

The Son of Man Forgives Sins

Jesus is once again on the move “to preach the good news of the Kingdom of God in other cities as well” (4:43). This morning, as Jesus enters into one of those cities, we look at two incredible moments which must be seen together. What ties them together is the beginning of the rise of opposition, “as the kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against His Anointed” (cf. Ps. 2:2), which we so wonderfully heard about last Sunday. One of the accusations the Pharisees leveled against Jesus was His vagrant disregard for the Law of Moses. But as we see in our text this morning, Jesus followed the Law meticulously and shows absolute faithfulness to its requirements (5:14). As Paul says, Jesus was “born under the Law to redeem those who were under the Law so that we might receive the adoption as sons” (Gal. 4:4-5). We are saved not only by the death of Jesus but also by the life of Jesus. He had to come to fulfill the Law for us so that through His active obedience we might be justified before God, being given His righteousness as a free gift through faith alone. It is just as important for our salvation that Jesus obeyed the Law perfectly for us as it is that He died in our place, condemned for our sins.

The first story begins with Jesus entering “one of the cities,” which was mentioned in 4:43. While Jesus alone is mentioned, we assume that Peter, Andrew, James, and John, having seen the miracle of the great catch of fish and being called by Jesus to follow Him so that they will now be catching men for the Kingdom of God, have left everything and are now following Him (5:10-11).

Further, we have been told that reports about Jesus’ healings of many diseases have gone out into every place in the surrounding region (cf. 4:37) causing the crowds to search for Him (4:42). When Jesus enters into this city there was a ready crowd seeking Him out (5:15). But Luke draws our attention to one man who has been waiting for Jesus’ arrival (5:12). He is described as “full of leprosy” (v. 12).

Leprosy, sometimes known as Hansen’s disease, is a terrible skin infection which causes lesions for form on the nerves, respiratory tract, skin, and eyes. Many who contract leprosy lose the ability to feel pain and thus will lose parts of their extremities due to repeated injuries or infections due to unnoticed wounds. It can also cause great weakness and poor eyesight among those infected. Though leprosy, today, is curable, in the ancient world most people who had contracted the disease were ostracized from their homes and community and banished to leper colonies where they would live out the rest of their sad lives. But for the devout Jew, contracting leprosy meant something far worse. They were declared by the priest as being

perpetually “unclean,” which meant they were forbidden to enter the temple to worship God (cf. Lev. 13:8). To be a leper meant that you were forsaken by your family, friends, and God.

This man who approaches Jesus is “full of leprosy” (5:12). When was the last time he felt the touch or embrace of another human? More importantly, when was the last time he was able to approach God in worship? The Law forbade him from entering the temple, so now he must enter the presence of the New Temple, which has entered into his city.

The scene is filled with intense drama. He has heard that Jesus is coming. He strains his weakened eyes to find Jesus among the dusty roads. When he finally sees Jesus, he doesn’t wait for Jesus to approach him. He runs up to Jesus and falls on his face before Jesus’ feet. The scene reminds us of how Peter reacted to Jesus as the boats began to sink as the enormous catch was dragged into them (5:8). But whereas Peter cried out to the LORD to “depart” from him, the man full of leprosy begged Jesus to come closer and heal him (v. 12). This man knew that it was Jesus’ prerogative of whether He would choose to heal him or not. He confesses Jesus to be “LORD” and humbly petitions Him with “if you are willing.” If Jesus chooses to heal him, the man knows Jesus can make him once again “clean.” If Jesus is willing, then the man full of leprosy will not only be cleansed of leprosy, but more importantly, he will once again be able to enter the temple to worship God.

