

Introduction

Some years ago our family took a trip to Boston to visit some of our nation's important historical sites. One of the places we visited was Bunker Hill where an early battle of the American Revolutionary War was fought. Commemorating the Battle of Bunker Hill is a 221-foot-tall granite obelisk. It is like a miniature of the Washington Monument. Two hundred seventy-four steps lead to the top. From there visitors are treated to a beautiful panoramic view of Boston and its surroundings.

After all this time the thing that stands out in my mind is the steps. It was a workout to climb them. And yet the view from the top was well worth every step. In our study of the gospel according to Matthew, I feel like we have been climbing stairs for the last several weeks. Each passage we have studied has brought us to a higher elevation from which our view of who Jesus is has been increasingly impressive. And as I anticipate preaching on today's text I feel like in some ways we reach the top.

[Read Text; Pray]

Jesus finished the sermon on the mount and went down from the mountain and great crowds followed him. They brought him their sick and he worked wonders. We have noted in times past how sickness is a physical and biological expression of the inward ravages of sin. What sickness is to the body sin is to the soul. When God warned Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree in the Garden of Eden, he had said in the day you eat thereof you will die. And when they broke God's law they died. They became spiritually dead and subject to physical death and everything that brings such death about. That includes leprosy and fevers and every other manner of physical debilitation. In the midst of healing the sick, Jesus attracted quite a following. People were attracted to Jesus as a result. But Jesus pointed out to them that following him was not easy. It would be hard and it would be costly. It would mean sacrificing oneself. And yet he proceeded to show by his authority that following him is certainly worth every sacrifice because of who he is. We have seen that Jesus has authority over nature as he stilled

the storm. We have also seen that Jesus exercises authority over the spiritual realm as he cast out the legion of demons. And this morning Matthew takes yet another step further in disclosing to us the authority of Jesus.

We see it as we look at . . .

I. A Desperate Predicament.

And behold, some people brought to [Jesus] a paralytic, lying on a bed.

A. Paralysis was and remains a desperate ailment. Many efforts have been made in our generation to make life more manageable for human beings with physical disabilities. But you do not have to go back that far in history to when physical disabilities just shut people out of a life with any sort of normalcy. To be a paralytic at any time would be heart-breaking and challenging. But to have been a paralytic in Jesus' day would have been unimaginably troubling. Paralysis means you can't feed yourself. It means you can't adjust the covers when you are cold or take them off when you are hot. It means you can't go to the bathroom on your own and you can't even clean yourself. You can't walk out into the beauty of a new day. You can't walk or run or sit up. You depend on everybody else for everything. You simply cannot accomplish anything in a physical. You just exist. Such was the condition of the man these people brought to Jesus. He was lying on a bed.

B. The man's physical condition provides an accurate description of the spiritual capabilities of the natural man. Just as this paralytic was incapable of physical work or movement of even coming to Jesus on his own, so it is with every human being by nature. Sin has a paralyzing effect on the heart and keeps us from doing any good.

In Romans 3 the Apostle Paul describes what it means that human beings are under sin: "None is righteous, no not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."

In 1 Corinthians 2 Paul explains that the natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he IS NOT ABLE to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

Back in Romans and chapter 8, Paul depicts the natural man as one who sets his mind on the flesh. And to set the mind on the flesh is death . . .for the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed IT CANNOT. Those who are in the flesh CANNOT please God." That is paralysis in sin. We call it total depravity. It means complete inability. The leopard cannot change its spots. And the sinner is as helpless to change his heart as this paralytic was helpless to change his physical condition. Paralysis was a desperate predicament for him and total depravity is a desperate condition for every human being.

C. But there was a bright spot in the desperate predicament of this man. There were individuals who cared about him. Yes, the text calls them merely "some people," but there is something extraordinary about them. They trusted Jesus. When Jesus looked upon the people who brought him, he saw something. He saw their faith. The ones who brought the paralytic believed in Jesus. They could not make the change in the man that he needed, but they knew who could. And they were convinced that if they just brought him to Jesus, his need would be met. Their faith was evident in that they brought him to Jesus.

D. The plight of every sinner is a terrible plight. It is gripping. It is paralyzing. It is debilitating and destructive and damning. But there is one who can bring lost men and women out of this terrible plight. That one is Jesus. And you never do wrong to bring sinners to him. You may not bring them to conversion, but at least you can bring them to Christ. Just as these friends brought this man to Jesus, it is our privilege as ones who also belong to Christ to bring sinners to him. We can bring them to him in prayer and we can bring them to church to hear the preaching of the gospel. To me this text is a great encouragement as believers in Christ seek the salvation of lost friends and lost family members. Certainly this is a place in the scriptures which endorses and encourages us in the act of praying for the lost and bringing them to Christ. It is not a guarantee that everyone for whom you pray will be saved, but it should encourage us

greatly that Jesus saw the faith of the ones who brought this man and did him good on the basis of their faith.

