

“Who Can Forgive Sins but God Alone?” (Luke 5:12–26)

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Brian Watson

Cleanliness is next to godliness. That’s apparently what the preacher John Wesley said in a 1778 sermon.

There’s some truth to that, though it’s easy to misunderstand. But we all know that cleanliness is important, and if things aren’t clean, there will eventually be trouble.

At the very end of last year, just after Christmas, the weather was extremely cold. And during that cold spell, our car started making some terribly loud noises when we started it. It was a low, loud groan, that kind of sounded like an angry cow. This went on for a few days, and one day when I had to drive somewhere early in the morning, it had a hard time steering, as if the power steering had gone out. So, I tried calling some mechanics and the local Honda dealership to see if I could get the car looked at. Because of the holidays, they had limited time slots, so they were booked solid. The best I could do was make an appointment for after the New Year.

So, I went online trying to figure out what might be wrong, to see how urgent this condition was. I saw some articles that suggest there might be a problem with the power steering. So, I followed the advice of one blog and took a turkey baster to suck up the old, dirty power steering fluid, and I replaced it with new fluid. It seemed to work pretty well. But then in February, I took the car to the dealership to get an oil change and to have them look at this situation. They told me there was a leak in the power steering fluid pump (the angry cow), and that I need to have that fixed, as well as get some other things done on the car. I’m not a car guy, but I like to get things taken care of on the car sooner rather than later, so that there aren’t bigger problems down the line. So, I had some preventive maintenance done.

I imagine that part of the reason why the powering steering pump wasn’t working well during the cold was because I was overdue for a power steering fluid flush and change. When the power steering fluid gets dirty, and when any water vapor gets in the lines, there can be problems during cold weather. So, dirty fluid led to problems. The same would be true if I never changed the oil. If you try to go 20,000 miles with dirty oil, your car is going to suffer.

The same can be true of our bodies. If our blood isn’t clean, or if our digestive tract isn’t clean, we can have problems. If you eat a terrible diet and never exercise, you’re going to have

problems. It's quite possible your arteries will get clogged with plaque, which could lead to serious and even fatal problems.

Now, while it's important to take care of your vehicle, having a car that has clean fluids and runs well won't get you closer to God. And though it's important to take care of your body, being healthy doesn't make you a godlier person. But there's a different kind of health, one that is more important, and that is the health of your soul. And if we want to have an abundant life, a healthy life, a life that fulfills the purposes for which we are made, we have to be made clean. If we want to see God and live forever with him in paradise, we need to be spiritually clean.

The only one who can clean up our souls, who can provide forgiveness of sins, is Jesus. The only way to have true, lasting health—in our bodies, in our relationships, and in our souls—is through Jesus. Today, we'll see that Jesus has the power and authority to clean people and forgive them. We'll see this in Luke 5:12–26.

If you haven't been with us recently, we've been studying the Gospel of Luke for over three months. Luke is one of the four biographies of Jesus found in the Bible. He begins his story of Jesus with the events leading up to—and including—Jesus' birth. And after describing a brief episode of Jesus as a boy, Luke focuses on Jesus' public ministry of teaching and performing miracles. We'll see that continue today.

First, let's read verses 12–16:

¹² 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.” ¹³ And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I will; be clean.” And immediately the leprosy left him. ¹⁴ 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 to them.” ¹⁵ But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. ¹⁶ But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.¹

Jesus is in one of the cities in Galilee, perhaps in Capernaum, where he was before. While there, he encounters a man who has leprosy. When we read about leprosy in the Bible, we may be confused, because it's different from what is called leprosy today. What we know as leprosy today is also known as Hansen's disease, which is named after the person who identified

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

the microorganism that causes that skin disease. In the Bible, the term “leprosy” can describe a variety of skin conditions.

What’s most important to know is that this man’s skin disease has made him unclean. And that was his biggest problem. He doesn’t say, “Lord, if you will, you can heal me.” No, he says, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.”

