

Jesus has authority to forgive sins

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Date: 03 March 2019

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[0 : 00] So I'm sure you'll agree that there are lots of things in life that are important.

It's important to get a good education, isn't it? I spent all my working life in education! So I'm certainly not going to suggest it's not important to get a good education.

It's important to have a good family life, good relations with your families. So often that breaks down nowadays. And yet it's an important thing. If we really want our children to grow up, if we want our houses to be places where Jesus is seen, then we need to maintain good relations in the family.

And I think it's important too, if we can, to maintain good relations with our work colleagues. And it's certainly important to do well at our job or occupation. Jesus says, whatever you do, do it as to the Lord. And whatever that is, it might be paid work, or it might be running a household, or it might be some voluntary task that you've undertaken. All these things are important. And it's important, isn't it, to maintain our physical health and well-being. Certainly it's wrong to destroy and damage our bodies by overeating or lack of exercise or anything like this. All these things are important.

important. But sometimes, of course, the merely important can get in the way of the crucial. And sometimes an obvious need can detract us from a vital issue. Detract us. And that seems to be what's happening in our passage tonight. The teachers of the law, and indeed the friends of this suffering man, were not able to help, because they did not really understand what the man's problem was. But at least the friends got it partly right, because we know that from the Mark discussion of this incident, that the friends brought him to the right place, whereas the teachers got hung up on a tricky theological issue. And you may have noticed, I said it was a very short reading, and with the description of the healing of the paralyzed man in Matthew, the last of this second group of three miracles, Matthew certainly adopts the less is more approach, doesn't he? We're not given that graphic detail that Mark gives us of the man being lowered through the roof to get to Jesus. It's an unforgettable image, one commentator describes it. And yet we're not given it here. Matthew doesn't think that's the important thing. All we get is just this actual interaction, the crucial interaction. We can't even really call it a conversation, because

Matthew actually only records the words of Jesus. No other words at all are recorded. We are told what the teachers were thinking, but then you hardly need prophetic insight to figure that one out. I'm sure in their place we would have thought just the same thing. And yet taken together, these three sayings of Jesus represent a quite extraordinary claim. Who is this son of man? The term Jesus uses to describe himself, and particularly uses here. What is he about? What did he come to do? And above all, of course, is his claim to such authority credible? We've already said that all these miracles that Matthew records here are basically about the authority of Jesus. Does he have the authority to cast out demons? Does he have authority over nature? But most crucially of all, does he have the authority to forgive sins? Is his claim credible? And so I'd like to look at this passage just in a fairly simple way, looking at the three things that Jesus says. First of all, as we might say, a strange encouragement.

[4 : 49] And secondly, in verse 5, a rabbinical question. I'll tell you why I called it a rabbinical question in a minute. And in verses 6 and 7, the authoritative word. Authoritative word. So we'll look at those, and then by way of conclusion and application to ourselves, we'll consider the reaction of the crowd, and indeed what our own reaction should be to these things. So let's look first of all at a strange encouragement.

So Jesus sees the faith of the man and his friends, and he starts with a word of encouragement. Of course, we don't know the medical history of this man, how long he'd been paralyzed. Was he paralyzed from birth or was it some accident? We don't know. Whatever caused his paralysis, he must have seen condemned to a life of helplessness, a life of dependence on the goodwill of his friends and family, and most likely an early death, medical science being in those days not what it is

today. And his plight was desperate. And perhaps in a sense, in bringing the man to Jesus, his friends were touching at straws, rather like that lady that we read of elsewhere who thought, if I can just touch his clothes, everything else has failed. This is my last hope. I can just touch his cloak. Perhaps the friends were thinking like that, and yet they were determined to get him to Jesus. And it says here that they did have faith. And so Jesus meets that with a word of reassurance. He says, as it were, yes, you have come to the right place. You have come to someone who can help. And so there is a reason for hope. And it's worth looking at here closely at what Jesus actually says.

He addresses the man as son. And the Greek word used there is the affectionate term of a parent for a child. And it also can be used for a leader, for a young protege or a teacher, for a disciple, particularly a favored disciple.

[7 : 18] And it says a lot, doesn't it? It says to this man, you think that this is tough, and you're right, it is tough. But Jesus says, I've got your back. We'll get through it together.

This is the encouragement, as it were, of the expert to the beginner stuck halfway down a ski slope. I've been myself both a beginner and an expert trying to help somebody else halfway down a ski slope.

Or perhaps if skiing isn't your thing, you might think of a difficult rock climb, where the leader of the expedition says, It's okay. This is tough, but I've been this way before. I know how to do it.

Follow me, and you'll be okay. So Jesus starts by addressing him as son, saying, I've got this. I've got you. I'm going to deal with this.

And so he says, be of good cheer. Be hopeful. There is hope. But then he almost seems to go off track. I mean, surely this is the part where he heals the man's paralysis.

[8 : 32] That's what everybody was waiting for. But instead, he tells the man that his sins are forgiven.

And that presented a tricky theological problem for the Jewish teachers. Probably they thought that this man was suffering because of some terrible sin he'd committed.

