**FRIEND, YOUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN**

Luke 5:12-26, Key Verse: 5:20

“When Jesus saw their faith, he said, ‘Friend, your sins are forgiven.’”

In today’s passage we read about two of Jesus’ many healing miracles. As I studied them, I was once again amazed at how much they teach—about who Jesus is, and the true nature of his ministry, and what he wants to do for all people. These healings, and the faith of the people who receive them, show what great spiritual blessings we can receive, even today. Let’s pray to learn the faith to receive what Jesus has brought to us.

1. A leper’s faith to be cleansed (12-16).

After calling the fishermen Peter and Andrew, James and John as his disciples, Jesus traveled through the towns of Galilee, preaching in the synagogues and driving out demons. Luke, the author, points out an especially noteworthy healing that Jesus performed.

Verse 12a says that in one of the towns, a man came along who was suffering from leprosy. As the footnote in our Bible translation says, the word “leprosy” was used in those times to indicate any number of infectious skin diseases. The Jewish law required isolation of people with such diseases. Leviticus 13:45-46 says, “Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ They must live alone; they must live outside the camp.”

Dealing as we are now with a pandemic, we might consider such a quarantine to be a wise move to slow the spread of disease in a community. However, as we also know now, having to live in isolation makes life much tougher, and deprives us of the basic joys of fellowship. This leper’s isolation was worse than most of ours, because he couldn’t even live with his own family. In addition, leprosy was regarded in those times as a punishment from God. People would gossip and tell each other that lepers had done something to deserve the condition they were in. And so, in that society, being a leper brought not just physical suffering and separation from one’s loved ones, but beyond that the pain of being considered unclean and unworthy. Even today, the word “leper” is used symbolically for someone who is viewed as an outcast.

I believe Jesus’ healing of a leper is highlighted by the gospel authors because it is a vivid picture of the condition of human beings who are under the power of sin. For one thing, as leprosy disfigures a person physically, sin disfigures the image of God in all people. God made human beings to reflect his own character by being full of love, compassion, wisdom, righteousness, justice, and truth, and to be pure, sincere, noble, and responsible. But we know that we all fall far short of that. Sin makes people immoral, violent, corrupt, and petty. The disease of sin twists people around on the inside until they cannot love God and their neighbor purely, and they suffer endlessly from bitterness and self-centeredness.

Also, just as leprosy results in becoming isolated, sin cuts our relationships with God and others. We hope that our separation from each other due to the pandemic is temporary, and at least we have technology to enable us to communicate somehow. But sin truly isolates people, because it breaks all kinds of relationships, with other people and with God, bringing the deep suffering of loneliness.

Finally, leprosy at that time was uncurable and eventually fatal. In the same way, “The wages of sin is death,” (Ro 6:23) and there is no human solution that can free us from the guilt of our sin. The condition of a sinner is well summarized by this one painful word that lepers had to cry out—“unclean”. Who is in this terrible condition of uncleanness? We all are, or have been. The prophet Isaiah wrote, “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.” (Isa 64:6)

Let’s think again about the life of this leper who came to Jesus. The verse says this man was “covered” with leprosy, so he must have been one of the worst cases. Being judged and shunned by his society, he might be full of self-condemnation. He could have no hope for the future and no sense of value as a human being. Every day he woke up to another day of painful and empty life, and yet he still had to get out of bed and try to find a way to get food to survive. But one day, he heard of Jesus. Jesus was accepting anyone who came to him and healing every kind disease and sickness. A spark of hope was lit in the man’s heart, hope that Jesus could be the solution for his life personally. With that hope, he took action to get up from where he was and make his way to Jesus. That was not an easy thing to do. Jesus was always surrounded by a crowd of people. It was illegal for this man to be near healthy people. If he was discovered, the crowd could stone him to death. To come to Jesus, this leper had to overcome all kinds of doubts and take a genuine risk. This was the expression of his faith.

