

The supreme authority of Jesus

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Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0 : 00] Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love. According to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.

So that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me.

Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart. Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean.

Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness. Let the bones that you have broken rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities.

[1 : 09] Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and uphold me with a willing spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways and sinners will return to you. Deliver me from blood guiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation. And my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise. For you will not delight in sacrifice or I would give it. You will not be pleased with a burnt offering.

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit. A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. Do good to Zion in your good pleasure.

Build up the walls of Jerusalem. Then will you delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings. Then bulls will be offered on your altar.

[2 : 23] While he was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy. And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him, Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.

And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, I will be clean. And immediately the leprosy left him.

And he charged him to tell no one, But go and show yourself to the priest and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a proof of them.

But now, even more, the report about him went abroad and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.

On one of those days he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem.

[3 : 38] And the power of the Lord was with him to heal. And behold, some men were bringing on a bed a man who was paralyzed, and they were seeking to bring him in and lay him before Jesus.

But finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the midst before Jesus.

And when he saw their faith, he said, Man, your sins are forgiven. And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, Who is this who speaks blasphemies?

Who can forgive sins but God alone? When Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answered them, Why do you question in your hearts?

Which is easier, to say your sins are forgiven you or to say rise and walk? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, he said to the man who was paralyzed, I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home.

[4 : 52] And immediately he rose up before them and picked up what he had been lying on and went home, glorifying God. And amazement seized them all and they glorified God and were filled

with awe, saying, We have seen extraordinary things today.

After this, he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, Follow me. And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.

And Levi made him a great feast in his house. And there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them. And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?

And Jesus answered them, Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.

Well, our key verse this morning is Luke 5, verse 20. As Jesus declares to this one man, Your sins are forgiven. Because each of these three sections of Luke's gospel that we just had read, so the cleansing of the leper, the healing of the paralytic, the calling of Levi, have in common with each other the forgiveness of sins.

[6 : 29] That's what we're thinking about this morning, forgiveness. Not so much forgiving each other, important, of course, though, that is, but supremely receiving forgiveness from God. And yet, of course, we live in a culture which doesn't really do forgiveness, because it's a culture which doesn't really do guilt.

A culture which sees people as essentially good. Don't talk to me about guilt. It might damage my self-esteem. A culture which likes to talk about things being inappropriate rather than wrong.

After all, who are you to tell me that I'm wrong? In other words, can you see, the very vocabulary that our society uses makes it harder and harder to grasp both the need, our need, for the forgiveness of sins and the wonder of having our sins forgiven.

The hymn that so many of us love with the refrain, It is well with my soul. It can seem strangely quaint, can't it? Strangely antiquated, old-fashioned. And yet, of course, each one of us knows in our hearts that we are guilty before God.

In the words of the Swiss physician, Paul Tournier, the true guilt of humans comes from things which they are reproached by God in their innermost hearts.

[7 : 57] He went on to say, nothing makes us so lonely as our secrets. In other words, although we're not a culture which does guilt publicly, all of us know guilt privately.

All of us know the need to stand before God as a forgiven person rather than as a guilty person. Well, you'll see there's an outline on the back of the service sheet and two headings.

First of all, the inappropriate priority of Jesus to forgive sins. Have a look at Luke chapter 5, verse 17. On one of those days, as Jesus was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem.

And the power of the Lord was with him to heal. Once again, Jesus is teaching people never got bored with hearing Jesus. Responses vary from amazement to anger, astonishment and fear, but people are never bored.

And then while Jesus is teaching this delegation of dignitaries arise from the religious establishments seeking, it seems, some kind of examination of Jesus' ministry. And then amidst all of that, verses 18 and 19.

[9 : 16] Just picture the scene where he perhaps are familiar to some of us, perhaps over-familiar to some of us, but it is extraordinary. A packed house full of people listening to Jesus, others crowding round outside, a paralyzed man brought on his bed by his friends.

Now Luke leaves it to our imagination to think of the mess and the noise as the roof tiles are removed, as debris falls down on people below and as the man is carefully lowered down.

Verse 20. And when he saw their faith, he said, man, your sins are forgiven. The word faith there, as always in the Bible, simply means to trust.

Our culture tends to think about faith, doesn't it, in the same way that we might think about catching a cold. You know, some people just happen to get it, others don't. But in the Bible, faith is always trusting, having confidence that comes from weighing up the evidence and looking at the facts, trust.