They did tend to think that way. So if the cause of the disease was sin, it makes sense that a cure would start with forgiveness, wouldn't it?

But this is where the scribes balk at. They didn't mind Jesus doing healings, but when he got to the root of the problem, forgiving sins, then they couldn't stomach that.

And Jesus instead gets to the heart of the issue. The paralysis was probably not a direct result of sin. Jesus said similar things himself, but if you really want to look at this, you can read all 42 chapters of Job, which addresses this issue in great detail.

[9 : 51] But while it's true that his paralysis was probably not a direct result of sin, it was true that a failure to trust in and obey God had been the man's most fundamental problem.

And that's what the Bible calls sin. But as in the case of Job, the suffering was not a punishment, but rather a path to insight.

This man was now beginning to display faith, and so Jesus could pronounce that his sin was forgiven. But of course that does lead to the crucial question, doesn't it?

Did Jesus have the right to do that? So we come out with this rabbinical question.

Jesus asked the rabbis a rabbinical question. And I would suggest to you it's not the question that's supposed to have a simple answer. We expect questions sometimes, you know, answer yes or no.

[10 : 58] But I don't think this is supposed to have a simple answer, and I think that's why I called it a rabbinical question. This is, it were, I think, one of the riddles of the wise that Proverbs chapter 1, verse 6 talks about.

It's a question that's to make you think, to unmask the inconsistency of their thinking and your thinking, and to get right to the root of the issue.

So which is easier to say, your sins are forgiven, or to say, get up and walk? And of course, on the face of it, the answer's obvious.

To say your sins are forgiven requires no external visual result, does it? Whereas get up and walk clearly does. But the teachers could see the problem.

If suffering is the result of sin, how could healing happen without forgiveness? And yet forgiveness is definitely God's business. On that point, they were on solid ground.

[12 : 04] Moses had set up a bronze snake to cure snake bites, and some of the prophets had performed healing miracles. Yet not one of them had claimed to be able to forgive sin. In fact, they

were all quite clear that only God could do that.

Moses had set up all these elaborate temple rituals for atonement, hadn't they? You can read about them all in Leviticus in great detail. The prophets had made the point that heart repentance was more important than external observance, but they still didn't claim to be able to forgive sins just like that.

It was always God's prerogative to forgive sins. And in their living memory, John the Baptist had preached what? He had preached repentance for the forgiveness of sins because the kingdom of heaven is near.

But not one of those people had claimed the right to forgive sins themselves. The teachers certainly had a point. For a mere man to forgive sins was blasphemy.

And yet, like the arguments of Job's comforters, Jesus describes their thinking as evil in verse 4. I think what he means by evil here is probably not so much evil in some ultimate devilish sense, but rather folly, moral confusion, misunderstanding, failure to see the point.

[13:42] They start from the correct premise that only God can forgive sins to arrive at an entirely false conclusion. They were putting two and two together, but they were failing to make four.

So let's look at the authoritative word that Jesus gives here. What is the correct answer to that question?

Or is there a correct answer to it, perhaps? It's the right way to put it. The issue is not whether Jesus can heal, because Moses and some of the prophets had done that, but they had done it in the Lord's name and in his command.

At his command. And the point here is that the Son of Man, Jesus, at that particular time, and here on the ground, as it were, verse 6, has divine authority.

What Jesus does not say is, in the Lord's name, get up and walk. It's interesting to compare what the Apostle Peter would later say when in a sense he echoed Jesus' words, but with an important difference.

[15:00] Of course, to a crippled man, Peter said, silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.

But Jesus here invokes no divine name. He speaks on his personal authority. He speaks in no name with his own.

And he does so to prove that he has the right to forgive sins. Even though we can't see that the man's heart has changed, we can only see that his body is healed.

Yet the latter proves the former. But let's look a little more closely about what this means. Do a little exercise in logic.

What's known as a syllogism if you're interested in the technical terms of these things. The argument runs like this. Only God can forgive sins.

[16:02] Jesus is merely a man not God. Therefore, Jesus cannot forgive sins. That was the teacher's argument.

But they managed to come to a wrong conclusion. How did they come to a wrong conclusion? Well, there's nothing wrong with the logic. The logic was perfect. It's the, what is known as the minor premise.

Again, if you want the technical term for it, which is incorrect, the fantasy lies in the second statement that Jesus is merely a man and not God. In claiming to be able to forgive sins in his, on his own authority, then Jesus was making a clear claim to divinity.

authority. No other conclusion is logically possible. If that were not the case, then the scribes would have been quite right. It does not make, would not make sense for Jesus to forgive sins in his own name.

Only if Jesus is claiming divine authority can he be claiming to forgive sins. And then he says, get up and walk and the man gets up and goes home.

[17:26] And that is to prove the, that Jesus authority is right. Surely if Jesus had made that claim and then said to the man get up and walk, surely God would have struck him down if the claim hadn't been true, at least he would not answer, God would not have answered to the prayer to heal that man and Jesus would have become a laughing stop, not able to do what he claimed he could.

