

Luke 5:12-26

Healing and Forgiveness

Whether we admit it or not, we all need something. Even those who do not profess faith in Jesus Christ will ask you to pray for them when they are sick or in trouble. It is part of our God-given moral sense to recognize that we are needy. In this passage we find two people who clearly recognize their needs. Though their needs are physical, Jesus offers healing in a spiritual sense as well.

Healing the leper

This particular episode occurred while Jesus “was in one of the cities” (v. 12) of Galilee. Luke is no more specific than that. It is probable that Jesus was either in a very small village or, if the city was larger, that He was near the edge of the city rather than downtown, for it is unlikely a leper could have made his way very far into a populated area. That it was astonishing that a leper would approach a person, especially a rabbi, is given away by Luke’s use of the word ‘behold’ (v. 12).

The disease is described as leprosy. This is a generic term for any number of skin-related diseases. The most horrible is Hansen’s disease (after G. H. A. Hansen, who discovered the bacterium that causes the disease in 1873), which is what leprosy is known by today. In the OT there was considerable space in the Law devoted to regulating the disease (Leviticus 13-14). The disease was seen as a curse from God, and something only God could cure. When Naaman, the captain of the army of the king of Aram was infected, he was sent to the Jehoram, king of Israel, to be cured. Recognizing the impossibility of this, and the fact that the king of Aram might use it against him, “he tore his clothes and said, ‘Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man is sending word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?’” (2 Kings 5:7).

Cases of leprosy are recorded not only in the Bible, but also in the cultures of ancient China, Egypt, and India. The bacteria affects the skin, upper respiratory tract, eyes, and nerves of the body. It is not highly infectious, but can be transmitted by close contact, especially with areas of the nose and mouth. People can be infected for up to twenty years before symptoms appear. Despite the urban legend, leprosy does not cause the skin to rot away. Instead, the victims of the disease lose feeling in the face and extremities and naturally wear away the tissue. The horrible disfigurement accompanying the disease was no doubt a cause of the social stigma associated with it. Treatment was ineffective until the 1940s, and today the disease is curable and even the disabling effects can be managed if treated early. There are about 215,000 new cases each year.

In this case, Luke, ever the physician, describes the victim as “covered with leprosy” (v. 12). This must indicate a very advanced stage of the disease. The wretched man was in a hopeless state. His disease was seen as a curse by God for his sins, and he was socially outcast. Nevertheless, this leper mustered the courage to approach a rabbi and “fell on his face” (v. 12). That he was in a position of worship (the parallel account in Matthew 8:2 says he “bowed down”) and called Jesus *kyrios*, Lord, indicates that he believed Jesus to be sent by God.

Notice the leper’s faith. He does not doubt the ability of Jesus to cleanse him, only His willingness to do so. This is how any sinner must approach Christ. We have nothing to offer, no conditions to make,

nothing to give in return. We must come in complete humility and simply beg to be cleansed. Thankfully, we need never be concerned, as this leper was, whether Jesus will heed our request.

We must not forget that Jesus is a rabbi and Leviticus 5:2-3 clearly states that if any person, even unknowingly touched anything unclean, they were guilty of violating the Law and became unclean themselves. Regardless, Jesus was so moved with compassion (as it says in Matthew's account) that He "stretched out His hand and touched him" (v. 13). He willingly touched a leper. Today we know that the disease is difficult to transmit and that it is transmitted through contact with the mucous membranes or saliva, but in the ancient world no such understanding was had. There was no idea how this horrible disease was communicated between people, so lepers were compelled by Law to keep their distance. And here is Jesus actually touching a leper.

There was nothing magical about the touch. Jesus healed by touching (Luke 7:14, 22:51), or by being touched, as He did with the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years (Luke 8:44-47). But Jesus could also heal at His very word without being anywhere near the victim, as He did with the centurion's servant (Matthew 8:13).

As with each time Jesus healed, the healing is complete with no residual after effects. Not only was the man cured of the disease, but "the leprosy left him" (v. 13) indicating that the disfigurement was also eliminated. The man was fully restored. Jesus then commanded the man in two areas. First, he "ordered him to tell no one" (v. 14) and then Jesus honored the ceremonial law by telling him to make the appropriate sacrifices before the priests to validate his being cleansed. The first command was to try to provide Jesus with some order as He continued His ministry. We have already seen how the crowds were growing as He performed miracles. The second command was for the priests. The fact that this leper would make known to them how he had been cured would offer compelling evidence that Jesus was the Messiah. They could then either accept or reject Him.

