

Saving Faith

Luke 5.17-26

Dominion Covenant Church

Mike Elliott June 22, 2008

I. Introduction.

Once upon a time a student was assigned to present to his college physics class a lecture on momentum and pendulums. He spent a good half hour describing the laws of motion with their application to pendulums. At the end of the teaching he asked the class, including the professor, “are you thoroughly convinced that as a pendulum swings it returns a little lower each time than the previous?” They agreed. “Are you sure?” They agreed. So he asked the professor to take part in a demonstration. A steel ball was suspended from the ceiling of the auditorium from a long cable. He had the professor sit with his back to the wall on one side of the room and pulled the ball to an inch away from his nose. He prepared to release the ball and have it begin its slow arc to the far side, then return toward its original position. Of course, the whole class knew that the laws of physics clearly showed the incontrovertible fact that the ball would not rise as far on its return. The professor was visibly nervous. He knew his physics, but in a few moments the steel ball would come whizzing straight for his head.

The student released the ball and the whole class watched with rapt attention. It peaked at the far side of the room and began its return. When the ball was half way back the professor frantically scurried away in mortal fear. He “knew” his physics, but that was not enough.

Isn't this an apt illustration of the type of faith many people have. They know the facts but when it comes to trusting their lives, they waver. The physics professor knew about gravity and friction, and when the rubber met the road he wavered! But the true Christian should not shudder, he/we, are to have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him (Eph 3.12). We are to be faithful, holding fast with confidence and rejoicing with firm hope to the end (Heb 3.6).

Today as we look at this beautiful and awesome account from the earthly ministry of Jesus may we see the power of true faith, the danger of false faith, and the glory of God in the faithful.

A. Jesus' ministry.

The account of healing the paralytic is a classic. Those of you who grew up in the church probably have done coloring books or worked with flannel boards depicting it. Matthew, Mark, and Luke—all three—relate this story so obviously it is important for us to be familiar with it. Unfortunately too often familiarity breeds casualness and we fail to see this event for what it really is: earth shattering. So I encourage you to take a step back and see it for the first time again as we go through it today.

B. Setting the stage.

First, let's set the stage. We are in the phase of Jesus' life called his Galilean ministry. He has taught in the synagogue of his home city Nazareth and provoked the wrath of many there (Lk 4.16-30); he has impressed many with the authority of his teaching (Lk 4.31-32); he has cast out demons (Lk 4.33-37) and healed the sick (Lk 4.38-41); and called Peter, Andrew, James, and John as disciples (Lk 5.1-11 with Mt 4.18). Clearly he has been busy, he has ruffled some feathers, and he has made his power know. He has already drawn large crowds, so large that he was pushed from the land into the sea!

It is no wonder then that he recognizes his need for quiet time in prayer. The verse that precedes the section about healing the paralytic reads, "So He Himself withdrew into the wilderness and prayed."

The New King James inserts the word "often" in there (He Himself often withdrew) because the verb tense indicates a repeated and ongoing action. This is not the only occasion when Jesus did so. Chapter 4.42 tells us of another. Indeed, this was part of Jesus' lifestyle. Over and over again he was fellowshiping with his Father in prayer. It is all the more important as he is engaging in frontline ministry confronting the evil one and human opponents. He does not proceed without prayerful preparation.

Our focus section begins with v17—"It happened on a certain day" or "On one of those days". Luke doesn't tell us exactly when or where it occurred but Mark does give the location in 2.1: Capernaum. This is the same town he was in when he cast out the Unclean Spirit in Luke 4.31ff. So it appears he was in Capernaum, did some traveling in the surrounding region, was out on the Sea of Galilee doing some fishing, and is back in Capernaum. His fame has spread far and wide (Lk 4.37) and sure enough, not only has the general public gathered together into a formidable crowd (Lk 5.19, Mk 2.2), but there is also a broad collection of Pharisees and teachers of the law who

had come from numerous towns in the region of Galilee. Everyone wants to see what this Jesus is about.

They do get to see what he is about; and it is a lot more than just curing fever (Lk 4.38) or leprosy (Lk 5.12-13). They are about to see the power of God come upon men via the faithful actions of a few faithful men. This challenges us to look at true faith, and to wonder both what it is and what it is not.

II. What saving faith is.

A. V17—faith that comes from the power of God.

Reading on in verse 17 we see that “the power of God was present to heal them.” We’ll see shortly that this healing is two dimensional—both physical and spiritual. Importantly, healing comes from the power of God. It is a fundamental mistake to think that we manifest it ourselves or that we can manipulate it at our beck and call through a particular mood, or music, or prayer. God moves as he wills and the healing that comes from faith comes from his power. Yes, it does come through us, but it is not because of us.

