

Authority on Earth to Forgive Sins
Luke 5:17-26
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Read Luke 5:17-26

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matthew 4:4b)

Introduction

A few years back a college student named Erin, who had been part of my youth ministry, called me out of the blue. She said that she had stayed in touch with one of her high school friends named Collin who needed someone to talk to. There were depression, addiction and behavior issues, but he also wanted to know why she believed in God and whether Christianity had any validity, and so she spent some time talking to him. But he had too many questions and their conversation was going nowhere. But she didn't want to leave him, so she called me and asked me if I'd meet with him. I said I'd love to, so he came by my office and we talked for a couple hours. We stayed in touch for a little while, I don't know if anything came of it. But I was thrilled that Erin was faithful to care enough about her friend to point him to Jesus. She could have walked away and said he's too much trouble, but she didn't- she stayed with him.

Maybe you've had similar experiences where you were in the position of helping a friend find out about Jesus. Maybe you had friends who took you to church or told you about Jesus themselves. I had a friend when I was in high school in Houston, TX named Eric that my brother and I invited to come to youth group with us. He was hesitant at first, hadn't really experienced church, but then had a great time and made friends. He ended up spending a lot of time with our youth pastor, Dan, who made sure that he understood what the Gospel was. Eric committed his life to Christ within a year of attending our youth group. Which made the next years of his life a mix of pain and hope. He was driving his car around Houston at night when a tire came off of a truck heading the other way, bounced over the median, and slammed into Eric's car. He was paralyzed from the neck down in the car crash and to this day is in a wheelchair. I lost touch with him after I went off to college and my family moved to Florida, so I wondered if his faith had sustained him and stayed with him. Years later, we connected on Facebook, and do you know what he posted on January 19th of this year? Matthew 5:9 – *“blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”* Praise God that thirty years later he still believes!

Today's passage is about some men who brought their friend to Jesus. It was a man like Eric who was paralyzed. And whereas Erin and I had friends that we brought to places where they could hear about Jesus, these guys were blessed to be able to go straight to the Man Himself in the flesh. They carried their friend on a bed and placed him right in front of Jesus. And Jesus did two amazing miracles in this man's life. As we work our way through the passage, we'll be reminded that Jesus can still do miracles in people's lives, and that it's the most loving thing in the world to

I. Bring Your Friends to Jesus (vv. 17-20a)

17 On one of those days, as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with him to heal. 18 And behold, some men were bringing on a bed a man who was paralyzed, and they were seeking to bring him in and lay him before Jesus, 19 but finding no way to bring him in, because of

the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the midst before Jesus. ²⁰ *And when he saw their faith*

This is a story focused on Jesus, no doubt, but I think there's a great point to be made up front about something that Jesus commended: verse 20, "*And when He saw their faith*" - it's the faith that the friends showed in bringing the lame man into His presence. Jesus acted based on that faith. This paralyzed man had no way to get to Jesus on his own. His friends had to bring him. They knew that Jesus was something special, they must have heard the buzz around the region that He was performing all kinds of miracles. But the house Jesus was teaching in was so packed that they couldn't get in on the ground, so they had to go to Plan B. When we hear about them lowering the paralyzed man through the roof, we probably have a picture of them tearing a hole in the shingling, doing irreparable damage. But William Barclay says that in most homes at the time "the roof consisted of flat beams laid across from wall to wall, three feet apart. The space in between the beams was filled with brushwood packed tightly with earth. It was the easiest thing... to dig out the filling between two of the beams; it did not even damage the house very much, and it was easy to repair the breach again."¹

Do you care enough about your friends to take them to Jesus? If your friend needed groceries, you'd take them to the store. If your friend was in an accident, you'd take them to the E/R. And if they are spiritually lost, do you take them to Jesus? We can't physically take them, so what do I mean?

- 1) First off, take them to Jesus in your prayer life; the most powerful part of evangelism is praying that the Holy Spirit will change someone's heart.
- 2) Take them to Jesus in your conversations with them- introduce them to Jesus. In the language of the Psalms: "*tell of all His wonderful acts.*" Tell what He's done in your life, what the Scriptures say about Him.
- 3) Invite them to study a book of the Bible or a Christian book written for unbelievers with you.
- 4) Take them to Jesus in His church with His people. Invite them here to worship where they can hear the gospel and see people who believe deeply and worship a holy God. One study said that 40% of people who joined a church first came because a friend invited them, and 37% linked their conversion to being invited to church.² If they're unwilling to step inside a church and you think it would help them, bring them to me or John or another mature Christian. We'd love to talk about God with anybody who's interested.

