

The Leper, the Paralytic, and the Tax Collector

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As we observed in Bible class a week or two ago, one of the most amazing attributes of the Bible is its inexhaustibility. No matter how much we study it, there is always something more to learn. For those of us who have been dedicated to the word for quite some time, often these new insights come as we consider the arrangement of stories and arguments in Scripture. Take, for instance, the gospel of Luke. Even though its elements are arranged chronologically, they are also ordered thematically, so that several stories taken together point to a greater truth.

This thematic style of arrangement enables Luke to address complicated spiritual questions by showing us the answer rather than telling us. The answer we're going to consider this morning concerns the topic of forgiveness. Because sin is so deadly, we all need forgiveness like we need oxygen. However, how can we be sure that Jesus is both able and willing to grant us that forgiveness? People today struggle with both of those things. Some question the divinity of Jesus, others, whether He would be willing to save someone as wretched as themselves. Without mentioning either question, Luke answers both, and he does it through the linked stories of the leper, the paralytic, and the tax collector.

The Leper

This three-part collection begins with the story of the leper. The first thing that Luke does for us here is present **HIS SITUATION**. Let's consider together Luke 5:12. Other than Malchus the slave of the high priest, this leper is probably the least sympathetic recipient of a miracle in the New Testament. We see this once we consider the Mosaic regulations concerning lepers. Leviticus 13 tells us that lepers were supposed to live alone, outside of the camp or the city, and they were supposed to warn off anyone who came near them by crying out that they were unclean. This man, though, goes 0 for 2. Not only is he inside the city, which is exactly where the Law of Moses says that he shouldn't be, but he approaches Jesus, crying out for help, which is exactly what the Law of Moses says he shouldn't do. However, he does get one thing right, or at least he gets it enough right. He believes that Jesus has the power to help him, and he asks Jesus for that help. As we'll see, the leper's faith isn't what it should be, but here he is, crying out for healing anyway.

This presents Jesus with a dilemma. On the one hand, the leper undeniably needs help. On the other, the man is a lawbreaker, and he is actively endangering Jesus and those near Him by breaking the Mosaic quarantine. However, Jesus proves to be **HIS SAVIOR** regardless. We see what Jesus does in Luke 5:13. Although it's not as evident from Luke's account, when we read the parallel passage in Mark 1, we see that Jesus is no happier with this leper than we would expect Him to be. After the healing, Mark says that Jesus warned the leper sternly, and some Mark manuscripts even go so far as to say that Jesus was moved with anger when He heard the leper's appeal. And yet, despite His displeasure with the man's sin, Jesus heals him anyway. This is critically important. If you'll recall, one of the main questions we began with this morning was whether Jesus was willing to be merciful toward sinners. We really couldn't ask for a better test case than this unsympathetic leper. Yes, Jesus is angry about his sin, but He is willing to heal him anyway.

Second, this story illustrates the power of Jesus. Our first question was, "Is Jesus willing?" Our second question was, "Is Jesus able?" Luke's answer to the question is an unequivocal "Yes!" According to the text, this man's leprosy left him immediately, publically, in a way that could not be explained other than by miraculous intervention. Jesus was the source of that intervention, so Luke presents Him here as more than merely human. Lots of liberal theologians, and even mainstream denominational pastors, are unhappy with that answer. They refuse to acknowledge the validity of any Scriptures that attribute supernatural power to Jesus. They would rather treat Him as merely a good man, no more than an ancient Gandhi or Mother Teresa. However, there's a huge problem with that viewpoint. The same gospels that proclaim the power of Jesus also proclaim His goodness. If I refuse to believe His power on the basis of their testimony, what grounds do I have to believe in His goodness either? If Jesus was not the Son of God, the whole New Testament is a tissue of lies, and I might as well invent my own Messiah as believe in someone else's invention. The Bible either stands or falls as a whole, and if it stands, then one of the things that must stand with it is the Lord's miraculous power.