The Authority of Jesus is manifest next through . . .

II. A Declarative Pronouncement.

Seeing their faith, Jesus made a wonderful declaration. He said, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven."

A. There can be no doubt that the friends that brought the man, and the man himself, came seeking that Jesus would heal him from his paralysis. So what Jesus declared here is stunning. I can almost hear the paralytic as well as the ones who brought him saying, but I wanted to be healed.

And yet we need to look carefully at everything Jesus said. "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven you."

The words "Take heart, my son" are significant. As I look back at the healings we have seen thus far in Matthew, I have noticed Jesus making different remarks on these occasions but never anything quite as tender and comforting as what we hear right here. You get the idea that Jesus is communicating something like this. My dear, dear son, you have nothing to worry about. You have reason to rejoice. Rest easy. Your greatest concern has been taken care of. Your worries are over. You are dear to me and I am doing for you the thing you need most.

B. But then Jesus indicates what that great thing is. He says, "your sins are forgiven." Jesus is making a very powerful statement. He is saying, and you thought your greatest need was to be healed physically. But no, you could be paralyzed for the rest of your life, but your greatest need is not to be healed of physical paralysis. Your greatest need is to be healed from spiritual death and spiritual paralysis. And that is what my forgiveness does. If there ever was a reason, my son, for you to take heart, this is it—sins forgiven.

C. Does it seem to you that Christians often seem to be joyless and despairing over life's troubles? It does to me. Far, far from experiencing the degree of trouble known to the paralytic and yet we wring our hands in

fear and throw up our hands in frustration as though the most important things in life are the state of our health or who likes us or what kind of vehicle we drive. I think one of the reasons professing Christians sometimes become joyless is that we have gotten used to the great and wonderful work of God that is the forgiveness of sins. There is nothing more important in any person's life than to have God forgive their sins. The forgiveness of sins is the supreme reason to take heart. And it is the forgiveness of sin in which we hear the blessed voice of God assuring us that we are his children.

When you have an eternal and a cosmic perspective, one that looks beyond the state of things at this moment, you agree. Every human being carries a burden. It is the heavy burden of guilt, the guilt of our sins against God. It is a burden so great it will sink our souls to eternal hell. The only way we can be brought relief from this burden is through the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. It would be far better that we should experience physical calamity in life of the magnitude of this paralytic, and even worse, than that we should miss out on the forgiveness God offers in Christ. There is no greater loss than to miss out on forgiveness and no great gain than to receive it. And having that perspective makes all the difference in being able to take heart.

Joni Erickson Tada. I am sure most of you have heard of Joni. When she was a young girl a swimming accident resulted in injuries that left her paralyzed. Now 69 years old, she remains confined to a motorized wheelchair. But that has not destroyed her joy. She has an international impact for Christ through artwork, writings, speaking, and ministry. No doubt she is looking forward to the new earth when she will be whole. However, she has made one thing abundantly clear: "She would rather be in her wheelchair knowing that she is forgiven in Christ than to be whole without his forgiveness." (RC Sproul, Matthew, 263)

Do you realize how important it is to be forgiven? And does that not help you put life into perspective? Think of the things you complain about. Think of the things that make you angry. Think of the circumstances that cause you stress. The fact is that none of that really matters if your sins are forgiven. Are they? Have you had your sins forgiven? Jesus does just

that. The Bible instructs us that if we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

We next see a portrait of Jesus' authority through . . .

III. A Divine Prerogative.

A. Well, Jesus knows what people need and he knows how to stir things up. And things began to stir in the minds of the scribes who were among the witnesses to what Jesus had just said. They reasoned in their hearts that Jesus was blaspheming because no one but God is qualified to pronounce forgiveness. To forgive sins against God is something only God can do. And in that sense they were completely right.

Psalm 49:7 says "Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life." And then verse 15, the psalmist exudes confidence because he says, "But God will ransom my soul from the power of [death]."

If you would be forgiven by God, God is the one who is going to have to forgive you. No one can do this but God. The scribes were not wrong in this thinking. So then why does Jesus say that evil is in their hearts?

B. The evil that is in their hearts is that they refuse to believe that Jesus is the Son of God. They are resisting the very point that Jesus is making here. He is God. He heals all manner of disease; he casts out demons; he wields power over even the most violent storm; he commands legions of demons; and he forgives sin. He is in fact God in human flesh. This is what the scribes reject. And this is where they are dangerously wrong.

