It's the name of Jesus. It means Jesus is our only hope. So we need love for our lost friends, we need to seek to bring them to Jesus that they might be forgiven and saved.

Number three, these friends also had faith. They had faith, hope and love. Verse 20 says, "He saw their faith." Whose faith did Jesus see? He obviously saw the faith of the four friends; they had enough faith to go through the crowd, to tear the roof off, to lower their friend down to Jesus. Jesus, looking up, saw their faith.

I picture Jesus in this somewhat-dark room; they didn't have lights or electricity in those days. They just had a few windows. And when the ceiling was opened up through the roof, the light came in and I imagine all four men laying on the roof, sticking their faces over the hole, dust on them, smiling and looking down. What a picture!

Jesus looked at them. He didn't get upset with them. He didn't rebuke them. He didn't get mad at them. He didn't say, "Get off the roof! You just interrupted my exposition of Scripture!" I would have done that. But Jesus was smiling! If I were to do a movie of this story, Jesus would have drywall dust all over Him and a big smile on His face, because He saw their love, conviction and faith.

And I believe He also saw the faith of the paralytic. I kind of changed my view of this story as I studied it again this week. I believe the paralytic had a yearning and a longing to be forgiven. I used to think he may have been disappointed when Jesus first said, "Your sins are forgiven you" rather than, "Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house." I believe he wanted forgiveness and had faith and Jesus saw His heart. Jesus had to fix his sin problem before He could fix his cripple problem. His biggest problem was his heart and not his legs.

So Jesus saw their faith, the faith of the four friends, and He saw the faith of the paralytic. The friends' faith was persistent. It didn't give up. I would have given up. Their faith was creative; they tore off the roof. That's a creative way to get people to Jesus. Their faith was sacrificial; it cost them. Who paid for the repairs? Who paid for the roof?

Someone said, "These four men understood what was important." I like that. "Too many

Christians are more interested in the place of worship rather than the people. Or the loveliness of the service rather than the 'lostness' of the sinner." That's good. We're worried about no interruptions, everything has to be right, about my comfortable pew in my comfortable church, about my comfortable fellowship with my comfortable donuts and Christian, sanctified coffee. Or when you go to eat at a restaurant after church, you ask for "a sanctified section," and you ask for a "Holy-Spirit filled waitress or waiter," because you don't want to get cooties.

Everything is sterile; we don't want to tear up a roof. We don't want to get dust on us. We don't want to be inconvenienced. We don't want to bother bringing someone to church. They might take up too much room in our car or cause us to use too much gas or eat too much food or—whatever. We have all our own reasons why we can't invite our friends, why we can't invite our family or our employer to come to church with us or to come to Christ.

But these four friends had so much love, so much conviction or hope, so much faith that they would do anything to get their friend to Jesus.

It reminds me of the Jesus Movement of the '60s. When Calvary Chapel, Costa Mesa was just starting, all the hippies were coming to church. I was one of those hippies. They had just put new carpet in the church, and the hippies were coming in barefoot. So some of the "established" people in the church felt the bare feet were damaging the carpet. Someone then took it upon themselves to put up a sign in the foyer that read, "No bare feet allowed." When Pastor Chuck Smith saw that sign, he took it down. He met with the church and said, "If we can't let the hippies in because of the carpet, then we'll tear out the carpet and let the hippies come in!" That would be like tearing off the roof to get your friend to Jesus.

The hippies used to sit all over the floor, sit in the pews and put their toes through the holes for the communion containers. People would freak out and say, "Oh, that's the 'abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet!'"

I remember people would ask me, "When are you going to cut your hair? Why do you look like a hippy? Why do you look like that? When are you going to look like a Christian?" I thought, I look more like Jesus than you do! What are you talking about?!

God looks at the heart. And we need to look at the heart. So let's get radical and tear the roof off if we need to, so sinners can hear the good news about Jesus Christ. Take the Gospel to the streets.

I like that Jerry Vines, an old Baptist preacher, gave names to these four men. He called the first man Frank Faith, who believed Jesus could heal; the second man was called Harry Hope, who believed Jesus would heal; the third man was called Larry Love, who said, "I love you. Won't you come to Jesus?"; and the fourth man was called Dan Determination, who said, "Let's not quit. Let's get you to Jesus." I like that. These are the kind of people we need in our church. So let's be people who care about the lost and seek to bring others to Jesus.

Not only did Jesus look up to see the faith of the friends, verses 18-20, but secondly, He looked

down and saw the paralyzed man's faith, verse 20. When He saw his faith, He said to the paralytic, 'Man, your sins are forgiven you.'" What an amazing statement!

