

***No One Likes Jesus: Which Is Easier?***  
***By Jason Huff***  
***March 13, 2016***  
***Psalm 32; Micah 7:18-20; Matthew 9:1-8***

Friends, our final Scripture reading today comes from Matthew 9:1-8. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy Word. “Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town. Some men brought to him a paralytic, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.” At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, “This fellow is blaspheming!” Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, “Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins....” Then he said to the paralytic, “Get up, take your mat and go home.” And the man got up and went home. When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to men.”

Which is easier: skydiving or parasailing? Since I have a fear of heights, I can’t imagine doing either one. Maybe some of you can. But we face the dilemma of “which is easier” in everyday life. Which is easier: ordering pizza but spending a lot of money or going to the grocery and buying the fixings for dinner? Telling the boss about an error you made and dealing with his anger or hiding the mistake and feeling the guilt? As a pastor, which is easier: preaching a sermon that has a clear list of things to learn and do at the end or a sermon that dwells on the heart and mind of God? These aren’t easy choices. It’s not even a choice between good and bad but difficult and more difficult.

At the heart of our passage today lies a question about what is easier, forgiving sins or healing someone. It returns us to the theme of our series, *No One Like Jesus*. Week after week in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus has done the impossible – calm a storm, casting out demons. But this week, Jesus’ impossible work goes into the purely spiritual realm. His words to the paralyzed man and the scribes made me think differently about this passage. Because it’s not just a story of healing. It’s not ultimately a story about us, either, though we could make it to be, and there are things we can learn from it. It’s a story about Jesus and the heart of God that lies inside of Him.

Jesus has been sailing around, having left the Gadarenes as they requested, and He returns to Capernaum, where He lived after leaving Nazareth as we learned way back in Matthew 4. When He’s there, He goes about Kingdom business – He teaches and preaches, He does the work He is called to do by the Father. The disciples are still with Him, learning from Him.

And then a paralytic man is presented to Him. Many of us remember from the other gospels that this man’s friends carved a hole in the roof where Jesus was teaching to get their buddy in to see Jesus. Matthew’s doesn’t include that detail because His focus is not on the man or even his companions but on Jesus and His reactions.

Even if you didn't have to cut through a roof, it took a lot of effort to carry a grown man through the city of Capernaum to where Jesus was. This guy's friends were awesome! We don't know what kind of man this was that inspired such loyalty. But this we know: he and his companions had faith. Faith that Jesus could heal Him; faith that God can restore the broken, and that God is making the world whole through His Son, Jesus.

But what struck me most is that Jesus knows exactly what to say to the man. We are so often at a loss for the right words, aren't we? We can small talk all day and never get to what's really bothering us. We might hem and haw to finally get to the point. Sometimes, we never really understand another person at all in our conversations. But this is not a problem for Jesus. He knows us personally, truly, deeply, and He has the words that really matter.

In this case, it's not an explanation for why the man lies paralyzed. He doesn't ask the man what he wants Him to do for him or if he wants to be healed. He doesn't even credit the man's faith for His healing, though all of these things happen to other people at other times. Jesus simply says the most beautiful words any of us could ever hear: "take heart, my son: your sins are forgiven."

The first part is hard to translate. "Take heart," "take courage," "take comfort," "be of good cheer," "don't be afraid," "cheer up" – these are all valid translations found in different Bibles. It's one word in Greek that means all of these things. It is an expression of utter hope and encouragement in the face of trials. Jesus tells the man, simply, "it's going to be OK."

How often we want to hear that? We want reassurances that everything is going to be OK. Whatever we're facing, that's what we really want to know, that the light at the end of the tunnel isn't an oncoming train. We want hope. We want to rest assured that no matter what happens, somehow, it's going to be all right. And that's what Jesus says.

He even takes it to the next level, calling the man, "my child." This is a familiar term, a term of endearment, in this case. It has nothing to do with the man's age and everything to do with comfort. When I hear this phrase, I think of a parent gently comforting a child who's awakened in the middle of the night afraid of the thunderstorm.