Now, to understand this issue, we have to know something about what the Bible says about diseases and being clean. And to understand this, we have to understand something about the nature of sin. Last week, I said that sin was a rebellion against God, a turning away from our Creator and turning to value the creation instead. We were made to know, love, and worship God but we have turned away from him. We don’t seek a relationship with him—at least not a right relationship with him. We don’t love him the way we ought to. We don’t worship him all the time. We don’t do what he wants us to do. In other words, we don’t live according to his design. And because of that turning away from God, we have a broken world. When we turn away from the God who ordered and arranged the world, we find disorder and chaos. When we turn away from the God who is love, we find hate and war. When we turn away from the giver of life, we find death. Part of the penalty of sin is a world full of disease and ultimately death.

So, the ultimate reason there are diseases like leprosy in the world is because of sin. That doesn’t mean there’s a direct connection between a person’s sin and an illness they have. It’s not that all people who have diseases have done some particularly awful sin. Some very healthy people are great sinners, and some very godly people have a lot of ailments. So, there’s no one-to-one connection between the amount of sin in a person’s life and their bodily health. But the reason anyone has a disease is because of the presence of sin in the world. And the fact is that all of us have sinned. There’s only person who never did, and that’s Jesus.

Now, in the Old Testament, we find that God calls a people, the Israelites, to himself. He rescued them out of slavery in Egypt and then he gave them his law, which taught them how to live. And when you read through that law, particularly the book of Leviticus, you find a lot of information about skin diseases (Leviticus 13 and 14), in particular. And sometimes it’s all a bit baffling to us. But the idea is that in order to be part of God’s people, you had to be clean. Now, on one level, this makes perfect sense. The Israelites didn’t have modern medicine and diseases are contagious. In order to protect the health of the people, those who had diseases had to be

removed. They often were placed outside the camp until they became clean, or healthy. So, the idea of keeping the unclean people on the edge of the community made perfect sense.

But the law also addresses issues in a symbolic way. The idea that you get when you read the book of Leviticus is that in order for the Israelites to approach God in worship they needed to be pure. They needed to be cleansed of their sin. Anything that made the Israelites impure made them unfit to be in the presence of God. And since diseases are ultimately the result of sin, those who were diseased couldn't be part of the community. They were ostracized. That was a visual picture of the contagious nature of sin. Sin needed to be removed from God's people. Sin corrupts. Sin has a way of being contagious, spreading throughout one body and on to others.

Because this man had leprosy, he would have been shunned by others. He would have been considered untouchable, for to touch someone with leprosy would make that person unclean. A leper was treated like someone who was less than human. Just listen to these words, found in Leviticus 13:45–46:

⁴⁵“The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ ⁴⁶He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.

So, this leper that Jesus meets has a skin condition that causes him to be “alone” and “outside the camp.” I'm sure he wants to be healed, but what he really needs is to be made clean.

What's amazing is that Jesus heals the man by touching him. He didn't have to touch the man. Jesus has the power to heal just by saying a word. But he intentionally touches the man, showing him that he is indeed a human being worthy of love and care.

When Jesus heals and therefore cleanses the man, he tells him not to tell others, but to go to the priest and to bring an animal sacrifice. In the Old Testament law, priests were the ones who examined people to see if they were healed. And if the person was healed, then that person had to offer animal sacrifices. Those sacrifices made that person clean (see Lev. 14:1–32).

The idea that animal sacrifices could make someone clean is strange to us, but the idea is simple, and it goes back to that root problem of sin. Because we have sinned against a holy, perfect God who made us for himself, we deserve death. In part, that's because our sin corrupts God's good creation. God wants to cleanse the evil from his creation. And evil deserves punishment. But God is also merciful and gracious, so he provided a way for unclean sinners to be made clean. Instead of us dying for our own sin, a substitute death could take place. In the Old

Testament law, the substitutes were animals. An animal's life could be taken instead of a human's life. And, like the rest of the law, this had a teaching element. It taught that sin is a serious crime that deserves the most serious punishment. But it also taught that the God could allow the punishment to be taken by another.

