

Who Can Forgive Sins?

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[0 : 00] Well friends, I want to start tonight by telling you that I hate, loathe, detest being sick.

And because I hate being sick, I try to avoid anything that is contagious. You see, I distance myself from people who have coughs and colds.

What was this going on down here? I distance myself from people who have coughs and colds and flus. I try and avoid physical contact with people who have contagious illnesses, which is a bit difficult when you have to stand at the door of church every morning and shake hands with 200 people.

But anyway, on top of that, I hate being dirty. I am fastidious about cleanliness.

I wash my hands almost after I touch anything. I have a shower at the drop of a hat. I make sure my clothes are always clean and fresh. I don't think I'm obsessive-compulsive, but I am what I would call fastidious.

[1 : 16] And underneath it all, I think that this issue is all about contagion. You see, all of us are familiar, I think, with the idea of contagion.

We know that when a person has a certain illness, then the things that belong to them, the things that they touch and the air that they breathe can be infected with their illness. We know this about common illnesses such as coughs and colds.

Remember with the flu of a few years ago when on the back of toilet doors all those signs began to appear about what you needed to do and so on to avoid spreading things. And Ridley Dining Room started to have bottles of all sorts of things scattered all around the place that you had to wash your hands with before you did anything.

We all know about this, don't we? And we know about it for a number of reasons, coughs, colds, significant viral things and so on. We know about it because of sexually transmitted diseases.

We know because of the various plagues that have at times affected our society. Contagion is a very common idea. We know and understand it. Now, the idea of contagion helps us understand the world of leprosy in the New Testament.

[2 : 27] You see, we don't know exactly what leprosy was in either the New or the Old Testament. We do know that it probably was not what we commonly call leprosy.

Rather, it was a group of sort of disfiguring, sometimes grossly disfiguring skin diseases, sometimes just mildly disfiguring skin diseases. Some of us probably have the things that would have been called on our skins that would have been called leprosy in a previous world.

According to Old Testament law, though, people who had these sort of diseases were taken out of normal society. They were segregated. They were forbidden to have contact with other people and things such as, until such a time, as this skin disorder of whatever it was disappeared.

And wherever they went, they were to publicly call out, unclean, to signify they were contagious lepers. And so that people could get out of the way, so they wouldn't be in contact or contract this particular thing.

And when it disappeared, there was an elaborate system of visits to priests to make sure that this illness that you had had, had well and truly gone.

[3 : 40] They ran you through a raft of checks. And they were repeated to make sure it wasn't coming back. And then only after all of this had been done, could you enter back into normal society.

And if your skin disease persisted, then you were never allowed back into normal society. And your contact to others was limited to contact with people who had diseases like yours.

A leper in the New Testament was therefore a person who was perpetually, physically unclean. But he or she was also perpetually, ceremonially unclean.

And he or she was also a person that was perpetually, socially unclean, or at least outside their own people group. And many people therefore viewed their illness as being imposed upon them because of their sin.

It was a sinful thing for many of them. Lepers were therefore the true outcasts of society and of first century Jewish society.

[4 : 40] They were outsiders in every sense of the word. And that is the sort of person Jesus talks about in Luke 5, 12 to 16. Now, since lepers were probably not normally allowed in towns, the leper is probably found on the outskirts of some particular town that Jesus is ministering in.

And in verse 12, we're told that he was covered with leprosy. That is, this skin disease was visible and all over him. And we can sense the desperation of this man.

He sees Jesus. He falls on his face before him. And he begs him, you know, if only you choose, you can make me clean. And then Jesus does the most remarkable thing in verse 13.

Have a look at it there in your Bibles. He reaches out and he touches this man. And he tells him that he's willing to make him clean.

And then he does it. And he pronounces him clean. And immediately, the leprosy leaves him. In verse 14, he gives some orders.

[5 : 51] He says, go and show yourself to the priest. Do what Moses commands. Go in and show yourself to the priest just as you've been ordered. Make an offering of your cleansing as a testimony to them. Saying, it's happened.

It's gone. In other words, report to the priest so that all the proper processes can be engaged in. Now, what do we learn about this? Well, on the one hand, we learn about the compassion of Jesus, don't we?