Scripture does not relate if the leper ever made the appropriate sacrifices for cleansing as prescribed in Leviticus 14. Perhaps he did, since we soon find Pharisees from Judea, and even Jerusalem itself, in the crowds following Jesus. We can assume, though, that he did not follow Jesus' command to keep quiet, since the news about Him was spreading even farther, and large crowds were gathering to hear Him and to be healed of their sicknesses" (v. 15). This lack of obedience by the leper actually hindered the ministry of Jesus.

Healing the Paralytic

As is common with Luke, there is little specificity with regards to the time and place of this event. All he says is that "one day He was teaching" (v. 17). Jesus is teaching, this time not in a synagogue, but a home. In Mark's gospel it says "He was at home" (Mark 2:2), but this does not necessarily mean the home belonged to Jesus. The word is not that specific, but Mark's gospel does indicate that the city was Capernaum.

In the audience on this occasion are a group of Pharisees. They may have been following Jesus for some time, Luke again does not say, but this is his first mention of them. The Pharisees were one of four Jewish sects at this time. There were the Essenes, who lived an ascetic monastic life (some associate John

the Baptist with them). The Zealots were the revolutionary group that sought to drive out the Romans from Jerusalem and restore the Jewish nation. The Sadducees were wealthy priests who were elitists (Jesus would quarrel with them over the resurrection).

The Pharisees were distinctive by their passion for the details of the Law. To this, they had added their own traditions, which were held with no less vigor and enthusiasm. The group had formed during the intertestamental period from the Hasidic branch of Judaism. This group (still very conservative today) sought to counter the Hellenization of Judaism during the Diaspora. They were few in number; Josephus says there were no more than 6,000 during the reign of Herod the Great. Still, they gained in number in the first century, and after the destruction of most Sadducees during the revolt of AD 70 and the Zealot party with the revolt of Bar Kochba in AD 135, the Pharisees became the mainstream Judaic party. Their comments on the Law (the Mishnah and Gemara) were completed about AD 500 and have become synonymous with orthodox Judaism today.

Not that the Pharisees were all bad. They believed in angels and demons, predestination and human responsibility, the Messiah, and the resurrection. Sadly, they had lost their way and become corrupted by the idea that perfect obedience to the Law was not only required, but possible. They focused on the external, a practice for which Jesus would hold them accountable on occasion, and their prideful self-righteousness was their undoing.

With the Pharisees were “teachers of the law” (v. 17). These were also called scribes and were usually, though not exclusively, of the Pharisee party. Their role was to interpret and apply the details of the Law. Both groups emphasized their traditions in addition to the original sacred writings. Jesus called them to account for this very thing in Matthew 15:1-7.

These people were not locals. Luke tells us that they “had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem” (v. 17). Though probably exaggeration, clearly word of the teachings and miracles of Jesus had spread to such an extent (perhaps the recently healed leper) that Jewish religious leaders were concerned enough to send out a scouting party to see what was happening.

As Jesus was teaching, some men arrived “carrying on a bed a man who was paralyzed” (v. 18). Mark’s narrative informs us that there were four men bringing their unfortunate friend. We are not told the specific cause of his paralysis, it could have been a birth defect or degenerative disease. It could also have been a physical injury or brain damage, but that is less likely since medical care in the first century would not likely have allowed someone who has suffered such trauma to survive.

It is amazing what pains people will take when they are in earnest. The crowd was so significant that the men could not get in. Whether out of rudeness or simply because of sheer numbers, the people did not move aside and allow them to bring their friend to Jesus. Not to be dissuaded, the four men then climbed up onto the roof (many first century homes had a flat roof with a staircase) and began to work their way through above the place where they could hear Jesus teaching. The roof of a typical middle eastern home was made of wood beams with rafters running crosswise. The space between was packed with wattle and daub (a fancy term for mud and sticks) that had been molded and dried. In this case the home had tiles as

well to preserve the integrity of the roof. Such a roof would be found only in a larger houses and suggests affluence.

