

Relentless Faith

Luke 5: 17-26

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Recently we discovered the central theme of Jesus' preaching ministry to be the kingdom of God. And we discovered the kingdom of God comes with astonishing authority and power. When Jesus preached, amazing things happened: demons were cast out, crowds of people were healed, a leper was cleansed, and the acceptance of God set a guilt-ridden fisherman free to forsake all, and follow Jesus.

Last week, we learned how this power to preach and heal was maintained in the life of Jesus by a disciplined life of prayer, which is a model for all who follow Him.

In today's lesson, we are again with Jesus as He teaches in another city. The central lesson this week, is the exclusive authority of Jesus to heal the whole person.

An Issue of Authority

Here is the scene before us: Jesus is teaching. The house is filled to capacity with people, including for the first time, a large group of Pharisees and teachers of the law from "every town" in Galilee, Judea, and Jerusalem.

Now here is a key phrase:

"And the power of the Lord was present heal them."

In this scene, we have a brewing conflict between Jesus of Nazareth and the Pharisees and teachers of the law. And at the center of this conflict is the issue of authority.

Who speaks for God? Jesus is a teacher, and present also, are the "Pharisees and teachers of the law." Two sources of teaching. The crowd has been taught since childhood that it is the Pharisees and teachers of law who speak for God. These men are the experts. They command great respect and honor. These are the men who "love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, and they receive greetings in the marketplace, and to be called, "Rabbi, Rabbi" (Matthew 23:6-7). And now, this upstart from Nazareth has begun a teaching ministry that bears authority and power, not like their scribes (Matthew 7:29).

Can you imagine the tension?

The question is this: is the power of the Lord present due to the ministry of Jesus, or due to the Pharisees and teachers of the law? In other words, on whose side is God? Something new is happening in Israel. There is this Nazarene, and the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

The people present have to decide who has the authority in their life. Which presses upon us the same question:

Who has the final authority in your life?

We all live in accord with some authority. During our developmental years, that authority was our parents, and extended family elders. In school, it was our teachers. For those who served in the military, it became those in command. Those who hold jobs have superiors in authority. These are the common, normal experiences with authority.

But what I am asking is what authority determines your identity, purpose, and hope? What authority determines your understanding of God, yourself, and others? The easy answer for most Christians is, "God," or "Jesus," or "The Bible." And these are true and good answers. But there is a problem: many Christians offer these answers, but their lifestyles say something else. And this brings us to a note of caution: Christians must always guard against a "faith," that says, but does not do.

- Jesus defined the Pharisees as those who "say, and do not do" (Matthew 23:3). It was the leading characteristic of this group. Does this sound familiar?
- In His upcoming "Sermon on the Plain," Jesus asks those following Him, "But why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do the things which I say?" (Luke 6:46).
- Paul told the Corinthians, "The kingdom of God is not in word but in power" (I Corinthians 4:19-20). Apparently, the false teachers who had invaded that church were talkers, but they lacked the power to walk their talk.
- James warns his readers to be "doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (James 1:22). There is no greater deception than self-deception.
- And John tells his readers, "My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth" (I John 3:18).

The point I am making is this: if Jesus is the unique, exclusive, and final authority for you, there ought to be evidence of this in your life beyond what you say. Now I am *not* suggesting some form of outward moralism. Anyone who knows me, knows I do not teach mere external, quantitative righteousness. There has been enough spiritual abuse handed out over the centuries by moralistic preaching. Yet, my point stands.

What does a life look like in which Jesus is the unique, exclusive, and final authority? We can draw three characteristics from today's text.

First, there is the presence of a relentless faith; second, there is calm assurance of the forgiveness of sins; and third, there is healing toward wholeness.

A Relentless Faith

We have discovered in this Gospel that Jesus healed desperate people in a simple, compassionate, and sovereign response to the need in front of Him. But in today's text, we learn Jesus also healed in response to faith. If we are to experience the power and depth of the salvation Jesus brings, we desperately need to know the quality and nature of that faith.

