

“Authority to Forgive Sins”

(Luke 5:17-26)

Introduction

- No one has ever had, or will ever have, the impact on the world as Jesus Christ had – and still has today! His ability to perform supernatural miracles, and His authority to speak divine words is unsurpassed. Although Jesus came to this earth in relative obscurity, He would certainly not leave this world unknown. Once He began His public ministry, Jesus’ fame quickly spread throughout the whole Palestinian countryside. Long before the days of the internet, television or satellite radio the popularity and reputation of Jesus Christ had reached a fever-pitch. It seems as though people either loved Him or hated Him, but one thing is for sure: seemingly everyone had at least heard of Him!
- ✓ Illust: The famed scholar of the New Testament and Scottish nobleman James Stewart (1896-1990), in his book *The Strong Name*, wrote the following powerfully profound words about Jesus Christ:

“He was the meekest and lowliest of all the sons of men, yet He spoke of coming on the clouds of heaven with the glory of God. He was so austere that evil spirits and demons cried out in terror at His coming, yet He was so genial and winsome and approachable that the children loved to play with Him and the little ones nestled in His arms ... No one was half so kind or compassionate to sinners, yet no one ever spoke such red-hot scorching words about sin... His whole life was love. Yet on one occasion He demanded of the Pharisees how they ever expected to escape the damnation of hell... He was the servant of all, washing the disciples’ feet, yet masterfully He strolled into the temple and the hucksters and moneychangers fell over one another in their mad rush to get away from the fire they saw blazing in His eyes. In the end, He saved others but at the last, Himself He did not save. There is nothing in history like the union of contrasts which confront us in the Gospels. The mystery of Jesus is the mystery of divine personality.”
- This is the Jesus that we are confronted with in the Gospels! At this time in Jesus’ three-year public ministry (approximately one year into His public ministry and two years before He would be crucified) Jesus Christ – the incarnate Son of the Living God – was saying and doing things that were truly awesome! He was teaching and preaching with authority of God, and performing miracles with the power of God. Consequently, the good news of Jesus Christ – both as a person and as a message – was spreading throughout Galilee, Syria, and Judea like wildfire. People were coming from all over to see what He would do and listen to what He would say. So much so, that Jesus often found it difficult to be alone with God in prayer. Masses of people were following and clamoring to Jesus in order to witness for themselves who Jesus was and what He would do and speak. Jesus was performing amazing miracles by the power of God, and He was authoritatively preaching and teaching the Word of God.
- As the means of demonstrating and validating Himself as the Messiah Jesus performed countless miracles. There was literally no one that Jesus could not heal. He displayed His divine authority over disease, disability, deformity, demon-possession, and even death.
 - ✓ Illust: “The miracles in fact are a retelling in small letters of the very same story which is written across the whole world in letters too large for some of us to see” (C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, “Miracles”, p.29).
- We see another example of this in Luke 5:17-26 (Matt.9:1-8; Mk.2:1-12). This particular passage highlights, once again, the fact that Jesus did not come to earth simply to perform miracles. He came to be the Savior of all who would come to believe in Him (Lk.4:43; 5:32; Heb.2:14; 1Jn.3:5, 8). And He performed miracles as a sign identifying Himself as the Messiah – the one and only Son of God and one and only Savior from God. Once again, in the passage before us this morning, we see that the people were amazed by the miracles Jesus performed, but first they would witness His divine authority to forgive sin.

Luke 5:17-26 ~ “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. ¹⁸And 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? ²³Which 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.’”

- There are two miracles in this passage. The first, and infinitely more important, one is the miracle of divine forgiveness. and the second is the miracle of divine healing.