This healing shows that Jesus has the power to heal unclean people. No Old Testament priest or prophet could heal a leper with just a touch. But Jesus also is righteous, obeying the demands of the Old Testament law.

And when people start to hear of his healing powers, they gather around him. In Mark's account of this story, "Jesus could not longer openly enter a town" because of these crowds. Therefore, he "was out in desolate places" (Mark 1:45). Here, we're told that Jesus went to those desolate places to pray.

When Jesus came to earth over two thousand years ago, his job was not to heal every disease. The miraculous healings he performed were not a new form of healthcare for all of Israel. No, they were signs that were meant to point to his identity as the one who would heal people of the root cause of illness, which is sin. But people are people, and if there's a way to be healed, they want that. So, they crowded around Jesus. But Jesus needed time to be alone. He needed time to rest, and time to pray. Jesus is the Son of God, which means he is divine and has perfect union with God the Father. But as a man, Jesus also needed to spend time praying to his Father, talking to him. So, he withdrew to spend time in prayer. Jesus often prayed before important moments in his life.²

Perhaps Jesus prayed at that time because he was getting ready for the conflicts that he would have with various Jewish religious leaders. We see the first of such conflicts in the next paragraph, Luke 5:17–26:

¹⁷ On one of those days, as 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. And the power of the Lord was with him to heal. ¹⁸ 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, ¹⁹ but finding no way to bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his

² Jesus prayed before the Holy Spirit descended on him, shortly before he was tempted in the wilderness (Luke 3:21). He prayed all night before he called his twelve disciples (Luke 6:12). He prayed before Peter's confession and his first prediction about his death (Luke 9:18). He prayed at the time of his transfiguration (Luke 9:28–29). His prayer led to his disciples asking him how to pray (Luke 11:1). He prayed on the Mount of Olives before his arrest (Luke 22:39–44). And he prayed on the cross (Luke 23:34, 46).

bed through the tiles into the midst before Jesus. ²⁰ And when he saw their faith, he said, “Man, your sins are forgiven you.” ²¹ And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, “Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” ²² When Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answered them, “Why do you question in your hearts? ²³ Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’? ²⁴ 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.” ²⁵ And immediately he rose up before them and picked up what he had been lying on and went home, glorifying God. ²⁶ And amazement seized them all, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, “We have seen extraordinary things today.”

Jesus’ teaching and miracles attracted a crowd. They also attracted the attention of some Jewish religious leaders. The Pharisees were one of four major groups of Judaism at that time.³ They were lay leaders who took a particular interest in how to be faithful to the Old Testament law. To do that, they developed a system of applying those laws to many situations not explicitly described in Scripture. The teachers of the law, otherwise known as scribes, were those who could make judgments as to whether the law was being followed. Luke tells us that these religious leaders were coming from all over to see Jesus.

At this time, Jesus is teaching in a building, and it is crowded with people. When Mark reports this event, he said that Jesus “was preaching the word to them” (Mark 2:2). And while Jesus is preaching, a group of men carry another man on a stretcher. This man was paralyzed, and his friends bring him to Jesus to be healed. The problem is that they can’t get through the crowd to get to Jesus. So, they find another way. In those days, houses were simple structures. They had a flat roof that was accessible by an outside staircase. In hot weather, people could sleep on the roof. So, they bring the man up the stairs, and then dig through the roof so that they can lower their friend to Jesus. These are some motivated people! They must have been a bit desperate, but they knew that Jesus alone could heal their friend.

When these men get their friend to Jesus, Jesus can sense their faith. They trust that Jesus can heal their friend. But he does something unexpected. Instead of healing their friend, he simply says, “Man, your sins are forgiven you.” That would be like going to your doctor, hoping to get medicine, and him reading some Scripture to you instead. You might say, “That’s nice, but I really was hoping you’d fix my body!”

³ The others were the Sadducees, the Essenes, and the Zealots.