In today's text, we discover the relentless nature of authentic faith.

The friends of a paralyzed man removed roof tiles in order to lower their paralyzed companion down before Jesus. Consider the quality of faith at work here! These men believed if they could just get before Jesus, all would be well. And when the size of the crowd hindered their entry, they did not go away frustrated or victimized; rather, they did whatever they had to do to gain access to Jesus.

This man, and his companions, displayed a *relentless* faith.

Such faith not only points to Jesus, it motivates one to do whatever is necessary to experience His healing touch. The friends of this man could have said, "Oh, well. Let's come back for the evening service, or, "We tried. Maybe we can catch Jesus the next time He is in town." That would be more like the casual faith at work in most professing Christians, today.

Most professing Christians today seek Jesus as it is convenient and comfortable to do so.

But these men determined to do whatever would be necessary to get to Jesus—and to do it, now! One can imagine the paralyzed man, saying, "Just get me to Jesus!" His friends then respond, "Okay, to the roof! rip off the tiles! Now lower him down in front of Jesus. That's it, carefully, okay, slowly." And then the mat comes to rest in front of Jesus. They have done what was necessary. They displayed a relentless faith that brought their friend before Jesus.

Now, let me caution: relentless faith is not about working up a froth in order to secure what one wants from God. That's is practiced in many Charismatic circles, and is truly absurd. It is not faith. What relentless faith does is to get before Jesus, for the sake of yourself or others. It does not test God. *Relentless faith has Jesus Himself as its goal.* Faith fixates on Jesus, and not on the problem. Faith pursues Jesus, no matter what. And faith then rests in the mercies of the Lord Jesus and His authority and power to bring about an outcome in His timing and in His way.

Such a relentless faith is the logical response to the authority and power of Jesus. This man had no doubt heard about the preacher from Nazareth; he had heard of the authority and power that accompanied His words. They had no doubt heard of other hopeless people finding healing and deliverance. And in hearing, the gift of faith was received: "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17). And this faith was a relentless faith.

So then, saving faith is neither casual nor fanatical. By relentless, we mean a faith that does not give way to circumstances when it comes to pursuing Jesus. And relentless faith is not one type of faith; it is the very nature of saving faith. It *is* faith.

The saints throughout the ages have also displayed a single-minded, relentless faith to follow Christ. When once, through the eyes of faith, they beheld His beauty, and heard His gracious voice, and experienced His authority and power, nothing was left but follow Him at all costs.

Oh, how we need a return to such faith today! Modern “faith” is halting, fickle, consumer-driven. It really cannot be called faith at all. For it is self-centered, worldly, superficial, and thus double-minded. And James tell us, a “double-minded” person cannot expect to “receive anything from the Lord” (James 1:6-8). A casual faith is in truth, unbelief.

However, a relentless faith allows us to see our desperate need of Jesus, and points us to Him, and to Him alone as our healer and deliverer; it pursues Jesus at all costs and without apology. A relentless faith is the prescribed throughout the Scriptures.

- The writer to the Hebrews tells us, “without faith it is impossible to please Him, for He who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Hebrews 11:7). This is a theme throughout Scripture.
- The greatest commandment is to “love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:5; Luke 10:27).
- The Psalmist declares, “Blessed are those who keep His testimonies, who seek Him with the whole heart!” (Psalm 119:2).
- To the captives in Exile, Jeremiah declared this promise from God: “Then I will give them a heart to know Me, that I am the LORD; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God, for they shall return to Me with their whole heart” (Jeremiah 24:7); and, “you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:13).

The New Covenant people of God are a people who pursue Him with a whole-hearted, relentless faith, and the promise of deliverance belongs to them alone.

Forgiveness of Sins and Wholeness

Removing the roof tiles and lowering this paralyzed man down before Jesus, was no doubt a show-stopping moment. But Jesus was not offended by their actions; rather, He saw their actions as evidence of faith. And in response to this faith, Jesus told the paralyzed man,

“Man, your sins are forgiven you” (Luke 5:20).

