

WHO IS REALLY ABLE TO FORGIVE OUR SINS?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

One evening in Jerusalem several years ago, while I was on a study tour of Israel with our staff and elders, several of us went on a walk around the walls of the old city. A young Jewish man accompanied by a woman motioned to us and cried out, "Hey, tourist, can I talk to you?" It soon became obvious that they both were on some kind of drugs. After he asked us questions about America I had an opportunity to ask him a question: "Here we are within a stone's throw of the temple area, and yet your nation does not have a temple or a sacrificial system in order to have the blood of animals cover your sins. So how do you deal with your sins?" He looked around at the other men nervously, and said, "I have worked out a psychological system whereby I repress my sin." When he paused, I said, "Then what do you do when it pops up?" He looked at me, and said, "I have to go now, tourist." He walked into the night, in the City of Peace, still filled with sin, guilt, and confusion.

That young man symbolized what the scriptures define as the "natural man" or "man in the flesh," one who seeks to deal with sin and guilt by using his own inner human resources. Natural man wants to believe that he was born good, but something went wrong; given enough time, money, and counselors it can be fixed. It intrigues me that the New Age literature does not mention sin, responsibility to one's Creator, guilt, shame, and the need for forgiveness. Basically, in that discipline you are your own god, which probably explains why it is so popular. One of the gurus of Eastern mysticism, which is a pillar of the New Age movement, wrote this about sin: "The subject (of sin) per se is given little attention, and forgiveness of sin is unrealistic. Wrong actions inevitably produce punishment, good actions their reward" (*Mediations of Maharishi*). The absence of the concept of sin in our culture is so obvious that a secular psychiatrist wrote a book a few years ago entitled, *Whatever Happened to Sin?*

The Christian concept of sin has a radically different view that matches up with reality. Man was created by a loving, righteous and holy God. All his creation is accountable to walk in fellowship with him and obey his commandments, resulting in living life as God defines life. When man violates that relationship by ignoring the commandments that were not designed to restrict us but to give us life, then that is called sin. The Greek word, hamartia defines sin as a "missing of the mark."

Ever since Adam and Eve chose to violate God's will in the Garden of Eden the Lord has declared in verses such as Jeremiah 17:9-10: "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick and deceitful: Who can understand it? I, the Lord, search the heart. I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds." David said, "There is none righteous, not even one." The apostle Paul said in Romans: "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). "Through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all have sinned" (Rom.5:12) Sin is the result of man's rebellion against God and his law. Sin is lawlessness, and the consequences of sin is physical, emotional and spiritual death. Death is the absence of life as God intended life to be led.

Who then is really able to deal with the issue of our sin? Are we the solution to our own guilt and shame and its crippling effects as some would have us believe, or is there someone else? Based on the Word of God, I would submit that there is hope for all who would believe that only Jesus is able to forgive our sins.

I. Only Jesus is able to forgive our sins, Luke 5:17-20

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 to set him down in front of Him. And 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."

From our previous study, we know that Dr. Luke wrote this gospel from the Roman garrison city of Caesarea to his Greek friend Theophilus. From 60-62 A.D., Luke wrote while the apostle Paul waited in prison for the Jerusalem Jews to present evidence before the Roman courts that he was a blasphemer who had created a riot in the temple area. In the interim, Luke interviewed as many living witnesses as he could find who could relate the details of Christ's life and ministry. Luke writes this gospel like a jeweler engaged in stringing a pearl necklace. The thread is Jesus' words, quoted in Luke 5:31,32: "It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call righteous men but sinners to repentance." The pearls are the various stories of redemption which our Lord used to show us how he sought to find the lost. We will see in our study today another of those pearls of redemption.

According to John's gospel, our Lord had previously ministered in Judea and Jerusalem for a year. In the second year of his ministry he went north to Galilee where he announced his Messiahship in the synagogue of his home town of Nazareth. Rejected and almost killed by the spiritual leaders, he walked 30 miles northeast to the little town of Capernaum on the north shore of the sea of Galilee. In time, he called this his own city (Matt. 9:1). His healing and teaching ministry began in Capernaum and then moved out to the towns and villages north of it. When he returned, he created a great deal of excitement by healing a leper, the first recorded healing of that nature in 2000 years of Jewish history. As a result, the Lord had to leave Capernaum to escape the crowds.

In this passage, Jesus once again is in Capernaum, using a private residence to instruct his followers. Generally, Jesus would teach about the Kingdom of God, and the reality that he was the prophetic Messiah, Savior, and King who had arrived in human flesh to set up his kingdom in the hearts of men and women who believed in his presence. First, he would forgive their sins, and then he would involve them in the plan of redemption, empowering them to rescue men and women from the devil's kingdom of darkness and bring them into his Father's kingdom of light.

