

Not What You Expected?

Text: Matthew 9:1-8

Hymn: "The Light Is Ever Night"

What were they expecting? We know from the other Gospel accounts the friends of the paralyzed man worked really hard to get him in front of Jesus. They couldn't get to him because of the crowds. So, they removed the roof and lowered the man right down in front of Jesus. What do you think these friends were expecting Jesus to do? What do you think the paralyzed man was expecting Jesus to say? Whatever their expectations were, this is what Jesus said: "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven." Do you think, just maybe, there was a smidge of disappointment when they heard those words out of Jesus' mouth?

The forgiveness of sins. We talk about it a lot in church. We sing about it. The Bible talks about it. In the Apostles' Creed, we confess that we believe in the forgiveness of sins. So, do we? Do we believe in the forgiveness of sins? I'm not talking about a doctrine on a piece of paper, something in the abstract, I'm talking about the actual forgiveness of sins. Many people pay lip service to the forgiveness of sins but don't or can't believe that their sins are forgiven. Many people pay lip service to the forgiveness of sins but when it comes to forgiving someone else, no way, not gonna happen.

Dear saints, the forgiveness of sins is very personal. There is no such thing as corporate guilt. Our sin is personal. The forgiveness of sins is personal. Ezekiel 18:20: "The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of his father or the father bear the guilt of his son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself. And the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself."

Personal sin entails personal responsibility and requires personal forgiveness. That is the only way for a sinner to be set free. We are bound because the wages of sin is death. And the evidence of sin is everywhere. In our text, the man is paralyzed. Why? Because of his sin. I'm not talking about some specific sin that earned for him this specific punishment. That's the Pharisee's way of thinking, as we hear them ask Jesus in John 5: Who sinned? This man born blind or his parents? Nevertheless, there is no sickness, no paralysis, no cancer, no heart disease, no COVID-19 apart from sin. The fact that these things are in the world means sin's consequences are in the world.

But go ahead. Try and deal with sin yourself. It can't be done. The evidence of sin is everywhere. We are all sinners. We are all going to die. And there is nothing you can do about it. But thanks be to God that is not the end of the story. While the evidence of sin is all around us, the evidence for Jesus' authority over sin is also everywhere in our text. You heard those words: "When the crowd saw it, they were afraid and they glorified God who had given such authority to men."

What did Jesus do? Jesus forgave the man's sins. And then Jesus demonstrated his authority. Because the scribes and the scholars were thinking in their minds and in their hearts, Jesus was blaspheming. Only God can forgive sins. How did Jesus know that they were having these evil thoughts about him? He has authority. He is God in the flesh. But the evidence for the authority of Jesus does not stop with Jesus reading their minds.

He then poses a riddle-like question: Which is easier to say? Your sins are forgiven. Or, pick up your mat and walk? Well, of course, it's easier to say that your sins are forgiven. They are just words. I can say, "The Houston Texas are going to

have a major upset over the Patriots today. I guarantee it!" There's no authority behind those words. It might be a hope, a wish, a dream, but there's no power or authority in those words. Jesus not only says to the man, Your sins are forgiven. But to show that He is no charlatan, to show that He is not a liar, to show that He is who He claims to be, God in the flesh, He says, "Rise. Take up your mat and walk." And immediately the man is healed.

The people were afraid. They were filled with awe, because God was in their midst. God had given authority for the forgiveness of sins to this God-man Jesus. And this authority to forgive sins the crucified and risen Christ has attached to water, bread, wine, and words. That should settle the matter, right? Jesus says it. That's it. It's over. Well, unfortunately, it's not over. As we look across the world and even certain sections of the visible church, the forgiveness of sins earned by Jesus and distributed as Jesus has promised and commanded is ignored and denied and despised. Why? Because some people think they have better words than Jesus. Some people think that their mind, their heart, their emotions, their feelings, and their words have more authority than the Son of God.

It shouldn't surprise us. God's Word teaches us that this is who we are by nature. Jeremiah 17:9: "The heart is deceitful above all things, desperately wicked. Who can know it?" When we rely on our heart, our feelings, our emotions, our words, rather than the word of God, we will always get ourselves in trouble and we too will either doubt or deny or despise or ignore the forgiveness of sins won by Jesus and freely distributed. There are three main false teachings with respect to the forgiveness of sin. There are many more than three, but three that rise to the top.

The first one is that really is no such thing as sin. Our mistakes are merely what the television painter Bob Ross called “happy accidents.” The concept of sin is a relic from a bygone era, we’re told, a means of social control from a bygone era, no longer relevant to our current situation. We know better. We know that God is love; He would never punish. And it’s just a short walk from the denial of sin to the detachment of Jesus from the Cross. After all, if there is no sin, there is no need for a Savior from sin. In the 1930s, H. Richard Niebuhr summed up this way the message preached in sin-denying churches: “A God without wrath brings people without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.” And so what we are left with? Bettering ourselves through whatever 5-, 10-, 20-step program we choose, because ultimately it’s not about forgiveness; it’s about feeling good.

The second false teaching is as old as our Gospel reading but still with us today: the view that human words can’t forgive. “Who do you think you are, sir, standing up there in front of the church and forgiving people their sins? Who do you think you are? God?” (To which, I am always tempted to say, “If I ever did think that, I’ve learned otherwise since I became a father.”) But, as you well know, your pastor is no god. He is a poor, miserable sinner just like you. And yet your pastor has been called and placed here for one reason—so that you would know that your sins are forgiven. To preach it into your ears and to administer it in the Sacraments. To assure you that without a doubt, no strings attached, your sins are forgiven. This is by God’s design. It is God’s Word being spoken even though it be through a mere man.

Finally, when it comes to the forgiveness of sins there is the false teaching that you can never really be sure. Jesus has done His part, of course, but the only way you

can be certain is by doing something yourself—making a decision, praying a prayer, giving a donation—which, of course, leads only to more doubts, Did I decide sincerely enough? Did I pray fervently enough? Was my donation big enough? But God is not a God of doubt. He is a God of certainty. God wants you to be sure and certain that your sins are forgiven, all of them. And if someone wants to hold you hostage because of something you have done in the past, if someone wants to hold over your head some deep dark secret, if someone wants to talk forgiveness but never forgive, you should know these voices are of the devil. Put against them the promise of your Baptism. You are God's own child, and He wants you to be sure and certain.

And so, dear saints, these three things must go together: 1. Though sin, personal sin, is very real, Jesus, God-in-the-flesh, is our Substitute. In our place He died, and for us He rose victorious. 2. This victory over sin and death is revealed to us in the Bible, the Word of God, where God continually teaches us that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us, and that although we continue to sin, the blood of Jesus Christ knows no limit and is for us. 3. And God's Word also reveals that the faith we need to receive this forgiveness is itself a gift God the Holy Spirit gives. All through the hearing, the believing, the eating and drinking.

"My son, my daughter, your sins are forgiven." Jesus does not disappoint. This is His gift to you, and of all gifts it's the one most needed. Don't ignore it. Don't deny it. Cling to it with all your life. Amen.

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