

Only God Forgives Sin, Part 1

Luke 5:21-26

42-65

Let's open our Bibles to the fifth chapter of Luke, the fifth chapter of Luke. And honestly, I...I am trying my very best to get through the gospel of Luke in a reasonable amount of time but so much is formative, so much is at the very heart of the Christian faith that I find it necessary to address issues that extend beyond the statements of the text themselves.

In the story of Luke chapter 5 we are introduced to the very important matter of forgiveness. Verse 17 says, "It came about one day that He was teaching and there were some Pharisees and teachers of the law sitting there who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was present for Him to perform healing. And behold, some men were carrying on a bed a man who was paralyzed and they were trying to bring him in and set him down in front of Him. Not finding any way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down through the tiles with his stretcher, right in the center, in front of Jesus. And seeing their faith, He said, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven you.' And the scribes and the Pharisees began to reason saying, 'Who is this man who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?' But Jesus, aware of their reasonings, answered and said to them, 'Why are you reasoning in your hearts? Which is easier to say, your sins have been forgiven you, or to say rise and walk? But in order that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,' He said to the paralytic, 'I say to you, rise and take up your stretcher and go home.' And at once he rose up before them and took up what he had been lying on and went home glorifying God. And they were all seized with astonishment and began glorifying God and they were filled with fear, saying, 'We have seen remarkable things today.'"

Forgiveness, what a word! Nothing is more foreign, seemingly, to sinful human nature than forgiveness. And nothing is more characteristic of divine nature than forgiveness. Man is eager for vengeance and God is eager for forgiveness. In fact, never are we more like God than when we love our enemies and do good to those that harm us, for then we prove, Jesus said, to be children of God. Forgiveness is man's greatest need and therefore God's greatest gift. And the gospel, the message of the church is the message that God will forgive all your sins. The message of the church is not a message of a good self-image. It's not a message of a repaired marriage, or family aid. It's not a message of success on the earth through psychology. It is the message of forgiveness. The message of the church is that all people are sinners, all people are under the wrath of God, all people are headed for eternal judgment because of their sin and God as a righteous judge will bring about that eternal punishment. But, God also is a God of mercy and grace who will forgive the sinner who comes to Him with a repentant heart and asks for that gift of forgiveness. The Bible tells us that the predicament of fallen humanity is bleak. It is deadly. It is as bad as it can be in time and eternity. Every person is a sinner under the looming sword of God's judgment with no ability to love God, no ability to know God, no ability to please God, no ability to serve God, no ability to obey God. The situation appears hopeless.

The verdict of God on man is that man is guilty and helpless and hopeless. And by all human measurements and all legal measurements, man is in an absolutely impossible situation. In fact, I don't know if you know this but God Himself says, "It is an abomination to justify a sinner." It is an abomination to God to justify a sinner. In fact, God says, "Justifying a sinner or declaring a sinner righteous or declaring someone guilty innocent, that kind of perversion of justice is as bad as declaring an innocent person guilty."

We make a lot in our society about the courts and how occasionally they find an innocent person guilty. And one of the television tabloid programs does a program on special broadcast on this person who's been in prison X number of years and finally they realize that this person was innocent and they let the person out and there's need for reparation and somehow restoration and restitution to this person who sat in prison for a crime they didn't commit and what a terrible travesty it is to declare an innocent person guilty. We don't make nearly as much out of declaring guilty people innocent. But both are an abomination to God on a human level. That is an affront to God who makes a clear demarcation and distinction between guilt and innocence, a clear demarcation between right and wrong, between sin and virtue.

And that's what's recorded in Proverbs 17:15. Listen to this very important verse. "He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous, both of them alike are an abomination to the Lord." Either wrong verdict, either declaring the innocent just or declaring the just guilty, both are an abomination to the Lord. Not only to the Lord, but because man is created in the image of God with a built-in sense of justice and right and wrong in his heart, Proverbs 24:24 says, "He who says to the wicked, 'You are righteous,' people will curse him and nations will hate him." We even have enough of the image of God in us, enough of the knowledge of right and wrong and the moral law of God to understand that it is not only to God an abomination to pervert justice, but it is to man as well. Repeatedly in the Scripture God Himself forbids anybody to declare a sinful person righteous.