A. Jesus’ authority to save the soul: The spiritual miracle of divine forgiveness (vs.17-20)

- From the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, we discover that the account in this passage happened in Capernaum: “*And getting into a boat he crossed over and came to his own city*” (Matt.9:1); “*And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home*” (Mk.2:1). As we have seen, Capernaum became Jesus’ “hometown”, and the headquarters of His Galilean ministry, after the people of Nazareth tried to kill Him (Lk.4:28-30; Matt.4:13).
- ✓ Illust: “No city in Palestine appears to have enjoyed so much of our Lord's presence, during His earthly ministry, as did [Capernaum]. It was the place where He dwelt, after He left Nazareth (Matt.4:13). It was the place where many of His miracles were worked, and many of His sermons delivered. But nothing that Jesus said or did seems to have had any effect on the hearts of the inhabitants. They crowded to hear Him ... ‘*until there was no room about the door*’ [Mk.2:2]. They were amazed. They were astonished. They were filled with wonder at His mighty works. But they were not converted. They lived in the full noon-tide blaze of the Sun of Righteousness, and yet their hearts remained hard. And they drew from our Lord the heaviest condemnation that He ever pronounced against any place, except Jerusalem – ‘*And you people of Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to the place of the dead. For if the miracles I did for you had been done in Sodom, it would still be here today. I assure you, Sodom will be better off on the judgment day than you*’ (Matt.11:23, 24)” (J.C. Ryle, *Expository thought on Mark*, p.26-27; italics mine).
- The people of Capernaum, and those who traveled and gathered for regions in and around Galilee, had already witnessed (or at least heard about) Jesus’ miraculous works and the authority with which He taught and preached – and they were thronging to Jesus to witness more.
- These verses (Lk.5:17-20) unfold in three distinct scenes.

1. The power (vs.17)

- Luke provides a detailed account of this scene: “*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*” (vs.17). People came from all over Palestine to hear Jesus teach the Word of God (“*He was preaching the word to them*”; Mk.2:2), and to experience or witness His miraculous powers. The crowds that gathered were not merely the “common people”, but also the religious leaders: “*Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there*” (vs.17). These men were seen as (and saw themselves as) the religious elite of the day (if you were to ask them, that is what they would tell you). The “*Pharisees*” (*Pharisaaios*; “separate ones”, vs.17) were influential leaders among the Jews, especially concerning their theology and their pious living (Matt.5:20). Most of the Pharisees were very religious but utterly unsaved (Matt.23:1-36). They were arrogantly self-righteous and legalistic,

loved money (Lk.16:14), and treated others with contempt (Lk.18:9-14). The apostle Paul, before becoming a disciple of Christ, was a Pharisee (Acts 23:6; 26:5; Phil.3:5). They rejected Jesus as the Son of God and were instrumental in having Him be crucified.

The *“teachers of the law”* (*Pharisaioi*; vs.17), also known as “lawyers” or “scribes”, were also in the massive crowd. The *“teachers of the law”* were influential religious leaders, like the Pharisees, but they were particularly known as experts of Jewish laws. And, like the Pharisees, they were self-righteous and unsaved (Matt.23:1-36) and they too rejected Jesus as the Christ.

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were in the crowd trying to find a way to indict Jesus of blaspheme, and find “cause” to kill Him (Matt.12:14; Lk.6:11).

- Luke alone mentioned that *“the power of the Lord was with him to heal”* (vs.17; *“power”, dynamis*). This simply means that Jesus – who, though fully God, divested Himself of divine rights and abilities (Phil.2:6-8) – was divinely enabled to perform miracles.

2. The problem (vs.18-19)

- The second scene is the problem. Mark recorded that Jesus *“was at home”* (Mk.2:1), which was likely Peter’s home and where Jesus setup His “headquarters” in Capernaum. When the people learned that Jesus was “home” they flocked to the house. The house was packed (*“there was no more room, even at the door”*; Mk.2:2), and around the house stood a mass of people.

When then read: *“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”* (vs.18). These men (Mark records that the paralytic was carried *“by four men”*; Mk.2:3) likely heard that Jesus had healed paralytics (and every other disease and disability).

Matt 4:24 ~ “So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them.”

- While we cannot be certain of the reason for or the severity of this man’s paralysis, I think it is safe to presume that he was either a paraplegic or a quadriplegic. Obviously, these men desperately wanted Jesus to heal the man who was *“paralyzed”* (*paralyomai*), but they could not get to Jesus – at least, not conventionally or conveniently.