We may not understand what's happening here, but these Jewish leaders did. They thought to themselves, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Why would these ask those questions? Think about this: who can forgive an offense? The person who has been offended. But we have no evidence that this paralyzed man had done anything to offend Jesus directly. We're not told that he lied about Jesus, called him names, stole something from him, or anything like that. So, how can Jesus dare to forgive this man? It would be strange if you got into a fight with someone in your family and I came along and said, "You are forgiven." I had nothing to do with that conflict. How could I forgive you?

Well, the answer is that Jesus isn't just a man. Jesus is the God-man. He has always existed as the Son of God. The true, living God is triune. He is one God in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God doesn't have a body. He is spirit. His immaterial. And yet, over two thousand years ago, the Son of God also became a human being, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in a virgin's womb. He was born as any baby would be, he grew as any child would, and he lived as a common—though sinless—Jewish man. But he is still God. And God has the power to forgive all sins.

So, when Jesus says this man's sins are forgiven, he is telling the truth. But these Jewish leaders don't believe that Jesus is God. So, they question him. And Jesus knows the secret questions they have, so he answers them with another question: "Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'?" In one sense, saying either thing is equally easy. They're just words. But the difference is that if Jesus just says, "Your sins are forgiven you," there's no clear evidence that anything has occurred. There's no physical event that happens when you are forgiven. So, Jesus can say this man is forgiven, and no one could prove him wrong.

But it's different if you say to a paralyzed man, "You're healed. Get up and walk." In that case, others could see whether that happened or not. That's why Jesus says, "But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . . I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home." The man does just that. He gets up and goes, glorifying God. That miracle proves that Jesus has the authority and power not only to heal, but also to forgive sins. The people were amazed and they glorified God. But, as we'll see, the Pharisees weren't impressed. They can't deny Jesus' power, but they don't trust him. So, they will later slander him and say that his power is demonic (Luke 11:14–15; John 10:19–20).

So, what do we learn from this passage? How does it affect our lives?

I think there are at least two major things we can learn from this passage. One is that while physical health is important, and we all want physical healing when we're sick, there's something more important. Ultimately, our spiritual health is the most important thing.

People can be very healthy in this life and be very far from God. You can devote all your time to diet and exercise, to preventative medicine, and have a long life. You may be fortunate to die at an old age, without having a heart attack or a stroke or cancer. Perhaps you'll be one of those rare people who die peacefully in your sleep. But if you have that and you're far from God, your physical health may last only for eighty, ninety, or even one hundred years.

But if diseases and handicaps afflict your body now, and your sins are forgiven because you trust in Jesus, your bad physical health will only remain for decades, whether those decades are few or many. You will die, just as all of us will die. And at that point, your spirit will be in heaven with Jesus. But that's not the end of the story. All of God's people will be resurrected. That means that their souls will be rejoined to their bodies. But those bodies will be transformed—we call this “glorified” in theology—so that they are perfect. Those bodies will be immortal. They will never die, let alone have any diseases.

So, if you focus only on physical health now, you won't get it in the end. You'll ultimately experience condemnation, a dreadful, eternal existence apart from God and anything good. But if you focus on spiritual health now, you'll get physical health thrown in, and that physical health will last forever. That doesn't mean Christians shouldn't focus on taking care of their bodies. We should. But there are more important issues.

Several years ago, I had surgery to heal a herniated disc in my back. I was a bit apprehensive about having surgery, particularly after one of my doctors explained all that could go wrong on the operating table. And he said, “There are worse things than dying.” I think he meant that I could be paralyzed or have some other outcome that would be worse than simply dying during surgery. But it's true. There are worse things than facing physical death. The Bible describes final condemnation as a second death. All who reject Jesus will face a spiritual death, which is far worse than we can imagine.