You see, it doesn't require much effort to imagine what it must have meant for this leper to have Jesus reach out and actually physically put his hand on him.

He had probably not been touched by a normal person for years. Probably not even brushed past them because he had to be crying out unclean all the time.

Everywhere he went, normal people skirted around him, kept their distance from him. They made sure they didn't merely just brush against him.

[6 : 52] They looked at him with disgust and revulsion. If only because of the physical defamation that it would have made on him. But this man, Jesus, was different. This man reached out, stretched out his hand and touched him.

Now, that's the first thing. Jesus exercises a remarkable compassion and care. But let me tell you, as startling as that is, that is not the most startling thing.

The most startling thing is that Jesus was able to do something. Like God, he spoke and the illness vanished.

The most intractable of all human problems, from a human perspective, dissipated. His skin was returned to normal. Now, I want you to think about this for a moment.

You know, the God who gave the Old Testament law that we read about in Leviticus, that passage about skin diseases in the Old Testament, it's God who gave that law.

[7 : 56] And he gave it for the good of his people. And he didn't want disease to spread. So he gave these laws that minimized the possibility of disease just taking over whole societies. Those laws that God gave in Leviticus were good laws.

They were right laws. God gave those laws and commanded that. You priests, you go out and administer these laws. Your God-given duty is to maintain standards of cleanliness, to diagnose leprosy, to pronounce lepers clean or unclean.

It's not a nice position for them to be in, is it? You know, going around inspecting things, not only in people's lives and not only on their skin, but even in their houses and on the walls and all these sorts of things.

It is not a nice position to be in a sort of inspector of things. A very personal nature. And it was often given to them to perform what must have been an incredibly painful and drastic step of segregating a person from everything that was precious to them.

Remember who's doing this? This is priests. Priests whose jobs were to bring people to God. To bring them to fellowship with each other through sacrifice and so on.

[9 : 04] And these people are now saying, well, you're out of this. The rest of my job is to bring people to God. Well, not you. You go over there. You don't belong. You see, we need to understand

this point really quite strongly.

You see, the Old Testament law acknowledges the fact that illnesses exist in a fallen world. The Old Testament law couldn't fix the problem, could it? All it could do is say, this is how to keep it at bay. It could merely remedy. It could not remedy the problem. And then along comes Jesus. And like God, he knows the law. And he realizes it's there for good reason.

He's not in disagreement with the law because he instructs this leper to go and obey the law. It's just that he's greater than the law. And like God, he is compassionate.

And like God, he can fix the problem. And so he does. It's a magnificent picture, isn't it? The Old Testament law was given by God. It was good and right. But in the long run, these laws couldn't make a person whole.

[10:08] They couldn't restrain people. They couldn't fix their fundamental problem. But Jesus can, and so he says, done. Clean. I can make you whole.

And that's just a precursor to what's about to happen next. With that in mind, I want to move on to the next passage. You see, I want to start by talking about the fundamental human problem.

Because this problem for this man that we've just looked at was a massive problem.

But it's not the big problem. See, when we look at our world, I think we are tempted to think that the most fundamental problems are environmental, social, racial, economical, or whatever you might think that they are.

Those problems are indeed very, very real. And they are very problematic for our world. And if we do not deal with them, they threaten our very existence as a planet and a people populating this planet.

You see, the fundamental problem, though, is not what happens on the outside of human beings.

The fundamental problem is what happens on the inside. What happens within us.

[11:11] Jesus knew that. He talked about the heart. You see, the Bible's picture is that God created us for relationship with him. He made us to live as dependent children. He fashioned us for harmony with him, with each other, with the environment that he placed us in.

But we humans have loved and had a passion for independence. We have never liked the idea of dependence. We prefer independence. We prefer to think that we know what works best for us.

And so we make this bid for independence. And we do so casually in some ways, just by simply ignoring what God might have to say and his advice. But sometimes we do it openly, don't we?

And with an open hand or even a shaking fist and say, God, I know that you want this, but I don't want it. And I am not going to do it.

No matter how we do it, our lives are characterized by doing our own things our own way without God. And the attitude and action of independence that that exemplifies is what the Bible calls sin.