His friends brought him because he was lame and could not walk. But Jesus looked not at his lameness but at his spiritual need. And he told the man, "Your sins are forgiven." Jesus saw not only the paralyzed legs, but He also saw the impotent man's paralyzed soul. Jesus saw this man's faith, but the man made no request for forgiveness. Yet Jesus said, "Man your sins are..." not "maybe," not "might be," not "if you're lucky," not "you better hope they are" but "... forgiven you."

Take note of the fact that the man didn't say, "Jesus, please forgive me. Jesus, I believe in You. Jesus, I trust You." This man was just lowered down through the roof. But Jesus knows the heart. Jesus perceived the faith of the four friends, and Jesus perceived the lame man's faith and his need for forgiveness. This perception is because Jesus is the divine Son of God. Jesus knows our supreme need is that of forgiveness of our sins.

Jesus knows our supreme need is the forgiveness of our sin. If you are not yet forgiven of your sins, that's your greatest need. You say, "Well, I need a job." "I need a healing." But your greatest need is for forgiveness of sins. The Bible says, "What profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (Matthew 16:26). It profits you nothing.

What good would it do for the lame man to live his life with legs but then die and go to hell for all eternity if he were not forgiven of his sins? So the first, paramount need of all human beings is the forgiveness of our sins.

In Matthew 9:2, there is something not recorded by Luke about this paralytic. Jesus said, "Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you." That indicates the man wanted, desired and was longing for his own sin to be forgiven. And in the Jewish mind, sickness directly related to sin. So Jesus would have to heal the man to convince him that his sin had been forgiven.

Alexander McLaren said, "The world has superficially diagnosed man's disease and is woefully wrong about the remedy." Oh, how true that is! Society treats the symptoms. Jesus came to take away the cause.

When I watch the news, I get so frustrated with all the pundits and the discussion and politics. They talk about the problems and they think they're politically, socially or economically answered. They don't realize that the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart. It's not a skin color; it's a sin problem. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked" (Jeremiah 17:9). Someone said, "The paralytic man is a picture of all men. In Adam's fall, we fell all."

If you don't understand that when Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, he brought sin, sickness and death upon the whole human race, you'll never understand or properly diagnose man's great need. You'll be treating symptoms, and they'll be no change. If you want to change society, change men's hearts.

People are freaking out saying, “How could there be a God of love who allows war in this world?” God doesn’t start wars and God doesn’t necessarily stop wars. He can do that, but the cause is man’s sinful heart. Until men’s hearts are changed, the world lies in sin.

Jesus will reverse the curse. The curse in the world today came as a result of Adam’s sin and transgression. There will come a future day when that will be reversed. But until that day, sickness, sorrow, suffering, war and all these diseases will remain in our world as part of our fallen existence.

Forgiveness of our sins is a great miracle. It’s supernatural. Only God can forgive sins completely. And God forgives all of our sins. It is certain, verse 20. Jesus said “are forgiven.” I’ve underlined the word “are.” Not “might be,” but your sins “are forgiven.” That’s the certainty. And this pronouncement of “Your sins are forgiven” in the Greek is in the perfect tense. Perfect tense means it happened in the past and continues into the present and then on into the future. So it’s permanent and won’t change.

the Cross of Christ. And it meets our greatest need and brings the greatest blessing: forgiveness of sins and fellowship with God. In order to forgive our sins, God had to send His Son, Jesus Christ, from heaven to suffer and die on the Cross for our sins. Jesus is the God-man, the perfect man and God in the flesh. He had to be a man in order to die, and He had to be God in order to forgive us and save us.

Not only did Jesus look up to see the persistent men and looked down to see the paralytic, but, thirdly, He also looked around and perceived the hard hearts of the scribes and Pharisees, verses 21-26. “And the scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying...” They were reasoning this in their minds. “...‘Who is this who speaks blasphemies?’” Take note of these question marks. Who does this man think He is?! He’s blaspheming! “‘Who can forgive sins but God alone?’”

Verse 22, “But when Jesus perceived their thoughts, He answered and said to them, ‘Why are you reasoning in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, “Your sins are forgiven you,” or to say, “Rise up and walk?” But that you may know that the Son of Man....’” That’s the first time He uses that title “...has power on earth to forgive sins”—He said to the man who was paralyzed, ‘I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.’ Immediately he rose up before them, took up what he had been lying on, and departed to his own house, glorifying God. And they were all amazed...” which means “blown away” “...and they glorified God and were filled with fear, saying, ‘We have seen strange things today!’” You bet they had! They were blown away and glorified God. This was really radical and strange.