For the first time, Luke mentions that the Pharisees (the separatists) were present as an opposing force to Jesus' teaching. They believed that the nation of Israel should be separate from any oppressive government, and that only God should be king. Their hope was fixed on the coming Messiah who would deliver them from the Roman government that ruled over them. Not only should they be separated from the Gentiles, whom they considered unclean, but they also believed they should be separated from any Jews who would not keep the law of Moses.

The teachers of the law were the scribes, the religious lawyers for the Jewish community. They studied, taught, interpreted, and transmitted the Mosaic Law, but generally from a perspective of tradition. The real law had been buried by tradition, and had lost its power. The Pharisees would keep the letter of the law but miss the point of its commands. Throughout the gospels, Jesus sought to bring the people back to the original intent of the law, not the traditions associated with it. He said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery,' but I say to you, every man who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart" (Matt. 5:28).

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law came from Galilee, Judea, and Jerusalem as an investigative group. From the gospel of John we know that many of the teachers from Jerusalem had witnessed or heard about how Jesus had cleansed the Temple, and they were envious and jealous because of the large crowds Jesus was attracting (John 4:1-4). They began a campaign to discredit Jesus by attacking the content of his message. Thus, on this day there was great tension in the house where Jesus was teaching. On the one side were his disciples and friends as well as open and interested Jews who were seeking to understand who Jesus was and what he was saying. The other side of the room had the closed-minded teachers and lawyers waiting for the slightest slip of the tongue so that they could accuse Jesus of violating the law of tradition. The battle line was drawn down the middle of the floor, and now all that was needed was an issue to begin the battle. The stage was set by God the Father. The last phrase of verse 17 says "and the power of the Lord was present for him [Jesus] to perform healing." Notice that it did not say that anyone was sick.

God the Father had empowered his incarnate Son with the person of the Holy Spirit before the teaching began. In the "days of his flesh" Jesus was never able to do anything of a miraculous nature in his own power. He needed to wait on his Father, demonstrating to all who would follow him that we must understand, "I am the vine, you are the branches, he who abides in me and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

The principle here is, just show up! Do not try to figure it all out, but just be there so that God can use you. If you go into a situation thinking that you are going to teach, God might change the situation so that not only teaching, but healing is appropriate. Although we may think we are not capable of the work before us, God says that he is. He wants our life full of adventure, confusion, and fun.

Plan A: "And behold some men were carrying on a bed a man who was paralyzed; and they were trying to bring him in, and to set him down in front of him."

The text does not tell us directly what caused this man to become paralyzed, but it does inform us that he had four faithful and tenacious friends who were not going to be denied the presence and power of the Lord. As they approached the home they soon realized that the house was filled with people who had gotten there first, and no one would take pity on the paralytic so that he might see Jesus. Mark 2 says, "Many were gathered together so that there was no room left, not even outside the door."

So they resorted to Plan B: "And 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."

What determination! Don't miss all the elements of human emotion and tension here because they are a real and vital part of the story. Imagine all the people in the house listening to Jesus teaching. Meanwhile, the four men took the paralytic friend upstairs onto the flat roof of the home, set the stretcher down, and began to remove the tiles so that they could lower the stretcher into the room where Jesus preached. As the men dug through the plaster it began to fall on the heads of the Pharisees and scribes, as well as the disciples and the Lord himself. Suddenly, the bright sunshine broke through the hole, and everyone saw the hands of several men cutting back the roof until the hole was big enough for the bed to be lowered through on ropes. The owner of the home must have said, "My roof, my roof! What is happening? Who is going to pay for my roof?" Since this was Capernaum, the home may have belonged to Peter's mother-in-law. If so, I am sure Peter said, "Here we go again! First my boats almost sank with an overload of fish because Jesus wanted to teach us about fishing for men, and now my in-law's home is coming down around our ears!"

What a group of committed friends! These men wandered around, carrying their paralyzed friend until they found a way to get what they wanted. They were not concerned about what they looked like or what the consequences of tearing up a roof would be. They only knew that they had to bring their disabled friend to the one who could help him.

Our Lord saw beyond the hole in the roof and looked into the hearts of the paralytic and his friends. He was not worried about the point he had just made in his teaching, or the Pharisees' presence. He looked at the man on the stretcher and said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven." There had been no request for physical healing, but nevertheless Jesus addressed it. Jesus acknowledged the five men's faith in him as the Son of Man, the Messiah, and in time they would see that he was also "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," the one who would say, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32).

