

Luke 5:17-26 — Which is Easier to Say?

(Matthew 9:1-8; Mark 2:1-12)

17 One day Jesus was teaching, and the Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there, having come from Jerusalem and seemingly every village of Galilee and Judea. The power of the Lord to heal the sick was with Jesus.

18 Some men arrived who were carrying a paralyzed man on a mat. They tried to bring him inside to Jesus 19 but could not find a way through the crowd. So they went up on the roof, removed some tiles, and lowered him on his mat, right in front of Jesus.

20 When Jesus saw their faith, he said, “Man, your sins are forgiven.”

21 The scribes and Pharisees began asking each other, “Who is this man who speaks such blasphemy? Only God can forgive sins!”

22 Jesus knew what they were debating and replied, “Why are you questioning this in your hearts? 23 Which is easier to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven’ or ‘Get up and walk’? 24 But so you know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins – he said to the paralytic, “I tell you: Get up, pick up your mat, and go home.”

25 Immediately the man stood up in front of everyone, took up what he had been lying on, and went home glorifying God. 26 Everyone was amazed and glorified God. Filled with awe, they said, “We have seen astonishing things today.”

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v.17

“One day” — Here Luke is vague about the “when” of this incident, but we can infer Jesus was teaching in a private house, rather than the synagogue, and thus likely not on the Sabbath. One might surmise this occurred in Peter’s house in Capernaum.

“Pharisees and teachers of the law” — Jesus' reputation for profound teaching and astonishing miracles had gained the attention of the Jewish religious authorities and a deputation from the Sanhedrin had been dispatched. (Maclaren) Prominent men of the leading religious party and learned doctors of the Law had been drawn by curiosity, skepticism – or some perhaps by higher motives – to hear for themselves the teaching of this now-famous Nazarene carpenter. (Pulpit) With so many rumors in the air about the possibility Jesus was the promised Messiah, probably all felt the necessity of coming to some definite judgment regarding him (JFB) and religious leaders from many other villages in Galilee and Judea had joined the deputation in Capernaum.

Early in their history, the Pharisees had helped the Jews “maintain the purity of their religion by teaching how the Mosaic Law and the traditions that grew up alongside it ought to be applied in daily life.” The “teachers of the law” – most of whom were Pharisees – “had expert knowledge of the details of the Jewish legal tradition and so would be expected to form an opinion about the correctness of Jesus' teaching.” (Expositor's)

Many members of this delegation from “headquarters” (Uteley) would be exacting listeners – many of them unfriendly. They had come to evaluate “this revolutionary young teacher, who had no licence from them, and apparently not much reverence for them.” (Maclaren)

“The power of the Lord” — Even a hostile audience, however, would not have stirred the slightest nervousness in Jesus, however. He was clear that both his teaching and the miracles originated with the Father, not himself. “I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has commanded me what to say and how to say it.” (John 12:49) And “the Son cannot do anything on his own. He can do only what he sees the Father doing, and he does exactly what he sees the Father do.” (John 5:19) Anyone who would evaluate Jesus today would be passing judgment on the Father, not his Son.

vv.18-19

Some men arrived who were carrying a paralyzed man on a mat. However, with so many people pressing in to see Jesus – and the delegation of religious leaders

seated at the scene – the group couldn't find a way to maneuver through the crowd.

Fortunately, one of them was a bona fide problem-solver. They went up on the roof, removed some tiles, and lowered him on his mat, right in front of Jesus!

This was not a difficult challenge. Most houses an outside staircase that led to the roof, which was made of tiles mudded together. Many houses already had a trap door in the roof and, if not, making an opening in the roof was a simple – and common – matter. The roofing materials could be separated without being damaged. It was “nothing very extraordinary – an ingenious device, nothing more.” (Pulpit)

Luke mentions the friends' solution to their problem “not because it was strange, but to illustrate the active, and as it were nobly impatient, faith of the man and the bearers.” (Cambridge) “By it the friends of the sufferer showed that they were intensely in earnest, that they were confident that the Master had both the power and the will to do what they wanted.” (Pulpit)

What they wanted was a solution to their suffering friend's problem and they knew it was the kind only Jesus could fix. “Even though they encountered obstacles that would have stopped others, they persevered by faith until they received from Jesus what they had come for. ... Because they were needy and came in faith, the four men and their friend went away rejoicing with the friend's sins forgiven and his body healed.”¹ (Cole)

v.20

“When Jesus saw their faith” — Be sure you do not miss the significance of “their” faith. Jesus saw not just the faith of the paralytic man, but also of his friends, who were determined to do everything necessary to get their friend to Jesus. (Utley) While many commenters turn this verse to address the importance of intercessory prayer, Bruce reaches deeper to recognize “a distinct recognition of the value of ... vicarious faith.”