As Jesus often does when He sees the broken of our world, He has compassion on the man and simply says, “I will; be clean” (v. 13). But Jesus does something else which the Law of Moses prohibited – He stretched out His hand and touched the man (v. 13). In the ancient world it was thought that leprosy was contracted from person to person by touching the leper. To touch a leper, much more, one who is full of leprosy meant that the clean individual himself became unclean. But when Jesus touches the man, rather than the leprosy making Him unclean, Divine power leaves Jesus and immediately restores the man to full health. At the same moment Jesus touches the man and says, “Be clean,” the man, who is full of leprosy, experienced the coming of the Kingdom of God upon him.

Now, think for a moment about what has happened for this man. One day, those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ will enter into Heaven. John describes in the Revelation that at that moment God Himself will wipe every tear from our eyes and death shall be no more. Neither will there be any mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore. But God will be with us as our God, our dwelling place in whom we will live forever. In the very moment when Jesus touched the man full of leprosy he experienced the fullness of the heavenly eschaton come upon him and he was made clean.

Jesus instructs the man, now clean, to tell no one but instead to go straightway to the priest and make the required offering as Moses commanded (v.14; cf. Lev. 14:1-32, 57). According to the Law, only the priest could publicly declare that a leper is now clean. Far from usurping or disregarding the Law, Jesus shows thorough faithfulness to the Law. But something far greater is going on here! What the Law of Moses could not do, the God-man, full of grace and truth, has the power to accomplish immediately. All the Law could do was separate the clean from the unclean. Jesus has the power to make the unclean, clean and restore the unclean back into a right relationship with God. This is what the Gospel of the Kingdom of God is all about. This is what Jesus is offering when He calls to you,

Matthew 11:28 - 12:1 ²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

When word of the healing of the man full of leprosy gets out, reports about Jesus spread further abroad and even greater crowds begin to gather to hear Jesus and be healed of their diseases (v. 15). According to the example of modern-day faith healers, you would think that it is time for Jesus and his disciples to set up a large tent and begin passing around the collection baskets. It is time to put Jesus' name up in lights, print colorful, slick "Madison Avenue" mailouts, and get Jesus to fill conference halls to draw all attention to His great power. But if Jesus' goal was to preach to larger and larger crowds and grow his budget exponentially all, of course, in the name of "building a successful ministry" then Jesus was an utter failure. By the standards of modern American preachers, who would rather preach their "therapeutic, deistic, moralistic messages" in order to build a successful ministry, what Jesus does next is completely contrary to what we would expect. Jesus withdraws from the crowds to where it is empty in order to pray (v. 16).

Now that the word about Jesus has spread further abroad, He has brought the attention of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law, who have gathered from every village in Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem to investigate who this is who is causing such a ruckus throughout Israel (v. 17). You want to keep your eye on the Pharisees throughout the Gospel to see what is important to them. What will those, who know the Law in detail, do when they see the power of God displayed before their eyes?

This incident begins with Jesus once again teaching and preaching the good news of the Kingdom of God in another city (v. 17), full of the power of the Holy Spirit to heal. We must infer from the story that Jesus had entered into someone's home to teach and we are told that a massive crowd had gathered in and around the house such that it was impossible for anyone else to squeeze in to see Jesus (v. 19). But hearing that Jesus had come to their town, a group of

men gathered up their friend, who was paralyzed, and rushed on their way to see Jesus. You can imagine for a moment what that was like. Out of love for their friend, they knew his body was broken and in need. They knew they could do nothing to fix him but the reports about what Jesus had the power to do had reached them and if they could just get their friend to Jesus, He could forever change his life. So they gather the man on his bed up and make the journey to see Jesus. Like most men, the paralytic probably rejected their help at first but as he bounced and bumped on his bed down the dusty road the anticipation of a new life would have filled his heart. Could this really be the turning point of his life? No longer having to beg for bread but now he could be made well and once again make a living for himself.