When the man got to Jesus, what did he do? Look at verse 12b. **When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.”** He called Jesus “Lord”, confessing his faith in Jesus’ supremacy. He said, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.” The contents of his short request tell us so much about what kind of faith he had. It shows what the man was sure of, and what he was not sure of. What was he sure of? He said, “You can make me clean.” He had no doubt that Jesus had the power of God to cure his humanly incurable leprosy. What was he not sure of? He was not sure that Jesus would be willing to do that in his particular case. Of course, he had hope that Jesus would be willing; he knew that Jesus was full of mercy and compassion. But he understood very clearly that whether he was healed or not was above all a matter of Jesus’ own willingness and decision. This is remarkable, because this man’s attitude could easily have been very different. Think how much he had suffered over the years due to his leprosy. He could so easily have become bitter. He could have angrily demanded that God had to heal him, because of how much he suffered and how *unfair* it was that he was sick while others were enjoying their healthy life. But this leper’s request shows a full grasp of Jesus’ lordship and full submission of his life to God’s will.

This is such a good model for how we can come to God in in prayer and for our attitude toward God overall. Sometimes we get discouraged and say, “God has to do such-and-such for me, because of all the trouble I’ve been through”. That represents a misunderstanding the nature of the relationship between us and God. But when we keep our basic “attitude of gratitude” toward God for the life he gave us, and respect of his sovereignty, our faith can please God and bear fruit. I learned that from people who have suffered things I cannot even begin to imagine, and yet they remain so full of grace and thankful hearts toward God.

Jesus’ response to the leper was immediate. Verse 13 says, “**Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. ‘I am willing,’ he said. ‘Be clean!’ And immediately the leprosy left him.”** Jesus understood the depth of this man’s suffering and his heart went out to him. As his heart went out, his hand went out, and before saying anything, Jesus laid his hand on the unclean leper. What a scandalous action! I imagine that all Jesus’ disciples instinctively gasped in shock when they saw Jesus touch a leper. But this shows Jesus’ awesome, barrier-breaking love. Jesus did not worry about “catching uncleanness” from a leper. We can even say that the very reason Jesus became a human being was so he could have a hand to reach out and touch a hopeless, sinful leper. By making a human connection through touch, Jesus began to bring this man back from his isolated world and into human fellowship and God’s love.

Jesus does not have his physical hand in the world anymore; instead, he has us. We are called to be Jesus’ hand. Jesus wants to use us to reach out and make a personal connection to restore someone who is deeply isolated in sin. Let’s pray that we may be the hand that Jesus wants us to be in this world.

Then Jesus spoke just a few simple words. “I am willing…Be clean!” Jesus directly answered the leper’s implicit question in saying “If you are willing…” Jesus said, “I am willing!” It is the most wonderful thing to know about Jesus, that out of his great compassion, he is willing to help us. Then Jesus did help the leper, speaking, “Be clean!” By the power of Jesus’ words, the leprosy instantly left this man, and his skin became as clean and fresh as a newborn baby’s.

This miracle shows us not only that Jesus is willing to help us, but what is the thing he most of all wants to help us with. As leprosy is a symbol of human sinfulness, what Jesus is most willing to help us with is to be made clean of our sin. We cannot guarantee that Jesus will fulfill every request for physical healing. His will in some circumstances is frankly mysterious to our understanding. But what we never have to doubt is Jesus’ love and willingness to cleanse us from our sin. Apostle John writes in 1 John 1:9: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” There is no sin so unclean that Jesus will not forgive us of it if we only come to him in faith.

Finally, Jesus further helped the former leper by giving him some directions. Look at verse 14. **“Then Jesus ordered him, ‘Don’t tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.’”** Why did Jesus say this? Jesus didn’t want news about this healing to spread sensationally; he knew he couldn’t do his salvation work if he became a celebrity right away. So Jesus told the man not to make noise, but instead to go to the priests and offer sacrifices according to the law. In this way, Jesus also helped the man to be restored to his place in society and accepted. In our ministry, we also help students practically the way that Jesus helped this leper. We help people who are living as lonely outcasts because of the uncleanness of their sin to be cleansed by faith and take their place as successful members of society, making a good influence.