After the paralytic's friends brought him into Jesus' presence, we see two miracles. One of them is the miracle they were looking for, what they were expecting, but the other is not. That's the one that happens first:

II. The Miracle of Forgiven Sins (vv. 20b-23)

he said, "Man, your sins are forgiven you." ²¹ *And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"* ²² *When Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answered them, "Why do you question in your hearts?"* ²³ *Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'?*

The scribes and Pharisees were absolutely right, only God can forgive sins. You can't just walk around telling people, "your sins are forgiven." I mean, you can, but on what basis, on what authority can you claim that? How can you possibly know that, unless you know the mind of God? And Jesus is not saying "your sins are forgiven" as a statement of fact, like, "hey, you have dark hair."

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark* (Westminster: John Knox, 2017), p. 40.

² <https://www.evangelismcoach.org/personal-invitations-to-church-are-most-effective/>

No, He was declaring something that He had just accomplished: “I have just forgiven your sins.” Of course, that was blasphemy to the scribes and Pharisees who thought that Jesus was just another human teacher.

If you ever have the choice between being physically healed and spiritually healed: take the spiritual healing. If we saw things as they truly were in the perspective of eternity, we would value Jesus’ healing of our souls that allows us to spend eternity in heaven much more than we would value healthy bodies for the brief span of time that we are on earth. If this paralyzed man got perfect legs, became a world-class athlete even, will that guarantee that he has a great life, that he would never be unhappy? Of course not, we know plenty of examples of people who are successful, healthy achievers who are depressed or have great problems.

I’m not saying that it’s wrong to pray for health, for healing; those are good things, we pray about them all the time. And it’s very easy for me who hasn’t had many health issues in my 47 years to say this, when I know people who have cancer and all kinds of physical ailments and long-term health issues. It’s the perspective that our spiritual health is greater than our physical health. In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul says that we groan in our earthly bodies, our tents, and long for our heavenly dwelling. When we get to heaven, we will receive perfect resurrection bodies.

Jesus comes to us, just like He came to the paralyzed man, and says, “I’m going to give you what you really need; which is so much more crucial than what you think you want.” “You think you want healthy legs, which will help you in this life, but having your sins forgiven will help you into eternity.”

So, the man has gotten what he needed, now Jesus adds in what he really wanted:

III. The Miracle of Physical Healing (vv. 24-26)

²⁴ But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the man who was paralyzed—“I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home.” ²⁵ And immediately he rose up before them and picked up what he had been lying on and went home, glorifying God. ²⁶ And amazement seized them all, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, “We have seen extraordinary things today.”

When Jesus said, “*Which is easier, to say ‘Rise and walk’ or ‘Your sins are forgiven’*” back in verse 22 He doesn’t mean easier to actually form the words with your mouth. He means it’s way easier for me to say this man’s sins are forgiven because none of you can really check that out. You can’t know if I’m lying or not. But if I say he healed, that would be a lot harder to say, because then he would have to actually get up off this mat. That’s verifiable, you can check whether I’m lying.

When Jesus asks which is easier, the short answer is, “They’re both impossible!” If you’re not God, you can’t forgive sins and you can’t heal a paralyzed man with just your words. But Jesus healed the man, and He said that it’s in order that those looking on would know that He has been given authority to forgive sins. “I’ll prove this thing that you can’t see by showing you the thing that you can see.” Jesus does this throughout His ministry- performs physical healings and miracles as a way of confirming His divinity and showing that He has spiritual power too. Essentially, “if you like what I’m doing healing these bodies, you should see what I can do for a soul!”

Now the fact that Jesus healed this man and many others, and that God can heal anyone at any time does not mean that He will always heal you. There are no guarantees in the Scriptures that God has bound Himself to heal you. The picture I see in Scripture is that God owes us nothing, but that in His

everlasting kindness, He gives us gifts. Sometimes those gifts are spiritual, sometimes they are physical. I've known people who were miraculously healed where their doctors could not explain it. Did God heal them outside of the use of medicine and the natural body's healing process? I don't know for sure. But I know He can. But sometimes He doesn't and we should not be angry and resentful as if He owes us healing. Sometimes, God is teaching and shaping us through our problems. To quote a Laura Story song called "Blessings": "*What if my greatest disappointments or the aching of this life is the revealing of a greater thirst this world can't satisfy? What if trials of this life are Your mercies in disguise.*" That song was not just written reflecting on general pain in life, that song was born out of a very difficult time in her life. Her husband was diagnosed with a brain tumor just a few years into their marriage. She wrote the song after praying for years for his healing that never came. She questioned God, but ultimately said that she had to choose whether to judge God based on their circumstances or choose to judge their circumstances based on what they held to be true of God.³ God always grants our prayer for salvation and forgiveness, and only sometimes grants our prayers for physical healing.

Conclusion: Two Responses to Jesus' Work

There are two responses to Jesus here in this passage, and every one of us is going to have one of these reactions:

1) The religious leaders' reaction- we've already touched on it in verse 21 – "*And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, 'Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?'*" A person today might say it like this: "I don't believe that. It doesn't fit into my worldview. My system of beliefs has no room for Jesus and miracles." Is that you? When people testify to God working in their lives, do you immediately discredit it? When you read about the miracles in the Bible, do you deny the possibility that they happened just because you've never experienced something like that, and don't believe that they could scientifically?

