Jesus Brings Forgiveness and Healing

1. Read Luke 5:12-16. This moment between Jesus and the leper is nothing short of electric—a plea filled with desperation met with a gracious response that utterly changes and heals the leper's whole existence. Jesus, driven by compassion, reaches out and touches him. This simple act is profound, shaking the foundations of the Old Testament understanding of cleanliness and holiness.

   In the Old Testament, the guidelines regarding clean and unclean weren't just arbitrary rules; they were vital for maintaining the divine-human relationship. God, in His unparalleled holiness, sought to dwell among His people. However, the stark reality of humanity's sin created an almost insurmountable barrier. The laws were designed as protective measures, allowing God's presence without divine wrath and punishment —a bridge of grace amid the choppy waters of human sinfulness. Yes, contact with the divine could lead to swift and severe consequences if one approached without the proper atonement. (UZZAH OR Aaron's sons.)

   Think about the tabernacle, where God's presence was uniquely manifest. The laws established a sacred order, creating a buffer zone of the clean around the holy. Yet, only those consecrated—those set apart through sacrifice—could venture close enough to experience the divine presence. Anyone else would face dire repercussions, underscoring the gap between a holy God and an unholy humanity.

   Now, enter Jesus, breaking these longstanding barriers with grace-filled audacity. His touch signifies something revolutionary: the Holy One is not afraid to get close to the unclean. In this action, we see the Gospel's heartbeat—God's desire to not only dwell among His people but to bridge the very divide that the law was designed to regulate. Jesus flips the script: He doesn't maintain a proper distance; He enters into our mess, demonstrating that through His love and sacrifice, our uncleanliness can be met with grace.

   This moment invites us to reflect deeply: What does it mean for us today? How does this compassion shape our understanding of holiness?
   For us today, it means recognizing that no one is beyond the reach of God's grace, regardless of their perceived "uncleanness" or societal status. This calls us to reflect on our own lives and the ways we may inadvertently create barriers between ourselves and others—barriers of judgment, prejudice, or fear.

   Jesus' act of touching the leper redefines what holiness looks like in practice. Traditionally, holiness was associated with separation from what is deemed unclean; however, Jesus completely turns that upside down (e.g. laid in a manger) and illustrates that true holiness is not about maintaining distance but rather embodying love and compassion in the face of human brokenness and makes things whole. Holiness heals everything it touches.

This understanding reshapes our perception of holiness from a static, exclusionary concept to a dynamic, relational one. Holiness calls us to be involved in the lives of others, especially those who are suffering. It invites us to see that being truly holy means reflecting God's heart—caring for the needy, advocating for the weak, and being willing to step into the messiness of life.

2. This passage ends by mentioning that Jesus goes away to pray. Prayer is a regular part of Jesus' life, especially before significant moments, like when He was baptized, chose His twelve disciples, predicted His suffering, was transfigured, and also in the Garden of Gethsemane before His crucifixion. At this moment in Luke 4, as more people come to see Him and challenges are approaching, how beautiful it is that Jesus chooses to pray.

   What does this teach us about prayer and its importance?

   It shows us that prayer is a vital connection to God, particularly during important times. Jesus demonstrates that taking time to pray helps one prepare for what lies ahead, whether it's joy or difficulty. Through prayer, we can seek guidance, find strength, and stay centered. It reminds us that, like Jesus, we, too, should make prayer a priority in our own lives, especially when faced with important decisions or challenges.

3. Read Luke 5:17-26. In this passage, we meet a paralyzed man who is entirely dependent on his friends for mobility. For years, he has been confined to a cot, trapped in a body that cannot move an inch. Picture the humiliation of being hoisted onto a rooftop and lowered before a crowd, with everyone's eyes on you and your helplessness. Consider the weight of a lifetime spent wondering if you would ever walk again.

   Now, if you were among the many people gathered in that crowded house, witnessing this remarkable scene, what would you assume is this man's greatest need? Wouldn't it be his physical healing and the desperate desire to walk again? Could there really be any need more pressing? How do we reconcile the urgency of his immediate physical condition with the spiritual healing that Jesus offers? In this moment, what do you think truly matters most?
   First, it's important to recognize that Jesus had already healed countless individuals before this moment (see Luke 4:40), indicating His willingness and ability to address both physical and spiritual afflictions. However, this section of Scripture serves a specific purpose: to reveal the true nature of Jesus as the Messiah. Throughout His ministry, He has made attempts to clarify His mission—whether in Nazareth, confronting demons, healing lepers, or with the crowds that sought to confine Him.