Jesus’ efforts to avoid becoming a sensation did not seem to be too effective. Verse 15 says, “**Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses.”** It’s interesting how Jesus’ own deeds of compassion actually seemed to interfere with his ministry and make it more difficult. But Jesus kept his focus on his mission through frequent times of private prayer. Jesus’ vital relationship with God the Father was his power source for his ministry, which he continually re-connected to.

1. Jesus forgives a paralyzed man’s sins (17-26)

The next episode of Jesus’ ministry that Luke covers happened when Jesus was teaching in the presence of some Pharisees and teachers of the law—the Jewish religious leaders. Verse 17 says they had now come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem. This seems to be a result of the growth in Jesus’ fame that we just talked about. Jesus had gotten enough attention that now the authorities were coming to check out his ministry. Mark’s gospel tells us that this particular gathering was in a house in Capernaum.

In the middle of Jesus’ message, something amazing happened. A light from heaven began to shine down on Jesus. Oh no, wait. It wasn’t a light from heaven. It was sunlight, because somebody was opening a hole in the roof above Jesus! What was going on? Verses 18 and 19 say, **“Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. 19When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus.”**

The determination of these four people is truly impressive. It’s more impressive because they were doing this not for themselves, but for their friend who was paralyzed. Seeing the huge crowd pressing in to be healed by Jesus, they could have easily given up and told their friend, “Well, I guess you aren’t getting healed today.” But their determination to help their friend led them to rack their brains until they had a flash of inspiration to climb up on the roof and let their friend down directly in front of Jesus.

Of course, not everyone would think this was a good idea. You might say this action was too shameless. First of all, they were interrupting Jesus’ message. I admit that I get a little stressed when my message is interrupted, because somehow if I lose my concentration it’s very hard to get back on track again. More importantly, the friends of the paralyzed man seemed to be cutting in line, jumping in front of all the other people who were presumably waiting patiently to be healed. And finally, they were damaging someone’s property, though presumably they would fix the roof after they were done.

How should their action be judged? Thank God that this passage shows us the way Jesus thought about the action of these four. When Jesus looked at what they were doing, verse 20 says, “He saw their faith.” The climbing on the roof, the making a hole in the roof with the noise and the interruption, the lowering their friend right in front of Jesus’s face—Jesus saw it as faith. It was the expression of faith that Jesus could heal their friend when no one else could. It’s faith expressed in an act of love for their friend. This teaches me that faith is a very active force. Faith is something that finds a way when there seems to be no way. Jesus wants to reward such faith, even when it comes in such an unexpected form.

So, what did Jesus say when he saw their faith? **He said, “Friend, your sins are forgiven.”** In response to the four friends’ surprising act, Jesus said something that was also very surprising.He did not heal the man’s paralysis first, which is surely what the four friends had invested their effort for, but instead Jesus made a spiritual pronouncement that the man’s sins were forgiven.

Maybe no one was more surprised than the paralyzed man himself. Did he think he was a sinner? Maybe not; maybe he only saw himself as a victim. Or, maybe he did feel he was a sinner, and lived for a long time under the power of condemnation, maybe even thinking his paralysis was God’s punishment for his sins.

Either way, Jesus taught this man, and all of us, the seriousness of the sin problem that we all have. We might think a paralyzed man can’t commit many sins, but sin is in the heart and the thoughts. And so, Jesus’ proclamation, “Friend, your sins are forgiven,” is the best news for anybody. It is the gospel of salvation. It’s the very thing Jesus came to this world to give us.

As the condition of being a sinner can be compared to leprosy, it also has elements in common with paralysis. Sin is like paralysis because its condemnation stops us from living the life God made us to have. We have all known people who are not physically paralyzed but are clearly spiritually paralyzed. We may have even been such a person ourselves. It is someone who is unable to take any action to do something good, only passively staying in the comfort zone of their routine. They might be unable to apply themselves to their studies, or worse, unable to show love to the people around them.