Now, it was common in first-century Jewish thought to view sickness as a consequence of sinning (John 9:2). But there is no indication that this man’s paralysis was punishment for

some act of sin; neither did this man appear to be suffering from intense guilt.¹ The man did not even ask for forgiveness. And yet, Jesus *pronounces* forgiveness. Jesus' words could be translated, "Your sins have been forgiven you."² In other words, in acknowledging their faith, Jesus is pronouncing the forgiveness that most certainly accompanies such faith. This event is a marvelous illustration of what Paul later refers to, saying, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them" (II Corinthians 5:19a).

The relentless pursuit of Jesus is an expression of faith that offers great assurance also of forgiveness of sins. Those still in love with sin do not pursue Jesus. Let me say it this way: if you love Jesus, if you desire His presence above and beyond all else, then you may be assured you are in a state of forgiveness of sins. Only a regenerate heart will pursue Jesus with a relentless resolve.

Yet, it is likely this pronouncement was not what was expected here. Great multitudes had heard Jesus preach and watched Him heal sick bodies. But now Jesus is also displaying His authority to forgive sins; to heal the sin-sick soul. In the paralyzed man, Jesus healed the whole person. This means regeneration provides the cure for the spiritually dead, *so that* the mind and body may also experience wholeness. The Lord Jesus brings to you both cure and care of all that ails you. Luke's understanding of salvation is the restoration of the entire person.³

Do you know that God cares about your mental state? Do you know that God also cares about the health of your body? God created all of you. And all of you needs redemption. Jesus has come to be a whole Savior. He alone brings wholeness to spirit, mind, and body. "Jesus brings no partial salvation: it is spiritual as well as physical," writes Leon Morris.⁴ The old Greek philosophy of dualism wherein the spirit is good but the body is bad, has slithered its way into the American church. The result is Jesus is too often portrayed in the church as the Savior of your soul, but not the Lord of your mind and body as well. But in today's lesson, we are being reminded Jesus comes to you with the authority and power to make you a whole person.

"Be to me the double cure: *save from wrath and make me pure.*" – Original version.

The Chief Obstacle to Forgiveness and Wholeness

However, to those religious authorities present, the Nazarene's pronouncement was cause for great consternation. They "reasoned, saying, 'Who is this who speaks blasphemies?

¹ Frederick Danker, *Jesus and the New Age: a Commentary on Luke's Gospel* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 122.

² Ibid.

³ Walter L. Liefeld and David W. Pao, "Luke-Acts," in *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, revised edition, Tremper Longman III, and David E. Garland, general editors, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), p. 121.

⁴ Leon Morris, "Luke," in the *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1988), p. 121.

Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (v.21). This is Jesus' first encounter with the Jewish religious authorities. Blasphemy was a capital offense, punishable by stoning. This is therefore no minor theological debate. These men are charged with maintaining the religious status quo. And in their reasoning, they are beginning to build a case against Jesus as someone who interrupts that status quo.

Both Jesus and the teachers of the law claimed exclusive authority to speak for God. "Who is this?" reason the religious authorities. But this is not an honest inquiry. It is indignation. "How dare He!" is the spirit here. Now it is important also to recognize the presence of these religious authorities for what it truly represents; their presence means the devil is again lurking about seeking to derail Jesus' mission. They don't like what they hear because the evil one is interpreting Jesus' words and actions to them. Evil is never more insidious than when cloaked in clerical authority.

And whereas the paralyzed man and his companions have come to Jesus on the basis of faith, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law have come on the basis of evil intent. The paralyzed man sees Jesus as a healer and deliverer; the Pharisees and teachers of the law, however, see Jesus only as a blasphemer. Two very different views of Jesus in the same room.