After this miraculous healing, Jesus explains to the now ex-leper what **HIS OBLIGATIONS** are. These are laid out in Luke 5:14. They are twofold. First, Jesus wants the man to keep quiet about his healing. Jesus likely makes this request for several reasons. First, Jesus had a mission to fulfill. He was on earth to seek and save the lost, not to tend the physical ills of every sick person in Palestine. However, if word got out that Jesus provided free miracle cures, He would be besieged by people who were interested in His physical healing, not His spiritual healing. Second, Jesus had a schedule to keep. He had an appointment with death on a Passover two or three years from this event, and until that day came, His time was not yet opportune. Jesus couldn't force a confrontation with the Jewish authorities yet without putting that timetable at risk, but if the leper was too noisy, Jesus might end up with a confrontation whether He wanted one or not.

Also according to Jesus, the leper's second obligation was to show himself to a priest and make a sacrifice for his cleansing. As Jesus alludes to, this wasn't some idea that the Lord had come up with on the spot. Instead, it was part of the Law of Moses, specifically in Leviticus 14. This was no huge, massive sacrifice. All it required was the offering of two

birds, which was about as cheap as it got under the Law. Jesus shouldn't even have had to say anything to the man. He should have been on his way to the priest already. However, Jesus repeats this to drive the point home.

That's what Jesus asked of the leper. However, we see **HIS ACTIONS** implied in Luke 5:15-16. Neither here nor in Mark is there evidence that the cleansed man ever goes to a priest. He doesn't do what Jesus and Moses told him to, and he does do what Jesus told him not to. He goes and blabs to everybody about this miracle that has happened to him. Most likely, the consequences of this were no surprise to Jesus. He finds Himself swarmed under by people who want to be healed, and if He wants a quiet moment or two to pray, He has to go into the wilderness to find it.

This story, about as well as anything else in the entire Bible, illustrates the shortcomings of physical miracles. The leper is disobedient when he comes to Jesus, he is healed, and after he leaves, he is still disobedient. His physical sickness was cured, but his wicked heart remains unchanged. About six months ago, I had a few Bible studies with a young man who insisted that he would believe in Jesus if only I could show him one miracle. I told him, "No, you wouldn't. You'd find some way to explain that one miracle away too, or some reason why you still didn't have to obey God." Human beings have an amazing ability to believe what they want to believe in the face of a mountain of evidence, and no miracle can produce faith in the heart of the unbelieving. Only the gospel has the power to change hearts.

The Paralytic

The bridge story in this set of three is the story of the paralytic, and we're going to use this story to reflect on before we partake of the Lord's Supper. It begins with a brief description of **THE SETTING**, which appears in Luke 5:17. Mark tells us that this story takes place in Capernaum, at a time when Jesus still has a house He can call His own, which was still true in the early part of Jesus' ministry. However, this isn't very early in His work. In His house with Him are religious men and scribes from all over Palestine. Apparently, the religious powers that be haven't decided that they hate Jesus yet, so they're still willing to listen to Him to learn what He has to say. One gets the impression that the common folks are there too, spilling out the door into the street. Also, note that the text says that Jesus has the healing power of God with Him. In a moment, this will take on two different meanings.

This first-century mob scene poses a problem for several **FRIENDS** who want to reach Jesus. We read their story in Luke 5:18-19. At first glance, these men appear very similar to the leper. They're coming to Jesus because they want physical healing. There are a couple of differences, though. First, they don't appear to be disobeying the Law. Second, they are concerned about the welfare of their paralyzed friend, not their own. However, they have a problem. Due to the crush of people, they can't even get through the door. Their solution is simple and ingenious, albeit kind of hard on Jesus' roof. They climb up on the roof, tear through the tiles, and lower their sick friend down.

As we'll see momentarily, rather than being outraged at the destruction of His property, Jesus is pleased by the action they have taken. They aren't violating the Law, and their unconventional entrance shows their confidence that Jesus can help their friend. There's a lesson here for us too. The Lord doesn't want us to come to Him in violation of what He has commanded, but He doesn't want us to let anything else stand in our way. In Luke especially, many of the characters who come in for the most praise from Jesus are the ones who don't give up, who persist in seeking His blessing even to the point of being impolite or obnoxious. We need to pray like that, and we need to live like that.

At this point, we think we know how things are going to go. Once again, Jesus is going to show His power over the natural world, and the paralyzed man is going to be healed. However, Jesus departs from the script, and in so doing arouses the ire of **THE PHARISEES**. Let's look at Luke 5:20-21. This man appears through the hole in the roof, Jesus is pleased with the faith of his friends, but rather than saying, "Rise and walk", Jesus tells him that his sins are forgiven him. This does not appear to be what the man was seeking, but he got it anyway.

