

The Healing Power of Forgiveness

Our New Testament Scripture reading is from Luke 5:17-26, the account of Jesus' healing of the paralytic, a paraplegic who was carried to Jesus by his friends. Here Jesus performs a miracle of compassion but also as a sign of his significance, power and authority as the Healer, the Great Physician of both our bodies and our souls.

I'll read **Luke 5:17-26:**

¹⁷ One day, while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting nearby (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. ¹⁸ Just then some men came, carrying a paralyzed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; ¹⁹ but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. ²⁰ When he saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." ²¹ Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, "Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" ²² When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? ²³ Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk'? ²⁴ But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the one who was paralyzed—"I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home." ²⁵ Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God. ²⁶ Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, "We have seen strange things today."

Being a paraplegic in the first century was a dire, helpless and hopeless condition. There was no public assistance for the handicapped and nothing was done to make life easier and opportunities accessible for those with limiting physical conditions. Not only were they banned from religious opportunities, the disabled were usually reduced to a life of beggary. Yet, though his physical condition was problematic to the extreme, Jesus understood a greater need in this paraplegic's life—the need for the healing power of forgiveness. Although we know that physical suffering is not always a direct result of sin and that often the godliest people are afflicted with the worst pain and suffering, Jesus understood that this man needed forgiveness and release from his guilt. And Jesus also knew that forgiveness would open the door for this man's complete healing and restoration.

Renowned psychiatrist Karl Menninger, in 1973 wrote a book titled, *Whatever Became of Sin?* His colleagues were stunned that this great psychiatrist would turn prophet and dare to suggest that not only his profession but also the churches had disregarded the importance of moral accountability. The

widespread ignoring of the importance of moral absolutes in the pursuit of self-esteem and personal fulfillment had resulted in moral turpitude and the breakdown of relationships between people and alienation from God, who alone can resolve the issue of real guilt.

Menninger's thesis was that the public discourse about sin, even from the traditional source of the church, had fallen out of vogue. This resulted in a growing personal irresponsibility for behavior in the 60's and 70's. In America, strangely enough, the most popular hymn used in secular assemblies, particularly it seems since 9-11, is John Newton's *Amazing Grace*. It's sung with an emphasis on God's mercy and favor, while many of those who sing it with gusto overlook the theme of moral and spiritual responsibility inherent in the entire lyrics of the hymn. But we can't understand grace apart from understanding sin and real guilt before holy God. Yet, as someone has said, we all sing, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me." And we can do so because we know that, at worst, we're *respectable wretches*" (Wm Long).

Jesus knew that the people in his audience were in bondage to more than physical illness and disability. The paraplegic may well have or not have been disabled as a direct consequence of his sin. Whatever the case may have been, Jesus was not going to give him physical healing without first addressing his sin problem. Jesus saw his bondage to real guilt, due to unforgiven sin, as a more serious need than for physical healing. Sin entraps and cripples us; and there was a connection between the paraplegic's being forgiven and his being released from his physical and emotional bondage.

More urgent than physical healing is our need for spiritual healing that gives us God's forgiveness, saving grace and the gift of eternal life. This gift of forgiveness is the key to our emotional, mental and spiritual health. That enslaving sin may be moral transgression, such as sexual immorality, theft, deception, fraud or greed. But it may be a more subtle and "respectable" sin of the spirit, such as pride, lust, temper, rage, anger, resentment, or the unwillingness to be reconciled to alienated family, friends or fellow church people. Top of the list would be the lack of love, even toward one's enemies, and the unwillingness to forgive or to seek forgiveness. Jesus says that this unwillingness to forgive others blocks us from God's forgiveness (Matthew 6:14-15). Perhaps such anger, resentment or bitterness had paralyzed this man.

But the paraplegic, with the help of his friends, drew near to Jesus, who stood ready to receive him. Seeing their faith, including his and those who carried him, Jesus said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you" (20). Jesus knew this man inside and out, and realized that his most urgent and important need was for forgiveness. We noted above that in our society we have come to think of ourselves as "respectable" wretches." But Jesus knew that this man was, like us, a needy wretch. He had a serious problem with guilt, real guilt that needed to be

removed through repentance and the forgiveness. As with the paralytic, Jesus sees our faith. This man and his friends believed in Jesus as the Healer and then they earnestly sought him, believing that he would reward them. Thus by their faith they involved Jesus, who received the seeker with kindness. Jesus greets the paralytic with the endearing word, "Friend."

Jesus' declaration of forgiveness wasn't lost on the assemblage of religious observers, who had been watching Jesus with jaundiced eyes. They were appalled that he should declare the man's sins forgiven. All the religious parties understood that God alone has authority to forgive sins. Who did this itinerant preacher, son of a peasant carpenter, think he was? Such a statement was blasphemy, punishable by death by stoning.

The religious critics were not offended by Jesus' physical healing of the sick and disabled. They probably even admired his healing power. Even today, Jesus would be widely and wildly popular if all he did was dispense his services, making life better for us. The world likes a Jesus who serves their felt needs and doesn't interfere with their lives with demands, such as belief in him as God's unique Son who calls for repentance and the disciple's cross.

When Jesus speaks, his word sets us free. What a miracle this was! A man who was a paraplegic becomes a jubilant dancer, carrying his pallet home, while praising God all the way (25). He was now set free from his sins and also from his physical disability. His healing, though including the physical, was certainly much more. It included a healed spirit. He was now a person made whole.

