

Sermon File # 582

Scripture Text: Luke 5:17-26

Sermon Title: *I Believe in the Forgiveness of Sins* (9th in series of sermons on the Apostles' Creed)

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I Believe in the Forgiveness of Sins

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to Luke 5:17-26, as we continue our series of sermons based on the Apostles' Creed. Today we'll look at the 9th affirmation of the Creed that states that we believe in the forgiveness of sins. This great statement of the faith, which since the 2nd century has defined the biblical truths of the church, is foundational to our understanding and our convictions. We've noted thus far our belief in God the almighty Creator and in his Son, Jesus our Lord. We say we believe Jesus was conceived by the Spirit and born of a virgin; that he was crucified, buried and rose again. We also affirm that he ascended to the right hand of the Father and that he will return to judge the living and the dead. We believe in the Holy Spirit, and also in the holy world-wide church, the communion of the saints, which we affirmed last Sunday. Closely connected with this unity with God and fellowship with one another in his church for which Jesus prayed in John 17 is the forgiveness of sins.

Today as we assert the truth of the forgiveness of sins, we consider Luke's 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 gives a sign of his significance, power and authority as the Healer, the Great Physician of both our bodies and our souls. As we consider this sign-miracle, we will note the healing power of forgiveness.

Follow as I read **Luke 5:17-26**.

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 American 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 relationship between moral accountability and emotional/mental health. 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, particularly in America during the 60's and 70's. We cannot appreciate grace apart from understanding sin and real guilt before holy God. But as William Long noted, we all sing from the popular hymn the words "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me." And we can do so because we know that, at worst, we are *respectable* wretches (www.drbilllong.com/EvenMoreWords/UnsinningI.html).

As we look at our text we can affirm together that we believe in the forgiveness of sins. We can say we believe in the forgiveness of sins, first of all...

Because of those in need of its healing power

Many were coming to Jesus to receive his healing. Luke writes "the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick" (verse 17). There was no distinction between all the maladies that were brought to Jesus, and he had God's unlimited power to heal all manner of illnesses but he also had the authority to forgive sins.

Many of those in need of God's healing forgiveness are those...

Who are in bondage

When Jesus preached in the synagogue of his home town of Nazareth, he applied Isaiah's Messianic prophecy to himself:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
 because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor.
 He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
 and recovery of sight for the blind,
 To release the oppressed,
 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19, quoting Isaiah 61:1, 2).

Jesus knew that the people in his audience were in bondage to more than physical illness and disability. Even as Isaiah prophesied, the ministry of the Messiah would be more than physical deliverance from disease and liberation from political oppression. The Christ would set his people free from bondage to the power of sin and guilt.

There was obviously a direct connection between this paraplegic's condition of paralysis and his un-forgiven sin. As we know, this correlation cannot always be made (as Job's "friends" erroneously tried to do in his case). Since the fall of Adam and Eve, the curse and consequences of sin are upon all mankind, including disease and disability. And some of God's best people are called upon to suffer immense pain and dreadful disease. Paul, a godly saint and great apostle, was given a thorn in his side, which was possibly a painful illness or disability (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). But the paraplegic in our text may well 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 un-forgiven sin, as a more serious need than for physical healing. And there was a connection between his being forgiven and his being healed and released from his bondage.

And we also need to realize that spiritual healing that comes when Jesus forgives our sins, is more important and urgent than any physical healing, which can become an idol. Any physical healing, regardless of how urgently needed and spectacularly given, is always temporary. For anyone my age or older, a physical healing may add a decade or two of life, but is limited in duration. These bodies are wasting away (2 Corinthians 4:16).

Far more urgent is our need for spiritual healing that gives us God's forgiveness, saving grace and the essential gift of eternal life. This gift of forgiveness is also the key to our emotional, mental and spiritual health. There is a psychosomatic relationship between guilt and physical and mental illness. I recall hearing Billy Graham quote a psychiatric medical doctor who said that he estimated that fully half of all the patients in his hospital could be dismissed if all could receive, experience and offer forgiveness. Sin, guilt and

alienation due to being un-forgiven or unforgiving, can keep us in emotional and even physical bondage.

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.

Those bound by guilt are those...

Who need the will to be healed and forgiven

Obviously the paraplegic in our text had the will to be healed, shown by his being carried to Jesus by his helpers. But amazingly, the longer we live in our bondage, the more indifferent and even resistant we can become against God’s healing and help.

I think about the paralyzed invalid at the pool in Bethesda:

“When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, ‘Do you want to get well?’” (John 5:6).

