
WE HAVE SEEN REMARKABLE THINGS TODAY

STUDY NOTES FOR CARE GROUPS - (LUKE 5:16-28)

The following are resource questions that you can use with your Care Group for discussion. They are based on the sermon preached on Sunday, January 31, 2010 by Rev Dick Hugonit at the Grace Baptist Church, Singapore. The sermon is available online at <http://www.gracebap.org.sg/worship/series.html>.

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Context: Who can forget the vivid scene of the crowded house and the bold attempt to get access to Jesus by demolishing the roof of the flat-roofed, single-story building? Add to that the dramatic impact of the paralyzed man standing up and walking off through the crowd with his stretcher, and it is no wonder the people exclaimed, "We have never seen anything like this!" (THE MESSAGE). Many translations render the verse as "remarkable", "incredulous", "unbelievable", etc. What they saw cannot be described because they have never seen or heard about such a miraculous healing.

But vivid as it is, it is not the healing of the paralytic which is the main focus of the story as Luke tells it. Indeed, the healing itself seems to come in as little more than a visual aid to reinforce Jesus' claim in quite a different area – **the authority to forgive sins**.

I. Sin and Illness

It was a widespread idea in the ancient world (and even today one can still come across it) that physical illness is in some way the result of the patient's sin. Jesus never endorsed that idea, and in John 9:2-3, Jesus directly contradicted it. So it is more than a little surprising to hear Jesus tackle an apparently straightforward case of physical paralysis with the declaration 'Your sins are forgiven.' We can only surmise with several "perhaps"...

- Perhaps Jesus was aware of something in the man's condition which made his spiritual condition of even more pressing concern to Jesus than his immobility.
- Perhaps there was some psycho-somatic element in the man's paralysis which demanded this approach.
- Perhaps also Jesus already had an eye not only on the paralytic but also on the Pharisees and the scribes (scribes are also commonly referred as teachers of the law) in the audience, whose horrified reaction to this statement 'Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?' may have been exactly what Jesus aimed to provoke.

II. Who can forgive?

Since sin is an offence against God, only God can, in any ultimate sense, forgive it. The Pharisees and teachers of the law's theology were correct, and Jesus does not dispute their indignation. Instead, Jesus defiantly goes on to repeat His outrageous declaration (v. 23), and even more remarkably, to put His credibility on the line by linking forgiveness with visible healing.

Forgiveness is not a matter of less importance than physical well-being, but it is no doubt easier to say 'Your sins are forgiven' than to say to a crippled man, 'Stand up,' since the former is not easily verified, whereas the failure of the man to get up would lay Jesus open to instant ridicule. So by linking the two together, Jesus uses His undeniable ability to perform the physical miracle as proof that He also has the authority to perform the greater but less verifiable act of forgiving sin.

III. The Authority of 'the Son of Man'

The issue is one of authority. Jesus claims the right to do what only God can do, and proves it by a spectacular instant healing. The crowd is impressed, while the scribes keep their counsel. But with hindsight, we can see here the beginning of the confrontation between this unorthodox rabbi and the guardians of religious orthodoxy, a confrontation which will develop in the rest of the gospel. The unique authority which Jesus claims is as '*the Son of man,*' (Luke 5:24) a title that Jesus is willing to adopt publicly. It derives from the great vision of Daniel chapter 7, '*of one like the son of man*' who is destined to share eternal kingship of God Himself.

IV. The Call of Levi

There is another aspect of Jesus' authority. Tax-collectors were outcasts from society, especially from decent, religious society. Tax-collectors are, from the nature of their job, not popular; the job requires certain of unyielding severity. Taxation itself was a fairly recent innovation in Palestine and the institution itself would still have been disliked. Under the Roman system, it was worse, for they worked on something very similar to a "commissions" basis: once they had filled their quota, the rest of the money went into their own pockets. Worse of all, they worked for the hated Roman oppressors. So, all in all, for Jesus to call a tax-collector into the group spreading the good news of God's kingship was a bold gesture. One can imagine also the thrilled gratitude of Levi (Matthew) at breaking out of the vicious circle into which he had bound himself. This whole section of Luke demands that we reflect on the nature of conversion. Levi left everything behind to follow Jesus. The Greek word for repentance means "*a change of mind-set.*" It consists in the adoption of a whole new set of values. This is evidenced by the abandonment of such conventional ways to holiness as fasting; Jesus wants to emphasize the joy of coming to Jesus. So He uses such images as the merriment of a wedding-feast; the joy of harvest-time. This is later on reinforced by the other images: you cannot patch an old piece of clothing with new cloth, or put new wine into skins already soaked with old wine.

Discussion:

The central idea in today's study is the authority of Jesus. He is the Son of God, one of the three persons of the Godhead. Jesus claimed equal authority with God the Father (note: The Holy Spirit is also regarded in the same authority and not relegated to a lesser role in the Trinity).

Then, as so often in Luke, there is the little note at the beginning that Jesus went off to pray (Luke 5:16). This prayer of Jesus comes between the two miracle-stories (Cleansing a leper in Luke 5:12-15), as a reminder of what Jesus is really about. The acclaim of the crowds is not the mainspring of Jesus' action. Jesus returns constantly to prayer, as the background of all His actions. This is the more striking as Luke here recounts it: in the midst of all the acclaim and the spread of the gospel, there is only one relationship which is of real importance to Jesus. Jesus turns His back on the popular success to return to the Father in prayer.

Finally, it exposes the religious teachers' arrogance and hypocrisy, a reminder to modern believers that we too, may be critical or even mocking of the other ways of seeking God and bringing people to God.

1. How is our relationship with God today?
2. When we meet with successful outcomes while serving God, do we seek acclaim instead of getting back to the Throne of Grace and give thanks?
3. Can we say in all honesty that we follow our Master's commands and example to pray? Why or why not?

Prayer:

Lord, grant me to re-examine my values, the ways in which I think I am seeking you. Lead me to a true conversion, so that my whole way of life flows from the joy of being in your kingship. Amen.