We need to be aware that being made whole is far more than being physically healthy. All physical healing is temporary. Jesus is far more interested in our becoming whole people, worshipers being made ready for eternity in heaven. Not all receive physical healing but that doesn't make them lesser people in God's kingdom. Paul the Apostle begged God several times to remove his thorn in his flesh, which was probably a painful disease or disability. But God's answer was to give him grace and strength to stand up under it. In this case the illness and affliction was an important ingredient to Paul's becoming a whole person (2 Cor. 12:1-10).

To forgive means to let go, to release and to set aside. When Jesus forgives us he lifts from us the burden of sin and guilt and sets us free from that load we no longer need to carry. He removes our sins and remembers them no more (Ps. 103:12; Is. 64:9).

I love what the late Corrie ten Boom said about how God has thrown our sins into the deepest sea and has posted a sign which says, "No Fishing!"

And through our healing, our being made whole, Jesus glorifies himself. The healed paralytic praised God. He became a worshiper, which is the goal of

God's healing and forgiveness. And as a result of his being forgiven and healed, others also became worshipers of God: "*Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, "We have seen strange things today"*" (26).

It takes the grace of God to see that our enemies, just as Jesus saw his enemies at the cross, are dupes of Satan. Truly, our enemies do not know what they are doing. And when we forgive, we are showing the insight of Jesus and are sharing his gracious power to forgive even our worst enemies. The nation was touched by the forgiveness given to Dylann Roof, the young white supremacist who murdered worshipers in an African American church prayer meeting last June. A young lady whose mother was murdered said, "I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you. "We have no room for hating, so we have to forgive," said the sister of another. "I pray God's mercy on your soul."

The Atlantic periodical explained, "Given the heinous nature of the crime, the willingness of Charleston's survivors to forgive was remarkable..... But the act of forgiving is more than just an expression of grace toward a wrongdoer. It's also an effective tool in helping individuals and communities touched by tragedy accelerate the healing process." It's not by our power and love that we can forgive to such a degree. It's nothing less than the love of Jesus in us. It's the Jesus way of living and forgiving that expresses the forgiveness for which Jesus prayed from the cross.

Jesus told an ungrateful Pharisee that the forgiven woman, who was anointing his feet with expensive oil, that she was responding to God's forgiveness with grateful love. Because she had been forgiven much, she loved much. Jesus noted that "he who has been forgiven little loves little" (Lk 7:36-50). The truth is, we've all been forgiven much. We just don't realize how much! And if we block our hearts to forgiving others, we block our hearts to God's forgiveness (Matt. 6:14f). We're to forgive one another, as God in Christ has forgiven us (Eph. 4:32). And wow! Has he ever forgiven us and continues to forgive us a bunch!

Just as the paralytic was made whole by forgiveness, so are we by our being forgiven and being forgivers, letting go of hatred, bitterness and ill will toward even our worst enemies. I wonder if this man was paralyzed due to an attack from someone, maybe in this crowd of spectators. Because Jesus made him whole, he would *supernaturally* offer his forgiveness to this former enemy who had harmed him. Then he'd be *really* free. *Really* healed.

Psychology professor Kathleen Lawler-Row conducted extensive research on her therapy patients and noted a strong corollary between her patient's blood pressure and their willingness or unwillingness to forgive. She'd ask them to relate their various stories, some that ended in conflict resolution and forgiveness and others of unresolved anger and bitterness and a refusal to forgive. Blood

pressure soared dangerously high for those unwilling to forgive, who harbored unresolved anger and bitterness

An unforgiving heart is self-destructive and even self-deceiving. We don't realize what an unforgiving heart is doing to our physical and much more, our spiritual health. I pray that today we'll all ask Jesus for the healing power of his forgiveness, for ourselves and for others. Jesus wants all of us to know his liberating, releasing, joy-infusing forgiveness. He wants us all to be able to leave this sanctuary knowing that our sins have been buried in the deepest sea of his wonderful forgetfulness. And he wants us to share his love as we forgive that one person we find it impossible to love! You won't feel like forgiving that parent or other caregiver who abused or withheld love from you when you desperately needed it. But when you nevertheless say, "I love and forgive you," something will happen in your spirit—the gift of the love of Christ.

I visited on the phone yesterday with a friend who served as a missionary in Belgium during my pastorate there. He was scheduled to preach in my church on the following Sunday, but called to say he and his wife had just been notified about their younger adult daughter's murder in the US. Burglars had tied their daughter to a kitchen chair while they stole her TV set, then doused the house with gasoline and burned the daughter's house down on her, hoping to destroy the evidence of their crime.

Yesterday I asked Ron if he and Renee had been able to forgive these horrible criminals, who are both serving a life prison sentence. His answer was that first he had to struggle with his anger with God, over this and a subsequent injustice they received from their mission agency. But after a time of struggle, Ron said he let go of his anger with God, realizing he could never comprehend God's ways, and just reaffirm his faith in God, which allowed him to once again affirm God's love for him and even for these murderers of their daughter. Faith in a loving God, who has forgiven us, is the key to receiving and sharing God's healing forgiveness. Forgiveness has allowed Ron to be healed and to regain a vibrant ministry

I too have needed, and you also may need the healing power of forgiveness.