And we need that, don't we? We grow up, we grow out of our childhood fears, the fears that have no merit, and we grow into fears that are far more true. We don't fear the dark much, but we do fear that call from the bill collector. We don't fear the thunderstorm much, but we do fear the ache of loneliness and a friendship that's gone sour. We don't fear monster in the closet; we fear the monster in our own hearts that jumps out and messes up our relationships, the monster that gossips, the monster that is not who we want to be. And we have no one to tuck us in and tell us that it will be OK in the morning.

But that's precisely what Jesus does here. He tells the man what he needs to hear. Probably paralyzed a long time, short of food, short of help, short on hope, his friends doing what they can, and Jesus says, "Take heart, my son." You aren't alone in this. You are my child, the child of the King, and I say that you will be all right.

And it's not an empty promise. It has meat; it has substance. And the substance of it shocks the crowd. It might have even shocked the paralytic! It was what he needed to hear. "Your sins are forgiven." Just that. "Your sins are forgiven." All the reassurances in the world can't measure up to those four words. "Your sins are forgiven." This man who might not have moved his arms or legs for years has hope...not because he'll be able to dance a jig, not because he'll be able to care for himself, get a job, make a living, but because his sins are forgiven.

A quote came up on Facebook from Ligonier Ministries this week, written by R.C. Sproul. And it was this: "the only remedy to real guilt is real forgiveness." That's what Jesus gives the paralytic. That's what Jesus gives to us. He gives us the remedy. He cures us of what really ails us.

Real guilt comes from real sin which causes real separation from God. And the only cure for it is real forgiveness – not empty words, not false promises, not a grumbled "I forgive you" when Mom and Dad say we have to make up and be friends, not ignoring, not covering up, but being forgiven by the only One who can truly, completely, and totally forgive us, being forgiven by God Himself, the One who is truly sinned against in every sin we commit and the One who can provide a way out of the condemnation we are due.

Then we're told of a conversation some of the scribes present were having. "He's a blasphemer!," they say. And in any other person's case, they would have been right. While we can forgive those who have sinned against us, ultimately it's God's prerogative to forgive someone's whole list of sins. When we sin, we sin against God first and foremost because we are creations of God. If I sin against you, if I punch you, then my sin is first against God because you are made in His image. It's against you personally as well, but because you were created by God to reveal His glory, for me to damage you is to damage what God has done.

So while we can and should forgive others, we have no right to step in and declare forgiveness wholesale. Even during the Confession of Sin and Assurance of Pardon each week, when I declare as the pastor to the congregation that we are forgiven, it's not assurance that I've forgiven you. It's assurance that God has forgiven you based on what Scripture tells us and what Jesus has already done for you.

But Jesus is not just anyone. He is the only person to have walked the earth who has the right to forgive sins. He is God the Son, God made flesh, God among us, and He has the right to say to this man, "Your sins are forgiven." Jesus accuses the scribes of evil thoughts because they refuse to recognize Him. Their thoughts show that they don't have a clue who Jesus is. Jesus knows full well that blasphemy is punishable by death. He doesn't do this lightly or carelessly. He forgives this man because it's His prerogative to do so.

So Jesus asks them a question to open their minds and hearts up to Him: "Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk!'" From their view, both are impossible. No one can do this, right? Even 2,000 years later, we know doctors have a hard time fixing a leg, let alone restoring a paralyzed person. Healing someone is easier than forgiving sins, but not by much.

But that's Jesus' point, too. Words don't mean much unless you have the power to accomplish them. We say things and then have to backtrack. We made grandiose schemes and then realize, "Well, maybe I shouldn't have been so bold." It's great to say, "Your sins are forgiven." But it's another thing entirely to have the power to make that happen. When you say, "Get up and walk," everybody's looking for something to happen. With "your sins are forgiven," there's no evidence.

So Jesus gives evidence. Before He heals the man, He says, "But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." He's equating one with the other – you can know Jesus can forgive sins because Jesus can heal this man who no one, even today, could possibly heal. He has the right.

But even here, amongst people who think evil of Him, Jesus still reaches out to them. Why does He heal the paralytic? Of course it is kind of Him. Of course the man will benefit from it. But the central reason Jesus specifically mentions is so that the scribes, who have made themselves into His enemy, can know the truth, can turn their hearts around, so that they themselves can hear the same phrase – "take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven." In this healing, Jesus says, "Come to me, even those of you who doubt, and you can experience the same love and mercy."