And yet that is exactly what God does. And He alone has the right to do it. He is the judge and He is the lawmaker. He is all three branches in one. He is the legislative branch, He is the judicial branch, and He is the executive branch. There is a singular governor of the universe who has written the law, who applies the law, interprets the law, judges the sinner, and He is also the executioner. Therefore there's only one person in the universe who has the right to do what for all of us is an abomination and that is to justify sinners, to declare guilty people innocent. And that is exactly what God does and that is the wonder of the gospel and the uniqueness of Christianity. Listen to Romans 4:5. God is called in Romans 4:5, "Him who justifies the ungodly." What God will not allow us to do for the sake of justice, God Himself has done. He justifies the ungodly. And it further says the faith of that ungodly person is reckoned as righteousness. So God justifies the ungodly on the basis of faith.

Paul writes further, quoting from Psalm 32, "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account." That, you see, is the message of Christianity. There is one person in the universe who has the power, who has the authority, who has the right to declare guilty people innocent, to declare sinful people righteous, and that one singular person is the lawgiver and the judge and the executioner, God Himself. He justifies the ungodly, declaring them innocent, righteous, forgiven.

How can He do that? How can He be just and the justifier of sinners? That's the question of Romans 3:26. How can He be just and the justifier of sinners?

Well you know the answer, don't you? Because He designed a plan by which His Son would take the sinner's place and pay the penalty for the sinner's sin. So justice was satisfied in the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ for our sins. "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." What we can't do, that is we can't justify sinners, it is an abomination to God for us to deal with people unjustly, to let guilty people appear righteous or righteous people appear guilty. That is a perversion for us. But God can do what He alone can do and that is He can justify the ungodly, forgive the sinner, not without paying due respect to His law, and that is why He had to send Jesus Christ to satisfy justice and die in our place.

Only God can do this. It is an abomination. It is a perversion. It is sin for us to pervert what is right and what is wrong, what is just and what is unjust, what is innocence and what is guilt. For we have no way to cover sin. Only God can be the forgiver because He has provided the substitute sacrifice. He is the Holy One offended. He is the judge, the lawgiver, the executioner, the only one therefore with the power and authority to pardon the guilty sinner. And that is the message of Christianity. That is the singular heart and soul of the gospel, the good news, that God will forgive your sins. And that means you will escape eternal punishment, you will escape eternal hell.

But having said that, the essential element, the core, the heart of forgiveness is not the remission of the penalty, it's not the escape from hell. The heart of the gospel is the motive that makes God do that. This is where we see the essence of the gospel. It's wonderful that the penalty is removed, that's the perimeter. But the center of the gospel is the motive that made God willing to do that. And what is the motive? John 3:16, "For God so (what?) loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." Romans 5:8, essentially, says the same thing. Romans 5:8 says God loved us. In fact He demonstrated His love for us, it says "in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

Alexander Maclaren said, "The essential of the gospel is the unrestrained flow of love from the offended heart of God who has been sinned against." "Pardon is God's love," he wrote, "unchecked and unembittered, granted to the wrongdoer. That is a divine act exclusively," end quote.

All sin is against God. All sin is a violation of God's law. Since God is the offended one, God is the lawgiver, God is the judge and executioner, only God can forgive the sinner. And in this passage the Pharisees were musing in their minds, saying to themselves, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" And frankly, that was good theology. They knew that. They knew their Old Testament well enough to know that. They were exactly right, no one, and that was the implication of their musing, "Nobody can forgive sins but God alone. Why is this man Jesus doing saying to this paralyzed man your sins are forgiven? Doesn't He know that only God can do that?" They had sound theology at that point. And that's the heart of the passage. This is a passage about forgiveness and the reason we need to spend a little time dealing with it here is because forgiveness is at the very heart of the gospel. It's at the very heart of the ministry of Jesus. It's the very heart of our ministry today. Of course, the truth of the matter is you can't preach the gospel of forgiveness unless people know they're sinners. You can't preach the grace of deliverance from eternal judgment unless people know they're headed for eternal judgment.

I was reading yesterday morning, Jim Boice who recently went to be with the Lord last summer, a great loss to the ministry, a great loss to the kingdom. And he preached here on a number of occasions and he was a very treasured friend to me and a partner in ministry, expositing the Word of God faithfully in Philadelphia. But his last book was *What Ever Happened To The Gospel of Grace?*

And I was reading it yesterday and in it he was talking about some recent surveys among evangelicals and this really shocked me. He said that one of the surveys — I think it's Gallup Poll — 76 percent of evangelicals surveyed believe that man is basically good. We might expect 76 percent of liberals to believe that. We might expect 100 percent of pagans to believe that. But 76 percent of evangelicals believe that man is basically good? You want to cut the heart out of the church's gospel message? Just convince them that people are good.