So Jesus reasons with them by the use of . . .

IV. A Dumbfounding Riddle.

He asks, "which is easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk?'"

A. One can argue both ways on this question. In one sense it is easier to say, "your sins are forgiven," because the forgiveness of sins is an invisible, intangible reality." But now, if I say to a paralytic, "Rise and walk," evidence will immediately demonstrate whether I have such power or not. So in one sense it is harder to say, "Rise and walk." The burden of proof is immediately greater.

And yet which really takes more power? In an absolute sense, it is easier to say, "Rise and walk." It is easier to merely heal than to grant forgiveness of sin. Healing disease is as easy for Jesus as speaking a word. It is as easy as stilling a storm and saying "Peace! Be still!" Healing is effortless for the One who spoke creation into existence. It is easy for the one who upholds all things by the word of his power.

But to forgive sin required from Jesus than to speak. It required that he die. For God to grant forgiveness of sin, the lamb had to be slain. Remember what John said when he beheld Jesus coming toward him? "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." To the eye of man, it looks harder to heal, but it is in fact harder to provide divine forgiveness.

B. So then Jesus says to the scribes, I am going to do what looks harder in your eyes so you will know I can do what is truly harder to do—to forgive sins. I show you the divine power to heal in order to demonstrate that I have divine power to forgive. And thus you should see that I am God the Son.

Next there is . . .

V. Demonstrative Miracle.

So then Jesus said to the paralytic, "Rise, pick up your bed and go home." And he did so.

Jesus performed what was amazing to human eyes in order to demonstrate he can also accomplish the work of divine forgiveness. When the crowds saw the man rise and go home, they were afraid. Why were they afraid? Again the holiness of God has been revealed. Stilling the storm produced fear in the hearts of the disciples. Casting out the legion of demons produced fear in the hearts of the Gaderenes. And now healing the paralytic results in fear in the hearts of the crowds, but they glorified God. They fear because the reality of who Jesus is has broken over them.

And yet still they miss the greatest lesson in the event. They glorified God because of what they saw. They glorified God because he had given such

authority to men. They have missed the greater truth. They remind me of the charismatic movement of today in which people become mesmerized by sensational in terms of what is seen. The superficial, the external, and experiential is valued over the substance, the internal, and the depth. That is the essence of worldliness. What Jesus is showing us here in this healing is that the thing which is most important is not what is seen and felt on the surface, but what is done in the realm of sin. By the power of Jesus sin are forgiven.

Do you struggle with assurance that your sins are forgiven? Well certainly they will not be forgiven unless you come to Christ Jesus believing in him. But beyond that forgiveness is not a matter of feeling. It is a matter of faith. It is a matter of the work of Christ. As surely as he healed this paralytic he forgives those who come to him with the burden of their guilt before God. He strips the bonds of the paralysis of sin away so that we can seek him, so that we can obey, so that we can glorify him through obedience. "Rise, pick up your bed and go home" has such a glorious ring to it. For the believer, the forgiveness of Christ sets the believer free. It enables the believer to rise, to get up from the mire of sin and obey. As Paul says in Romans 6, "all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death . . . in order that just as Christ was raised through the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." We are no longer enslaved to sin; we are set free. We are alive to God. We are adopted as sons of God. We are free to one day "go home" to be with him! We are free to live without letting sin reign in our mortal bodies to obey its passions. And the reason is because of King Jesus. He has set free those who draw near to him in faith. He forgives their sins.

Conclusion

So do you see how Matthew has been taking us up the stairs to gain an increasingly clear view of who Christ is? This series of miracles has put his glory on display in increasing degrees of clarity. He can heal leprosy. He can raise a centurion's slave. He can bring sudden relief to a woman with a fever. In fact every person that came to him with sickness and demon oppression he healed. But then he commanded winds and waves and they obeyed. And then he commanded a legion of demons and they obeyed. Matthew brings us upward to see the Lordship of Jesus first over sickness

then over nature then over the supernatural and at last over sin itself. And this last part is what makes everything else matter. The King over disease and the forces of nature, and the forces outside nature, is the King who also forgives sin. He forgives those who trust him. All the other things manifest power that boggles the human mind, but the forgiveness of sins matters most and demands the most from him. To him be the glory!

At Bunker Hill stands a monument to a battle that was fought in the quest for freedom from a tyrannical king. So the life of every believer in Christ should be a living monument to the battle that was fought by Jesus Christ upon the cross to secure forgiveness for his people and to free us from the tyranny of sin. In our freedom let us take heart, sons of God, and pursue the holiness for which he died.