There are many lessons here. There is more than one miracle in this story. First is the miracle of perception. Jesus perceived faith in the four men and in the paralytic. Jesus perceived the need for forgiveness of sin in the paralytic, and He perceived the thoughts of the scribes and Pharisees, verses 21-23.

The scribes and Pharisees didn't verbalize their questions; they were just thinking these things in their minds. This man speaks blasphemy! If Jesus were not God, that would be true: to usurp yourself in the place that only God held would be blasphemy. And then they reasoned, truthfully, Who can forgive sins but God alone? They're thinking this in their minds. They didn't say anything, but Jesus knew their thoughts.

Jesus knows what you're thinking right now. You're busted! I'm glad I don't know what you're thinking. And you can be really glad that you don't know what I'm thinking. But Jesus knows what I'm thinking, and Jesus knows what you're thinking. The Bible says, "All things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:13). You can fool your husband, you can fool your wife, you can fool your friends, but you can't fool God. He sees and He knows. This is either scary, frightening and convicting if your heart is not right with God, if you're playing games with God, or you're sincere but stumbling and falling and you love the Lord, He sees and knows your heart and He understands. I'm thankful that God knows my heart. So Jesus read their thoughts.

Then Jesus said to them, in verse 23, "Which is easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Rise up and walk'?" There are a lot of things that can be said about this statement, but Jesus asked two questions to their two questions.

Jesus was intending to convey that it was easier to say, "Your sins are forgiven," because it's unverifiable. When He said, "Your sins are forgiven," how would anyone know that was true or not? Anyone could say that. But Jesus said, "But that you may know that the Son of Man has power..." and ability and the right "...on earth to forgive sins—He said to the man who was paralyzed, 'I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.' Immediately he rose up before them, took up what he had been lying on, and departed to his own house, glorifying God."

I'll bet this man shook Jesus' hand and went home walking and leaping and praising God. When you haven't walked your whole life and Jesus heals your legs, you put them to good use: you jump and jump and leap and walk all the way home. He and his bed no longer needed to be transported. That's a marvelous picture.

So Jesus was saying that He is God, He has the authority to heal the man immediately. The power of God was there to heal. The miracle of perception, secondly, turned into the miracle of power; power that proves that Jesus is God, power that pictures the salvation of a sinner. What a marvelous miracle Jesus performed: the power to forgive sin, the power to heal the paralytic, who went walking and leaping and glorifying God.

Our greatest need is for forgiveness. Don't forget that. We have a world that is freaking out for social justice, but the greatest need is for forgiveness. We have political this and political that, fighting and all the issues that are going on. But man's greatest need is for forgiveness. If you die in your sin, you are lost for all eternity. "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (Matthew 16:26). It profits you nothing.

If you are not forgiven, that's your greatest need. It's not to make more money, not to have a nicer house, not to have a different job, not to have a better wife or husband. Rather you need forgiveness. So the root cause of the problems you have in your life is your sinful heart.

Maybe you're struggling in your marriage right now. And you're thinking, I just need a divorce. I need to get out of this marriage. What you need is to get your heart right with God—your heart and your spouse's heart.

When they asked Jesus about divorce, He said, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so" (Matthew 19:8). It was never God's purpose, plan or design. God wants to forgive and cleanse your heart. God wants to change your heart; He wants to give you a new heart. The Bible says, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). God can forgive you and heal your marriage.

Some of the problems you're facing right now is because you need to repent of your sins. You need to come lame, broken and say, "God forgive me. God, I need You. God, cleanse me. God, help me!"

People come up to me all the time after service and they share this problem, that problem, and I often inquire or pray with them that they'll give their hearts to Christ, that they'll know the Lord, that they'll be born again, that they'll be forgiven of their sins. I know that once we become aligned properly vertically with God, that horizontally our relationships come into play. So don't forget the lesson that your greatest need is forgiveness.

And forgiveness is an exclusively divine act. Ultimately sin is against God. When David sinned with Bathsheba, he said, "Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight" (Psalm 51:4). David was a true man of repentance, "a man after [God's] own heart" (Acts 13:22). He knew that he had sinned against God. That's the key to forgiveness: knowing that only God can forgive your sins, wanting to get right with God and not worrying about the consequences of your sin in your life but rather wanting cleansing of your sin in your heart.

Jesus is God and He is willing and ready and able to forgive your sins. He can cleanse you, He can heal you and He can give your lame legs the ability to walk in holiness and true godliness.