

“The Healing of Forgiveness,” Luke 5:17-26 (Second Sunday of Lent, March 17, 2019)

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, 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’? 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.”

PRAY

We are working our way through the gospel of Luke these weeks before Easter Sunday and today we come to the account of Jesus healing the paralyzed man.

As is always the case when Jesus heals someone there’s more going on than simply a naked display of God’s power. Jesus doesn’t only heal with his miracles; he teaches with them. And in our text for today Jesus teaches us about forgiveness.

I think it’s fair to say that while forgiveness is important in all the major world religions (Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism), and while we hear it talked about positively in the secular culture around us, only in Christianity is forgiveness essential. Only in Christianity is forgiveness absolutely foundational. Only in Christianity do you see spoken of like this: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” Matthew 6:14-15.

Forgiveness is the essence of Christianity, and we’ll answer three questions about forgiveness from our text: *why does Jesus forgive?* *Second, how does Jesus forgive?* *Third, how can Jesus forgive?*

First, why does Jesus forgive? We’re told that Jesus is preaching to a crowd of people when suddenly some men bring a paralyzed friend of theirs to Jesus. They can’t get to Jesus directly because of the crowd, so they climb up on the roof. Palestinian roofs were typically flat with staircases leading up to them and composed of thatched tiles placed on beams. These tiles could be easily removed to be repaired or replaced, and these men did just that: they removed them and lowered their friend down to set him directly at the feet of Jesus.

As a preacher, it can be tough to preach with distractions, but usually you just tune them out. Often after a service someone on staff will say, “Did you hear that noise during the sermon?” and I’ll reply, “I didn’t even notice it.” But if someone started cutting a hole in the roof and then lowered a paralyzed man to the floor, I’d notice. Everything in the service would come to a stop while we watched.

Now, why were the friends lowering the man down to Jesus’ feet? Why does the paralyzed man want to be set at Jesus’ feet? It’s obvious. Jesus is a miracle worker. They all want Jesus to work his magic so the man on the bed can walk again.

But what does Jesus say? Luke 5:20b: “Man, your sins are forgiven you.” Just imagine for a moment the account stopped there, and that’s all there is to the story. How do you think the man on the bed would have reacted?

I have no doubt that he would have been extremely disappointed. I could imagine the man saying, “Jesus, I don’t mean any disrespect, but I did not come here to get my sins forgiven. Don’t you see? I can’t walk! I’m not too concerned about having my sins forgiven because I have a far bigger problem than that!”

And Jesus, by going about the healing the way he did, was saying to the man, “No, you don’t.”

Jesus says, “I know you’ve suffered a long time. But your biggest problem is not your physical suffering. Your biggest problem is your sin.”

Friends, I don’t know what you walked in here this morning thinking your biggest problem is, but it is not the nasty things that have been done to you or how you’ve been hurt. It’s not that life hasn’t been fair to you. It’s not your parents, or your spouse, or your singleness, or your children, or your job. It’s not even a cancer diagnosis or spinal cord injury.

Your biggest problem is your sin. You were created by a holy God to live a life that reflects his character: a life of perfect love, patience, kindness, and courage, and ***you haven’t done that.*** Because God is holy and wants a perfect universe, and because he’s determined to have it, **he will destroy all sin.** Our God is at war with all the things that lead to hatred, division, jealousy, abuse, greed, racism, and sexual immorality. The question is: how will God go to war against those things *without going to war against you?* Because those things lurk inside every one of us.

The answer, of course, is Jesus. Through Jesus Christ we can receive the forgiveness of sins we so desperately need.

Yet it’s hard for us to feel that need. You know, in certain corners of Christianity, they have healing crusades. These men and women who claim to be able to work wonders can, night after night, can draw thousands upon thousands of people who want their healing. But say you want to hold a “forgiveness” crusade? No one would show up. It just doesn’t feel like something we need. **It feels like that if we just get our felt needs met, everything will be fine.**

But it doesn't work that way. I think I can prove it to you. My guess is that almost everyone in this room has had the experience of getting something they really wanted. Whether it was academic success, or athletic success, or getting in a relationship with that one person you drooled over for so long, or getting the job you wanted – a lot of us know that feeling. And in some part of your heart while you were working your tail off to get it you thought, “If I get this, then I'll finally be happy.”

Then, you got it and celebrated. But six months later, the joy wore off. It didn't excite you anymore. And then you set your hopes on something else and said, “Well, maybe when I get this, then I'll be happy.” Ever since your life has been a treadmill you can't get off.