And that is why these men have come to Jesus, because they have done that. And yet, I wonder how they felt on hearing those words, your sins are forgiven.

[10 : 33] Perhaps something like, is that it? I mean, what an anti-climax. Perhaps one of them kind of leant down over the roof and shouted to Jesus, the legs, look at the legs.

Just looks irrelevant, doesn't it? Irrelevant to a man whose needs are so obvious. Just like today, I guess, one of the commonest attitudes to Christianity in 21st century Britain is simply that it's irrelevant.

So you know, when the church publishes a report on the environment or on modern slavery or on the living wage, the media picks it up and there's a flurry of interest, as if to say, isn't it good that Christians are kind of finally getting with the agenda, so to speak, and talking about things that really matter?

But if we talk about sin and forgiveness, our culture seems to say, please don't talk about that here. It's got nothing to do with us. That's the kind of thing you talk about within church walls, not outside. It's why, you see, I've called this point the inappropriate priority of Jesus to forgive sins because Jesus seems to ignore, doesn't he, this man's obvious need.

[11 : 51] Well, he does ignore this man's obvious need. But actually, he also addresses this man's greatest need.

It's the forgiveness of sins that is Jesus' priority. It's what we've seen throughout Luke's gospel. If you remember that from growth groups or if you've been here over these last few Sundays looking at Luke 4 and 5, it's what Jesus did back in chapter 4, verses 43, as he left Capernaum and all the physical needs that were there, saying, I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to other towns as well, for I was sent for this purpose.

And in chapter 5, verse 32, it's how our section today finishes. As Jesus says, I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. In other words, you see, as these men bring their friend to Jesus, they are actually looking for, if I can put it like this, they are looking for two smaller things.

They are simply hoping he'll be able to walk. And yet, here is Jesus. He's been announced as God's forever king, bringing God's forgiveness, bringing life life in God's kingdom, ushering in a new humanity, as we thought about last week.

But they just want something temporary. Rather like a young child. You could do this experiment, I think, over coffee later on. And if you offer a young child a chocolate in one hand and a check in the other hand, it's fairly obvious, isn't it, which one they're going to take.

[13 : 29] They're going to take the chocolate. The point being, I guess, that if we look at our own lives and we just want to be healthy, successful, happy, as so many do, actually that is childish.

Because Jesus offers something far bigger, something far more wonderful. I take it that across the world, anyone with any awareness that there is a living God knows the need to be forgiven. the Muslim who asks the question, have I done enough? Do my good deeds outweigh my bad deeds? The Roman Catholic who knows what it means to stand guilty before God but doesn't know what it means to be free from guilt.

The Hindu who hopes that perhaps if they live a good life now, things will turn out better in the future, in the next life. you see, as Jesus looks at this paralyzed man here, he sees what no one else can see.

As he looks at me, as he looks at you, he sees what no one else can see. He sees our sin. He sees our rejection of God, our turning away from him, our living life my way as I decide what is right and what is wrong in God's world.

[14 : 52] And therefore, to receive from Jesus the declaration of sins forgiven is the most wonderful thing that we can have in this life.

And to stand before God on the final day, forgiven, is the most wonderful thing we can have in the next life.

It's why we had Psalm 51 read. Psalm we looked at on the day away last weekend. But it's wonderful, isn't it, just to hear the joy in the psalmist.

Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness. Let the bones that you have broken rejoice.

Perhaps indeed for some of us looking at that psalm on the day away last weekend, it was indeed a joy restored. the inappropriate priority of Jesus to forgive sins.

[15 : 56] But secondly, the extraordinary authority of Jesus to forgive sins because that is the reaction, isn't it, of the crowds. Just look at the end of verse 26 as they say, we have seen extraordinary things today.

Because Jesus claimed to be able to forgive sins immediately raises the question of his identity. Verse 21, and the scribes and the Pharisees began to question saying, who is this who speaks blasphemous?

Who can forgive sins but God alone? All sin is ultimately against God. I may lie to you and although, yes, it's a sin against you, it is ultimately a sin against God breaking the ninth commandment. I am saying to God, yes, God, I know that you always tell the truth but actually, I don't care. I reject all that you stand for. In the little universe that I've made for myself, truth doesn't matter and if it makes me more popular or if it makes my life easier, then I'll lie.