So the healing takes place, and the man gets up and goes home. Very simple. But it's not the scribes, the teachers of Israel, who respond. It's the crowd. They are filled with the fear of God, the holy awe and reverence of Him, and they praise God for the authority He gave to Jesus to do something so incredible. The people the healing was intended to reach weren't impressed, but the average Joe who'd come to listen to Jesus is dumbstruck by the sight.

Hope is the first thought that comes to mind. They are given hope by Jesus. They begin to have faith in what they can't verify with their eyes – the forgiveness of sins – because of what they can see – this long-suffering man now healed in their midst. The crowd, full of every kind of person, filled with every kind of sinner, realizes that Jesus is not just an exorcist, not just a calmer of storms, not just a healer of people far from the Kingdom of God, but the One who can tell them in all honesty and truth, their sins are forgiven.

No wonder they are praising God! This is a gift that is far better than a temporary fix for pain and suffering. This is a gift of life, eternal life, of hope that no matter what they've done, God can fix the damage done. Of all the healings, this is the most significant, because everyone whose body is whole but whose soul is broken now knows that their redemption draws near.

Jesus is front and center throughout the New Testament, but we see Him at work in a different way in this passage. The beauty of this encounter is that Jesus' agenda is laid bare. He's here to heal us, and He isn't going to stop at just our bodies. He's here to deal with the heartbreak of sin and the addiction we have to it. Every burden, every wound, every tear, every sorrow, every last ounce of rebellion and its consequences, Jesus comes to strip away.

But there's more. Jesus' compassion is on full display. I've been in hospitals a lot lately, between my mom and our friend Ed. I'm convinced that doctors are a strange breed. Most of them, especially those who work in hospitals, are very good at what they do, which is cut into people and put things back together. It takes a ton of knowledge to do that, to know the medicines that people need and so on.

But a lot of doctors are really, really bad at the whole compassion thing. Doctors are kind of like the auto mechanics of the human body, you know? My mechanic doesn't have to be graceful or kind or loving; I just want to know that when my car pulls out of the shop, that shimmy's gonna be gone. But we want the people who work on our bodies to feel something, because it's us they're cutting into. Sometimes, nursing is a much harder job because they have to make up for the compassion the doctors don't have. When you operate on seven people a week forty-eight weeks a year, I'm sure there's a lot of blur. It's hard to care about each one.

Jesus, on the other hand, brings compassion to the forefront. "It will be alright, my son; take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven." He gets right to the heart of what matters. Yes, I will make your body whole; yes, you will walk again; but the chief thing, the most important thing, that you are forgiven, *that* is what I will make certain occurs.

Isn't that what we truly want? We might not recognize it, but it is. Deep within us, beyond our other desires, beyond all our hopes and aspirations, beyond our wish for a body that works right and a good job and a great family, is that we are right with God. Some people become atheists so they don't have to struggle with the question – if there's no God, there's no one to have to be right with. Others battle fears and depression because they know they aren't good enough to be right with God. But we who believe – we have assurance that we are forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ.

How blessed Jesus is, how glorious, how worthy of our praise! He doesn't have to do a barrage of tests or send us for a CAT scan. He doesn't have to do bloodwork to diagnose what's wrong with us. He knows. And He has the cure. And praise be to God, He gives the cure freely, without cost, to those who love Him, who are called according to God's purposes. When I think about our friend Virgil today, I have confidence, I have hope, I know that he can finally hear me and hear you and hear all of us, he can think clearly, I think of that huge smile, and I know God has given Virgil the eternal cure, the cure that someday every believer will have. Virgil was not a perfect man; he told me a lot about his imperfections. But he knew, without a doubt, that Jesus had said to him, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven."

There is only one question before us this week: which is easier? To pursue happiness or to pursue God? Perhaps the question would better be, "which is more rewarding?" Comedian and actor Jim Carrey once said, "I hope everybody could get rich and famous and will have everything they ever dreamed of, so they will know that it's not the answer." Carrey isn't a Christian, but he knows that earthly happiness is fleeting. Pursuing what the world has to offer is easier than pursuing God, but it's empty at the end. Pursue God, trust in Him, put your faith in Him, and you will know the blessing of hearing those beautiful words of Jesus: "Take heart, my son;" "Be of good cheer, my daughter;" "don't be afraid, my child;" "your sins are forgiven."