When they saw that there was *“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”* (vs.19). Thankfully, Mark describes exactly what enabled them to lower the paralytic through the roof to be in front of Jesus: *“And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the paralytic lay”* (Mk.2:4). They got on the roof (probably using stairs on the side of the house) and began tearing a hole in the roof (typically a flat roof for resting or sleeping).

✓Illust: “The typical roof of that day consisted of timbers laid parallel to each other about two or three feet apart. Sticks were closely laid crosswise upon the timbers, and the structure was padded with reeds, thistles, and twigs. The whole thing was overlaid with about a foot of earth, which was packed down to minimize leakage. All told, the roof was about two feet thick. During the spring, grass flourished on these primitive roofs. So the paralytic’s friends had their work cut out for them – they were performing a mini-excavation” (R. Kent Hughes, *Preaching the Word: Luke*; p.174).

- They were willing to rip open a roof to bring their “friend” Jesus. Not to be denied, they overcame every obstacle so that the paralytic might be healed. What an example these men are to us! For we should have the same (if not more) tenacity in bringing people to Jesus – not to be healed but to be saved. They were courageous and determined. They were not deterred by difficulty or inconvenience or embarrassment. It seemed that nothing was going to stop them from bringing their friend to Jesus, and we ought to have that same attitude with regard to evangelism.

3. The pardon (vs.20)

➤ The third scene is the pardon. While everyone obviously saw these men tearing a hole in the roof (the noise, the commotion, and the debris falling to the ground; of likely Peter's house) and lowering the paralytic in front of Jesus, Jesus saw much more! In verse twenty, we read that Jesus "*saw their faith*" (or "seeing their faith"). Jesus knew that they men – probably all five of them – had no doubt that Jesus could heal the one paralyzed.

This was already an unusual and dramatic moment. But what Jesus did next was completely unexpected. People probably thought that they were about to witness a miracle. They probably thought that Jesus would reach out and touch the man (like He did with the leper; Lk.5:13); or that Jesus would rebuke the disease (like He did with the severe fever of Peter's mother-in-law; 4:39); or perhaps Jesus would heal in a way that they had not heard of or seen before.

➤ Whatever they were thinking, whatever they were expecting, we can be assured that they were totally unprepared for what Jesus said: "*And when he saw their faith, he said, 'Man, your sins are forgiven you'*" (vs.20). It would be foolish to argue that Jesus missed the point. For the man obviously wanted to be healed, not forgiven. But, in response to their faith, Jesus gave that man the greatest miracle of all. The miracle of salvation! Physical healing (paralysis) is temporary, and salvation (forgiveness) is eternal.

Despite appearances, the paralyzed man's greatest need was not healing but forgiveness. Even if the man remained paralyzed, Jesus would have given him an infinitely greater gift than physical healing. Of course, anyone who suffers from paralysis (or any disease) desperately wants to be cured. But to be forgiven of sin before a holy God is everyone's greatest need, and should be the greatest desire of every single human being!

✓ Illust: "Forgiveness of sin is God's greatest gift because it meets man's greatest need" (John MacArthur; *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Matthew; 9:2*).

➤ As Christians, we must be vigilant in our understanding that nothing (i.e. not be healed of cancer, not living pain-free or suffering-free, not being cured of paralysis, not any physical healing) is better or greater than God's gracious and loving gift of forgiveness. When a person is truly forgiven by God, when they sincerely put their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, they stand before God as though they never sinned. For Jesus – through His sacrificial and substitutionary death on the cross – bore the full penalty of their unrighteous, and gave to them the full reward of His righteousness (Is.53:4-6; 2Cor.5:21; Gal.3:13; 1Pet.2:24; 3:18).

Ps 130:3-4 ~ "If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? ⁴But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared."

Ps 103:12 ~ "as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us."

Isa 44:22 ~ "I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you."