[12:18] And the Bible makes clear that we are all those people. We are people who sin. We are people who act independently. And that sin shows itself in multiple ways for us.

In our self-centeredness, in our lust, in our covetousness, in our breaking free from all moral constraints. And more than that, the Bible actually shows us that the consequences of that sin are multiple.

Because of human sin, the world that we live in is a broken and divided place. Relationships are fractured. Our world is desecrated.

Violence and mistrust are a constant state of play in our world. They just sit there and operate constantly and continually. Violence and mistrust are there.

And we are confused. We're alienated from each other. And most of all, though, and this is the most disastrous thing, we are without God and without hope in the world.

[13:17] We are on our own, you see. That's what sin does to us. It puts us on our own. Because that's what sin is. It's saying, I want my own thing my own way without God. Well, that means you've got to have it without other people as well in the end.

And we are on our own. In our own world. In the midst of our own mess, both corporately and individually. It is an awful mess.

We are in a horrible state. So first, we learn that sin is awful and intractable. Second, we learn from the Bible that the consequences of sin are disastrous and deadly.

And lastly, the Bible is clear that there's only one solution for our dilemma. And that solution is God. God must deal with this because we can't. Because our very nature is inclined away from the solution.

The solution must be God. Because we are sinful, we cannot of ourselves help ourselves. It's like trying to pull yourself up by your shoestrings. You know, it's just not going to work.

[14:16] You can't make any progress. We can never make ourselves good enough for God. We can never make up, sort out the distance that there is between God who is holy and us who are not.

So if anything is to happen, it's got to come from God. And God must sort it out. But the sins have been committed against him and he alone can forgive them.

Now with that in mind, we finally come to the story of the paralyzed man. So have a look in your Bibles there at Luke chapter 5, verses 17 to 26. Now the context is set in the first few verses.

And look, we all know this story. I know you know it because it's one of those stories that, well, if you've ever been to Sunday school, it's one of the first stories you learn, isn't it? This one, because it's just wonderful.

So the context is set. Verse 17, religious authorities are present. Jesus is doing some teaching. People come from every village in Galilee and Judea.

[15:18] And verse 18 tells us there's this sort of crowd crashing in from every direction. And in this context, in verse 18, we're told there are some men come carrying their friend. And probably they're amongst all sorts of people like this doing this sort of thing.

They've got a friend who's paralyzed. And they clearly want to take advantage of the healing power that is present with Jesus. But they can't get into the crowd. And so they climb up onto the roof and they rip the roof tiles off.

You know, because it's probably held there by clay and all sorts of other tree things and so on. And they rip it apart. And they want to get in and they want to lift their friend down right into the midst in front of Jesus.

And they do it. They lower him down. They obviously have faith, don't they? They think that this man in here, he can do something about this, our friend. They obviously also expect healing.

And then Jesus does the totally unexpected thing. Look at verse 20. It says, When he saw their faith, he said to them, Friend, your sins are forgiven.

[16:24] And Jesus then pronounces forgiveness. In other words, he recognizes that there's some sort of organic connection between sin and disease in this case. Now, he probably doesn't mean this particular man's sin.

No, he probably just means sin in general. And that sin has caused this man to be in this state in some way. Not his specific sin again, but sin in general. And so he makes war on disease.

How? By making war on sin. He announces forgiveness. And now look at verse 21. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law are shocked.

Even though there's some ambiguity, it sounds to them as though Jesus himself is forgiving the sin. That is, he's not just saying on behalf of God.

You know, this morning at the Lord's Supper, that's what I did. On behalf of God, I said after we'd confessed sins, God forgives you. I was declaring something, not that I was doing, but that God had done. And declaring to people, this is what God is doing.

[17:26] He's forgiving sin, but they get this sneaking suspicion, that's not what Jesus is doing. That he's actually saying, I'm doing it. He's putting himself in the place of God, who's the forgiver of sins.

And that, of course, amounts to blasphemy. If I did that here this morning, I hope the congregation would have some strong words to say to me. You see, because I can't forgive anyone's sin.

It's a blasphemy for me to say that. Now look at verse 21. That is, I cannot actually, I don't have the power. I can tell them that God will do this if they do that. But God himself forgives sin.

