JESUS HEALS A PARALYTIC

Luke 5:17–26

Key Verse: 5:24a

“But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins…”

Have you ever felt hopeless? It’s kind of a silly question, because most of us have, and probably, more often than we’d like to admit. Hopelessness may be the most debilitating thing in life. Without hope we feel powerless, life seems futile, and we give up. We become hopeless when bad things never seem to change and there seems no way out. In today’s passage Jesus encounters a hopeless man, a paralytic. And surprisingly, what Jesus does for him isn’t what we’d expect. He doesn’t immediately heal his paralysis; he first forgives his sins—something that may never even have occurred to the man. Why is it that, in the midst of all our struggles in life, what we need most is forgiveness? How can we be sure we’re forgiven? And how does it give us a new and lasting hope? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his life-giving word today.

Today’s passage starts out with a dramatic setting. Look at verse 17. What a picture! This is the first time in Luke that Pharisees and teachers of the law are mentioned. In verse 21 Luke also mentions “scribes.” Scribes were the people who worked with the Pharisees to write down what they taught. In this Gospel, Luke is going to mention these people often (Pharisees: 5:30,33; 6:2,7; 7:30,36,37; 11:37­–39,42–43,53; 12:1; 13:31; 14:1,3; 15:2; 16:14; 17:20; 18:10,11; 19:39; scribes: 5:30; 6:7; 9:22; 11:53; 15:2; 19:47; 20:1,19,39,46; 22:2,66; 23:10). They’re the ones who end up having Jesus executed. Their conflict with him starts here, with this incident. Luke tells us that they’re sitting there where Jesus is teaching. They probably think they’re the ones who should be teaching. They’ve come, Luke says, “from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem.” That’s a lot of Pharisees! And then there’s a crowd of ordinary people there. The place is so packed, it’s nearly impossible to get in.

What’s going on? Though it has just begun, Jesus’ ministry has caused quite a stir. Reports have spread about him (4:14,37; 5:15). People glorified him for his teaching (4:15). People marveled at his gracious words (4:22). People could see with their own eyes that his word had authority and power (4:32,36). Not only that, but Jesus could *heal*. He could command unclean spirits to come out of people (4:35,36). He could heal any who were sick with various diseases (4:40). He could even heal an incurable man “full of leprosy” (5:12,13). Jesus’ popularity as a teacher and healer is soaring. These Pharisees, teachers of the law and scribes have suddenly found themselves greatly challenged. They are the ones who were supposed to be teaching and caring for people, but it looks like Jesus is about to put them out of business. So they’ve all come to investigate. Jesus has had no formal training, whereas they see themselves as the ones who know best, as the rightful stewards of the ministry of the word. So Jesus is sitting in a room full of his strongest critics.

Luke adds one thing more. Look at verse 17b. Despite this atmosphere, God’s power is present with Jesus to heal the sick. No doubt it’s related to his private prayer life (5:16). The Bible teaches us that when we assemble in the name of the Lord Jesus, his same power is still in our midst (1Co5:4). It’s the power of the Holy Spirit, which Luke mentions often about Jesus and his followers (Lk4:14,36; 5:17; 6:19; 8:46; 9:1; 10:19; 21:27; Ac1:8; 4:7–12,33; 6:8; 10:38; 18:28). Critical people and their hostility doesn’t diminish this power in the least. The question is, who will benefit from his healing power?

Look at verses 18,19. This alone is such a beautiful story: A paralyzed man and some men—they’re such a sharp contrast to the Pharisees, teachers of the law and scribes. The Pharisees have filled the room where Jesus is; the paralyzed man and the others can’t even get in. They’re definitely not coming to criticize; they’re desperate for help. The paralyzed man can’t get to Jesus on his own—people are going to have to carry him. His “bed” is a stretcher. The Greek word Luke uses for “paralyzed” is different from most other places in the Bible; it was a diagnostic term used by medical professionals at that time.

We don’t know what caused this man’s paralysis, or how long this has been going on. But at that time, such people were shunned by society. This is the unlovely part of the story. Most people are thinking this paralysis happened because God is for some reason displeased with this man. As a man, he can’t do what most men can. He can’t provide for a family. He can’t contribute to a community that needs many helping hands. He can’t even stand up. Instead, he’s a drain, a burden, a discouragement. And there doesn’t seem to be any solution. No therapy, no rehab, no way to regain the use of his body. So it’s very likely he’s been kicked out of his family’s home. They just can’t handle him anymore. He’s probably been left out on the streets, homeless and begging, which adds another dimension to the humiliation. To feel powerless once in a while can be frustrating, but to live day in and day out with paralysis can really damage the human spirit. On top of that, to feel judged, never invited to events or fellowship, never welcomed, reinforces an ironclad sense of hopelessness.