Jesus didn't believe that. That's why they killed Him because He told them even though they thought they were good, they were bad. They were as bad as bad could be and they were headed for hell. And they were religious.

So the heart of the passage is the heart of the gospel. It's about forgiveness and you need to understand it. And there's some elements of it that I want you to understand and thus we have to take a little bit of time.

Now remember, at this point in Luke's gospel we have a tremendous amount of evidence already packed into the first five chapters, evidence that Jesus is God, that He is Messiah, the Son of God, the Savior and Redeemer of the world. We've already noted that from the testimony of Zacharias, Elizabeth, Joseph, Mary, Anna, Simeon, John the Baptist, the Father from heaven, the Holy Spirit, His credentials, His genealogy. We've seen His power over disease, His power over demons. We've seen His power over the natural creation as He controlled the fish in the Sea of Galilee. We've seen His amazing power to escape from a mob that wanted to kill Him and throw Him off of a cliff in Nazareth. There are lots of evidences of the great power of Jesus. His healing power has been chronicled and the many occasions in which He cast demons out of people. So we've seen His power in the natural realm. We've seen His power in the angelic realm. But in this portion of Scripture we're looking at His power in the moral realm, His power to exonerate the guilty, His power literally to deliver a person from the position of guilt to a position of innocence, to totally change a person's moral estate, as the old writers used to say, moral state, or estate, to move them from being under the judgment of God to being under the blessing of God. Jesus literally had the power to transfer a soul from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God. He had the power to do that with a word and He did it to this man. He said, "Your sins are forgiven." And the leaders were right, "No man had the power to do that." In fact, for a man to say that, he was treading where angels fear to tread. This powerful story then introduces us to the matter of forgiveness and also to the hostility of the Pharisees and the scribes who eventually sought and achieved the death of Jesus.

Now last time we looked, first of all, at the context in verses 17 to 19 and we met the Pharisees, these quote-unquote "separated men" who were non-priests. They were laymen, devoted fanatically to the law and tradition. There were about 6,000 of them in Israel at the time of Jesus. They had developed a complex set of regulations to bind on the people in order to keep them loyal to the law. However, their system obscured the law completely and replaced it with a human code. They were self-righteous. They were void of grace, void of salvation. They were legalists. Their system had shut them off from God all together and from salvation.

Among the Pharisees were a smaller group called scribes. They were the top echelon Pharisees, the legal experts, the scholars among the scholars. They were all there this day, according to verse 17. They had gathered together to hear Jesus teach and to see the power of healing that He was able to do by the Holy Spirit, the power of the Lord as it's called at the end of verse 17. So they came to really, I think, to incriminate Jesus. They already had heard about Him. They had certainly heard

about His message, heard about His healings, heard about His casting out of demons. They came to see for themselves from all over the land of Israel, even from Jerusalem where the most important of them lived. So we saw the context.

Then in verse 18 in the middle of this meeting going on in Capernaum in a...probably a large house because it had a tile roof. Most houses had a wood roof with beams and then mud and straw packed in. But if you had tiles, a little bit more sophisticated, maybe a little more money, maybe a larger house, a good place to accommodate a large crowd, which was there that day. In fact, the crowd was so large that some men came and there were many, many people who would come wherever Jesus was who were sick and needed to be healed, and this was not unusual. Some men, four of them the other writers tell us, came carrying on a bed, a pallet, literally, just a flat kind of a cot, a man who was paralyzed. They were trying to bring him in and set him down in front of Him. Not finding any way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down through the tiles with his stretcher, right in the center, in front of Jesus. Couldn't get him in. One-story houses in Israel at that time had a roof patio and they had outside stairs that just went up and you spent a lot of your time up there because of weather being somewhat moderate there and also being a good place to get cool when it was hot down inside because of the cooking that was going on, you went upstairs. And so it was the patio for the family. There would be some tiles there, they would locate exactly the right tiles directly over Jesus who was somewhere in the middle of the house, literally crushed with people all around. And they took the tiles off and dropped the man right in front of Jesus. Pretty dramatic moment and we discussed that last time. That was the context in which this forgiveness occurred.