What is the solution to this? It’s to receive Jesus’ forgiveness. Just as the leper showed Jesus’ willingness to cleanse us from sin, this paralyzed man shows that Jesus will grant forgiveness of sins to anyone who comes to him by faith. In Acts 10:43, Apostle Peter tells Cornelius the Gentile that this is what Jesus came to do: “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

We must not underestimate the power of forgiveness. The paralyzing grip of sin in our lives can be broken, not by legalistic efforts, but by receiving Jesus’ full acceptance and forgiveness in our heart. Did you also notice how Jesus called the man “friend”? “Friend, your sins are forgiven.” It shows that Jesus fully accepted the man. It was the work of restoration, just like with the leper. It shows that in Jesus God is for us, not against us.

Jesus’ message of forgiveness immediately caused a scandal. Verse 21 says that when the Pharisees and teachers of the law who were there heard this, they “**began thinking to themselves, ‘Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?’”** We know the irony in this statement, that in Jesus all the fullness of God actually was dwelling bodily, with all the authority that implies. Jesus had full authority to forgive sins. But don’t forget that Jesus also granted his disciples the authority to proclaim the forgiveness of sins for anyone who believes. I believe that the religious leaders protested, not just because of the issue of blasphemy, but because they didn’t want forgiveness to be proclaimed; they wanted to keep using the law’s condemning power to hold people under their own authority.

By the way, Jesus also cured the man of his paralysis. Jesus boldly confronted those who accused him of blasphemy, saying, **“Which is easier? To say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’?”** Jesus points out the hypocrisy of the religious leaders being okay with miraculous healings, but complaining when the same person proclaimed forgiveness of sins. Based on what Jesus had already done, they should have believed that he was anointed with authority to forgive sins. But Jesus patiently gave them another demo. Verses 24 and 25: “ ‘**But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.’ So he said to the paralyzed man, ‘I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.’ 25Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God.”**

By his words and deeds, Jesus clearly taught that the purpose of the physical healing was to demonstrate his authority to give the spiritual healing of the gospel. His wisdom is quite remarkable. As the for the formerly paralyzed man, now he could go and live a new and fruitful life as a forgiven sinner. Everyone who was there that day acknowledged that they had seen the real work of God among them.

When I was failing in graduate school during my first try at getting a PhD, at the end of my fourth year I had to go and talk to the director of graduate studies, basically to beg him not to kick me out. He said that everybody thought I was a nice guy, but why wasn’t I making any progress in research? I said to him, “I realize I’ve been somewhat passive.” That was the understatement of the century. The fact was, I was totally paralyzed when it came to applying myself to research work, because of a big, complicated, tangled web of many types of sin in my heart.

I really prayed earnestly in those days for God to give me a miraculous breakthrough, and so did our coworkers in New Jersey, like the paralyzed man who suddenly jumped up and walked. It didn’t happen that way, however. The director gave me one more chance, but after the fifth year I was kicked out. So I had to basically start over, got some jobs, and started a new PhD program a few years later. I didn’t have faith to be healed all at once from my paralysis; it was more like Jesus patiently gave me physical therapy, teaching me to walk step by step. The only faith I can say I had was faith that God had called me to be a professor shepherd, and so I could keep trying even though I had so far not displayed any evidence that I was able to do PhD work. I could try again because forgiveness meant I was not doomed to make the same mistakes I made before. I didn’t have to pretend to be something I wasn’t; because I was accepted and forgiven, I could look at my life objectively and see what I could do. My testimony is that Jesus could change me from a passive to an active person, and now I pray for understanding to help people who are similar to me.

Today we learned that by faith in Jesus we are cleansed of all our uncleanness and we receive forgiveness of our sins. Like the leper, we need to come to Jesus boldly yet humbly and ask for what he can give. We also learned about being a good friend to our fellow sinners. The paralyzed man could receive such a great blessing because of his faithful friends. May God bless you with faith to receive forgiveness and cleansing from sin, and to be a friend of sinners like Jesus was.