This seems a strange question to ask a paraplegic who had been an invalid for 38 years (verse 5). Yet through years of managing one’s condition and living one’s life in dependence on others and accepting one’s lot as permanent, the will to be healed can be eroded. And stubborn human pride often resists the forgiving and healing grace that God would proffer us. Even Christians all too often learn to live with “sin management.” Rather than seeking total forgiveness and holiness and freedom from besetting sin, Christians often try to manage sin so that they keep it from getting “unmanageable” or causing problems for them and others. And so we can learn to manage the ongoing un-forgiven sins of pride, lust, bitterness, selfish ambition or greed.

We may intend to someday, hopefully before it’s too late, to be rid of our sin and live forgiven and surrendered lives. But right now we are like the young Augustine, who prayed, “Lord, make me holy, but not now.”

But we, like this paraplegic, those who need forgiveness are those...

Who must draw near to Jesus

The paraplegic and his helpers boldly drew near to Jesus. Coming to the house where Jesus was teaching and healing the sick, they were shut off from approaching Jesus because of the crowd. But being determined, they

climbed the outside stairs or ladder, typically placed on the sides of the houses. From the flat rooftop they removed what were likely tiles on the roof, which could be removed and replaced without damaging the roof.

We also who are in need of healing must ask ourselves if we have the will to be healed and transformed by the power of Jesus, or if we have become satisfied with things as they are. We also must ask if we are determined to seek him. Some I have talked with will say they are seeking God, and some are sincerely doing that, moving ever closer to an honest and genuine faith. But many who say they are looking for God are more likely “looking out” for God, trying to avoid him and are more likely running from him. They are “looking” for God like I’m “looking out” for the flu, hoping to avoid catching it. Under the guise of being serious seekers they are asking questions that hopefully have no answers and thus can keep God at a distance with their endless arguments. Such “seekers” often ask questions about how a loving God can allow the suffering of innocent people in the world. These are often the ones referred to earlier who sing of *Amazing Grace* that assumes God should save a quite “respectable” wretch like them.

But the paraplegic drew near to Jesus the Great Physician. And we believe in the forgiveness of sins...

Because Jesus heals and forgives

And Jesus stood ready to receive him. Seeing their faith, assuming his and those who carried him, Jesus said, “Friend, your sins are forgiven” (verse 20). Jesus heals and forgives...

By understanding our condition

Jesus knew this man’s heart, even as Evangelist John writes that Jesus knew and knows “what was in a man” (John 2:25). He knows our true condition today. 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 of sin.

Our grave condition is our separation from God. We are alienated from holy God by our sin, which is our failure to live by his standards and our inner and outer rebellion against him and his word. The incarnation of Christ, God’s eternal Son was for the purpose of our rescue from our sin and everlasting death penalty. We all share the guilt for the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ because he died because of us and for us as our substitute in dying the death we deserved to suffer. Our guilt for our sin is not just imagined, not simply a psychological neurosis or disorder of some kind. We stand before God in our guilty condition and either we must receive his pardon through faith and repentance or else we must bear the guilt and suffer our deserved

punishment (See Romans 3:23; 5:12; 6:23; 2 Corinthians 5:20-21; 1 Peter 3:18).

Jesus sees us as lost sinners, those he came to seek and to save (Luke 19:10). And, as with the paralytic, Jesus heals and forgives...

By seeing our faith (verse 20)

The Message paraphrases verse 20, saying, “Impressed by their bold belief, he (Jesus) said, ‘Friend, I forgive your sins.’” The paralytic and his helpers were drawn to Jesus and determined to come to him, which expressed to Jesus their faith. Faith is not primarily intellectual but rather is a conviction that stirs the will to repent, seek forgiveness, trust and obey. Scripture says that “without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Hebrews 11:6). This man and his associates believed in Jesus as the Healer and then they earnestly sought him, believing that he would reward them. Thus by their faith they pleased Jesus and even *impressed* him.

Grace, working through the Holy Spirit, stirs us to believe and to seek and obey the Lord Jesus. We cannot do this on our own. Paul clearly says that we were dead in our transgressions and sins, more disabled than the paraplegic (Ephesians 2:1). “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:5). If you are aware of a need for God in your life, you can be sure that God is at work in you. He has begun a good work within you (Philippians 1:6). He is drawing you sincerely to seek him and to form a love relationship with him as Lord and Master of your life.

And grace received the true seeker with kindness. Notice that Jesus greets the paralytic with the endearing word, “Friend” (20). Matthew’s account has Jesus say, “Take heart, son,” which is the Greek, *tékuvov*, literally “child.” (Matthew 9:2). As Isaiah says so graphically,

“Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you;
He rises to show you compassion” (Isaiah 30:18)

And then Jesus heals and forgives...

By exercising his power and authority

Jesus said to the paralytic, “Friend, your sins are forgiven” (verse 20). This declaration was not 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.

