

Trinity 19  
Matthew 9:1-8  
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October 18, 2020

Four men bring their paralyzed friend to Jesus on a bed to be healed by him. To be paralyzed is one of the worst ailments you can suffer in this life. He could not move his limbs. He could not work. He depended on others to provide for his most basic needs. He couldn't feed himself, dress himself, or use the toilet by himself. He likely developed bed soars from lying down all day. This man had great need to be healed. Yet, what does Jesus say to this poor guy in such misery? "Take heart, my son! Your sins are forgiven!" This might sound disappointing to some. "He didn't come to have his sins forgiven. He came to be healed by the great healer!" Yet, Jesus performed the most important task first. He forgave the man's sins. That was his greatest need.

Indeed, the forgiveness of sins is always our most pressing need, because without the forgiveness of sins we remain enemies of God, separated from Christ, doomed to death and hell. But with the forgiveness of sins, we have life and salvation, peace with God, and a certain home in heaven! And Jesus demonstrates by first forgiving the sins of this paralytic before he healed him that the forgiveness of sins is always our greatest need, no matter how great our other needs are. I've prayed at the bedside of many sick people, from broken bones to cancer. Some have gotten better. Some have not. But the most important need we prayed for was always answered, the prayer for forgiveness.

2020 has been a rather difficult year. The spread of the coronavirus has caused panic in governments and among civilians around the world. People fear for their loved ones and even for themselves, because of this virus. And the response to the virus has added all sorts of other difficulties to our lives. Many lost their jobs and continue to suffer from lower wages. Many still fear the loss of their income. People couldn't see their family and friends in nursing homes and hospitals for months at a time. Many churches were closed. Besides all that, our state was hit by a freak storm, that has ruined many farms and properties over a third of our state. Rising violence, riots, looting, and arson in many of our cities have wreaked havoc and raised stress around the country. And the tense election has set many on

edge as we fear for our children's and our nation's future. Of course, all these added difficulties have not taken away all the other sorrows that hits us in any given year. People are still getting cancer, having strokes and heart attacks, falling and breaking bones. Our loved ones continue to get sick and die. Marriages continue to struggle; children continue to stray. And throughout this tumultuous year, through the sickness and fear, the storms and fires, the violence and chaos, the loneliness and frustration, our greatest need remained the same. Forgiveness of sins. And so, our greatest need has continued to be to hear our Savior's word and believe his promise of forgiveness and salvation.

Some of the Scribes were offended that Jesus forgave the man's sins, because only God can forgive sins. Jesus proved his authority to forgive sins by demonstrating that he is not only a man, but also true God. He did this first, by reading the Scribe's hearts, as the Scribes had only spoken to themselves and not out loud. As Jesus could see the faith in the paralyzed man's heart, so he could see the hatred in the hearts of these Scribes, something only God can do. Secondly, Jesus proved himself to be God by curing the paralyzed man from his paralysis. The crowd then glorified God that he had given such authority to men.

And yes, it is a wonderful thing that God gave the authority to forgive sins to men. This is the greatest authority one can wield, the authority to raise from the dead, to rescue from hell and bring to heaven. Yet, this fact that man has the authority to forgive sins, which amazed the crowd and angered the Scribes, was the only way it could be!

God does not forgive sins according to absolute grace. That is, God does not just decide that our sins are not a big deal and that he will just forget about them. Our God is a just God. Sins must be atoned for. This is why the Prophet Isaiah prophesied that "the Lord laid on Him the iniquity of us all" and "by his stripes we are healed." In order for our sins to be forgiven, our sins needed to be paid for. The only one, who could pay for our sins is God. So, God needed to become man.

Yes, it is a marvel that a man forgave sins. Yet, it was indeed the only way. Jesus prayed in the Garden to this Father, that if it were possible, to take the cup of suffering away. Yet, it was the will of the Father for Christ to bear our sins with bitter suffering and death. Not, because he is cruel. Not, because he

wanted his Son to suffer. But because he desired our salvation. Our salvation could only be obtained by our sins being atoned for. Only Jesus, true God and man, could atone for our sins in our place.