Then we see the claim that Jesus makes and it comes very rapidly. Verse 20, "And seeing their faith..." There's no conversation, there's nothing recorded in Matthew, Mark or Luke that the man said anything. There is no conversation by his friends, apparently. They just plop him there in front of Jesus and Jesus seeing their faith, that's interesting, isn't it? How do you see faith? Well He could see everything. He could see everything. And what He saw was a persistent, intense, relentless faith that literally dismantles the roof if necessary. A very embarrassing thing to do, by the way, to sort of thrust yourself in the middle like that, particularly when you're like this man, a paralyzed man who in the social structure of that day would have been an outcast. Not a leper in the sense that people feared that he had a contagious illness, although it was very possible that he may have since paralysis in some forms was a direct connect to venereal diseases. But this man would have been an outcast socially and to embarrassingly plop himself in the middle of this thing by dismantling the roof would take a tremendous amount of faith that Jesus was going to do something dramatic to change the situation. "Seeing their faith He said, 'Friend.'" The other writers tell us He also called him "son." "Your sins are forgiven you."

Well this is amazing. The issue doesn't seem to be about sin, it seems to be about paralysis. It seems to be about the fact that he can't walk or he can't move. He's confined to this pallet and has to be carried around. What is this about sin?

Well as I said a few weeks ago, Jesus noted the faith of all of them, just not the four friends, but the man as well. Nobody will ever be forgiven without faith and nobody will ever be forgiven their sins without repentance. So what Jesus saw was not primarily a man who had a physical illness, but primarily a man who had a sinful heart and a man who sought forgiveness. Nobody is ever going to be forgiven by proxy. It wasn't the faith of his friends that brought about his forgiveness. Nobody is ever going to be delivered from sin, delivered from judgment on the basis of somebody else's faith,

and nobody is ever going to be delivered and forgiven apart from their own faith and repentance. Jesus healed people who didn't have faith. He healed some people who had a little faith and healed other people who had a lot of faith. But He never saved anybody who didn't have faith. Salvation has always been by faith, hasn't it, and always with repentance.

So the indication here is that what Jesus gave this man was not just a healing. In fact, at the point that He forgave his sins He hadn't healed him. That comes later in verse 24 where He says to him, "Get up." Before He ever dealt with the physical problem, He forgave his sin. The man came, I'm sure he had faith in Jesus' healing power. He probably had faith that Jesus certainly was the messenger from God. He had heard about His power to heal which was without any equal. Healings just didn't happen. They just didn't happen. There hadn't been healings in Israel for 500 years when Jesus arrived. They weren't common and they knew this was very unusual as people were being healed everywhere Jesus went. He knew He was a messenger from God.

But the real cry of his heart was not the physical need. The real cry of his heart was for forgiveness. And he knew that God was a God of mercy and in his heart he wanted to be forgiven. Jesus read his heart. He perhaps had heard that Jesus preached forgiveness because He did. Everywhere He went He preached forgiveness. He preached the good news to the poor, prisoners, blind, and oppressed, as we learned in chapter 4. He preached that men were sinners, desperately needing forgiveness and mercy. That's why they tried to kill Him in His own town, Nazareth. When He preached that message in the synagogue they tried to throw Him off a cliff. They couldn't stand the idea that they would have to reassess themselves as sinners. But this man didn't have a problem with that. He knew his sin and he knew he needed mercy and forgiveness. And when the Lord looked at this man He saw not a paralyzed man, a paralytic, He saw a sinner. He saw a sinner who believed that God was merciful and a sinner who desperately wanted God to forgive him because that's the condition of heart to which God responds with forgiveness.

He called him "Friend." He just pulled him in, no longer an enemy. Friend, son, the language of the kingdom and there's no forgiveness ever given anybody without repentance and there's no forgiveness given anybody who doesn't cry out in faith for the mercy of God. This man knew he couldn't earn his salvation by works. This man didn't have any self-righteousness. This man was not only an outcast on the outside physically, but he knew he was an outcast on the inside spiritually and he sought forgiveness. And Jesus gave it to him.

And that's always the way it's been. I mean, this is a classic illustration of how people were always...always saved, always delivered, always forgiven throughout all the Old Testament era. The sinner had to take a look at his own heart and see that he had violated the law of God and violated the law of God; that there was in him nothing but bankruptcy. He had to have that beatitude mentality, that meekness, that poverty of spirit, that bankruptcy, that hunger and thirst for righteousness that you know you don't have, where you've looked to yourself against the law of God and you know you fall short and you know you're a sinner and you desperately need forgiveness. And you come to God who alone can give it. And I think he came to Jesus that day not only for physical healing, but even more so because he knew that Jesus was preaching good news to poor people and prisoners and blind and oppressed and he was one of those and he needed deliverance from sin and that's why he came. And Jesus knew that was in his heart and so He forgave him.