Jesus *knew* who he was, the eternal Son of God. He was the anointed Christ, the Messiah, the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, as he announced in his hometown synagogue (Luke 4:18-19, quoting Isaiah 61:1, 2). Jesus was speaking the words the Father had authorized him to say and was doing what he was seeing the Father do, in absolute obedience to and dependence on the Father (John 5:19).

And so we too come to Jesus, knowing that only through him can we come to the Father (John 14:6). Jesus alone can make us whole. He is the Great Physician and all healing is from him. There are excellent medical personnel and facilities throughout Belgium. And yet, every ounce of medicine and all medical science are gifts from God and are inspired by his general revelation. And in the healing processes of the human body, God is at work, whatever the spiritual condition of the medical patient. As Jesus said, God "causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). And Jesus has the authority to transcend the limits of medical science and the normal physiology and healing of the body to do the miraculous.

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. This is why many seeker churches, even among evangelicals, are so popular. They dispense a Jesus who serves their felt needs and does not interfere with their lives with demands, such as for repentance and the disciple's cross. Jesus' opponents were offended that Jesus declared the man forgiven. They knew what we often fail to comprehend, that the healing of the soul through forgiveness of sin and the gift of eternal life is a greater work of God than physical healing. And they understood the inherent claim of Jesus to deity, because God alone can forgive sins.

I find it interesting how freely people often dispense forgiveness, as though it were in their power and authority to forgive. You also have seen people interviewed by news reporters, following a tragedy such as a terrorist attack. These people may say, regarding the terrorists who have injured and murdered their victims, "I forgive them," as though the terrorists were repentant and also as though they, the "forgivers," had the authority to forgive. Of course we must forgive, as Jesus taught, those who sin against us (Matthew 6:14-15) and do so with unlimited forgiveness toward the repentant (Luke 17:3-4).

But, just as David confessed in his great penitential psalm, all sin is ultimately and immediately against God and we must seek his mercy, grace and forgiveness (Psalm 51:4). And when we come to him, as did the paralytic, Jesus speaks his word of forgiveness.

Jesus knew the unbelieving hearts of his critics, who rejected his authority to forgive sins, essentially dismissing his claims as the Son of God. He performed the miracle of healing to demonstrate the attendant and greater

miracle of forgiveness. And so Jesus said, “Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...” (23-24). Jesus may well have been saying that it would be easy for someone to claim to forgive sins and simply say words that could not be verified. He would verify the veracity and power of his words with this miracle of physical healing. Jesus is saying that both miracles come simply through his authoritative word of divine power from God. The same powerful word that called matter and creation into existence is the power of his word to forgive and to heal (Genesis 1:3; Hebrews 1:3).

Jesus could also well have given a “how much more argument.” If he is willing and able to forgive our sins, *how much more* is he able to give physical healing? To heal a physical illness takes only the power of Creator God, but to forgive sins requires his love, mercy and grace provided through the cross. Isaiah prophesied this greater healing when in his great Messianic Suffering Servant passage he noted,

“But he was pierced for our transgressions,
 he was crushed for our iniquities;
 the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
 and *by his wounds we are healed*” (Isaiah 53:5).

In order to forgive our sins God had to send his Son to suffer for our sins and to die in our place. As New Testament scholar Leon Morris wrote, “...It is not improbably that Jesus is saying that it is much harder really to pronounce the word of forgiveness than the word of healing. He was doing more than the healers of the day could do” (pages 117-118, *The Gospel according to St. Luke*, Tyndale NT Commentaries). Jesus could not take sin and forgiveness lightly, knowing that he would have to suffer our hell in order to proffer to us his forgiveness. You do not give away lightly what costs your life for you to obtain.

I remember the photo of a soldier who had returned to the US, who went to visit the parents of the soldier who sacrificed his own life in order to save the life of his comrade. The rescued soldier came to the deceased rescuer’s parents to express his sympathy but also his love and gratitude to the parents who reared a son who would give his life for another. Such a gift is not given lightly. And thus “I forgive” is a powerful word but not an easy word.

Jesus heals and forgives...

And 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 (verse 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 man made whole.

Luke was a medical doctor (Colossians 4:14), and yet he recognizes that physical healing is inadequate for making a person whole. As I thumb through Luke's gospel, I find instances of people receiving physical healing but also a subsequent and more significant spiritual healing. A woman "subject to bleeding" made her way through the crowd to touch the edge of Jesus' cloak and was healed physically. Yet Jesus called her out of the crowd to make her a worshiper, as she in fear confessed her healing. Then Jesus said, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace" (Luke 8:43-48). On another occasion, Jesus gave physical healing to ten lepers. But only the one who came back to worship and thank Jesus received his spiritual healing. Jesus said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well" (Luke 17:11-19).