B. V18—faith that is humble.

Next, notice the difference in posture among the various onlookers: the multitude is pressing in and blocking the door (Mk 2.2, v19), the Scribes and Pharisees are sitting by (v17), the paralytic and his friends go to great lengths to find a way in (v19). The paralytic has recognized he needs help (v18) and this takes great humility.

Perhaps that is the great blessing of physical infirmity—we realize we need a physician. And it is the great tragedy of spiritual infirmity—too often people are ignorant of the fact that they need the great physician. Here we have a man who is seriously debilitated. We don’t know for how long—might have been since birth or he might have been involved in an ox-cart accident the day before. But for however long he has been in this condition, he is not so passive or blasé about it to think he doesn’t need help. No! He knows he needs help and he is humble enough to admit it.

C. V19—faith that is persistent.

At the same time that he is humble enough to admit that he needs help, he and his friends are persistent enough to press for help in v19. How many of us, if we were trying to get into our favorite concert and arrived only to find the venue was sold out and we couldn’t even see over the crowd at the door

would just go home and hope for another opportunity, or be bitter because we didn't get what we want. Not here. These guys are serious. There is no stopping them. They find a way onto the roof and get to work. They are not easily dismayed.

Luke describes the roof as being tiled, they “let him down with his bed through the tiling...” As an aside, Bible authorities used to say that Galilean roofs weren't tiled, only Gentile roofs were tiled. Skeptics have thus jumped on this as a clear case of error in the Bible. Evangelicals have tried to dig Luke out of a hole by saying Luke was simply speaking a bit anachronistically to be a good story teller. Guess what... recent archaeological evidence has discovered 1st c. Palestinian roofs with tiles. Apparently there was enough Gentile architectural influence even at that early date so it is entirely possible that Luke's story is accurate in every detail.

Back to the point about tiles... Tiled roofs of those days would have required a lot of labor to bust through. They would have been many inches thick and there were no jackhammers or power drills. It was a hard and thick material made to be quite durable. The fact that the men were successful in breaking through is further proof of their tenacity. They are not going to go away without getting what they need.

D. V20—faith that is visible.

Jesus knew their need and he saw their faith—it was visible. He saw what they did as a result of their faith since they did not simply sit quietly in prayer asking for healing, though of course Jesus would hear those prayers and know those desires of their hearts. He saw their actions that came from earnest faith.

Note he saw beyond the outward infirmity and saw the needs of the heart. This man obviously needed physical healing but Jesus provides much more: forgiveness of sins.

E. V21—faith that comes from God alone.

In verse 21 we see the first reaction to Jesus' bold statement. The scribes and Pharisees charge him with blasphemy. They are not critical openly, being a write-a-book about it type of skeptic; instead they do it quietly in their thoughts (v22). Of course they were correct in their theology for indeed no one can forgive sins but God (Ex 34.6, 7a; Ps 103.12; Isa 1.18, 43.25, 44.22; Jer 31.34; Mic 7.19) but they were wrong in their conclusion about Jesus. They faced a choice between 1-recognizing Jesus for what he claimed

to be, divine, or 2-accusing him of wrongly usurping divinity and being guilty of blasphemy. They chose the latter. Just like the demons in James 2.19 they have some correct theology (there the demons correctly know that the true God is monotheistic, here the critics correctly know that only the true God can forgive sins). Just like the demons this accurate knowledge is not enough because they do not apply it correctly. As they say, the devil is in the details; in this case the details of application. Authority to forgive sins is the prerogative of God alone and here we are faced with the person Jesus Christ who claims that authority, thus he is God.

F. V22-24—faith that affects our outward being.

I noted a moment ago that while the man was obviously paralyzed, Jesus first deals with the deeper need of sin. Why then does he even bother with the physical healing we read about in verses 22-24? He gives us the answer at the beginning of v24: “so that we may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins.” We know the skeptics thought Jesus was making a false claim: he said he could forgive sins but only God could do that, he is not God, therefore he is a liar, blaspheming God. How could Jesus convince them that he really could forgive sins? They couldn’t see the man’s heart, now wiped clean. They couldn’t see Jesus’ blood covering his sin. So to prove the larger yet invisible miracle to forgive sins, he decided to do the smaller yet visible miracle of healing his body. If he could do the latter then he could do the former. Hence he tells the man to arise.

The man’s faith first gained the great reward of eternal salvation and now it gains the great reward of temporal relief from suffering. While we can’t all expect that to happen, even Paul, a great man of faith, did not have the thorn in his flesh removed, still true faith affects our outward being. Paul had great joy in his suffering and contentment in his trials because he knew it was for a good cause and was only temporary. So whether it is full healing of the body or joy in the mist of continued suffering—there are always outward effects of true faith.