Now the question comes at this point, and it's very important to listen because this is a critical matter to have in mind as we go through this. Was it necessary for that man to believe that Jesus was God?

Did he believe that Jesus was God? It doesn't say that. It doesn't say what he believed. It just says he had faith. It doesn't say that he believed that Jesus was the Son of God, God in human flesh, the incarnate One, Emmanuel, God with us, or that he believed that Jesus was Messiah, or that he believed Jesus was the Savior, Redeemer of the world. It doesn't say that.

Well was it necessary to believe that Jesus was God to be saved? Answer: No. Was it necessary for Moses to believe that Jesus was God to be saved? Was it necessary for David to believe that? Was it necessary for Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah to believe that? Was it necessary for anybody in the Old Testament time to believe that Jesus was the Messiah? No.

What did they have to believe? They had to believe that they were sinners. They had to believe that they were bankrupt, that they had no ability to change their condition as sinners, no ability on their own to escape the judgment of God, no way to achieve self-righteousness that would satisfy God's standard and therefore they had to throw themselves on the mercy of God and ask God to be merciful and save them. That's the way people were saved in the Old Testament. And, folks, on this side of the cross were still in that dispensation. I don't know what this man believed about Jesus. He certainly believed that He was preaching the message of forgiveness and he certainly believed that He had been sent by God because of the miracles that He was doing. And he believed it enough to believe that he would be healed and hope that he would be forgiven. I don't know that he knew that Jesus was God. He may have had that kind of thought, but it doesn't say anything about his view of Christ.

For a moment, turn to Luke 18 and I'll continue to make this clear in your mind. In Luke 18 — this is very familiar, I've referred to it a number of times — Luke 18 verse 9. Jesus tells a parable and this is right from the lips of Jesus so this is a...a good text to understand this matter. Jesus says in verse 10, two men went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other was a tax gatherer. So what you have is the extremes, the 180-degree poles here. The Pharisee who is at the pinnacle of religiosity and the tax gatherer, who is the scum of the scum, who is a Jew who has bought a Roman tax franchise and is now extorting money from his own people, traitor of all traitors. So you have the extremes.

The Pharisee goes into the temple to pray and stands up and prays to himself. And that's the way it is, he's talking to himself. "God, I thank Thee that I'm not like other people, swindlers, unjust, adulterers or even like this tax gatherer." He's very pleased with himself. Verse 12, "I fast twice a week, I pay tithes of all that I get." So he just comes before God to tell God how great he is.

"The tax gatherer standing some distance away wasn't even willing to lift up his eyes to heaven." He wouldn't even look up, his face is down. He's pounding his breast, which was a sign of deep, deep grief, saying, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner." That's all he says. He doesn't say anything about Jesus. Doesn't say that He believes Jesus is God. He just says, "God, be merciful to me a sinner, measured against Your law I am undone, I am wretched, I am distraught, I am broken, I am contrite, I need mercy."

Jesus says in verse 14, "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other." Now Jesus said a man who fell on his face before God in the temple and pleaded for mercy was justified. That's not a matter... and Christ is not the issue here, yet. The man was justified. It doesn't say anything about what he believed concerning Jesus. What he did believe was that he was a sinner. He was distraught over his sin, he had no hope. He was headed for judgment. And he was

outside the kingdom and he had no plea except, "God, be merciful to me."

Now after the cross and after the resurrection, the matter of faith for salvation is still in place, but what one believes is critical. We come to Romans chapter 10 and we read in verse 9, "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be (what?) saved." Now on this side of the cross that content is added. You still believe you're a sinner, you still cry out for mercy, but only through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ which was verified by God as satisfying through the resurrection. There was a time, according to Acts 17, when God overlooked some things, but now since He has sent Christ, He commands all men everywhere to repent and to acknowledge the One, the Man whom He has appointed.

Now as we go through this study of the gospel of Luke then, that will be a helpful perspective for you. Don't expect everybody who is forgiven to have a full understanding of who Jesus is. They couldn't be expected to have that until His work was complete. And now the touchstone of the work of Christ is that you must believe that He is Lord and that God raised Him from the dead to verify His deity. But prior to the cross and prior to the resurrection, it was a matter of believing God would forgive by mercy the penitent sinner.