Here was a helpless, useless man, a captive who had to depend on four people to help him get to Jesus. By the discernment of the Holy Spirit given to him by the Father, the Lord saw beyond the crippling and went to the root problem of this crippled man (this does apply to all crippled men). He did have a physical problem, but the root cause, according to Jesus, was much deeper than a physical breakdown. As a consequence to this man's rebellion against God and his commandments, he was experiencing the divine judgment from the holy and righteous God. The only hope for this sinner was to turn to Jesus in faith and throw himself on the Lord's grace and mercy. With a heart of discernment and compassion, Jesus acknowledged the crippled man's faith and addressed the real sickness, a sickness of the heart, not the body: "Friend, your sins are forgiven."

Matthew 9:2 records, "Take courage, my son, your sins are forgiven."

Many other stories in the New Testament tell us how sin creates all kinds of physical problems. John 5 relates the story of the lame man waiting at the pool of Bethesda for the angel of the Lord to stir the waters. People believed that the first one in the pool after the stirring would be healed of whatever disease he had. In this case, Jesus said to the crippled man, "'Arise, take up your pallet and walk.' And immediately the man became well and took up his pallet and began to walk. . . . Afterward Jesus found him in the Temple and said to him, 'Behold, you have become well; do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse may befall you.'

Paul said to the Corinthians who were misusing the Lord's Supper, "Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep [death]."¹ Over bad attitudes that some had at communion, some were getting sick and others had died. It was sin that killed them.

The most important issue in an individual's life is that he come to the biblical reality that "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. . . . Just as through one man [Adam] sin entered into the world, and death through sin and so death spread to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5). "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6).

From this episode we see that only Jesus Christ can forgive our sins against God that separated us from him all our lives. He is the only one who can offer us eternal salvation. Once we become followers of Jesus, he then is also available to forgive us of our daily sins so that we can be restored from their crippling effects in our physical, emotional, and spiritual lives. First, there is the sin of turning him off as a lifestyle. Then, after we come to know Jesus, all our old habits and attitudes have to be forgiven by Jesus.

I talked to two people this week, a man and a woman, who have been emotionally and physically crippled by fear and anxiety because of the recent earthquake. You would be, too, if you felt the ground move 20 inches horizontally and 20 inches vertically for 15 seconds! But to be filled with fear two weeks later moves us into the arena of sin. The scriptures tell us that habitual fear and anxiety is sin. It is choosing to believe that God has lost control of this earth and will no longer care for his children. When we are anxious, we are telling God that we do not believe he is caring for us anymore, so we must take care of ourselves. All of us know men and women who are physically, emotionally and spiritually crippled because of stress, guilt, fear, unbelief, and anxiety. These are symptoms of a deeper problem: Sin against God and his word. The scriptures tell us not to give into that fear in any fashion: "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6,7).

Who is really able to forgive our sins? The answer is Jesus the Son of Man, the Savior of the world.

II. The proof is in the healing of the crippled, Luke 5:20-26

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."

When Jesus said, "Your sins are forgiven," a theological battle broke out. Rabbinical theology taught that all physical infirmity was a sign of divine displeasure and came as a punishment from God for specific sin. Since God was the one displeased with sin, and the one who had punished this paralytic because of sin, then only God himself could forgive sin.

The Pharisees and scribes also reasoned that if this paralytic had sin in his life, he should have gone to the temple and made a sin offering to transfer his guilt and sin onto the head of the innocent lamb, and then have the priest sprinkle the blood on the horns of the altar. This act was an atonement that "covered" his sins from the eyes of Jehovah and pledged his forgiveness. His forgiveness would be possible only by the direct act of God; no human lips dare pronounce it. Jesus, however, had spoken in his own name and therefore was claiming the prerogative that belonged to God. For this, he could be charged with blasphemy. If convicted, blasphemy was punishable by death from stoning, and the felon's body would be hung on a tree, and then buried in shame (Lev. 24).

The Pharisees and teachers were thinking, "In a sense, it does not matter that a man says, 'Your sins have been forgiven you,' or, 'Rise up and walk.' For if he says, 'Your sins are forgiven,' how can we prove that (except we know a man who says that is a blasphemer)? But if he says, 'Rise and walk,' and the man does not, then we know he is a fraud."

Knowing their thoughts by the discerning Holy Spirit, Jesus challenged the Pharisees' thinking: "In order that you may know 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." To prove to them that he was God incarnate and the Messiah, he not only forgave the man's sins, but healed him of his paralytic condition.

