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Luke 5:12-26

14th Message

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MIRACLES OF MERCY

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

When I was young I played the clarinet. I remember a competition I entered in about the 7th grade. I had practiced my song long and hard with my cute little piano accompanist. When it was my turn to perform I was very nervous. I had never done this before. Lots of people were watching. Somehow when we started, my accompanist and I got out of sync. The feeling was horrible and I was very embarrassed and self-conscious. I stopped playing and agonizingly asked the judges if we could start again. The second time through we were flawless. However, the false start had cost us the top-level ribbon. I wanted to clean the slate completely, but it wasn't possible. The judges had heard the botched beginning.

Most of us have botched our beginnings and have wished at times that we could start over. We've made errors or choices with unintended consequences. We wish we had done it differently or said it better. We long to clean the slate and do things right. Remember the magic slate? The magic slate consisted of a filmy sheet attached to a cardboard backing. Children could draw and write on the sheet and then lift it up to erase everything and start over. That is what we wish we could do with life.

However, we do not have the ability or authority to travel back in time and erase the past, despite what Hollywood would have us believe. Mistakes seem to linger and mark us. We view ourselves, and others view us, through a fractured and tainted lens. We are branded, categorized, and labeled. We wonder if there is a way to make things right, to redeem life, to restore relationships. The Bible tells us there is a way. This way comes through a person with the authority and the power to bring restoration despite failed efforts, flawed choices, and botched beginnings. This is the miracle of God's mercy.

We are in the section of Luke that describes Jesus' Galilean ministry, where he is teaching, healing, and gathering disciples. In 5:1-6:16 there are three call scenes, two healing scenes, and two Sabbath episodes. The contrast is between gathering disciples and the increasing opposition. Our study this morning consists of two stories, two miracles. As we will see the two accounts are related and the second miracle heightens the first.

Cleansing of a Leper

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." And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean." And immediately the leprosy left him. (Luke 5:12-13 ESV)

The first story recalls the healing of a leper. Jesus is in an unknown city in Galilee. A leper approaches and begs to make him clean. Jesus touches this man and the leprosy leaves him immediately.

The word "leprosy" is a term used for a broad range of skin diseases. But the phrase "full of leprosy" indicates an extensive and very visible case. Lesions and swollen areas on the skin would have

made the man unsightly. Therefore, he is a social outcast and is labeled as unclean, untouchable. People would have associated the cause of his disease with sin. Perhaps this man's condition would correlate today to someone with an advanced case of AIDS or one of the many homeless people we see on the streets. We don't want to get too close or, heaven forbid, actually touch them.

The fact that the leper begs Jesus indicates a sense of urgency. He crosses cultural boundaries and yet his faith allows him to approach Jesus without reservation. The man addresses Jesus as "Lord," meaning that he sees him as a prophet who can help. Perhaps the leper was well acquainted with the story of the Syrian general Naaman who was cleansed from his leprosy through the ministry of Elisha. Maybe Jesus can do the same thing. In fact, he knows Jesus is capable. The only question is his willingness. I wonder if we have the same confidence and faith in approaching Jesus.

Jesus demonstrates compassion and personal care by touching the man. One might imagine that this man has not been touched in a very long time. We saw this at the end of chapter 4 and we will see it several more times in Luke (7:14, 13:13, 18:15, 22:51). According to the Law, touching the leper would have made Jesus unclean. However, love trumps law. As with Peter's mother-in-law, the cleansing is immediate.

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." But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray. (Luke 5:14-16)

Jesus charges or commands the man to remain silent, go straight to the priest, and perform the 8-day cleansing process outlined in Lev. 14:1-32. So, in this Jesus adheres to the Law. He wants the man's healing to be a proof or testimony to the priests.

The effort to keep the healing secret fails. The crowds keep coming and more and more people seek healing. However, Jesus isn't constantly available. He often withdraws to the wilderness, to the desert, for the purpose of prayer. Charles Spurgeon said, "Neglect of private prayer is the locust which devours the strength of the church."¹ Jesus remained strong by spending time alone with the Father, a great model for us.

The issue at stake here is purity. The Pharisees and scribes did everything they could to maintain purity. They were obsessed with it. Staying pure was more important than people. They would never have thought of touching this leper or associating with sinners. Such an act would have rendered them unclean.

However, in the case of the leper, instead of Jesus becoming unclean the man was cleansed. The purity and cleansing power of Jesus is contagious. Scot McKnight writes: "Jesus is the first contagion of purity. Jesus lives for us, and he becomes impure for

us so that he can touch us and ‘infect’ us with his purity.”² This audacity of Jesus to touch unclean sinners will now begin to be a major tension between Jesus and the teachers of the Law.