Look at verse 21. Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, who is this that is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?

And verse 22 indicates that Jesus knows what is going on in their brains. And so he asked them, look friends, what is easier to say? Your sins are forgiven or stand up and walk.

[18:30] And Jesus knows, doesn't he? See, this is the genius of what's going on here. He knows it's relatively easy to say your sins are forgiven. It is. We can do it all the time.

I do it in the Lord's Supper. It's pretty easy to say your sins are forgiven. This is what God's doing. He's forgiving your sins. And, you know, I can't sort of run up to Jono when I say that and check, you know.

Has he really? No. I can't do it. There's no way of sort of getting inside, checking out whether or not those sins are forgiven. There's nothing visible I can check. There's no way you can check out the authority of the one who's making a pronouncement, particularly when he's saying it on his own grounds.

You know, I forgive. No. So Jesus does something to prove his authority. He does the other thing that God alone can do. He heals this man of an incurable disease.

And in so doing, he says, see, I can do this thing that God does. And this means I can do that thing that God does.

[19 : 33] I can make you walk. Therefore, I can forgive your sin. You see, he does only what God can do. And so he proves his authority.

He proves it. And to prove the point, the man gets up, walks home. And Jesus indicates there's something very new going on here. He's not like the priests, you see. They proclaim God has forgiven. Jesus is actually doing the forgiving.

He's far greater than them and the law they represent. Let's sum up. And it's a fairly short sermon this evening. Let's sum up. We've seen lots of things about from these two stories. I wonder if I can sum up and pick out one or two things.

First, I want you to look at with me at some passages from Scripture. Look at Romans chapter 8. So flip in your Bibles to Romans 8 if you want to know where it is. You just keep going from where we were, Luke, through Acts, and you finally hit Romans.

Romans chapter 8, verse 3. So look at it with me. For it says this.

[20 : 34] That's verse number 1.

Now come with me to the book of Hebrews. So keep working toward the back of your Bibles. You go to Hebrews chapter 9, verses 9 to 14. So Hebrews 9, 9 to 14.

This is a symbol, the writer says, of the present time. Sorry, I'll wait for you to catch up. I can still hear the rustle of pages. So Hebrews 9, 9 to 14.

This is a symbol of the present time, during which gifts and sacrifices are offered. They cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, but deal only with food and drink and various baptism, regulations of the body imposed until the time that comes to set things right.

But when Christ came, as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent, not made with hands, that is, not of this creation, he entered once and for all into the holy place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.

[21 : 53] For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled, so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

Can you see and hear what the verses are saying? They're saying, the Old Testament law, well, that was God-given. It was good. However, the Old Testament law never dealt with the fundamental problem.

You see, it never dealt with sin and its consequences. But Jesus, well, he has done this. He's dealt with it by dying in our place. He's taken our punishment. He's brought God's forgiveness.

We now can be friends with God. And that's what's been indicated in these two stories that we've read. Jesus is the agent of forgiveness. He makes us friends with God again.

He has therefore solved the great problem of our sin. Second thing I want you to notice is the impact of our passage. You see, Jesus not only pronounces forgiveness, but he actually forgives.

[22 : 55] He speaks like God into the lives of people. And he acts like God. And the implication is clear. He is God in the flesh. He is God in human form.

No wonder they thought he was blaspheming. That is a massive claim. That's, though, why he can deal with sin. Because he's God in the flesh. That's why the fundamental human problem can be solved.

Because God has come to sort it out. That's the grand message of the Christian faith. God has come to sort things out. God has intervened into his world. Now, friends, I want to tell you that I often treat this very casually and tritely.

And I think we often do as Christians. Because we have become so, so used to this fact. It has become something that we just count on daily.

Something that we drag out daily. Something that we just use daily. We often treat it casually and very, very tritely.

[23 : 58] And for us, God is no longer holy. For us, God is not awesome. Not distant. Not a judge.

Not someone we're going to have to face up to one day. And he's going to say, Out of my presence. Come into my presence.

No, instead, we think God is somewhat tame. Ordinary. Accessible. Accessible. At the drop of a hat. The push of a button.