The healing of that man is the proof that Jesus greater claim to be able to forgive sins is a valid one. So by way of conclusion, let's look at the reaction of the crowd here.

I don't intend to take too long, it's a short passage and perhaps I should take Matthew's advice and say less is more. Let's try and keep it short. What about the reaction of the crowd in verse 8? Unlike the teachers, the crowd seemed to have got the point. They understood that something crucial was happening here. But what was actually happening here in that probably not very big house was actually something more awesome even than the exodus that their fathers had known. But someone was here who had greater authority than Moses, greater authority than Elijah or Isaiah. In fact, the one to whom those prophets pointed.

[19 : 23] And they realized they were saying that the solution to their real problem, the problem of sin, of separation from God, of the need for repentance, was not found in some arcane ritual.

Zechariah had prophesied that, that he would put aside the sins of the people in one day. It wasn't a matter of going to some hidden chamber in the temple accessible with only the most careful preparation.

But that forgiveness of sin was right there on the ground in public, if you apply to the right person. And so if we want to get to know God, the path does not lie in a pilgrimage to Jerusalem or Mecca, but rather to come to Jesus.

You probably won't need to dig a hole through the roof. We did have a hole in the roof here once, but it was used mainly by pigeons. I don't think anybody was ever lowered down through it. But we don't need that because you can get in through the door.

But make sure you come to Jesus. Of course, Jesus is the one who says, take heart, child, take heart, son, your sins are forgiven. Just make sure you go to the right person.

[20 : 47] Just make sure you get to Jesus. But there is a little more that can be said. There is one thing that's still strange about the crowd's reaction.

And that's the very last words. Let me find it again. Lost it. They were filled with awe.

Well, that was certainly good. They praised God, which the teachers were signally failing to do. That was certainly good. But then they said, they praised God who had given such authority to men.

It's a plural. The new NIV, I noticed, actually says to man, which is not entirely accurate, but at least it says man, not a man, or this man.

It is a plural there. The authority is given to men, but surely doesn't that contradict all that we've just said? Surely it's only to Jesus that that authority is given.

[21 : 55] How can we understand that? Well, it's worth considering Jesus' own words right at the end of Matthew's gospel. Of course, he said this, all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.

Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age. The authority belongs to Jesus, but you can ask where it is to be found.

And we say this so often, don't we? Coming to church will not make you a Christian. Just turning up every Sunday will not make you a Christian. And of course, that's true. you won't meet with Jesus just by coming through the door of the building, or coming through the roof if you really want to do that, do it that way.

That won't enable you to meet with Jesus. And yet, it is true that there is a sense in which you meet with Jesus in his church.

[23 : 23] You meet him as you learn of his teachings. That's what he commanded, wasn't it? I mean, he could have commanded all sorts of things, I suppose. But he's on the basis that all authority in heaven and earth has been given to him.

He says, go and make disciples of all nations. Make disciples, i.e. people who learn, people who follow Jesus' teaching, to baptize them as a sign of that discipleship.

And then he repeats it, teaching them, in case you still haven't got it, teaching them what? To obey everything. The one who has authority should be obeyed, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

So it is true in one sense that you come to church to meet with Jesus, but of course the church is not really the building at all, it's the gathering of God's people.

And as you come and meet with God's people, that is where Jesus is to be found as the church carries out its task of teaching them to obey everything I have commanded.

[24 : 33] So while it's true that the authority belongs to Jesus, the task of exercising that authority does in one sense belong in the church and to the church, because they are those, the church is the one who is given the task of teaching them to obey everything.

It is the confession of Jesus Christ that Peter says, as Peter is told, unlocks the way to heaven. And people argue about exactly what that means, but I think it means at least this much that the church is given, in a sense, the keys to the kingdom of heaven, because they are entrusted with the word. Teaching everyone to obey everything that Jesus has commanded. And I think implied by that is not more than that, in one sense.

Of course, we have to expand it and apply it and apply it in a given situation. So in a sense, we do add things to the Lord's command. But, basically, our job is to do nothing more and nothing less than to teach them to obey everything.

that Jesus commands. So, you're all here this evening. Well, perhaps not if you're listening on the recording, I suppose, but for those who are here this evening, have you come to meet with the Lord Jesus?

[26 : 18] Because if you have, if you do, you will find that he does indeed have the authority to deal with your real problem, which is that wickedness that every one of us has in our hearts that separates us from God and causes us to selfish and harm our fellow humans.

You may be sick, you may be suffering, you may be confused, and by all means talk to him about that too. Those things are important and Jesus does care about them, just as he cared for the suffering of that paralyzed man.

On the other hand, you might have come in full health and your bank account might be well in the black with lots of zeros after the numbers.

But whether that's true also, you're still separated from God by the attitude of your heart if you've not applied to the one who has authority to say, yes, your sins are forgiven, come to the throne of grace.

You haven't come to Jesus unless you become a disciple, obeying what he commands. And that's the real issue and the real problem.

[27 : 44] And so we need to come to him and do not be satisfied until we hear the words spoken through the spirit, take heart child, your sins are forgiven. So let's go.