Jesus, in healing the paralyzed man this way, says, “I am going to get to the root of your discontent. It's not your circumstances – as awful as they may be. I've come to deal with your greatest problem. It is your noisy, restless, unforgiven heart. It is full of anxiety, rage, fear, pride, bitterness, because your relationship with God is broken. Until you're healed of that you will never be able to truly walk, no matter what shape your spinal column is in.”

Many of you know who Joni Eareckson Tada is, and how she's been a quadriplegic for more the 50 years as a result of diving into shallow water, and one of her favorite hymns says, “Pass me not, Oh Gentle Savior, hear my humble cry; while on others thou art calling do not pass me by.”

This was what she wrote once: “I can't tell you how many times I used to sing this as a prayer when I was first injured and in the hospital. This is how the hymn would connect: I would picture that passage in John 5 where the disabled people came to the pool of Bethesda to be healed. I imagined myself among the many that day when Jesus walked by the pool. I would picture the columns and porches. I felt the dry, dusty air. I envisioned Jesus walking among the others, healing them, touching them, and I would plead, ‘Oh, Jesus, oh Jesus, don't pass me by!’ I would see myself on a straw mat, Jesus approaching, His eyes meeting mine, Him sensing my desperation, stepping over others to kneel by me, reaching down, touching my cheek and saying – ‘Yes! Daughter, be healed.’ Oh, my goodness, the power of that image could even cause a muscle spasm back then. I would open my eyes, see my hospital room, and I would strain to rise from my bed. My legs and hands never got the message. Back then it seemed as though Jesus had passed me by.

“Decades later there was the chance for me and my husband to visit Israel. And there I was visiting Jerusalem. We turned a cobblestone corner and -- oh, my goodness – look, Ken, here's the pool of Bethesda; here are the ruins of the colonnades and porches. Here are the steps leading down to the water. And sitting there looking over the ruins in my mind's eye I could picture hundreds of sick and paralyzed people. I turned to Ken and said, ‘Oh sweetheart, you wouldn't believe how many times I used to picture myself here...’ I scanned the ruins and whispered, ‘And now, after so many, many years, I'm... here, *I'm here.*’

“Tears literally welled in my eyes that day. ‘I made it,’ I said, resting my arm on the guardrail. ‘And Ken, Jesus *didn't* pass me by. He *didn't* overlook me. He did answer my prayer: He said ‘No,’ to a request for healing.’ And I'm so glad – because a ‘no’ answer has purged sin from my life, strengthened my commitment to Him, forced me to depend on grace, bound me with other

believers, fostered sensitivity, disciplined my mind, stretched my hope. Being in this wheelchair has meant knowing *Jesus* better... feeling *His* strength every day.”

Jesus didn't pass Joni by. He fixed what even someone who's been in a wheelchair for 50 years says is her biggest problem: her sin. That's why Jesus forgives.

Second, how does Jesus forgive? Now let's read all of Luke 5:20: “And when he [Jesus] saw their faith, he said, ‘Man, your sins are forgiven you.’” That's unusual. Jesus forgave the man his sins *before the man ever acknowledged his sins or said anything about his faith.*

If you've been coming to Grace Bible any time at all then I hope you've heard that forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God does not come with doing good works or by praying a certain, formulaic prayer. It does not come with walking an aisle after a church service and being presented to a congregation. It does not come by being baptized and joining the church. God's forgiveness comes with ***repentance and faith*** – and nothing else. You repent of your sins and you believe that Jesus is the Savior, you turn from your sins and turn to Christ.

But the paralyzed man says nothing; his friends say nothing. Yet Jesus can look at the man and say, “Your sins are forgiven.” Now how do reconcile that with what the rest of Scripture teaches about how you get God's forgiveness?

You reconcile by looking first at the men who carried the bed with the man lying on it. They had faith in Jesus. The men trusted in Jesus enough to cut a hole in a roof to get their friend to him. *And the paralyzed man trusted Jesus enough to go along with them.* He wasn't fighting them, he wasn't screaming “don't let me down from this roof.” No, the paralyzed went along with them. He wanted to be there. And that was all the faith it took for him to be forgiven.

So many people have this idea that the God of Christianity is a demanding god, waiting on you to slip up so that he can hurl a thunderbolt at you and smite you. If you don't get everything just right and dot all your “i's” and cross all your “t's” then don't expect anything good from him.