Because of Jesus' atonement for our sins on the cross, forgiveness is freely given. Note, forgiveness is not free! It came at the cost of Jesus' bitter, suffering and death! Yet, Jesus freely grants us forgiveness. This is also why the authority to forgive sins is given to men. Not only to the God-man Jesus, but to *men*. Yes, the authority to forgive sins is given to sinful men! Jesus said, "Whatever you bind on earth is bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth is loosed in heaven." and "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them, if you withhold forgiveness from any it is withheld." Jesus is able to give this authority to men, 1. because he is *God*. If he commands people to relay a message from him, that message is as true whether it's coming from a donkey or an angel. And 2, because Jesus has already purchased the forgiveness of our sins. When the minister forgives your sins in the stead of Christ, he is relaying the fact that Christ Jesus has purchased your release from hell and your entrance into heaven. Jesus has given his church on earth the authority to forgive all sins by the merits of his own suffering and death.

This necessarily means that forgiveness of sins is received through faith. Since it is only Christ, who paid the price for our sins. We cannot do anything to deserve forgiveness. Forgiveness is given as a gift. And those who relay this gift do so through words, words given by God himself. So, those who receive this forgiveness do so, not by their works, but by believing the words of Christ. This is why Christ, after seeing their *faith*, said, "Your sins are forgiven."

Now, this man truly was paralyzed and was suffering greatly. And Jesus truly did heal the man, so that he took up his bed and walked in the sight of many witnesses. Yet, the fact that the man was paralyzed and then walked after his sins were forgiven, signifies something to us about the forgiveness of sins and faith.

The man was paralyzed. That is as close to being dead you can be while still being alive. The man could not do anything for himself! He was living almost like he was dead, waiting to die! This is how St. Paul describes our spiritual condition before faith in the forgiveness of sins. The Holy Spirit caused St.

Paul to write in Ephesians chapter 2, “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.”

So, you see the spiritual condition illustrated by the paralyzed man. He could not work. He could not walk. He could not follow Jesus. And so, in our sin, without faith, before we receive forgiveness, we are spiritually paralyzed. We're dead to any good work. We cannot please God. We cannot love God. We can't believe in God. Yet, when Jesus speaks words of forgiveness to us, he makes us alive. First, he forgives our sins. Then, our arms and legs start working. Our heart loves God. We walk not in darkness, but light. We do good works, which were prepared beforehand for us to walk in them.

This also helps us understand our Epistle lesson from Ephesians 4, where St. Paul tells us to put off our old self, which belongs to our former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of our minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Our old self is spiritually paralyzed, incapable of doing good or loving God and rather follows the course of sin in this world. Our new self is renewed by the forgiveness of sins and made alive by God's grace, like that paralyzed man, who rose and walked after his sins were taken away from him.

In order to be empowered to put off the old self and put on the new self, you need to be forgiven. Satan has deceived many to believe that since the forgiveness of sins is given freely apart from our works that we can continue in sin without any consequences. Yet, as St. Paul says, “That is not the way you learned Christ!” Christ made us alive by forgiving our sins! He freed us from the bondage of sin, that left us spiritually paralyzed by taking those bonds off of us. How can we respond to such freedom by returning to sin and spiritual paralysis and then claim to be free and alive! No, if we return to sin, we return to death and slavery, we return to being a spiritual paralytic, who cannot even lift his arm to Jesus.

Therefore, we must avoid lying, which comes from the father of lies, the devil, who seeks to murder our souls. Instead, we must always confess the truth, from the truth of our own sinful condition to the truth of Christ's forgiveness and Lordship over us. We must avoid anger and wrath, and instead have a zeal for the Lord, his truth, and love. We must not steal or cheat in any way, but rather work hard so to provide for those in need and support what is good. Yes, these are works that Christians ought to do. Yet, you do not do them in order to be forgiven, but you do them because you are forgiven. You find the power to do these good works by receiving the forgiveness of sins through faith, just as the paralytic found the strength to carry his bed and walk home by first receiving the forgiveness of sins.

Our most pressing need at all times remains the forgiveness of sins, because without the forgiveness of sins, we cannot please God. We can only continue in sin. Our most pressing need at all times is the forgiveness of sins, because we still live in sinful bodies in a sinful world where we may encounter death any day. Our most pressing need at all times is the forgiveness of sins, because only through the forgiveness of sins can we enter heaven. Our most pressing need is the forgiveness of sins, because only through the forgiveness of sins can we speak the truth in love and love our neighbor rightly. And God richly provides us with this most pressing need through his word and through the Sacrament of Christ's body and blood. May God awaken in us an awareness of this most pressing need, so that we never despise it. Amen.