A friend. And the sin's not really fundamentally a problem. It's just something we do casually every now and then. And, well, there's always a way to get it sorted out. We just go back. And we just say sorry.

Often we don't repent. We just say sorry. There's no gusto in it. There's no energy in it. There's no sense of a defiance of God that will shut you out of his presence forever.

[24 : 59] Because Jesus has become so accessible. He's become so ordinary. Friends, I remember the day I was converted. I bore massive guilt for things I had done.

And I came to God. And I said, I know you've got a mechanism for dealing with this. And please, please, please take this from me.

And he did. And I woke up a different person. But the danger for me every day since then is that I just come back and forget how awesome it is.

Friends, sin is an enormous problem. It is a massive thing that is wrong. It breaches relationship with God.

It separates us from God like nothing else can. We cannot come into the presence of God or his Son.

[25 : 56] Without this thing being dealt with. And it is in our very being. It saturates our existence. It is what makes us tick. Which is why the Bible tells us about it on page 2.

So that we might know that this is it. And the great ones throughout the Bible, they've been guilty of it. Abraham can't steer clear of it from very long. David can't.

Any hero you mention can't. And the Bible points it out for us, you see. Because it says, look, they're not free of it either. And if it is not dealt with, you are not going to be friends with God.

And you'll be shut out of his presence forever. It is terrifying in the extreme. And Jesus walks into this context. He says, your sins are forgiven.

Take up your mat and go home. And that's what he does for us, friends. And I make it so trite. So often. Friends, let me say that there's a danger that we forget these very basic truths of the gospel.

[27 : 04] So tonight, yesterday I went to a conference all about men and women in ministry and so on. And while those things are very interesting, very important, they pile into insignificance beside this one.

Friends, this is the core of it. And Jesus marks into this context and he says, your sins are forgiven. So I want to urge you tonight to remember the grandeur of this.

And of what Jesus has done. And of who he is. See, our situation was dire before God. We were without God and without hope in the world.

We were destined for destruction. And not even God's good and holy law could help us. We were in desperate need. We could not help ourselves. We were without God and without hope in the world. And into that situation he sent his only son so that we might be saved. And he died the cruelest of deaths for us. And as a result, we were brought back to God.

[28 : 15] We were reconciled to God. Friends with God. Eternally bound together with God. And transported into the heavenly places in Christ where we now sit.

Imagine that. We who were sinners now sit spiritually in the very presence of God. In the most holy of all holy places.

With God himself in Christ. We sit there now spiritually. That is where we are. And there is only one way we are there now. It is because of the blood of his son shed for us.

We are people of immense privilege. Justified. Reconciled. Made righteous. Friends with God. Brothers and sisters of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We can boldly enter into the presence of the Father through the work of the Son. The intimacy created by God's indwelling spirit. We are those who can cry out, Abba, Father.

[29 : 17] Use a term of affection with God. That's as incredible as him touching us. A term of immense affection. Friends, if there are any of you here tonight who have not yet entered this

friendship with God.

Then I want to urge you to do something about it tonight. Come and talk to me or talk to Jono or Chris or any one of the staff or the trainees or people you've come with. You see, we desperately want you to have what we have.

We desperately want you to be forgiven. Reconciled. Reconciled. Reconciled. Home with God. So don't let it go.

Come and talk to one of us. If that's all a bit confronting, we have these wonderful little green communication cards. And there's one there that says, I want to find out more about Jesus, which is the same way as asking this question.

Just tick it. And someone will come and talk to you. We will help you to be healed of the greatest illness you have. By bringing you to Jesus.

[30 : 19] And we want you to be there. And for those of you who have treated this great mystery as something very casual, as I think so many times in life I have, I can now recite the prayer book in all those sections and let it wash over me.

And friends, that's a terrible thing. Because it's a wonderful thing that Jesus has done for us. And so don't, if you're in that situation, then go back and learn these truths again.

And let them not just wash over you, but soak deep into your lives. Let's pray together. Father God, we thank you.

That through your Son we can come into your presence. And we can even do it boldly. And through the work of your Son and the fullness of your Spirit, we can instead of cowering away, say, Abba, Father.

We thank you for this immense privilege. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.