

Marvelous Forgiveness Matthew 9:1-8

“They marvelled.” And no wonder, for this was no staged performance. In a small town like Capernaum, which was about the size of Port Gibson in those days, anyone who had become paralyzed, whether from a terrible injury, or from a stroke, or from a disease like polio would certainly have been the talk of the town. Everyone would have known him and the undeniable reality of his sad condition.

And the lengths to which his friends were willing to go also testified that his disability was as genuine as it was serious. Both Mark and Luke tell us that, instead of pressing through the tremendous crowd, they went up on top of the house and removed part of the roof, creating a hole big enough for them to lower their friend down in front of Jesus. They never would have done that just to perpetuate a fraud.

No, there could be no trickery here. And yet Jesus was able to heal this obviously, truly paralyzed man just by telling him to get up and go home. Marvelous? Certainly.

But this Greek word translated as “marvelled” can also mean that the crowd was astonished, or even surprised. And if Jesus’ ability to heal this man’s body by simply speaking to him was marvelous, the other things he said were equally astonishing, even shocking. For the first thing He said to this man wasn’t, “Get up and go home.” No, the first thing He said was “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

And, believe it or not, this statement is still confusing, especially to people who are not Christians. After all, non-Christians are perfectly willing, even anxious for the Church to be about the business of healing the sick, or meeting people’s other purely physical needs. Many churches, for example, have been providing groceries or meals that people can just drive by and pick up during the current COVID crisis. Other congregations or individuals have prepared lunches for health-care workers. And no one criticizes Christians when we do things like this. In fact, Jesus Himself remained popular as long as he was healing the sick and casting out demons. After He fed 5000 families with five loaves and two fish, John tells us that the crowd even wanted to make Him their king.

But as soon as you stop doing good deeds and start talking about what Jesus actually says, that’s when you start to get pushback from the non-Christian culture. For you can’t talk about Christ’s life and ministry without talking about forgiveness, as He does in his first words to this paralyzed man. And you can’t talk about forgiveness without explaining what you need to be forgiven for – and that means bringing up the concept of sin. And you can’t talk about sin without

defining it in at least the broadest of terms, without at least implying what sort of behavior is acceptable and unacceptable in the sight of God according to the Scriptures.

And that's where we lose the non-Christians. That's when they start calling us narrow-minded or bigoted, and above all judgmental. Who do we think we are to say what God wants or doesn't want? Thus, the non-Christian world still finds Jesus' words about sin and forgiveness astonishing, or even shocking. They can't understand why He doesn't shut up about sin and get on with the only thing they consider to be important, the physical healing of this man.

But can we be honest? Don't we Christians share at least a little of their confusion? Sure, we believe in the need for forgiveness of sins. But surely Jesus could see from all the trouble this man's friends went to that his most urgent difficulty was physical paralysis. So, why would Jesus bring up this man's spiritual problems first? Why doesn't Jesus heal his physical sickness before tending to the needs of his soul?

Well, if we're asking these sorts of questions, maybe we should take a closer look at our own priorities. Maybe we should consider what we spend most of our time praying for – is it spiritual blessings or simply physical ones? What do we want most for ourselves and our friends – spiritual or physical health? Let's put it this way: if Jesus were to offer you a choice between physical health and spiritual health, which would you choose? And what does that say about your true priorities?

Well, the folks in this passage whose priorities can't be called into question are, believe it or not, the scribes. They were not at all confused about the relative importance of spiritual matters – they knew how serious sin is. And when they heard Jesus' words, these experts in the Law were not at all surprised that Jesus would consider this man's sin to be his most important problem. But they still marveled, they were still astonished because they thought that Jesus had blasphemed, taking the authority of God unto Himself. For, they reasoned, no one can forgive sins except God. So how could Jesus rightly declare anyone's sins forgiven?

Now, it's true that we tend to discount whatever the scribes and Pharisees say. After all, they were the enemies of Jesus, the ones who eventually convinced the Romans to crucify Him. But if we search the scriptures, which these men knew so well, we discover that they were in fact correct, at least on this point. God is, in fact, the only One who can forgive sins.

But why is that? It's not only because God is the great lawgiver. It's not only because God obviously has the authority to sit as judge over the world He has made. It's also because, whenever we sin, God is also the injured party, the One against Whom we sin. And in order for

any criminal's penalty to be set aside, the injured party would have to agree, or else justice would not be done.

Think about it. If a thief stole from your friend, could you say to the thief, "That's all right. You don't have to pay back the money?" Of course not – only your friend, the one who lost the money, could say, "You don't have to pay it back."

But how is God the injured party in sin? After all, if you kill someone else, isn't the one who died the victim of the crime? If you break into someone's house, isn't the homeowner the victim of the crime? Of course – but God is too.

Why is that? Because of what any sin says about our relationship with God. You see, any breach of God's law, no matter how seemingly insignificant, is a slap in God's face, a denial of God's truthfulness, a rejection of God's authority, a declaration of independence from God's rule. Who else but God could possibly forgive such a horrible crime?

So surely, Jesus is right. Sin is a big deal – a much bigger problem than this man's physical illness. And surely the scribes were also right in their astonished, horrified reaction to Jesus' words – surely, only God can forgive sin.

So, why did the scribes condemn Jesus? It turns out that the problem wasn't their priorities or even their understanding of the Scriptures. The problem was that they simply jumped to the wrong conclusion. They assumed that Jesus was blaspheming because they assumed that He did not have the authority He claimed to have. But what if God had, in fact, given Him the authority that He claimed?

And you know, by using the title "Son of Man," this is exactly what Jesus was saying about Himself. For the same title is used by Daniel, in chapter seven of His book: "I saw in the night visions, and, behold, *one* like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion *is* an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom *that* which shall not be destroyed."