"And at once he rose up before them and took up what he had been lying on and went home glorifying God." The Lord demonstrated that he was the Son of Man through this miracle, and thus had the very authority to forgive sin that the spiritual leaders were looking for in the Messiah. They did not, however, expect Jesus to have that authority. The Pharisees and scribes were silenced for the moment while Jesus demonstrated that he was clothed with divine authority and majesty, and thus had the right and the power to forgive sins.

The scribes and Pharisees saw that their theological arguments were destroyed by the fact that the paralytic was healed in their sight. The crowd was filled with fear, saying "We have seen remarkable things today." They were in awe that Jesus was able to say, "This man is not crippled because of a physical problem, but because of sin." He had insight into the human condition and how sin against God can have such a crippling effect. They were amazed that this man had gotten up and walked away, because they had known about him and his disability. Based on faith in Jesus Christ, the Lord had rewarded not only the paralytic's faith, but the faith of the four friends as well. Unfortunately, many of those present would not glorify God because they were blinded and could not see the Son of God sitting in their presence.

We often sing the hymn "Amazing Grace." It was written in 1750 by John Newton, an Englishman who had been dedicated to the Lord for Christian ministry as a child by his mother. But Newton rebelled against his godly upbringing, and at the age of 17 went to sea. Soon he deserted ship and was caught, imprisoned, and punished severely. When released from prison at 18, he was so bitter his friends thought that he would lose his sanity because his life was filled with sin, shame, and fear. He became involved with the slave traders of Africa, transporting slaves to America. One night at sea during a violent storm, John Newton gave his heart to Christ. However, he became captain of his own ship and his slave trading life continued for the next six years. Finally, he turned his whole life over to the Lord, abandoned slave trading, and entered seminary. In 1758 he was ordained a minister of the Church of England, fulfilling the prayers of his mother. In 1807 he wrote his own epitaph: "John Newton, Clerk. Once an infidel and libertarian, was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy, near sixteen years at Onley in Bucks and 28 years in this church." He died December 21, 1807 at the age of 82.

That is the grace of God! A man who was crippled by hatred, fear, rebellion and sin had his need met by God when he realized he could not save himself. "Amazing Grace" was John Newton's life story of the God's grace extended to a sinner crippled by fear, guilt, and shame.

Who is able to forgive sin? Only Jesus is able to forgive the sins that keep us physically, emotionally, and spiritually crippled. Then only he is able to give us the courage to take up our pallet and walk, setting us free from guilt and shame. As a result, our hearts should be filled with praise to the Lord for his mercy and grace

towards us. Once we were sinners, but now we are forgiven because we placed our faith in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

If you have never invited Jesus Christ into your life, the Scriptures say that you are dead in your trespasses and sins. It is not that you were created to be dead, but that is the condition you are in: You are breathing, but you are not living. You do not have the life of Christ in your heart. The sin that finds you rebelling against God in your heart can be dealt with in the name of Jesus Christ. He will come into your life and set you free from that. Just ask Jesus to come into your heart, to become your Lord. He will then forgive all your sins, become your Savior, and give you the gift of the Holy Spirit, power to cope with all your present realities.

There are others of you who are struggling with a personal sin, such as hatred or bitterness. I heard of a man the other day who has hated his father for 20 years. That hatred can cripple a person so that his life in Christ is useless. Those of you who struggle with sins of hatred, fear, stress, gossip, immorality--all of those sins can be forgiven. You need to turn to Jesus and ask him to forgive you and set you free to be used again for his honor and glory.

Our gracious heavenly Father, we come to you in humility and joy. What an amazing little story we have just read telling us that you have not come for the righteous, but those who are sinners. Father, I ask two things this morning: For those among us who do not know who you are as Lord and Savior, I ask you please to save them. In Jesus' name, Amen.

If you do not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ today, just say by faith, "Dear Jesus, please come into my heart, become my Lord and Savior. Forgive my sin of rebelling against you, save me and become Lord of my life. Give me your Holy Spirit to live my life so that I please you the rest of my life." If you say that simple prayer, you no longer will be spiritually crippled.

For those brothers and sisters in Christ who struggle with sins--you have problems with others in the body, you struggle with stress, false guilt, drunkenness, immorality, hatred, jealousy, envy--it is crippling you, holding you back from who you could be in Christ and the wholeness, joy and peace that is part of your inheritance, I ask you to go to Jesus as this moment. The scriptures say, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Just name the sin and ask Jesus to forgive you. He will.

Father, thank you for this morning. Thank you for the truth that you are the only one through your Son Jesus Christ who can save us and cleanse us from our sins, and give us newness of life in Christ, as you did with this former paralytic man. Amen.

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