So, here we may better understand this scene as the presence of two sources of teaching: Jesus' teaching sourced from above, commissioned and empowered by the Holy Spirit; and then the teachers of the law with their body of teaching from below, sourced and energized by the evil one. Each claim ultimate authority. Each have serious impact on people's lives. Only one is from God.

The chief obstacle to forgiveness and healing is toxic, Satanic-energized religion claiming authority in one's life. And how does one know if one is under the influence and authority of such religion? There are two primary symptoms:

- 1) Despair, or, 2) Smug self-righteousness.

A person who believes he or she is too bad to be saved, and/or that God is particularly angry at them, is under the authority of toxic religion. Such people believe themselves to be terminally unique; no one has ever sinned like they have. On the other hand, a person who is quite confident in themselves before God, tied usually to religious tradition, is also under the influence of toxic religion. Both states, the despairing and the self-righteous, are symptoms of toxic religion, often masking as Christianity.

So, let me ask you this, in our scene, who has Jesus come for? The paralyzed man, or the religious critics? Do you know there is only one class of people Jesus Himself said He had *not* come for? There is only class of people for whom Jesus offers nothing: those who feel no need of Him. Jesus said it this way, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31-32). "I have not come to the righteous," says Jesus. Who are the righteous? Anyone who maintains the

delusion that God is impressed with their basic goodness. And this goodness is measured against, not the righteousness of Christ, but against those perceived to be less good than they themselves. It is salvation by comparison.

Redemption Versus Recovery

Listen please, Jesus is not come make good people better; Jesus is not come to help you help yourself. He has not even come to ensure you are comfortable. Like the religious authorities before Jesus that day, those relying upon their own resources feel they have no need of a healer and deliverer. Neither do those who seek to approach Jesus on the basis of reason alone. You can't think your way into forgiveness and wholeness. The ability to rightly perceive and reason did not survive the Fall. The natural man therefore cannot reason his way into salvation and wholeness; neither can he recover enough to find salvation (I Corinthians 2:13-16). What is needed is redemption, not recovery as defined by Twelve Step programs.

Only redemption is genuine recovery. Adam fell. The new Adam, Jesus Christ, recovers for humanity what Adam lost in that dreadful fall. And every person is either in union with Adam or Christ. There is no third option.

Remember what we heard in the Nazareth narrative: Jesus has come for the poor, the crushed, the captive, the blind, the oppressed, and those who need to experience God's acceptance. Jesus has come for those who have nothing to offer Him. The great obstacle to your spiritual health and overall well-being is not your sins—Jesus came to save sinners; the great obstacle is any latent notion you can impress God with your own goodness, apart from Christ. Once again, genuine recovery involves the redemption only Christ can provide.

Paul warned the Corinthians of the seductive nature of teachers who point you away from Christ and back to the self (II Corinthians 11:1-4). Still, it didn't take long before this error slithered into the church. By the second and third centuries, with very few exceptions, the early Church Fathers adopted a view, based in Greek philosophy, that the Christian life was about working for salvation.⁵ The compulsion to self-justification is insidious.

If you think you are saved by what you know, rather than who you know, Jesus is of no use to you. If you admit you are broken but manageable, then you have missed Jesus, and are in grave danger. The very essence of the gospel is that Jesus has come to save the unsavable, to heal the terminally sick, to bring life to the dead. The gospel is not a self-help program.

But the religion of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, was just that, a self-help program of external, quantitative righteousness. They looked righteous, they acted righteous, and theirs was a quantitative, meaning measurable, righteousness. You could measure their

⁵ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (Eugene, OR; Wipf and Stock, 1996), p. 133-141.

righteousness by all the religious activities and duties they performed. But Jesus made it clear early in the Sermon on the Mount, “Unless your righteousness surpasses the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). This means if you are seeking Jesus to help you increase your own base-line of righteousness, then you are in serious trouble. You will not enter the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven does not belong to you.