Being made whole is far more than being physically healthy. (On this topic, read Marva J Dawn, *Being Well When We're Ill: Wholeness and Hope in Spite of Infirmity*.) All physical healing, as I have said, 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 does not 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 being a whole man. The illness or affliction was part of his being spiritually healed and refined for heaven, a God's dependent worshiper (2 Corinthians 12:1-10).

The word to forgive means to let go, to release and to set aside (Greek ἀφίημι. See *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, volume I, pages 509ff). When Jesus forgives us he lifts from us the burden of sin and sets us free from that load we no longer need to carry. Those who of you who say you have not forgiven yourself are living in defiance of God's word and authority. When you bring your sin and guilt before Jesus he lifts it from you and cleanses you by his blood and makes you holy in his sight. You are as righteous as though you had never sinned. And we must simply and gratefully receive his forgiveness. He removes our sins and remembers them no more (Psalm 103:12; Isaiah 64:9).

"God does not wish us to remember what he is willing to forget" (George A Buttrick).

And through our healing, our being made whole, Jesus sets us free,

Thereby glorifying 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: "Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, 'We have seen remarkable things today'" (verse 26).

Our healing and even our being forgiven and receiving eternal life are not primarily for our sake. We can make an idol out of our healing and health and can even be self-centered in our personal salvation. We are healed and saved for the pleasure and the glory of God, who alone is to be praised. Our life purpose and our greatest pleasure are in the glorifying of God. These bodies of ours, whether physically healthy or not, are temples of the Holy Spirit and are not our own, as Paul reminds us: "They have been bought at a great price. Therefore honor God with your body" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

Forgiveness brings gratitude and love for God. Jesus pointed the presumptuous Pharisee to the sinful woman, who anointed his feet with expensive perfume and tears of gratitude. After telling the parable about two who were forgiven debts, one small and another large, he noted to the Pharisee that he was not responding to Jesus with love because he had not realized the enormity of his sin and need for forgiveness. On the other hand, the woman was aware of the depth of her sin and guilt and the greatness of Jesus' love and mercy and his forgiveness. Thus, realizing she had been forgiven much, she loved much. "But he who has been forgiven little loves little" (Luke 7:36-50). And, let me add, those forgiven little and healed little, worship little.

The healed and forgiven are the ones who glorify God in their newly found freedom and wholeness.

Conclusion:

I pray that today we will all place ourselves "right in front of Jesus" (verse 19) and seek his grace for the healing power of forgiveness. You may have the need for physical healing of a disease and Jesus may choose to give you healing, either through medical science or without it. But he may have other plans for making you whole, which will include allowing you to struggle with your disease or disability.

But I do know this: Jesus wants all of us to know his liberating, releasing, joy-infusing forgiveness. He wants us all to be able to leave this worship center knowing that I sins have been buried in the deepest see of his wonderful forgetfulness.

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

If you have repented of your sins then God has forgiven them in Jesus, whose blood washes you to perfection in his sight. If you cannot forgive yourself then you are not acting in faith and obedience. If you are obedient you will agree with Jesus that the power of his blood is capable of wiping away every sin. The word of God says that whatever is not of faith is sin (Romans 14:23). There is no unpardonable sin, only unpardonable sinners, who reject Jesus' love and grace until their hearts are hardened beyond repentance.

You cannot enjoy the forgiveness of your sin if you are unwilling to be reconciled with another. If you are closed off in an unforgiving spirit toward another, then you are necessarily closed off from the heavenly Father's forgiveness. That's what Jesus meant when he said, "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your heavenly Father will not forgive your sins" (Matthew 6:14-15). When we fail to forgive others who sin against us we fail to comprehend how much God has forgiven us—far more than we would ever be called on to forgive others (Jesus' parable about the unmerciful servant is relevant at this point: Matthew 18:21-35). Just as God's forgiveness of us has healing power, so our forgiveness of our brother or sister brings joy and healing to our relationships. Remember how Jacob reacted to Esau's forgiveness: "...To see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably" (Genesis 33:10).

As we sing and pray I invite you to place yourselves "right in front of Jesus," to receive the healing power of his forgiveness. Then you can say with conviction, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins."

Questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Although we reject the idea that all illness is a sign of God's judgment, can you think of occasions when there is a relationship between guilt for sin and physical and emotional illness?
2. How can the experience of receiving God's forgiveness affect our emotional and/or physical wellbeing? Conversely, how does remaining in a condition of guilt and un-forgiveness affect us?
3. How is it possible for someone to lose the desire to be healed, both physically and spiritually?
4. How would you describe the faith of the paralytic and his friends? In what ways do they model for us the faith that we need for forgiveness and being made whole persons?
5. What do you think makes a person whole? Does wholeness require physical health?
6. When Jesus forgives anyone it is not a light matter. What did it cost Jesus for him to be able to forgive us?
7. How does willingness to forgive others affect the forgiveness we receive from the heavenly Father? See Matthew 6:14-15.

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