So, if Jesus is not the Son of Man, the Messiah, then He was what the scribes considered Him to be: a sinful, presumptuous blasphemer. If Jesus is not the Son of Man, then the scribes were absolutely right to plot against Him and demand that He be crucified.

But if He is the Son of Man, the majestic and powerful One Whom Daniel describes, then the Church is right to place its primary emphasis not on caring for people's physical needs, but on evangelism and missions, encouraging everyone everywhere to follow Him. For if Jesus of

Nazareth is the Messiah, the Son of God, then everyone in the whole world owes Him not only their allegiance and obedience, but their worship and love.

But given that the church's primary calling is to spread this gospel, to call people to repentance from sin and to faith in Christ, this passage gives us yet another cause for astonishment. Because this passage just doesn't fit our pattern of evangelism. Jesus' offer of forgiveness doesn't go along with the way we usually present the gospel.

Think about it. In most gospel presentations, we tend to start with sin, in one way or another. We might show someone how his thoughts or actions are inconsistent even with what he thinks is right. Or we might explain how someone fails to live up to the Biblical standard of righteousness. But we usually start with the problem, with a person's need for salvation.

Then, we usually turn to the need for confession and repentance. We encourage sinners to admit what they have done and ask God to forgive them because of the sacrifice of Christ. And we conclude by reassuring them that God will in fact forgive those who seek His grace in this way.

And all of that is true, and all of that is right, but that's not what Jesus does in this passage. For although He starts by asserting this paralyzed man's sin problem, Jesus doesn't urge the man to confess his sins, or even to admit that he's sorry for what he's done. In fact, Jesus doesn't wait for the sick man or his friends to say anything. Instead, Jesus takes the initiative. Jesus is the One Who declares the sick man's sins forgiven before he has a chance to say or do anything.

And that is exactly what Paul teaches in Ephesians chapter 2, isn't it? We were all dead in our trespasses and sins, just as helpless spiritually as this paralytic was physically. But Jesus didn't wait for us to wake ourselves up, to somehow make ourselves alive. No, He raised us up, just as He gave that paralytic power to stand up. As Paul says, it is by God's grace that we are saved, not by anything we do for ourselves.

But Paul adds that we are saved through faith, and that also seems to be at work in this passage, doesn't it? After all, verse 2 tells us that it was when Jesus saw their faith that he said the paralytic's sins were forgiven.

Now, that still might seem a bit astonishing to us, for there's no way these men had the sort of faith in Christ that we have. No, they probably thought Jesus to be simply a miracle-working prophet – perhaps like Elisha in the Old Testament. Or even if they had somehow come to the correct conclusion that Jesus was the Messiah, something that even His disciples hadn't

yet realized, everyone at the time thought the Messiah would be a military leader, someone who would smash the Romans and bring independence to Israel.

No, their faith in Jesus wasn't particularly well-informed. It wasn't theologically sophisticated. But it was real. It was determined. It wouldn't take no for an answer. And most important of all, these friends had put their faith in the right Person: they knew they were helpless, and they trusted Jesus to help them.

And the triumphant conclusion of this passage proves, of course, that their faith was justified, just as ours is. For in demonstrating His power to heal the paralytic, Jesus clears up so many of the reasons for our astonishment, doesn't He? He proves that He has the power to take the initiative in salvation, granting us new life and along with it the ability to respond to Him in faith. He proves that He is the Divine Son of Man, and thus that our relationship with Him is much more important than any physical healing we might enjoy in this world. But there's one more marvel, one more astonishing thing in today's passage.

Look at the question Jesus asks in verse 5: "Which is easier?" Which is easier, to make a paralytic walk or to say that his sins are forgiven? Well, of course the words are much easier than the actions, we might naturally reply. But I wonder if that is really the case.

For remember what Daniel has told us about Jesus. He is the Divine Son of Man, the One Who has been given dominion, glory and a kingdom from the Ancient of Days. In New Testament terms, Jesus is the living word of God, the Son of the Father, the One through whom all things were made.

So, what did it really cost Jesus to make a small adjustment in a man's nervous system, allowing his brain to control his limbs? To Jesus, a man of infinite power, a God of infinite love, such a healing cost nothing. For Jesus retained all His power after the paralyzed man stood up, and He even gained glory from many who observed the miracle.

So, yes, it would have been easy for Jesus to do only what this man and his friends wanted, to say, "Get up and walk." And it would be easy for Jesus to give us what we want most of the time – to fix all of our worldly circumstances, to give us comfort and prosperity and physical healing and then send us on our way – to death. To Hell.

But on the other hand, what did it cost Jesus to say, "Son, your sins are forgiven you?" What did it cost Him to forgive any of us, to save us not just from physical death but from the terrible torment of being separated from God for all eternity? It cost Him all of His blood and all of His tears, all of His love and all of His life. It cost Him the cross. For Jesus to say, "Your sins are forgiven," He had to lay down His own life, so that God's justice could be satisfied.

And that's the last piece of the puzzle, isn't it? For it isn't really enough for us to know that Jesus is the Divine Son of Man, the One Who has the power to heal our worst diseases. It isn't even enough to know that Jesus has the authority to grant new life to anyone He chooses. After all, as we saw last week, the demons were well aware of Jesus' power, but that just made them afraid of Him.

No, the reason we place our trust in Jesus isn't just because we know of His power. No, the reason we trust in Jesus, the reason we should seek Him as relentlessly, as doggedly as those men digging through the roof of that house, is because we know His love, a love He proved not just by healing this paralytic's body – that was easy – but by saving all who trust in Him through the blood of His cross.

Why would anyone turn away from such marvelous forgiveness? And how can we fail to trust such amazing love?