What is more, this really gets the religious experts upset, and I suspect that if we had been there and knew what they knew, we would be upset too. Jesus healing lepers and whatnot was supernatural, but other prophets had done that before. However, nobody had ever claimed before to have the power to forgive sins with a word. According to the Law, forgiveness of sins had to be accomplished in the Temple with massive shedding of animal blood. Here, there was no sign that any forgiveness had even occurred, and just as we would be, the Pharisees are upset at the perceived blasphemy.

What they don't realize is that they have walked into a setup, and the setup becomes obvious from **JESUS' REPLY**. Let's look together at Luke 5:22-23. Jesus knows perfectly well that in their hearts, these outraged pious Jews are accusing Him of blasphemy. What is more, the Son of God knew what their reaction would be before He even said anything, which is why He said what He said in the first place. He could have performed another uncontroversial miracle and sent the healed man on his way, but He had a larger point to prove. Jesus' ministry did not primarily concern itself with the physical. Jesus was more interested in the spiritual, and He needed a way to prove that He had power in the hidden realm too. The Pharisees are right to think that His claim to forgive sins is a huge deal, and that has to be established somehow. This is the method He chooses, and His logic is impeccable. Nobody can perform miracles apart from God, so if Jesus claims to have the power to forgive sins and then performs a miracle, God is endorsing His claim to have the power of forgiveness too. It's harder to forgive sins than to heal the paralyzed, true, but either one is impossible

for an ordinary man. Even today, our faith is based on this logic. None of the New Testament authors ever saw or reported on physical evidence of forgiveness, but their accounts of the great things that Jesus did on earth give us reason to believe in His power to do greater things in heaven. If He says our sins are forgiven, we can believe Him.

The conclusion to Jesus' logic comes when He performs **THE MIRACLE**. This appears in Luke 5:24-26. Jesus has been intending to do this ever since He saw the paralyzed man, but now, He hasn't only healed him, He has made His spiritual point too. Once again, this mighty work falls into the Scriptural pattern of spectacular, incontestable miracle. In front of dozens of people, this paralyzed man, who was likely familiar to many in attendance, gets up, picks up his bed, and walks. This is not merely Jesus knitting nerves in the spine. In an instant, the Lord also had to revitalize the atrophied muscles and restore the man to full function. He did, and even the men who had been accusing Him of blasphemy knew that He did. Nobody left Jesus' house that day with any doubt that a miracle had occurred.

The subject and audience alike all left glorifying God, but they may well have missed the real point. Jesus' greatest power lay not in His ability to heal the sick, but in His ability to forgive. Today, we no longer seek miraculous healing from our Lord, but we entrust our souls to His forgiveness, and we will not be disappointed. This isn't an ability that Jesus innately possessed. Instead, He paid for the right to forgive the paralytic, and He paid for the right to forgive us. We often think of mercy as an obligation, not something to be sought for its own sake. Jesus disagrees. He wanted so badly to be merciful to us, though we certainly did not deserve it, that He surrendered His life to make mercy possible.

The Tax Collector

The final story of this three-part series is the story of the tax collector. Unlike the first two, this story begins with **JESUS' CALL**. This call appears in Luke 5:27. This is a story that we take for granted: "Yeah, Jesus calls Levi. Big deal." However, in the first century, this was a big deal. Even today, we don't like taxes, and nobody goes around bragging about being an IRS agent. Imagine, though, how we would feel about tax collectors if the taxes they imposed were ruinous, not even leaving us with enough money to eat, and all the money collected went overseas so some overlord nation could live in luxury. That's the way thing were not only in Palestine, but all over the Roman Empire, and as a result, Levi and his ilk were cordially hated. And yet, Jesus calls this despicable human being to follow Him.

To say the least, at first glance, this appears utterly inappropriate for Jesus to do. However, the gospel writers want us to consider this act in the context of the two preceding stories. Jesus has just healed a leper, forgiven a paralytic of his sins, and then healed him to boot. This is Jesus' resume. He specializes in taking on impossible tasks and carrying them out. Calling the tax collector is third in this series of impossible tasks. This time, though, the task is entirely spiritual in nature. Jesus has already forgiven a garden-variety Jew. Now, He seeks to reclaim the soul of a tax collector.