2) The crowd's reaction- Verse 26 – "*And amazement seized them all, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, 'We have seen extraordinary things today.'*" The people in the crowd might not have been able to explain or fully understand what they'd seen, but they were filled with awe and praised God for what happened.

Gregory Boyd is a professor of apologetics, a pastor and the author of a book called *Letters From a Skeptic*, which is the letters that he and his dad wrote back and forth; it's a great book, I highly recommend it. His dad, Ed, was an atheist who couldn't understand why his otherwise intelligent son had become a Christian and asked him every common unbeliever's question, which Greg then answered. Spoiler alert: his dad becomes a Christian at the end. Here's the final chapter, the tribute from Greg to his dad:

"The most profound change in Dad's post-conversion life was his general disposition. The pre-Christian Ed Boyd was usually contentious and ill-tempered. More often than not he was angry about something and very vocal about it. Soon after his surrender to Christ, Ed Boyd acquired a profound peace, a pervasive sweetness, and - most remarkably - an amazing sense of gratitude I never saw prior to his conversion.

What made his transformation more remarkable was that, soon after he committed his life to Christ, my father was given more reasons to complain than he had ever dreamed. One year after his conversion my father suffered the first of several debilitating strokes. Over the years he lost most of his physical abilities and verbal skills. Eventually this once fiercely independent man was unable to care for himself and was confined to a wheelchair. By the age of eighty, he was almost completely blind and deaf. The pre-Christian Ed Boyd would have been positively

³ Joyce Lorriene's article "The Message Behind the Song 'Blessings' by Laura Story,, found at godtv.com.

miserable, yet the Christian Ed Boyd rarely complained.

While it sounds odd, the worse things got for my father, the more grateful he became! Before his final stroke left him in a coma, I was with my father when he began to weep for no apparent reason. Shouting into his hearing aid, I requested an explanation for his tears. His response floored me. Sitting in his wheelchair, wearing diapers, unable to do anything but the most elementary tasks for himself, nearly totally blind and deaf, this once-malcontented man said in his stroke-impaired speech, "Because I feel so blessed by God just to be here." I embraced him tightly for a long moment as we both wept. As a witness to the unfathomable love and power of God, this man was definitely not the same father I grew up with...

Two weeks later he fell into a coma from a massive stroke that caused his brain to hemorrhage. He passed away three weeks later. One of my greatest joys is knowing my dad's dreams of heaven have now come true. I envision him in the presence of Christ, dancing with absolute abandon and shouting for joy at the full realization of God's deep love for him."⁴

Ed Boyd found out that his spiritual condition- of having his sins forgiven and his place in heaven secured through Jesus- were more important than his temporary physical condition. Do you know that? Do you believe that? Can you praise God for that?

I want to return one more time to the question of which is easier to say: "Your sins are forgiven" or "Rise and walk" - because there's a deeper way I want to look at this question. Let's look at it from one more angle. When Jesus says "rise and walk", He's healing a man whom He had created. It's actually not very hard for God to fix broken things; if God can create everything in the universe in 6 days, He can surely fix something, even a human body, with just a word. Not a problem. But for God to say "your sins are forgiven," it actually takes more than just His word. God cannot just overlook sin and decide that someone can be let off the hook. As soon as He does that, He ceases to be a good judge. Sin has consequences and must be punished. For every sin a person commits, blood must be shed; the whole Old Testament sacrificial system was designed to drive that deep into Israel's understanding - "when I sin, blood has to be shed to atone for that sin."

And that's as true today as it ever was- when we sin, God's justice demands someone's death, someone's blood for our sin. Your sins will be paid for when you die- your death will satisfy God's justice, but you will be eternally separated from Him unless there is a substitute. The good news is that Jesus will be that sacrifice of death and His blood that will pay for your sins. His death will substitute for yours. Dan Doriani summarizes this: "On this day, Jesus forgave sins by a word. Some time later, he earned the right to say that word by going to the cross for the sin of all who believe in him. His work two thousand years ago allows him to say to the paralytic and to all who believe, 'Your sins are forgiven.'"⁵ We sang about it in "His Mercy Is More":

"His blood was the payment, His life was the cost,
We stood beneath a debt we could never afford,
Our sins they are many, His mercy is more."

So when Jesus asks if saying "your sins are forgiven" is an easy thing to say: yes, it's easy to say, but it cost His perfect obedience and His painful death on the cross to achieve. Amen.

Benediction - Romans 15:13 - "*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.*"

⁴ Gregory and Ed Boyd, *Letters From a Skeptic*. David C. Cook: 2008, pp. 234-235.

⁵ Daniel M. Doriani, *Matthew*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008, p. 376.