

11. The Healing of the Paralytic

After his first miracle in Galilee and after his trip to Jerusalem where he threw the vendors and moneychangers out of the temple and he spoke with Nicodemus, a Jewish leader, Jesus passed through Samaria and returned to Galilee, specifically to Capernaum, which served as a base for him. Today we find him in a house teaching a large crowd.

“And again He entered Capernaum after some days, and it was heard that He was in the house. Immediately many gathered together, so that there was no longer room to receive them, not even near the door. And He preached the word to them. Then they came to Him, bringing a paralytic who was carried by four men. And when they could not come near Him because of the crowd, they uncovered the roof where He was. So when they had broken through, they let down the bed on which the paralytic was lying. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven you.’ And some of the scribes were sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, ‘Why does this Man speak blasphemies like this? Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ But immediately, when Jesus perceived in His spirit that they reasoned thus within themselves, He said to them, ‘Why do you reason about these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, “Your sins are forgiven you,” or to say, “Arise, take up your bed and walk”? But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins’—He said to the paralytic, ‘I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.’ Immediately he arose, took up the bed, and went out in the presence of them all, so that all were amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We never saw anything like this!’” (Mark 2:1-12)

THE MOST URGENT PROBLEM, ACCORDING TO JESUS

Certainly the most astonishing part of this story, apart from the miracle itself, is the first thing Jesus said to the paralyzed man: “Son, your sins are forgiven you.” It was an astonishing statement for two reasons.

First, because it was obvious that the man had been brought there because of his physical state. Without any doubt, they wanted Jesus to heal this man of the illness that prevented him from being able to move his limbs, to get himself around, to feed himself, to work as other people do and to lead a normal life. He had been confined to his bed for who knows how long, and his friends, as much as himself, wanted his body to be healed.

Let's say in passing, that these four men had a great deal of confidence in Jesus' ability to heal this illness. They believed that Jesus was their only hope and that if they could only draw Jesus' attention to their friend, he would be healed. Being convinced that their efforts would be rewarded, they did not allow themselves to be discouraged by the crowds that prevented their access to the house where Jesus was. They climbed to the roof where they made an opening and lowered their friend on his stretcher or mat directly in front of Jesus. They wanted their friend to be healed. They had faith that Jesus was able to do this and they put their faith into action.

Our faith must also be expressed in action by acts of obedience and service and by a firmness and perseverance in the face of obstacles and suffering. As James said, “Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, ‘You have faith, and I have works.’ Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works” (James 2:17,18).

As we were saying, the paralyzed man and his friends came for a physical healing, but Jesus spoke first of sin. Before healing the body, he preferred to address the problem of sin. Indeed, whatever the many problems in life may be—illness, unemployment, war, poverty, insecurity, etc.—our number one problem, whether we recognize it or not, is always sin. It is sin—our disobedience, our rebellion towards God, our carelessness, our pride—everything that separates us from God and condemns us before His holy and just law. This is our greatest problem. The other problems we will leave one day. They are only temporary, because they relate only to our existence on this earth. But sin is an evil the

consequences of which are not only horrible—they are eternal.

Jesus knew that the greatest need of the man who had been placed in front of him was not the healing of his body but the healing of his soul, the forgiveness of his sins before God, the removal of the barrier that separated him from his Creator. The Savior did not neglect his physical needs, but he considered spiritual needs as more important and more urgent. He did not allow physical needs to cause the spiritual ones to be forgotten. This is exactly what often happens to us, and it is why we find Jesus' reaction surprising. His reaction should, nevertheless, lead us to think about the behavior of certain religious leaders today who constantly emphasize physical cures and material prosperity instead of the forgiveness of sin and the "inheritance incorruptible and undefiled... that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you" (1 Peter 1:4).

THE AUTHORITY TO FORGIVE SINS ON EARTH

But the statement, "Son, your sins are forgiven you," was astonishing for second reason, as well.

When the scribes heard these words of Jesus, they reasoned thus: (1) Only God can forgive sins. It is His law that is broken when we sin, and so he is the only one who can pardon our sin. (2) They could not see in what sense Jesus could occupy the place of God. (3) They therefore concluded that Jesus was blaspheming. Jesus knew what they were thinking in their hearts. He knew the heart of each person. So he answered their thoughts by saying that he would heal the paralyzed man in order to demonstrate that he had the authority to forgive sin. If he could not heal him, that would be the proof that he could not pardon him either. He did heal him, and everyone was amazed.

WOULD JESUS THEREFORE BE GOD?

A writer named C.S. Lewis did not believe in God before becoming a Christian. After his conversion to Christianity, he tried to reason with those who were still unbelieving. He wanted to lead these people to face certain realities about Jesus. A part of what he wrote in his book, *Mere Christianity*, relates to this passage we have just studied. It says:

"Among these Jews there suddenly turns up a man who goes about talking as if He was God. He claims to forgive sins. He says He has always existed. He says He is coming to judge the world at the end of time. Now let us get this clear. Among Pantheists, like the Indians, anyone might say that he was a part of God or one with God: there would be nothing very odd about it. [According to their religion, God was not the creator of the universe; He is the universe. One cannot distinguish Him from what exists. Moreover, God is not personal, according to them. He is an impersonal force that animates all that is living.—ID] But this man, since He was a Jew, could not mean that kind of God. God, in their language, meant the Being outside the world, who had made it and was infinitely different from anything else. And when you have grasped that, you will see that what this man said was quite simply, the most shocking thing that has ever been uttered by human lips.

"One part of the claim tends to slip past unnoticed because we have heard it so often that we no longer see what it amounts to. I mean the claim to forgive sins: any sins. Now unless the speaker is God, this is really so preposterous as to be comic. We can all understand how a man forgives offences against himself. You tread on my toes and I forgive you, you steal my money and I forgive you. But what should we make of a man, himself unrobbed and untrodden on, who announced that he forgave you for treading on other men's toes and stealing other men's money? Asinine fatuity is the kindest description we should give of his conduct. Yet this is what Jesus did. He told people that their sins were forgiven, and never waited to consult all the other people whom their sins had undoubtedly injured. He unhesitatingly behaved as if He was the party chiefly concerned, the person chiefly offended in all offences. This makes sense only if He really was the God whose laws are broken and whose love is wounded in every sin. In the mouth of any speaker who is not God, these words would imply what I can only regard as silliness and conceit unrivalled by any other character in history.

“Yet (and this is the strange, significant thing) even His enemies, when they read the Gospels, do not usually get the impression of silliness and conceit. Still less do unprejudiced readers. Christ says that He is ‘humble and meek’ and we believe Him; not noticing that, if He were merely a man, humility and meekness are the very last characteristics we could attribute to some of His sayings.

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.’ That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He

would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up as a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. [But if you do not classify him as a false prophet or as a madman, if you do not want to reject somebody whom even the Quran identifies as the Spirit of God and the Word of God, then it is necessary to think, and with an open mind, about the claims of Jesus.—ID] But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.