As they approach the house where Jesus was teaching, they began to search for an opening to get their friend to Jesus. You could imagine the dismay that filled each of their hearts as they realized there was no way they were going to get close to Him (v. 19). At this point, most people would have probably just given up and made their way back, saying along the way, "Well, we tried." But not these friends! They have an idea. They carefully carry the man up to the roof. In this area, at the time, a house would have had a flat roof where the house owner would have entertained friends. They would access the roof by a wooden ladder leading to the top of the house. You can see these men carefully carrying their friends up the ladder being sure not to let him slip off from his bed. They carry the paralytic man over to the edge of roof and set him down under the sun.

We know from earlier passages that down below every eye is fixed on Jesus as they marveled at every gracious word that was falling from his lips (cf. 4:20, 22). When suddenly debris from the ceiling started to fall and suddenly the light from outside began to pierce the darkness inside. As more and more debris began to fall and more and more light began to fill the room the crowds began to squeeze together to get out of the way. Suddenly a large opening was torn into the ceiling, large enough to lower a bed with a grown man upon it down to where Jesus was teaching. What was going on? The crowds who were listening to Jesus were certainly shocked at all the commotion. The faces of the Pharisees and scribes were filled with scowls as surely some Law was being broken. And Jesus, what was He thinking? Did He marvel at the faith of these men thinking in all Israel He hadn't seen faith like this?

What man or woman among us would go through such lengths to go out of our way to help our friend in time of trouble? What love and compassion we see in these men as they are willing to do anything they can to get their friend to Jesus. They must have been shocked when Jesus finally spoke. Jesus simply says, "Man, your sins are forgiven you" (v. 20). What? They didn't bring their friend all this way to have his sins forgiven. What's wrong with Jesus? They went through all this trouble to hear Jesus tell their friend that his sins were forgiven. Others in the

crowd were equally shocked. "What did Jesus say?" "He told the man that He has forgiven his sins."

The scribes and the Pharisees were enraged. They asked among themselves, "Who does Jesus think He is, speaking such blasphemies? Only God can forgive sins!" At this point, the theology of the Pharisees was impeccable. They were exactly right. Only God can forgive sins. No mere man can forgive the sins of others. Certainly, if someone sins against me, not only can I forgive them but God tells me that I am obligated to forgive others, even my enemy. But Jesus isn't forgiven someone who sinned against Him. He is forgiven a man who sinned against others. The Pharisees error was not in their theology but in their confusion as to who Jesus was. Only God can forgive sins is right. What should that have told them?

Jesus knows what they were thinking and he asks them a question that has troubled readers of the Gospel ever since the words were penned, "Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you' or to say, 'Rise and walk'?" (v. 23). Which is easier? That's hard to say. It surely depends on what you're looking for. After all, anyone could say, "Your sins are forgiven you" and how would you know? The proof of having your sins forgiven exists only in the invisible realm where God dwells. But if Jesus says, "Rise and walk" and the paralytic just sits there unable to move then Jesus would be exposed as a charlatan. If Jesus tells the man to get up and walk and he doesn't then Jesus' preaching would be invalidated and he would have been humiliated and laughed out of town. But we know that Jesus can heal.

Jesus chose the much more dangerous thing to do because to say such things would ultimately mean His death. But now He proves for all to see that He in fact has the power, the authority to forgive sins by turning to the man once more and saying, "That you may know that the Son of Man (which is to say "the Son of God"; cf Dan. 7) has the authority on earth to forgive sins, I say to you, Rise, pick up your bed, and go home" and the second He said it power is transferred from Jesus to the legs of the paralytic and he stands up, grabs his own bed, and makes his way back home glorifying God (v. 25), free from his paralysis, free from his sin. The crowds were seized/paralyzed with amazement, glorified God and were filled with awe/fear saying, "What we have seen today is extraordinary!" (v. 26). This is the appropriate response to those who are suddenly ushered into the presence of Almighty God.

Once again the Kingdom of God has come upon this man in his paralysis and what the Law could not do, the Son of God has come to earth, full of grace and truth, with all the authority of Heaven and earth to fully accomplish. Truly what is impossible for man to do, but with God all things are possible! (Matt. 19:26; Luke 18:27).

Amen! -SDG-