So, Jesus at that moment, back to verse 20, at that moment on His own personal authority absolved the man of all guilt for his sins. He did what...what is on the human level an abomination. To bring a man into a courtroom anywhere in the world, I suppose, who is absolutely guilty and declare him innocent is intolerable. It's a breach of justice. Now to bring an innocent man into a courtroom and declare him guilty is a breach of justice that is intolerable. It is an abomination to God that that be done on a human level, but God is able to do, because of what He has accomplished in Jesus Christ, namely the satisfaction of His justice on the sinner through a substitute, God is able to do what man can't do, God is able to forgive sin. Only God can do it. And when Jesus did it, He was making the loudest statement possible that He in fact is God.

And by the way, this continues to be the emphasis of Jesus' ministry. His ministry was about sin and forgiveness. Down in verse 29, Levi...or "Levy" as the name is pronounced today, or Matthew as his name is known, had his friends over. It was a pretty crummy group, a bunch of tax collectors and sinners. And the Pharisees and scribes began grumbling at the disciples saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax gatherers and sinners?" Well, if you've got a message of forgiveness, you hang around the people who want it. Jesus said, "It's not those who are well that need a physician, those who are sick." That's sarcasm. You...you, of course, are well. I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. The message of Jesus: sin, repentance, forgiveness.

Over in chapter 7 it just...I mean, it's everywhere but he talks about the same kind of thing in verse 36 to 50. But down in verse 48 He says to this woman, "Your sins have been forgiven." And those reclining at the table with Him began to say to themselves, "Who is this man who even forgives sins?" And He said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you." It doesn't say, "You believed that I was God, you believed in Me as your Redeemer or God." You were a sinner, you knew you were a sinner, you came with a penitent heart and you believed in the mercy of God and you cried out. This was a woman, you remember, who washed His feet with her tears.

That's the kind of people Jesus wanted to hang around, sinners. It was the righteous people that nauseated Him, the self-righteous people who didn't think they were sinners. Listen, if you don't know you're a sinner, my friend, you have made a severe error in diagnosis. It is severe enough to cost

you eternity in hell. You don't want to go to a doctor who makes a bad diagnosis; you could die. Worse yet, you don't want to make a worse diagnosis of your spiritual condition.

As we go through the gospel of Luke we're going to see many other occasions where this matter of being with sinners... They even said about Jesus, He hangs around drunkards, prostitutes, tax collectors. That's because "the Son of Man has come to seek and save that which was lost."

So the man was instantaneously — back to Luke 5 — instantaneously forgiven. I mean, you talk about a miracle. Now you think it was something to gather all the fish over to Peter's net. That was...that was a physical miracle of amazing proportions. You think it was something to cast out demons and heal all these diseases. Let me tell you, that pales. Miracles in the angelic realm and miracles in the physical realm to me pale compared to miracles in the moral realm. All you have to do to do a miracle in the physical realm is overpower the laws of nature. All you have to do to do a miracle in the angelic realm is overpower the demons. But to change a man's moral standing before God, that's...that is the greatest alteration of what is conceivable. But here is Jesus and He alone can do it. And when Jesus said to this person, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you," He set Himself apart from every human being who ever walked on this earth because He alone can do this. No priest can do it in a little box because you've confessed. We can tell people their sins have been forgiven because they've believed in Christ, and been saved. We can affirm that. That's what Jesus meant when He said to Peter, "Whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven," Matthew 18. All He was saying there was when people tell you they put their trust in Christ and confess their sins, when people have told you they believe, you can tell them that they're forgiven but you can't forgive them.

You say, "Well can't I forgive a friend's sin?" Sure, you can forgive the offense against you, but you can't forgive the offense against God. Only He can do that. Jesus was a...Jesus never met this guy. He wasn't saying, "I'm forgiving you for offending Me, I'm forgiving you for, you know, messing up the house, taking all the tiles off, forgive you for interrupting My message." That is something that demands serious forgiveness. That's not what He's talking about. He's not talking about forgiving the man some act of turpitude against Him. He's talking about forgiving all the man's sins forever. The offense is not against Him as man, the offense is against Him as God. And 76 percent of evangelicals believe man is basically good? No wonder churches are entertaining their people.