Not to get sidetracked, but we cannot fail to notice the extraordinary fact that Jesus knew their thoughts, he knew what they were reasoning in their hearts (v22). This is a great encouragement and a great warning. I said that true faith affects our outward being, but a particular outward being might be a cover-up. The Bible speaks of people proclaiming Jesus who at the end will be rejected by Jesus who says to them, “I never knew you.” (Mt 7.21-23) On the outside they looked authentic but on the inside they are fatally

corrupt. God knows the true inward groanings of man—we cannot deceive him.

G. V25a—faith that obeys.

Jesus has seen into the hearts of the skeptics and exposed their unbelief, while he has seen into the heart of the paralytic and seen his true belief. In verse 25 we see how true faith responds to the true Lord. It responds in obedience. First, this obedience is *immediate*. Immediately he rose up. Second, this obedience is thorough. Jesus told him three things to do and he does all three. He rose up, took up his bed, and went to his own house. Done. However, he does a fourth thing he was not explicitly told to do.

H. V25b—faith that glorifies God.

He spontaneously glorifies God. It could be that he glorifies God merely by obeying Jesus so quickly and thoroughly. In which case it is a great lesson to learn that delayed and haphazard obedience does not glorify God. But more likely the man did these things while glorifying God *audibly*; perhaps shouting for joy and grabbing his neighbors by the shirt collar, “guess what just happened to me, praise God!” His faith was no doubt expressed in great joy.

I. V26a,b—faith that engenders amazement and fear in those around.

Imagine the scene as the man trots off with his bedroll. The crowd would be justifiably stunned. Luke says in verse 26 they were amazed and filled with fear; Matthew writes they “marveled”. Also, just like the paralytic himself, they all glorified God. How beautiful it is to see a mass of people all giving credit where credit is due and giving God the glory!

However, it is likely that a portion of the audience remained unconvinced. I am speaking of the scribes and Pharisees. It is grammatically possible that the skeptical scribes and Pharisees are included in the “all” who were amazed and glorified God. But Matthew says the “multitude” marveled (Mt 9.8), the same “many” (Mk 2.2) that had crowded around Jesus for healing while the scribes and Pharisees were “sitting by” (Lk 5.17). We have further evidence that they remained skeptical in the next portion of the Gospel narratives. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all have the calling of Matthew the tax collector right after this; and in that incident there are the Pharisees asking another theologically accurate but wrongly applied and skeptical question. It appears to me that the scribes and Pharisees remained unconvinced.

J. V26c—faith that is strange by the world's standards.

Back to those who *were amazed* and *did marvel*. Luke writes that they said, “We have seen strange things today.” Mark records it as, “We never saw anything like this!” The Greek word translated “strange” is the root of the English “paradox”. To the onlookers it doesn’t seem to be possible. It’s as if they are saying, “I can’t believe my eyes. This is crazy!” Indeed, to the lost of the world the things of the Spirit of God are foolishness (1Cor 2.14) because they are spiritually discerned.

K. V26—faith that isn’t necessarily understood or agreed upon.

This leads to my conclusion that while the crowd was impressed they were not convinced; they were not believers. The paralytic man is saved and physically healed but those without the Spirit can’t make sense of it. Matthew says the multitude marveled and glorified God for giving such power *to men*. They think Jesus is a mere man with a special power; they fail to see the full import of what has happened—God has come to dwell with his people, *Emmanuel*, God with us.

So while oftentimes the salvation of one individual is contagious and many others around him become saved too, other times it is only the needle in the haystack that comes to Christ. Just because your family thinks you are crazy for following the Lord, just because your coworkers think you are a nut, just because the media thinks Christians are deluded doesn’t mean your faith isn’t true. Majority doesn’t rule and the veracity of religion is not an exercise in democracy. Often times true faith will stand out in a crowd and go against the grain. We have to be prepared to be one among many others and fight in a battle where we *appear* to be out numbered.

Even if the paralytic was the only one to come to faith that day, what a wonderful day it was.

III. What saving faith is not.

Well, we have taken a fairly careful look at the true faith manifested in the paralytic whose sins were forgiven and whose body was healed. We must always be mindful that there are fatal faiths out there. I have already mentioned the fatal faith spoken of in James and the fatal faith spoken of in Matthew 7. Let’s look at other faiths that fall short of true and saving faith.