“Your sins are forgiven” — What an astonishing statement! Jesus declares forgiveness for the paralytic but, even more significant, he asserts his authority to

make that declaration. (Expositor's) Jesus is deliberately provoking the religious leaders who had come to evaluate him. In rabbinical Judaism, sin and sickness were related. (Utley) While Jesus was not implying that sin was the immediate cause of the paralytic's condition, he certainly was drawing a line in the sand for those who needed to decide whether he was indeed the Messiah.

MacArthur draws the picture clearly:

This passage reaches a high-water mark in the ministry of Jesus. We haven't been here before. This is the first time He has said this to somebody. ... Jesus is here claiming to have the authority to forgive sin. And thus He is claiming to be God. And He is either God or He is a blasphemer. ... If He's not God, then we have to say He is a blasphemer and that is the most heinous crime that can be committed against God. And the Pharisees and the scribes knew it.²

v.21

Jesus has his doubters squarely across the horns of a dilemma. The easy conclusion, in one sense, would be to write Jesus off as a blasphemer. Yet then one must account for the miracles – which could hardly be attributed to anyone but God.

“Who is this man” — The word ‘man’ hints at contempt for Jesus. Hear the question as “Who is this not-God?”

“Who speaks such blasphemy?” — In classical Greek, ‘blasphemy’ meant “abuse and injurious talk, but the Jews used it specially of curses against God, or claiming his attributes. (Cambridge) Jewish law regarded blasphemy – an overt defilement of the divine name – as a capital crime, and the penalty for conviction was death by stoning. The Pharisees and teachers of the law were convinced Jesus had crossed the line. (Expositor's)

“Only God can forgive sins!” — Can you see Jesus smiling? This was precisely his point! “Jesus was clearly, unambiguously giving them the sign they asked for. He is clearly proclaiming his messiahship.” (Utley) The inquisitors “rightly ascribe forgiveness of sin to God alone, yet grievously sinned in imputing blasphemy to

Christ.” (Gill) “They rightly said that none but God alone could forgive sins as against God; they wrongly concluded that Jesus was not divine.” (Edgar)

The Pharisees were possessed of a rigid spirit. The experts couldn’t see beyond the minutiae of their rules. Insensitive to the power of God filling the room, they were blinded to the enormity of what he was doing.

Maclaren notes what every pastor knows: “There is a temper of mind which is sharp-eyed as a lynx for faults, and blind as a bat to evidences of divine power in the Gospel or its adherents. Some noses are keen to smell stench, and dull to perceive fragrance. The race of such inquisitors is not extinct.”

vv.22-23

“Why are you questioning?” — With the jurors murmuring among themselves, Jesus draws them up short and demands an explanation for their quiet debate. He is about to spring the trap and none of them see it coming.

“Which is easier to say?” — Any Tom, Dick, or Harry could say “Your sins are forgiven” and no one could possibly know whether anything had happened in the divine realm. But tell a paralytic to “get up and walk” and soon everyone in the room would know whether they had heard the voice of God.

The jury already had reached its verdict of blasphemy – too soon. Smyth writes, “That was not the first nor the last time that ecclesiastical logic has drawn a correct circle of reasoning by which the living truth has been shut out.” Now, however, both the jury and the courtroom observers would see “the purpose, power, and person of the Messiah.” (Utley)

v.24

“The Son of Man” — By using this title for himself, Jesus not only emphasizes his humanity in submission to the Father, but he also delays the inevitable confrontation with the religious authorities when he accepts the designation “Son of God.” Because “Son of Man” was not used by rabbinical Judaism, “it did not have militaristic, nationalistic, exclusivistic connotations” commonly associated with the Messiah. (Utley)

“Has authority on earth to forgive sins” — Jesus sets the stage to prove he is the Messiah. He lays down the challenge for “an instant and visible fulfilment.”
(Pulpit)

“Get up, pick up your mat” — The tension among the jurors is palpable as Jesus utters these words. Will it happen or not? The courtroom observers, however, are filled with excitement because they have heard the stories. Some of them know sufferers who have been healed. Perhaps some of those present have received healing themselves. But every eye in the house is glued on the paralytic. They are about to see proof whether Jesus is a blasphemer or the Messiah.