This man became permanently forgiven, perfect tense, permanently forgiven. And this stunned the Pharisees and the scribes, just stunned them. And their brains began to buzz. Verse 21, we come to the confrontation and we'll just introduce this, this morning. "And the scribes and Pharisees began to reason," their brains start to spin. The *grammateus*, the legal experts, their minds started to sort out what they had just heard. They knew their theology and only God could forgive sin and Jesus had just forgiven the man, He had just declared the guilty innocent. And, you see, they also believed that most sick people were sick because they were sinful. And so they got the picture and their brains began to reel with this. And it doesn't say they said anything. Their minds just began to function and I'm sure Jesus was continuing to teach and speak while their minds were whirring with this incredible statement they had just heard. And what they were saying in their minds, verse 21, what they were saying is, "Who is this man who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" And frankly, they had really good theology.

If Jesus was a man, this was blasphemy of the worst kind. This is the first time in Luke's gospel they accused Jesus of being a blasphemer but as you go through the record of the gospels, Matthew,

Mark and Luke and John, this became their constant perspective. Jesus was a blasphemer, Jesus was a blasphemer. Every time He claimed to be God they saw it as blasphemy. Ultimately they determined that what He did not by the power of God, but by the power of Satan. They had to have an explanation that was supernatural so they attributed His works and words to Satan. They accused Him of a blasphemer...of being a blasphemer. They do it so long and so often that finally they get the whole of the populace against Him and they get the Romans to execute Him.

Now the worst crime you could commit within the framework of Judaism was blasphemy because blasphemy was a direct assault on God and they revered God. And they did revere God in their own sort of twisted way. And Jewish tradition said that there are three ways you blaspheme God. One, you speak evil of the law of God. You remember that when the apostle Paul came to Jerusalem after his last missionary journey, they accused him of speaking against the law. That was a kind of blasphemy. Any attack on Scripture, which was the law of God to them, and even their extended law that had developed beyond Scripture, any attack on what they saw as the law of God was a blasphemy. That was the first kind of blasphemy.

The second step in blasphemy was to slander God Himself. First, to speak evil of His law, or His Word; second, to speak evil of Him. To reject the law, to depreciate the law, to curse the law, scorn the law; that was bad. Worse was to curse the name of God, to speak evil against God Himself. But the worst of all, the worst of all was to put something in His place as God, any idol, any other god in violation of the first commandment, worshiping any idol raised up in the place of God.

But you want to go one step beyond that? The worst form of that was to act as if you're God. Blasphemy upon blasphemy upon blasphemy; and their distorted minds were just overwhelmed by this. Claiming to be able to forgive sin, saying to this man your sins are forgiven, you're now exonerated, you just moved from the category of the guilty to the innocent, from the unjust to the just, this is more than they can stand. This is the most outrageous blasphemy conceivable. This man is talking as if He is God. He might as well have said He's the Creator of the universe, that He's the Holy One of Israel, that He's the Redeemer of Zion, that He's the holy and Almighty One, the eternal judge, the God of glory. He might as well have said that because they think, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" And they were right.

You can't come to Jesus with any patronizing nonsense about being the good teacher. He's either God or He is a blasphemer. You understand that? Some people have said, "Well, you know, the Jewish people, they rejected Jesus cause they didn't quite get what He was saying." Yeah, they got what He was saying. They rejected Him because they did get what He was saying. They were exactly right. Who can forgive sin but God alone? Answer? Nobody. So either Jesus is God or He's the rankest blasphemer that ever lived. There aren't any other options.

Now they knew the Old Testament law. Leviticus 24 told them exactly what to do with a blasphemer. And this is the most extreme form of blasphemy imaginable. It's worse than speaking against the law of God. It's worse than speaking against God Himself. It's the severest form of idolatry in that you are God. Back in Leviticus 24 verse 10, "The son of an Israelite woman whose father was Egyptian went out among the sons of Israel and the Israelite woman's son and a man of Israel struggled with each other in the camp. And the son of the Israelite woman blasphemed the Name and cursed."

Now you say, "Well that doesn't sound too serious. I hear that every day on the job." Well it's serious. They're out having a fight. In the middle of the fight they curse. Curse God. So they brought the man

to Moses. And it even tells everything about the man. His mother's name was Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan." God doesn't mind mentioning names, even genealogies. And they put him in custody. So Moses took him and put him in custody. He had cursed God, he had blasphemed God. And they waited to find out what the Lord would tell them to do with the guy.