And the Pharisees are right, as they say, who can forgive sins but God alone? If you and I get into an argument, if I lose my temper, I guess you'd rightly feel aggrieved but if someone else then came along having seen the argument and said to me, don't worry Simon, I forgive you, I think you'd be doubly aggrieved at that point.

[17:25] You're the one who's been sinned against, only you can forgive. But notice, will you, verse 21, that what the Pharisees won't do is to consider that there's an alternative to what they think.

In other words, you see, they won't set aside their prejudices, they won't consider the possibility that actually Jesus is indeed God in the flesh. C.S. Lewis, the 20th century broadcaster and author of the Narnia Chronicles spoke about this very powerfully and in response to the accusation that his belief in God was simply wishful thinking, in other words, he wanted there to be a God so he believed that there was a God, he thought there was a God.

He insisted that the existence of God was not something he had wished to be true. He said that he had valued his own independence, his independence from God far too much for that.

He wrote, I'd always wanted above all things not to be interfered with. Indeed, he would describe himself often as the most reluctant convert in the whole of England as he was confronted with something that he was forced, in his own words, to concede was true, the truth about Jesus.

And I guess there may be some of us here this morning and we find ourselves on a similar journey to that. Well, Jesus replies, verse 22, when Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answered them, why do you question in your hearts?

[19:06] which is easier, to say your sins are forgiven or to say rise and walk? It's the issue, isn't it, of whether Jesus can actually deliver or is he simply speaking empty words?

Rather like, you know, is Jesus like the professional boxer bragging the week before the fight, only then not to be able to deliver on the night? Or is he like the politician or business leader who makes great claims, but actually it's simply hot air?

Now, of course, it's easier to say your sins are forgiven because as an onlooker, I am none the wiser. It's invisible. How would you know at that moment whether or not someone's sins were forgiven?

It's much harder to say rise and walk because at that moment as an onlooker, well, it's obvious, isn't it, they either do rise and walk or they stay where they are.

And so what Jesus does in verses 24 to 25 you see is that he does the visible thing, rise, get up, and walk, to demonstrate the invisible thing that he is indeed the one with authority to forgive sins.

[20:19] In other words, just as the man got up and walked, so he went home forgiven. How is that possible? Verse 24, because of who Jesus is.

He is the Son of Man, the title which he so often uses to describe himself. A title taken some of us may remember when we looked at the book of Daniel several years ago from the middle of the book of Daniel where the Son of Man is given by God all authority over all people for all time.

He is indeed God's appointed ruler, God's appointed judge, and so yes, he does have authority on earth to forgive sins. It's why you see when Christians claim that Jesus is unique, that he is the only way to God, it's not because if you like we are being tribal, you know like children in the school playground having an argument about which is the best football team.

It's not a question of who can shout the loudest in the playground, but instead it is about looking at the facts of history, asking the question, who was Jesus?

He claimed to be God. He claims as here to be able to do what only God can do, to be able to forgive sins. The view you see that is so commonly held that Jesus was simply a good man or a religious teacher or a moral example.

[21:50] It simply doesn't fit with the facts. There is no evidence for a Jesus who was simply like that. Jesus himself claimed to be God as he does here.

Those who oppose Jesus do so because he claims to be God as they do here. And as God on earth, how will Jesus forgive sins?

Jesus, well by the end of Luke's gospel he has died on the cross bearing in his body the penalty for our sins, taking the judgment that is rightly ours.

It means that as we trust him, we can be sure the punishment for sin has been paid for. We can be confident that we are declared forgiven both now in this life and in eternity.

Well, three questions for us just to begin to think this through. First of all, how do you see Jesus?

[22 : 51] How do you see Jesus? Now, it may well be that your assumption this morning is that Jesus has basically come for good, respectable, upright people.

And it may be as an extension of that that you are very conscious that you are not like that. You may be outwardly, of course, but certainly not inwardly. You may even have thought to yourself, I would like to be a Christian, but actually I'm not good enough.

Or perhaps you've been a Christian for a while and frankly you are discouraged, you are appalled as you look at your own heart and as you see what is in it.

Others can't see, of course, but you can. So notice, will you, that either side of the healing of this paralytic, Jesus demonstrates his wonderful willingness to forgive sins.

He does so, first of all, with a leper in verses 12 to 14. Have a look at verse 12. While he was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy.

[24 : 01] And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him, Lord, if you will, you can make me clean. He doesn't say, does he, Lord, if you can, but Lord, if you will.