LEVI'S ANSWER to this appeal is revealed in Luke 5:28-29. Levi does two things. First, he obeys. Second, he makes a big dinner in Jesus' honor, so that all of his tax collector and sinner friends can get to know Jesus too. Simply by the act of choosing to follow, Levi shows the difference between him and the leper in the first story. The leper was only given physical healing by Jesus, and his heart remained hard and disobedient. Levi, on the other hand, has been offered the chance to become a disciple of Jesus, and in return for his spiritual cleansing, he offers obedience.

Hard on the heels of his decision to obey, Levi starts introducing others to his Savior. On one level, this makes perfect sense. Levi has spent his whole career as a tax collector getting spat on by the righteous Jews. And yet, here comes God's holy, miracle-working prophet, and this prophet offers scum like Levi the opportunity to be His disciple. What a deal! Of course Levi is going to tell all of his tax-collector friends about Jesus too. This is their big chance!

And yet, this very logical reaction is alien to our evangelistic experience today. We regard evangelism as something that only super-duper advanced Christians are able to do. And yet, Levi wasn't a super-duper advanced anything. There's no evidence here that he knew the first thing about what Jesus taught. All he knew was that Jesus wanted him, and he figured correctly that Jesus would want all his buddies too. That's all it takes for us to evangelize effectively. All we have to be is excited about having found a Savior and eager to tell our friends about Him too.

However, this dinner provokes a predictable response from **THE PHARISEES**. Luke explains in Luke 5:30. They heard Jesus say that He had the power to forgive sins, and they saw the miracle that backed His claim up, but they haven't put things together yet. They don't see this feast as an opportunity to return some lost souls to God's kingdom. They see it as an opportunity to get spiritually contaminated. They had already written Levi and his fellows off, and they had no interest in exploring the possibility that it wasn't too late for the sinners at the dinner. All they were concerned about was preserving their precious ritual purity, and they got upset when Jesus didn't share their priorities.

Likewise, friends, as religiously observant people today, when we consider the lost, we have to be careful that we are doing so with Jesus' priorities in mind and not our own. There are all kinds of ways we can go wrong here. We can share the contempt of the Pharisees and want nothing to do with those whom we perceive as less personally righteous ourselves. Conversely, we can be so concerned about the contempt of the worldly that we do our best not to stand out from the world at all. In all of these cases, we've got an overthinking problem. It's not our place to judge or massage

outcomes. The gospel will always put people where God wants them, so all we have to do is use the gospel to introduce the lost to their Savior. Jesus wants us to tell others about Him. Let's confine our thinking to doing that.

Of course, we see the Pharisees put in their place by **JESUS' REPLY**. Let's read about it in Luke 5:31-32. This is one of those statements from Jesus that is a lot more complicated than it looks on the surface. The first level, though, is obvious. Jesus is a physician for the sick. He didn't come to help the people who didn't need spiritual healing. He came to help the people who did. Sometimes, people fall into the trap of believing that they aren't good enough for Jesus. They think they need to get their lives squared away before they obey the gospel, or that they need to study more and learn more, and a whole bunch of other things besides. It's like they're only willing to seek help once they think they don't need it anymore. That's exactly backwards. Jesus came to save everybody, even and perhaps especially the modern-day equivalents of tax collectors and prostitutes. No matter how badly we have messed our lives up, no matter how greatly we have sinned, Jesus has a place in His kingdom for us if only we are willing to follow Him.

The second part of this answer, though, is that Jesus only came to save those who are willing to acknowledge that they are sinners. The tax collectors and sinners weren't the only ones at that table who needed Jesus. The scribes and the Pharisees needed him too. Their sins might have been more religiously acceptable, but they had a whole lot of hypocrisy and self-righteousness to repent of. The primary difference between Levi and his Pharisee critics was that Levi was willing to admit that he needed help, and the Pharisees weren't. Even today, Jesus cannot save those who won't admit that they need Him. This world is full of people who insist loudly that they are good people just the way they are, so they don't need to obey the gospel. That is a disastrous delusion, and it will keep those who believe it from His salvation.