Jesus' healing of the paralyzed man shows that kind of thinking is nonsense. ***Jesus proves that God is looking for any chance you'll give him to bless you.*** Even when you don't say the right thing. Even when you don't say anything at all. *Jesus can see into your heart and is ready to receive you before you're even sure how to come to him in the first place.* Even when you're not 100% sure you want to believe in the first place.

I love the testimony of C.S. Lewis. He had been an atheist for years, and he was a professor in Magdalen College, Oxford University when slowly and reluctantly he became convinced of the Christian faith. He did not want to become a Christian, but he couldn't help it. This is what he wrote: “You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; **the Divine humility which will accept a**

convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape?"

Faith that is reluctant, inarticulate, and tiny is still saving faith, and if your faith is in Jesus, all you need is a little. "For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you." Matthew 17:20b.

How can that be? It is not the quantity or quality of your faith that saves you **but the object of your faith.** Say you and your friends rent a boat and go out in the Gulf of Mexico to do some deep sea fishing, but none of you know what you're doing. You don't have any life preservers and you weren't paying attention to the weather. Suddenly you find yourself in the middle of a powerful thunderstorm. The wind whips the waves up around you so much that your boat capsizes and sinks, and you find yourself in the water. You're not a strong swimmer. In just a few minutes you're going to drown, but you see a piece of driftwood floating past you in the water. It's not very big, and if you had to lay odds on whether or not that driftwood could keep you above water you'd say there's a ten percent chance. But you don't have any other choice, so you grab it. And it holds you up – you ride out the storm on that wood, the Coast Guard comes by a few hours later and picks you up.

You only had ten percent faith in the wood. You were ninety percent sure you were going to drown. Does that mean that you get on that Coast Guard cutter, you're only ten percent saved? No, you're one hundred percent saved, because it's not the quality of your faith or the quantity of your faith that saves you. It's the object of your faith.

Today, perhaps, some of you might say, "My faith in Jesus is so weak. I'm so easily tempted by other things. If I could total it up I probably have only ten percent faith in Jesus." Well, friends, if that's you, you're still saved. Our God is more ready to forgive than you are to come to him and ask for forgiveness. Psalm 103:8-13: "The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. ⁹ He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. ¹⁰ He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. ¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; ¹² as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. ¹³ As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him."

How do we apply this? *First*, if you are here this morning and struggling to believe in Jesus but you just can't make yourself go all the way, stop trying so hard. Remember that faith is a gift that God gives you. You can't manufacture it. "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast." Ephesians 2:8-9. "The gift of God" in verse 8 refers back to both the grace and the faith itself. Faith is a gift.

Therefore, instead of trying to work yourself into a state of belief or have some experience which you think will make you believe, just go to Jesus and say, "I want to know you, I want to see you!" If you'll do that you'll find Jesus has been after you for years and you just didn't realize it.

Second, maybe you've got a loved one who doesn't know Jesus, and your heart is breaking because this sibling, this friend, this child doesn't believe.

What can you do about it? ***Live out your faith.*** The paralyzed man's sins would not have been forgiven except that his friends were willing to live out their faith and take the man to Jesus, and the best way to bring new people into the faith is to live out yours.

I remember listening years ago to a woman who grew up in a fairly prominent, Christian family. Her father was a minister in a big church and her mother was also a leader in the women's ministry of their denomination. Her entire life her parents had her in church, taught her the Bible, taught her the children's catechism, had her in Christian schools.

But she said that by far what influenced her the most in her Christian walk was seeing her parents actually worshiping the Lord themselves on Sundays, actually seeing them read the Bible and pray over things at home during the week, actually seeing them serve others. You want to influence your kids? Then far more important than making them read their Bibles is you being obviously hungry to read yours. Far more important than telling your kids they need to serve others is to serve them yourself.

Third, how can Jesus forgive? Now let's read Luke 5:21-23: "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?'" And then Jesus sets out the question which has bedeviled Bible teachers and commentators for centuries: "Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Rise and walk?'"

Which is easier? We read this and we think, "It's got to be easier to say, 'your sins are forgiven' as opposed to "rise and walk" because one can be immediately **verified** and the other cannot." We can know immediately whether or not someone can walk, but we don't have a machine that can scan the human heart and detect if someone has been forgiven.