So the Lord came at that time and spoke to Moses. This is what the Lord said, "Bring the one who has cursed outside the camp and let all who heard him lay their hands on his head and then let all the congregation stone him. And you shall speak to the sons of Israel saying, 'If anyone else curses God, he shall bear his sin.' Moreover the one who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall certainly stone him, the alien as well as the native when he blasphemes the name shall be put to death." And everybody gets involved so everybody sees the price of cursing God.

So verse 23 of Leviticus 24 says, then Moses spoke to the sons of Israel, told them what God told him. They brought the one who had cursed outside the camp, stoned him with stones. "Thus the sons of Israel did just as the Lord had commanded Moses."

They knew that passage. They knew what should be done to a blasphemer, and so they were ready to do it. Jesus is either a blasphemer or He's God. He either can forgive sin as God, or He has blasphemed God by saying He can. In the blindness, of course, of their wickedness, in the blindness of their self-righteousness, they were unable to make the right decision about who Jesus was. They rejected Him as God, concluded that He was nothing but a blasphemer who was energized by the devil himself.

I love this, verse 22, so simple. "But Jesus, aware of their reasonings..." Wow! He knew everything they were thinking. Aware, *epiginōs*, *epiginōs*, from a verb, *epiginōskō*, that means "deep knowledge." *Ginōskō* means "to know." *Epi* adds a preposition to the front of it for intensification, deep knowledge. He had penetrating, deep, true knowledge of their reasoning, their *dialogismos*, their mental dialoguing. He knew exactly what they were thinking, exactly.

Back in chapter 2 and verse 35, Simeon had said, "Many hearts are going to be revealed...the thoughts of many hearts are going to be revealed," and this is one time when the thoughts of the hearts of the Pharisees and scribes were clearly revealed to the Son of God. Mark 2:8 says, "Jesus knowing, or aware in His spirit that they were reasoning that way within themselves." He knew exactly what their thoughts were. So He said to them in verse 22, "Why are you reasoning in your hearts?" The implication is why are you reasoning like that in your hearts? Why are you having those kind of thoughts? Why are you questioning My authority to forgive sin?

Now just stop for a moment and say, "Folks, only God knows what people are thinking." First Samuel 16:7, "The Lord looks on the heart." First Kings 8:39, "For You know the hearts of all men." First Chronicles 28:9, "For the Lord searches all hearts and understands every intent of the thoughts." Jeremiah 17:10, "I the Lord search the heart." Ezekiel 11:5, "I know the things that come into your mind, every one of them." And you can read for yourself Psalm 139, particularly the first half that shows about what God knows.

And Jesus knew this because He was God. John 2:25 it says, "He knew what was in the heart of man." John 6:61, "He knew what was in the heart of man." Matthew 12:14, "He knew what was in the

heart of man." And He knew what they were thinking and He knew they were thinking He was a blasphemer. And He knew they wanted Him dead. This was a tragic, tragic mistake.

Jesus confronts them in verse 23 with a question. "Which is easier to say, your sins have been forgiven you, or to say rise and walk?" Provocative, isn't it? Do you know the answer? Come back next week.

With that question Jesus penetrates to the real issue here and seals the evidence of His deity and we'll see how that unfolds next time. But in conclusion, don't leave me yet. In conclusion, the message crystal clear here is the message that Jesus Christ came to forgive sinners. You are one. So am I. I've been forgiven, so have most of you. But it was because at some point we came to the true understanding of our condition, right? May God help you by His Holy Spirit to make a true assessment of your sinfulness, your desperate condition, the impending judgment of God, which is as close as your death, which could be any time, or the return of Christ which could be any time. You better make a right assessment of your own condition and go to the God of mercy and ask for the forgiveness that now is granted to those who believe that Jesus is Lord, who died in their place and rose again.

Lord, God, as we conclude our service this morning. It is with hearts of thanks that we do that. What can we say for the gift of forgiveness? There are no words. We sing, we pray, we sing week after week, we rejoice in our hearts, we offer prayers of thanksgiving and yet we can't even scratch the surface of the profound gratitude that we feel for this gift of forgiveness. Oh God, may You forgive sinners today as You did that man that day in that house. May You be saying to sinners right here in this place, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you," because they have made a right calculation of their condition as sinners with no hope under Your judgment, crying out for mercy, trusting the sacrifice of Christ who died and rose for them. Save sinners and turn them into friends, we pray, for Your glory. Amen.

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