Isa 43:25 ~ "I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins."

Rom 8:1 ~ "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (see Jn.3:16-18, 36; Rom.5:1; 1Jn.5:11-12)

1 John 1:9 ~ "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

➤ Without question, without exception, without exaggeration, the greatest thing a person could ever hear from God is, "*your sins are forgiven you*" (vs.20)! Spiritual forgiveness is infinitely, and eternally, better than physical healing. No person in their right mind would choose temporary healing over eternal salvation. It is a foolish thing to desire physical comforts over eternal glories.

Rom 8:18 ~ “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (2Cor.4:17; 1Pet.1:6-7)

Rom 8:18 ~ “For I consider that our present sufferings cannot even be compared to the glory that will be revealed to us.” (NET)

➤ Again, the primary and ultimate reason why Jesus did miracles is not to bring about physical healing or earthly comfort to people. The real reason Jesus did miracles was to reveal Himself as the Messiah to those who would believe. Jesus did miracles as a sign to those who would believe – to point to Himself as the Messiah. Miracles don’t convince someone against their will (see Lk.16:29-31). For example, most of the religious leaders witnessed many miracles from Jesus which only further hardened their hearts against Him. As the Puritans used to say, “The same sun that melts the wax, hardens the clay.”

A true miracle is a supernatural sign (*semeion*; see Lk.2:12; 11:16, 29-30; 23:8). A miraculous sign does not, in and of itself, make someone believe [this is why Jesus did not perform miracles before such people as Herod (Lk.23:8-9), and the people of Nazareth (Lk.4:23-30)]. People who were looking for miraculous signs, and not for the Savior, missed the true reason for the sign (Lk.11:29). The hearts of those who refused to believe in Christ were only hardened when He performed great miracles (e.g., the Pharisees and teachers of the law). Only those whose hearts – first softened by the sovereign love and saving grace of God – were willing to believe and recognized Jesus as the Messiah through His miraculous works.

John 20:30-31 ~ “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

B. Jesus’ ability to cure the body: The physical miracle of divine healing (vs.21-26)

➤ As one might imagine, Jesus telling the paralytic that he is forgiven caused quite a stir – especially among the religious leaders. For they refused to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, and the more miracles He did the more they hardened their hearts against Him (see Lk.11:14-16; Jn.12:9-10). The Jewish leaders were always looking to accuse Jesus of wrongdoing. They even lied and misrepresented what He said as a means of accusing Him (e.g., Jn.2:18-22; Matt.26:59-61).

➤ These verses also unfold in three distinct scenes.

1. The questions (vs.21-23)

➤ Outraged by Jesus’ words, *“the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, ‘Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?’”* (vs.21). They were right that only God can truly forgive sins, and if Jesus were not God His claim to be able to forgive sin would indeed be blasphemous. Jesus saying that He can forgive sins is tantamount to Him saying that He is God, and that is exactly what the religious leaders heard Him say, and that is exactly what Jesus intended to say.

Jesus repeatedly, unapologetically, unambiguously, declared Himself to be God – the one and only Son of God and one and only Savior from God.

John 8:58-59 ~ “Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.’ ⁵⁹So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.”

John 10:24-26 ~ “So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, ‘How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.’ ²⁵Jesus answered them, ‘I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name bear witness about me, ²⁶but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep.’”

John 10:28-33 ~ “I give them [i.e., my sheep] eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. ³⁰I and the Father are one.’ ³¹The Jews picked up stones again to stone him. ³²Jesus answered them, ‘I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me?’ ³³The Jews answered him, ‘It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God.’”

➤ Mark informs us that at this point the scribes and Pharisees did not question Jesus audibly but raised these questions internally. *“And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves”* (Mk.2:8; Jn.2:25). As another display of His deity, Jesus read their minds: *“When Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answered them, ‘Why do you question in your hearts?’”* (vs.22).