We don’t know who these men are or where they came from. But they sure are going to a lot of trouble to get him to Jesus. They’re carrying him, which alone is hard enough. They’re struggling to get through an intense crowd, which isn’t working. They’ve even come up with a creative idea: now they’re climbing up on the roof, then, somehow opening up the tiles, and then, devising a way to carefully lower this man into the room without dropping him. That’s a lot of labor! They’re going way above and beyond. It reminds us of the saying, “Where there’s a will, there’s a way!” Nothing is said explicitly about their motive, but it seems pretty obvious: they truly care about this man. They’ve definitely heard about Jesus and his power to heal. They’ve also become convinced that Jesus would care about this man, too, though most other people didn’t. They don’t want this man to miss the chance or live even one more day like this. Though the word “friend” isn’t used here, O to have friends like this! O to be friends like this!

We notice one other thing here. In verses 18 and 19 the phrase “before Jesus” is repeated twice. Coupled with the description of his power to heal in verse 17b, it’s drawing our focus to Jesus’ presence and what he can do. This man has no hope. The religious leaders are offering no hope. The crowd could care less about him. The men could find “no way to bring him in, because of the crowd.” Still, in Jesus there’s hope. Somehow, if even the most hopeless person can be brought before Jesus, overcoming whatever obstacle, there’s real hope.

Let’s come back and think about the scene in that room. Jesus is teaching. Enemies are watching. People are crowding in, tightly packed. And then, there’s this noise, this dust, and suddenly, a wretched paralytic on a stretcher being lowered right in their midst, interrupting everything. Surely some people thought this was just too much. It’s no fair, like taking cuts in a line. How could these men do this, without permission, to somebody else’s house?

And how does Jesus respond? Look at verse 20a. “And when he saw their faith…” To some it may have looked like rudeness, but Jesus saw their faith. This is also the first time in Luke’s Gospel that this word “faith” is mentioned, and Luke is going to record this word many more times (7:9,50; 8:25,48; 12:28; 17:5–6,19; 18:8,42; 22:32). Faith is the key for Jesus to work. Faith is the way for people in need to gain access to what Jesus can do. What is faith? From this story we can see one clear and simple truth: faith is action. Faith is to persevere no matter what the obstacle. Faith is to stay laser focused on Jesus, on his presence, his power, his care, on what he can do, even for the most hopeless.

Then comes the shocker. Look at verse 20b. Jesus says, “Man, your sins are forgiven.” What’s going on? Well, one thing is clear—Jesus is not at all agreeing with the idea that the man’s sin caused his condition. What he *is* saying is that his sin is an even worse problem than his paralysis. It’s stunning. What could be worse than physical paralysis and all that it brings? Jesus says it’s sin. Why is sin most serious? It’s because sin cuts our relationship with God. And in this man’s case, sin is epitomized in his paralysis. Sin makes us powerless. In our sin we can’t do good things, even if we really want. If we honestly face our sin, we get so discouraged. Why is that? Because there’s no solution to it. As a friend recently told me, “Sin makes us all really messed up, and there’s no way to fix it.” We can’t undo sin. We can’t get rid of sin, either. It’s not really our human condition that gets us depressed, it’s our sin that makes us most hopeless.

But Jesus came to this world to shine God’s light of forgiveness on us (1:78,79.). Jesus, full of God’s Spirit, came to bring us this good news, to proclaim liberty, the year of God’s favor (4:18,19)—in short, he came to bring God’s forgiving grace to all sinners. Forgiveness is one of Luke’s major themes, repeated four times in this passage alone, and throughout this Gospel more than in all the others (1:77; 3:3; 5:20,21,24; 6:37; 7:47–49; 11:4; 12:10; 17:3–4; 23:34; 24:47), and in Acts (2:38; 5:31; 8:22; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18). To accept God’s forgiveness in Jesus is the very essence of what it means to be a real Christian.

Of course the religious experts are quick to criticize. They accuse Jesus of blasphemy—as if Jesus is insulting God and having no reverence for him. In their hearts they’re severely criticizing Jesus, but he can immediately perceive their thoughts. And he’s not intimidated by them at all. He publicly calls them all out. Read verse 24. Jesus couples his authority to forgive with his healing. It’s like his forgiveness and his healing are one and the same. As the old saying goes, “The proof is in the pudding,” meaning, what Jesus actually does with this paralytic proves his authority to forgive. He says, “But that you may know…” Jesus wants everyone to know he has authority on earth to forgive sins.

Why is this so important? It’s because it gives us real hope. His forgiveness restores our relationship with God. His forgiveness heals us, body, soul and spirit. His forgiveness also restores us to our homes, just like Jesus sent this paralytic man home, to be reconciled to his family. We shouldn’t doubt it: Jesus has authority on earth to forgive sins. Because of this, we shouldn’t dwell too much on our own sins or on others’ sins. We should simply come to Jesus, and also simply bring people to Jesus, no matter who they are.

Let’s look at the outcome. Read verses 25,26. Luke often mentions how the good news that Jesus brings leads people to start glorifying God (Lk2:20; 4:15; 5:26; 7:16; 13:13; 17:15; 18:43; 23:47; Ac4:21; 11:15–18; 21:20). Why? It’s a wonderful expression of our hope being restored. No more despair. No more cynicism. No more bitterness or suspicion. Just the great joy of glorifying God.

Let’s read verse 24a again. May God help us to come before Jesus with faith and experience his authority to forgive all our sins, heal us and restore our hope and our joy in God.