Edgar lays it out well: “According as this takes place or fails is he willing to be judged. ... Here was a demonstration of his ability to forgive sins as against God, for the paralysis departs and the powerless patient starts to his feet and reaches home with his bed as Jesus commands him.”

v.25

“Immediately the man stood up” — Jesus had given the paralytic an impossible command – impossible, that is, but for the presence of God’s healing power and the man’s immediate response of faith-filled obedience. The healing validated the declaration of forgiveness. (Expositor’s)

Spurgeon refers to this as “the double miracle.” Healing was proven by obedience. “Openly to all onlookers an active obedience became indisputable proof of the poor creature's restoration. ... The true sign of pardoned sin, and of paralysis removed from the heart, is obedience.”

“Took up what he had been lying on” — The “paralytic” carried the bed which had carried him! “The proof of his sickness became the proof of his cure.”
(Cambridge) Filled with ecstasy by his deliverance, the man did the only thing he could do: He went home, glorifying God.

Spurgeon returns here to the theme of hands-on intercession. Cases like this “need the aid of a little band of workers before they will be fully saved,” he wrote. “Some cases thus taken up will need much thought before the design is

accomplished. If by any means we may save some, is our policy. Skin for skin, yea, all that we have is nothing comparable to a man's soul. When four true hearts are set upon the spiritual good of a sinner, their holy hunger will break through stone walls or house roofs.”

v.26

“Everyone was amazed” — Astonishment seized them all, and that includes not only the crowd but also the Pharisees and legal experts. And while a handful of the jurors may have taken the lesson to heart, it does not appear the amazement convinced the majority of them of Jesus’ divine mission. (Benson)

“We have seen astonishing things” — Yet, again, everyone agreed they had seen something other-worldly. Gill unpacks the thought by talking about “paradoxes, things wonderful, unthought of, unexpected, and incredible by carnal reason, and what were never seen, nor known before.” How hard the heart that left unpersuaded by the proof Jesus provided.

The paralytic and his friends sought no small thing from Jesus. Yet Clarkson says the man found far more than he expected: “Seeking healing for his body, he found that, and with that mercy for his soul. Christ has more to give us than we count upon receiving.” To that, Burkitt adds, “The hand of faith never knocked in vain at the door of heaven. Mercy is as surely ours as if we had it, if we have but faith and patience to wait for it.”

Edgar connects physical with spiritual paralysis: “This healing of the body is a sign of what Jesus is willing and waiting to do for our souls. Paralysis is what has seized on many. What a living death it is! It is only Jesus who can free our spirits from it. If we look to him he will give us his Spirit to strengthen us with all might in the inner man, and to help us to earnestness and action.”

Benson sees two important lessons in this story:

- 1. That sin is the cause of all sickness, and the forgiveness of sin the only foundation on which the expectation of a recovery from sickness can be comfortably built.*

2. *That when we are sick, we should be more concerned to get our sins pardoned than our sickness removed. ... We may learn to give God the praise of those mercies of which we have the comfort, and to acknowledge his hand in all our recoveries from affliction and escapes from death, and to glorify him for them, by whose mercy and power alone they are wrought.*

Maclaren offers both deeply individual and socially sweeping applications:

[Christ's] miracles of bodily healing are parables of that higher miracle. And we all need to lay that truth to heart for ourselves. No tinkering with superficial discomforts, or culture of intellect and taste, or success in worldly pursuits, will avail to stanch the deep wound through which our life-blood is ebbing out. We need something that goes deeper than all these styptics. Only a power which can deal with our sense of sin, and soothe that into blessed assurance of pardon, is strong enough to grapple with our true root of misery. ... That is what all attempts to make man happy and restful while sin remains unforgiven, are doing.

Social reformers need this lesson. Many voices proclaim many gospels today. Culture, economical or social reconstruction, is trumpeted as the panacea. But it matters comparatively little how society is organised. If its individual members retain their former natures, the former evils will come back, whatever its organisation. The only thorough cure for social evils is individual regeneration. Christ deals with men singly, and remoulds society by renewing the individual. ... Make the tree good, and its fruit will be good. To make the tree good, you must begin with dealing with sin.

1 <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-20-helping-our-friends-find-forgiveness-luke-517-26>

2 <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/42-64/307.8>