Now, if you're here today and you don't know where you stand with Jesus, you may not understand why sin is such a problem. If that's the case, I would urge you to listen to last week's

message, which you can find on our website or on our podcast channel.⁴ In short, sin is a rebellion against God. The only reason anything exists is because God created it. God created this universe for his glory. He created this planet for his glory. He created life on this planet for that purpose. And he created human beings to know him, love him, worship him, represent what he is like, and rule the world by coming under his authoritative word. But we reject God. We may not think of our attitude toward God as rebellion or rejection, but if we're not living our lives for God, thinking about him, his design for our lives, and his will, then we're ignoring God. If we don't truly love God simply for who he is, we're rejecting him. And if we're not following his design for our lives, thinking we know better than God, we're rebels. That's a serious problem, one that corrupts us just the way an infectious disease might destroy a healthy body.

If you don't know Jesus truly, if you're not relying on him to heal your soul, I urge you to put your trust in him.

If you do know Jesus, take the issue of cleansing from sin very seriously. We should prioritize healing of sins. We should be praying for the salvation of the lost more than we pray for someone's physical condition. There are worse things than dying.

And we should take seriously the contagion of sin. I'll talk about this after the service, but I'll say this now: Sin that goes unchecked has a way of spreading. And just as a body can be damaged by a disease, the body of Christ, the church, can be damaged by sins. Yes, we're all sinners, so we will fail, often in small ways. But there are larger sins, sins that are particularly egregious, that we must root out of the church. Any division, any slander, any fighting against one another, any rebellion against God-ordained authority, sexual sins, false doctrine—these things have to go. We don't deal seriously with sin in order to beat up on other people, or to act "holier than Thou," or to be judgmental. We take sin seriously because it's bad for us. We should want spiritual health, both individually and within this church.

The second thing we should take away from this passage is that Jesus has the authority and power to heal. And he has the compassion to do so. Obviously, Jesus performs miraculous healings. Some of us may be skeptical about the possibility of miracles. If that is the case, you should know that science cannot disprove that miracles take place. In order to do that, scientists would have to observe and measure every single event that has ever taken place in history. If you

⁴ <https://wbcommunity.org/let-down-your-nets>.

stop and think about that, such observation would be impossible. And many credible witnesses throughout history have reported seeing miracles take place.

The Gospels are reliable historical documents, and they all agree that Jesus has the power to perform miracles. He can do so because he is the God-man.

He also has the power to forgive sins. Again, he can do that because he is God. But on what basis does Jesus forgive sins? In other words, *how* does Jesus forgive sins? Does he simply sweep them under the carpet and forget about them? Does he relativize them and say, “Oh, don’t worry, you’re not so bad. Sure, you made a mistake, but who doesn’t?” No. Jesus doesn’t take sin lightly. In fact, he goes so far as to say that no one is good but God (Luke 18:19) and that the world is evil (John 7:7). So, how can Jesus forgive sins if he doesn’t take them lightly or just set them aside?

The reason Jesus can forgive sins is because he would die to pay the penalty for them. Each Gospel depicts Jesus’ death. He didn’t die of natural causes. No, he was tortured and crucified, executed in a horribly painful manner. And he wasn’t executed because he had done anything wrong. Yes, people like the Pharisees hated him and wanted to get rid of him. But, ultimately, Jesus died because it was God’s plan to crush sin instead of crushing all sinners. When Jesus died, he didn’t just experience a physical death. He experienced a spiritual death, alienation from his Father. He endured hell on earth, suffering that goes far beyond mere physical pain. He did this so that he could take on the condemnation that sinners deserve. But his death only pays for the sins of those who put their trust in him, who come to him in faith knowing that he alone can heal, who come to him in love and humility knowing that he is King and God.

Jesus has the authority and power to heal. But he also has the love and compassion to do so. He touched a leper, an outcast. This would be like someone in the 1980s touching a person dying of AIDS. In those days, we didn’t know a lot of about HIV and AIDS, and there was a great fear. People who had that disease were rejected and feared. But Jesus isn’t afraid. He comes to people who have a far worse condition than AIDS—he comes to people who have the malignant, rapidly-spreading, defiling and contagious disease of sin—and he heals them. Let us come to Jesus for healing, so that he can forgive us of sin, cleanse us of sin, and transform us so that we become healthy.