One can only imagine the confusion within as those listening to Jesus teach heard scraping on the roof and began to see (and perhaps feel) pieces of mud and debris fall into the room. Finally sunlight appeared through the hole and everybody must have stopped to look up and see the men widen the hole and then lower their friend on his bed through it. The look on the face of Jesus is not recorded, but it must have been a great smile of approval.

Jesus responded to their faith. Faith has always been the hallmark of a true believer. At the end of his powerful catalogue of faith, the writer of Hebrews elegantly continues, “³²and what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, ³³who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight” (Hebrews 11:32-34).

“Seeing their faith” (v. 20) Jesus said “friend, your sins are forgiven you” (v. 20). I do not think this was what the man expected to hear. He was certainly puzzled, perhaps even disappointed. He had hoped to be healed, being forgiven had probably never crossed his mind. Yet Jesus knew what the man truly needed. Physical healing would only be temporary; Jesus came to offer eternal healing.

Jesus took sin seriously. He understood that we needed to recognize that sin was not only outward actions but inward thoughts and attitudes. We did not need to get over our guilty feelings, or try to mitigate the effects of sin with good deeds. We need forgiveness. Forgiveness is a key element of the gospel. Unique among faiths, Christians recognize that we cannot earn salvation. While many faiths acknowledge there is sin, and that sin creates a chasm between us and a holy God, only Christianity understands that man cannot bridge that gap. Only Christianity presents the fundamental truth that man needs to be forgiven for his sins, not that he needs to make up for them.

It is interesting that there is no evidence that the man believed Jesus to be God and therefore capable of forgiving sins. He did not ask for forgiveness, and the context suggests that his friends brought him there to be physically, not spiritually healed. Jesus recognized that the man understood that he was entirely at the mercy of Jesus. Humble and submissive, he was forgiven.

This was not well received. “The scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, “Who is this man who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone?” (v. 21). The Pharisees were correct. Once again we are reminded that we may be correct about a great many things of our faith, but if we are wrong in the essentials, we are very far astray from the truth. It is true that only God can forgive sins. He is the one offended, and therefore it is His prerogative to forgive. We may forgive the effects of sin against us. We may act lovingly toward the offending party, and not hold a grudge, but only God can forgive the guilt of sin. The Pharisees were correct, only God can forgive sins.

Their error, of course, is that they denied that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. By claiming to have the authority to forgive sins, Jesus was clearly stating that He was God. This made Him either the

Messiah or a blasphemer. There were three levels of blasphemy according to Jewish law. The first was to speak evil of His Law as Paul had been accused (Acts 21:27-27). A second form of blasphemy was to speak evil of God, Himself (Leviticus 24:10-16). The most severe form of blasphemy was to ascribe the attributes of God to oneself. This is what the Pharisees accused Jesus of doing.

It is noteworthy that though Jesus was “aware of their reasonings” (v. 22) He did not correct them. Neither did He did not counter their argument that only God could forgive sins. He simply continued, “Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins have been forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk?’” (v. 23). There is no way to scientifically demonstrate if one’s sins are forgiven. Yet is clear if a paralyzed man can walk. Jesus’ point was clear. If the Pharisees would not believe what they could not see, He would give them evidence that they could see.

And again, the healing was immediate and complete. So restored was the man that his muscles functioned well enough that he could not only walk, but pick up his bed and then carry it away. There was no rehabilitation or physical therapy needed for his atrophied body. “Immediately he got up before them, and picked up what he had been lying on, and went home glorifying God” (v. 25).

The audience was “struck with astonishment” and “filled with fear” (v. 26). The word for ‘astonishment’ is *ekstasis*, which means to displace the mind from its natural state. They were unable to grasp what had happened, and the usual human response to such things is fear, *phobos*. They were terrified at what they had seen. This was a miracle that had demonstrated the power of God. Notice also that ‘all’ those present had this understanding. A reminder that even the Pharisees and scribes saw and understood what had happened. Every knee will one day bow, but not all will bow willingly and joyfully.

Take Aways

How hard are you working to bring others to Christ? Are you as interested in the spiritual needs of those around you as their physical needs?