Yet, many Christians today boast about free-will and basic goodness. It is common to hear Christians think they are saved due to a free-will act on their part while they were still sinners. They think they are saved because they freely chose Jesus. Nothing could be further from the biblical teaching (John 1:12-13; 3:5-11; 6:43-45; I Corinthians 1:30; Ephesians 2:8-9; Philippians 1:29). Such thinking is philosophical, not biblical. The Bible clearly teaches that before we were in Christ, we were slaves to sin (Romans 6:16-18). Yet, most Christians today believe human free-will survived the fall, even though the Bible teaches the sinner is in willful bondage. The free will Adam possessed he freely gave over to the evil one in order to pursue autonomy from God.

Listen, the fallen human nature is free to do only one thing—sin. The human will and human nature are inextricably connected. Jesus told the pious Jews of His day that only the Son can free those in bondage to sin, and in the end, they sought to stone Him to death (John 8:31-59). Today’s American gospel appeal to the basic goodness and free-will of the sinner has far more in common with the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, than with the paralyzed man and his companions. The popular American gospel of today represents a major obstacle to genuine faith in the One who brings forgiveness and healing—Jesus Christ.

Glorifying God

I have told you there are three characteristics present in the one who has Jesus as his or her unique, exclusive, and final authority: a relentless faith; calm assurance of forgiveness of sins; and, healing toward wholeness. Now, I want to include one more: the obedience that glorifies God.

Jesus responded to the private reasonings of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, “Why are you reasoning in your hearts? ‘Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or ‘Rise up and Walk?’” The easy answer is to say your sins are forgiven you. It is easier because forgiveness is not, at least immediately, measurable. One can receive absolution, and then who is to say whether one received it or not? So Jesus takes it further. “But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins”—He said to the man who was paralyzed, “I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your home” (v.22-24). Jesus did not ask them man if thought he could walk if Jesus asked him to do so. Jesus did not say anything about healing; Jesus commanded him to do what had been previously impossible. “Take up your bed, and go to your home.” In other words, “Get up and walk back into community.”

What did the man do? He did *not* turn to the religious authorities for approval. He did not ask the teachers of the law what he should do, nor did he ask his companions upon whom he had utterly relied, to help him up. No, “Immediately he rose up before them, took up what he had been laying on, and departed to his own house, glorifying God” (v. 25). Despite the presence of these religious authorities, the paralyzed man immediately obeyed Jesus. And note, it was not a burdensome obedience; rather, he immediately did what Jesus commanded, and gave the glory of God. There he goes, he who was once paralyzed, now walking and glorifying God.

Relentless faith in the authority and power of Jesus brought this man forgiveness of sins, bodily healing, and a mind and heart set on glorifying God. Jesus made him whole. Just as the fallen, natural mind glorifies the self; the sound, spiritual mind glorifies God.

The question before the crowd as to who held the authority was clearly answered, and powerfully displayed. What about the Pharisees and the teachers of the law? The text is not specific. It just tells us “they were all amazed, and they glorified God and filled with fear, saying, ‘We have seen strange things today!’” How sad! Relentless faith, forgiveness of sins, and healing, had become strange, meaning, rare and unfamiliar in Israel.

Summary

There is no shortage of people, places, and things seeking to be the authority in your life. But the gospel calls every believer to embrace Jesus as the exclusive, unique, and final authority in life and practice. And the believer for whom this is true will bear certain characteristics: relentless faith that pursues Jesus as an end in Himself; a calm assurance of forgiveness of sins; and healing toward wholeness. These characteristics produce a mind set on glorifying God—a truly sound mind. In contrast to relentless faith is a casual faith that pursues Jesus as is convenient; a Jesus that does not threaten the religious status quo. This casual produces only a mind subject to evil reasoning and wrong conclusions about Jesus.

Jesus comes to those who are desperate; those who know He alone is their hope. They come to Him with a relentless faith—they must get before Jesus, and then they rest in His mercy and power to save. The kingdom of God has come, and with it, the King in His absolute authority and power to forgive and heal His subjects. Pursue Him today, and do so with a relentless faith. **AMEN.**

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