A. John 2.23—faith in a miracle worker.

On many occasions Jesus performed special signs and this impressed people. Scripture often says on these occasions people “believed”. For example, John 2.23, “many believed in his name when they saw the signs which he did.” No doubt a definite impression had been made. But the power of Jesus and the purpose of Jesus go far beyond the miracles. The miracles were not an end in themselves; they were a means to an end. That is what it means by “sign”. A sign points to something else. A sign points to the thing it signifies. A stop sign on the road doesn’t mark the location where you stop, it tells you to look out for the stop spot. The stop sign points to the limit line painted on the road and the traffic intersection. The sacraments of the Lord’s Supper and Baptism are also signs. They point to the thing they signify, namely invisible grace. The bread and wine aren’t grace themselves, as if you can get more by taking two crackers instead of one. Rather it points to what it signifies, God’s grace.

Similarly the miraculous signs Jesus performed were not the main feature, they were not his reason for coming. He did them to prove his power to do something vastly more important, that is, to forgive sins. If he couldn’t forgive sins and thereby show his deity, there was no power claim to be backed up and no reason to do miracles. So to believe in Jesus only for his miracles is to fail to grasp the most basic nature of his being and mission.

B. John 6.14-15—faith in an earthly king-messiah.

On some occasions the people took it a step further (further in error), and upon seeing these miraculous signs they desired to make him an earthly king. This was the case in John 6 right after he fed the 5000. His answer to their desire was to get away. He departed to the mountain. He did not want his mission being confused with the nationalistic ideals of the populace.

This is a good lesson for us to remember. We shouldn’t fall into the trap of thinking, “my faith has made me spiritually well” so now “people will like me, I’ll get a better job, I’ll be put into positions of power...etc.” That may be the case for some, but not all. Saving faith does not grasp after power that is not its own but instead is patient, meek, and longsuffering.

C. John 12.42, 26—shy faith.

While genuine faith is meek, it is not shy. We should be ready, and willing and eager, to give an answer to everyone who asks us a reason of the hope that lies within us, with meekness and fear. (1Peter 3.15)

I admit when I was a young Christian I was fearful, of man more than God. I was traveling with a Christian tour group and was embarrassed to wear my nametag that had the company's name on it, "American Christian Tours".

In John 12 we have recorded the perfect rebuke to my behavior.

42 Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess *Him*, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; **43** for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.

In this case it appears they were true believers, albeit very weak and impotent believers. They feared being put out of the synagogue and all of the social ramifications that would have come along with that. They could have lost their friends, their jobs, and their social status. To some, the cost of discipleship seems too high; but of course when we take an eternal perspective we see the cost of the alternative is far higher.

So, a shy faith may still be true faith, but it is weak.

D. James 2.19—shuddering faith.

Finally, we come back to the shuddering faith of James 2. Knowledge of God's existence and fear of Him gets you nowhere. Knowledge often puffs up rather than melts a heart and fear can make us cower away from rather than cling to God.

In the past year have I gained a clearer understanding of the shuddering James speaks of. When we discipline our daughter, either by saying no or a flick on her hand (or more) often times she gives a whole body shiver—she shudders. She appears to be saying, "I don't like that. I want to do what I want to do and don't bother me about it." In the same way the demons of James 2.19 are confronted with the tangible information that God is one, but they don't like it, they shudder. Their whole bodies, as it were, react against it because they are rebellious.

While demons are beyond redemption and sealed in their rebellion, we are not. May God be so generous as to grant us and our children repentance; that we would not shiver in rebellion at his authority but crumble in humility at his mercy.

IV. Conclusion.

So we have contrasted the true and saving faith of the [formerly] paralyzed

man with various false faiths. We need to be able to identify the two and pursue the former instead of the latter.

The account of the full healing of this paralytic man teaches us a number of valuable lessons.

A. God is the first active agent.

First, at the beginning of the account we read that the power of God was present to heal. If God's power isn't present first, nothing is going to happen. We need to pray that God's power would be present in our lives, not only to heal us but also to minister in the lives of people we come into contact with. We want our lives to be full of power, and the only real power is from God, so we need to be full of God's power.

B. Man is the second active agent.

Second, God, having moved first, is not content with us sitting idly by. The man and his friends acted on their ardent faith and did whatever it took to gain a hearing with Jesus. They climbed up on the roof, dug through the hard tiles, and rigged up the rope system to lower him down. They recognized the need for help and pressed forward to get it. We too should be just as eager for Jesus' blessing in our lives, not easily dismayed but instead pressing forward with eager anticipation and hope.

C. True faith has Real results.

Third, importantly our hope is not in vain. We trust that God is the rewarder of those who diligently seek him (Heb 11.6). The power of God is present to heal and it *does* heal. Having healed it overflows in our hearts to produce joyful, God-glorifying obedience. Remember how quickly the healed man obeyed the multifaceted command of Jesus... and thereby glorified God! May we too be quick to obey and quick to have God-glorifying words on our lips.

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