Jesus vocalized their thoughts and immediately answered their question with a question: *“Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk?’”* (vs.23). This was a glorious setup. Merely saying *“Your sins are forgiven you”* (vs.23) is easy, and almost anyone can say it. But implicit in Jesus’ rhetorical question is not just saying the words but making what you say come true. That is, when Jesus said, *“Your sins are forgiven you”* (vs.20, 23) the paralytic was truly forgiven by God (e.g., Lk.23:34; Jn.5:14; 8:11) but there was no tangible way of proving that fact. So, in that sense, it is easier to grant divine forgiveness than it would be to grant supernatural healing. Commanding the paralytic to *“rise and walk”* (vs.23) would be immediately and empirically tested – whether true or false.

2. The confirmation (vs.24-25)

➤ While Jesus was under no illusion that healing the paralytic would convince the religious leaders (whose hearts were hardened against Him) that He was indeed the Messiah (Jn.2:25; 9:3; 10:26-27). His miracles, however, were the gracious and glorious demonstration of His deity – a sign to those who would receive Him, and a stumbling block to those who would reject Him. Their rejection of Jesus as the Christ would leave them justly condemned and without excuse (Jn.5:39-41; Rom.1:20-21).

John 10:25-26 ~ “Jesus answered them, ‘I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name bear witness about me, ²⁶but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep.’”

John 10:37-38 ~ “If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; ³⁸but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.”

John 11:4 ~ “But when Jesus heard it he said, ‘This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.’”

John 11:14-15 ~ “Then Jesus told them plainly, ‘Lazarus has died, ¹⁵and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.’”

John 11:40-43 ~ “Jesus said to her, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?’ ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, ‘Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me.’”

John 11:45-49 ~ “Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, ⁴⁶but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. ⁴⁷So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, ‘What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. ⁴⁸If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.’”

➤ Jesus’ miraculous (supernatural) powers showcased His deity and His authority over sin. For all physical disease, disability, and death stems from sin (the Fall; see Gen.3:17-19; Rom.8:20-22). The

healing of the paralytic was another example, demonstration, of His divine authority. *“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’*” (vs.24). What a dramatic moment! All eyes were on the paralytic. Once again, by “divine fiat”, we see Jesus execute His divine authority by the sheer command of His will. *“And immediately he rose up before them and picked up what he had been lying on and went home, glorifying God”* (vs.25). The (former) paralytic did not leave the house the same way he entered it (we are not told who fixed the roof). For he had been miraculously, instantly, and completely healed by Jesus.

- This miracle should have proved (beyond a shadow of a doubt) that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, and that He has divine authority to forgive sin.

3. The reaction (vs.26)

- For some people, Jesus’ miracle was convincing proof that He is the Messiah (perhaps especially for the former paralytic and his friends). Luke recorded a four-fold response from all who witnessed the miracle: *“And amazement seized them all, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, ‘We have seen extraordinary things today’”* (vs.26).

Mark 2:12 ~ “And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We never saw anything like this!’”

Matt 9:8 ~ “When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.”

- Sadly, while they were amazed and in awe, and while they gave God praise for the healing, many people still refused to believe in Jesus as the Christ (see Jn.12:37). The people were impressed by Jesus’ miracles, and they loved Him as a miracle-worker, but they did not believe in Him as the Messiah.

Luke 10:13-16 ~ “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. ¹⁴But it will be more bearable in the judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. ¹⁵And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades. ¹⁶The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me.”

Matt 11:23-24 ~ “And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. ²⁴But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.”

Conclusion

- The same decision lays before us today. Many people love Jesus’ miracles, but they do not love Jesus. They want Jesus to perform for them, even forgive them, but they refuse to worship Him. Many people claim Him as their Savior, but deny Him as their Lord. They believe in Jesus as a man, a “good” or “moral” teacher, but reject Him as the Son of God. Many people are amazed, but not converted.

John 20:30-31 ~ “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

- May we not make the same grave mistake. May we not be enamored by all Jesus’ miracles and not believe in Him as the Messiah. May we never think of Him as our Savior, and not also as our Lord. May we never forsake the goodness, mercy, love and power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.