Jesus' ability is not in any doubt. But what about his willingness to touch a leper, a social outcast, excluded from God, excluded from God's people, a complete spiritual outsider?

And therefore, you see, it's a beautiful moment when Jesus stretches out his hands and touches him and says those words, I will be clean.

As is the moment over the page in Levi's house in verses 29 to 32. Verse 29, and Levi made a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others, reclining at table with them.

And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners? And Jesus answered them, those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

[25 : 14] I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance. Jesus describes himself, doesn't say, if you like, as the sin doctor. It's the very reason he came, for sinners, to call them to repentance, to follow him.

In the words of John Calvin, the French reformer, it's not by bringing our good deeds to Jesus that we are saved. Not by bringing our good deeds, but by bringing our sins.

Bringing our sins to Jesus. It's completely the opposite, of course, isn't it, of worldly religion, and how every other religion operates. Which says to God, look, I've done all these bad things, but here are these good things I'm bringing to you, and perhaps you will take them into account.

And Levi knows that all he brings to Jesus is his sins. And wonderfully, it is sinners that Jesus came for.

So that's our first question. How do you think of Jesus? How do you see him? Secondly, how do you see yourself? Because if the first danger is that we miss out on the forgiveness Jesus offers because we have a wrong view of Jesus, the second danger is that we miss out because we have a wrong view of ourselves.

[26 : 36] Perhaps respectable, well thought of, or certainly not as bad as many others. Like those in verse 31, thinking of ourselves as those who are well, and so who have no need for a doctor.

But look again, will you, at verse 32. Notice, will you, that Jesus is not saying that the two categories of people that exist in the world are those who do need forgiveness and those who don't.

Now what Jesus is saying is that the two categories of people that exist in the world are those who think they have no need for forgiveness, who see themselves as righteous, forgiveness, and those who know they need to be forgiven, who see themselves as sinners.

In other words, you and I have an astonishing capacity for self-deception. Like those pink-tinted mirrors in the old passenger line of the Queen Mary, not the very smart, swanky new Queen Mary, but the original one.

And in the first-class cabins, the mirrors were tinted pink, apparently. So in other words, you could wake up in the morning, you could look at yourself in the mirror, and you'd see this wonderful picture of pink, rosy health.

[27 : 50] When, of course, when anyone else looked at you, what they saw was a picture of seasickly green, which is probably also how you felt as well. It's Jesus' point here, isn't it, about the doctor.

You don't phone up your GP tomorrow morning and ask for an appointment and then turn up and say, doctor, thank you very much indeed for giving me some of your precious time. I've just come to tell you how well and healthy I am.

That would be a very odd thing and a terrible waste of NHS resources. Do we see ourselves, as Jesus sees us, sinners facing judgment in need of forgiveness?

How do you see Jesus? How do you see yourself? Thirdly, how do you see the mission of the local church?

How do you see the mission of the local church? Jesus' agenda on earth is to bring salvation through the forgiveness of sins. It's been our theme this morning. It's been wonderful to have songs which have reminded us of that.

[28 : 52] All achieved through his death on the cross. Just as Jesus announced back in chapter 4, verse 18, the spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind. We said three weeks ago it's one of the most misunderstood verses in the whole Bible.

Not a gospel of social action, although yes it does have social implications, but a gospel for the forgiveness of sins. It's this gospel that at the end of Luke Jesus commissions his apostles to proclaim to all nations.

It's this gospel that every local church is to proclaim. And therefore of course it must follow, mustn't it, that a local church which has something else at the heart of its mission statements must therefore be sub-Christian.

But it's also a gospel that will cause offense and grumbling as it does here in Luke chapter 5. from those who either haven't grasped that this is Jesus' agenda or from those who don't see the sinfulness of their own hearts.

[30 : 12] And therefore in a respectable place like this in South London, I take it we must expect people to take offense at Jesus. We must expect some in Dulwich to take offense.

for the kind of response which says, well I like the idea of a Jesus who has come to bring social justice and help the poor. After all there are plenty of people out there who need that.

I like that kind of Jesus. But a Jesus who came for sinners, who puts the spotlight on me and on my heart, well I find that at best irrelevant and at worst offensive.

We must expect that kind of response from some. And to pray that like Levi, they would discover the joy of repenting, knowing the forgiveness that Jesus brings and following him.