   In this situation, Jesus emphasizes that the man's most pressing need extends beyond his physical condition. While it's easy to focus on the urgency of the man's paralysis, Jesus highlights that the most significant issue is sin, which leads to eternal separation from God. This moment underscores that Jesus prioritizes spiritual healing and forgiveness over temporary earthly blessings. Ultimately, He is the Messiah who addresses our deepest need—restoration from sin—before any other concern. This is a teachable moment.

4. Jesus clearly demonstrates His authority to forgive sins by showing that His word is even powerful enough to enable a paralyzed man to rise and walk. But it's interesting to consider the irony that Christ, who had the power to heal diseases, raise the lame, and calm storms with just a word, ultimately had to endure the immense suffering of the cross to bring about forgiveness. In contrast, here we are—

individuals who aren't capable of performing miracles—yet we have the ability to forgive others simply by speaking a few words: “I forgive you.” It seems so straightforward, yet we often struggle with it.

What holds us back from practicing forgiveness, even when it could bring such profound healing to ourselves and others?

5. What does the fact that Jesus prioritizes the need for forgiveness over any physical needs reveal about the true purpose and mission of Christ’s upside-down kingdom in our world?

The LCMS prioritizes Gospel proclamation because it views the Church’s unique, divinely ordained mission as the delivery of eternal salvation through the **Means of Grace**, a task that no other institution in the "Left-Hand Kingdom" can perform. While social mercy is a necessary fruit of faith, elevating social justice to the Church's primary mission risks the "Social Gospel" error, where the temporal needs of the body eventually eclipse the eternal needs of the soul. By maintaining a sharp **distinction between Law and Gospel**, the LCMS delegates the pursuit of earthly justice to the **vocations of the laity**—trusting that the Word preached in the pulpit will naturally compel Christians to serve their neighbors in the world—thereby ensuring that the Church remains a "hospital for sinners" rather than a mere agency for political or social reform.

6. In the nineties, a song came out entitled “One of Us.” Joan Osborn sang:

What if God was one of us
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on a bus
Trying to make His way home
If God had a face what would it look like
And would you want to see
If seeing meant that you would have to believe
In things like Heaven and in Jesus and the Saints
And all the Prophets
And yeah, yeah God is great
Yeah, yeah God is good
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah

This song used to drive me crazy. I admit it’s catchy and would easily get stuck in my head. But I guess what always irked me was the fact that, indeed, God actually *was* one of us. God *is* one of us. That is the whole point of Jesus, whom the song cryptically mentions. This is what the Bible is about. This is what moved the prophets and saints to risk life and limb. God was and is one of us.

The question should be: Why? Why did He become one of us?

He became one of us to pursue forgiveness and reconciliation. That’s why. He didn’t wait for sinful man to come to Him. He pursued forgiveness and reconciliation all the way to the cross. Here He is in this account giving what this man desperately needs even though the man didn’t even ask for it. While we have such a hard time making peace and going the extra mile and going above-and-beyond for the sake of our neighbor, Jesus shed His blood and gave His life to make peace ***for*** us with God. When you think about that, how can we not rethink the way we handle conflict with others? Why are we so proud and not more willing to pursue forgiveness at all costs?

7. It's said that "to err is human; to forgive, divine." That was Alexander Pope's conclusion in "An Essay on Criticism." You might say it goes against human nature to forgive. But thankfully, we don't need to have some special power within us to bring forth forgiveness for another. We've been given all the forgiveness we'll ever need from Christ, Himself. When we forgive others, it's not because they've earned it or deserve it. No. We forgive for Christ's sake. We remember that Christ shed His blood to make forgiveness possible, and for this reason, it's literally as easy as saying the words "I forgive you." But does this actually make forgiveness easy? How does Christ's sacrifice reshape the way we understand forgiveness and live in it?

   The hardest part is that we often have to keep on saying those words. We have to keep on forgiving. It's seldom just a once-and-done thing. Sometimes we'll have to wake-up every day and remember that we have forgiven. And when we see our enemy or remember what they've done to us, we have to make the choice NOT to act not upon our emotions but upon the mercy and grace given in Christ. When our emotions try to deceive us into holding on to someone's sin against us, we'll have to remember to base our willingness to forgive not on how we feel towards that person, but on how God feels toward us in Jesus Christ.

8. Read Luke 5:27-32. In what ways does Jesus' call of Levi (Matthew) challenge our understanding of who is worthy of forgiveness and inclusion in the community of believers?"

   Jesus highlights the importance of grace and the transformative power of forgiveness. Does Christ's power to forgiven really shape the way we look at the world… as individuals and as a church? Because if it does, then a person's life and choices shouldn't bar them from being who Christ calls them to be through the Gospel.

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