But that is not what Jesus was concerned about. For Jesus, making the lame to walk is *nothing*. Jesus is God and he knows how the human body is put together, for he put it together. It is through Jesus, the Bible tells us, that God created and sustains the universe. It is nothing at all for the Great Physician to reconnect severed neural pathways, heal a spinal column, strengthen atrophied legs, and enable someone to get up and walk. *It's like a child stacking his blocks.*

But what is difficult (and this is the point Jesus was making) is for God to forgive sins. It's hard not because God is unwilling to do so, but because to forgive God must reckon with one of his immutable characteristics: his justice. God's justice demands that sin be punished. It is not possible for God to snap his fingers and just make sin go away, because then he would not be just. Just as we would not want criminals to be able to commit crimes in our society and not face the consequences, God will not allow sin to go unpunished.

Jesus, in asking “which is easier,” had on his mind what was going to have to happen in order for people to receive forgiveness: the cross. On the cross Jesus would satisfy the justice of God, so that sinners would not have to. Jesus had on his mind what he would suffer on the cross, the wrath of God on sin. Jesus going through total abandonment, excruciating physical pain, unimaginable spiritual agony. The only way Jesus could forgive us is by going through hell on the cross. So, which is easier? *Friends, for Jesus, it's always easier to heal than to forgive.*

Do you want to be like Jesus? *You will never be more like Jesus than when you forgive.* When you want to angrily confront the person who's wronged you and shred them with your words for what they did to you, and then you don't. That's the practice of forgiveness. It hurts like everything to do that, but that's a small taste of what Jesus did for you. When you want to go to others and run that person down, ruin their reputation for what they've done to you, and then you don't. And, most importantly, when you want to dwell on what they've done to you and replay the tapes in your mind of what happened over and over again, and then you don't. It hurts, it's painful to do that. Forgiveness was costly to Jesus and it's costly to us.

But by being forgiven you'll find you'll become more like Jesus than you ever thought possible. One of my favorite examples of this is Edmund Pevensie, from *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In the second book in the series, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Edmund is a brat and spoiled-rotten. He lies, he complains, he annoys everyone, he's awful. He is incredibly mean to his younger sister, Lucy. When Edmund gets to Narnia he meets the White Witch, and at first she's kind to him. She gives Edmund his favorite treat, Turkish Delight, and promises that if he will just bring his brother and his sisters to meet her, she will make him King of Narnia. Edmund loves this idea because he wants his sisters and brother to bow down to him. Of course, the only reason she wants to meet them is so she can kill them and keep her throne.

So, Edmund goes back and brings his siblings to Narnia, but he can't immediately deliver them to the Witch, so he goes to meet her by himself. When he meets the White Witch the second time without his siblings, there's no mention of him being made king. Instead, she ties his hands behind his back, and orders a dwarf to whip him and force him to walk where she wants Edmund to go. Now, if that isn't a picture of what sin is, what addiction is – promising to make you a king but soon thereafter turning you into a slave – I don't know what is.

But something begins to happen to Edmund – he begins to repent. We read that on that walk, hands tied, whipped from behind, he saw how awful he'd been and that for the first time felt sorry for someone other than himself.

Soon after that he's rescued and meets Aslan the Lion, who forgives him. But the only way Aslan can save Edmund from the White Witch is by sacrificing himself on the stone table. Aslan dies, but then is resurrected because there is a Deeper Magic before the Dawn of Time that the White Witch doesn't know about. He leads Narnia to victory over the White Witch.

Edmund sees all this, and he's changed. From that point in the story on through the rest of the books Edmund is a different person. No one is wiser than Edmund in the rest of the series, no one is braver, no one is more compassionate, no one is more ready to forgive and no one looks for the good in others like Edmund. And whereas he once hated Lucy, now he is her protector.

He loves her, he cares for her. Why? He'd been forgiven. That's what the experience of forgiveness does for all of us.

Luke 5:25-26 says, "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.'"

Probably the people were amazed because the paralyzed man walked, and of course that would be an amazing sight. ***But nothing is more amazing than a forgiven sinner, and nothing glorifies God more than forgiveness.*** Jesus may not meet your greatest felt need today, but he is always ready to meet your greatest need, your need for forgiveness. Until that need is met it might only be cruel for him to meet the others.

Do you want to really, truly rise up and walk? Do you want, as Isaiah 40 puts it, to run and not be weary, walk and not faint? Then go to Jesus. Jesus is always ready to give you the kind of joy and freedom that can only come from knowing him. AMEN