Lepers. Who are the lepers? We are. If our sin disease were visible we would all be lepers, every one of us. Actually, the truth is if we are in Christ, then we are healed lepers, cleansed sinners through the touch of Jesus. We have been made new and yet we are very well aware of our tendency to sin. But at any time we can approach Jesus with confidence and faith even if we are full of sin. There is no one who cannot be cleansed through the touch of Jesus. Jesus is willing and he is capable.

Jeremiah asks the question: “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?” (Jeremiah 13:23 ESV) Drastic change and healing is not possible for us, but it is possible for God.

We are also called to be disciples of Jesus as we talked about last week. Instead of excluding sinners and marginalized people to keep ourselves clean, we are to touch others with the compassion of Jesus and offer the same cleansing we have received. It is important not to see ourselves in a different category than lepers. But it is easy for us to do. We become obsessed with purity and protection instead of holiness and wholeness.

When lepers walk through the doors of a church they often feel excluded, unclean, and not good enough. They often feel like they are unwelcome. They don’t know that we all had or have the same disease because we all look so good. That is why lepers often feel more comfortable in a bar or coffee house hanging out with people who are like them. The church is designed to be a Sinner’s Anonymous, a place where lepers are welcome. The ministry of Jesus now becomes our ministry.

Healing of the Paralytic

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. (Luke 5:17)

The healing of the paralytic is more extensive and intensifies the healing of the leper. The setting is a small house in Galilee. Mark tells us it was in Capernaum. For the first time Jesus is under the scrutiny of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. The Pharisees were a separatist lay movement whose goal was to keep the nation faithful to the Law of Moses. They developed traditions as to how the law was to apply. They went a little overboard.

The teachers of the Law were often called scribes. They were religious lawyers, fundamentalists, charged with the task of preserving Biblical teaching. They were concerned about someone getting the kingdom of God wrong. These Pharisees and scribes had come from all over, as far away as Jerusalem. Things are beginning to heat up.

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, but finding no way to bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the midst before Jesus. And when he saw their faith, he said, “Man, your sins are forgiven you.” (Luke 5:18–20)

The word had gone out about Jesus and people were coming from all over. Not only was Jesus teaching, but also the power of the Lord

was with him to heal. The place was absolutely packed. People were surrounding the house 10-deep trying to hear. Some men show up carrying a paralytic on a stretcher or small bed. They want to bring him before Jesus but there is no way to get through the crowd and into the house. The crowd would not make a path for them.

We don’t know if the paralytic couldn’t walk because of an accident or because he was born that way. But like the leper, people would have attributed his condition to sin. The disease of the body was a result of the disease of the soul. In truth there is not a one-to-one correspondence between illness and sin. However, all sickness is due to a fallen and sinful world.

In Palestine, the walls of private houses were usually built of rough stone and mud-brick. Where stone was scarce, the entire house was of mud-brick on stone foundations. . . . Roofs were constructed from beams covered with branches and a thick layer of mud plaster, though the rafters were sometimes supported by a row of pillars along the middle of the room.³

The men carry the paralytic up a ladder and onto the roof. They remove some chunks of clay to make an opening and most likely make a mess. They lower the man down into the packed room, into the middle of the room, right before Jesus. These friends went to great lengths to get this man an audience. They risked social convention and financial cost and public humiliation. Who knows what the man was feeling – all these people looking at him; his weakness and illness exposed for all to see.

Jesus looks at the men, who are probably still on the roof and sees their faith. This is the first time this word is used in Luke. He looks at the man. He knows that the man is desperate to walk but also senses his sorrow over sin and says to him. “Man, your sins are forgiven.” The word “forgiven” is a perfect passive verb, meaning that Jesus does the forgiving and it is an ongoing reality. The man only has to receive the gift. Clearly there is more going on here than just a healing. Zechariah’s prophetic word is now beginning to happen.

**... you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God, (Luke 1:76–78)**

Jesus knew that he would get a reaction from the scribes and Pharisees.

And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, “Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” When Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answered them, “Why do you question in your hearts?” (Luke 5:21–22)

In their minds Jesus has just committed blasphemy by claiming the authority to forgive sins. Only God can forgive sins and that has to happen through the priests in the Temple. Blasphemy is a serious charge involving the defilement of the name of God. The Pharisees think that Jesus is violating God’s honor because he is taking to himself something reserved only for God. It is punishable through death by stoning. Jesus is claiming that he is replacing the Temple and the priests. Jesus perceives and exposes the thoughts of the Pharisees and scribes with a question.

Which is easier, to say, “Your sins are forgiven you,” or to say, “Rise and walk”? 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.” And immediately he rose up before them and picked

up what he had been lying on and went home, glorifying God.
(Luke 5:23–25)

Jesus asks another question: “Which is easier to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk?’” He is saying that it is easier to say something that cannot be visually verified than to say something that can be visually substantiated. And so to substantiate the claim to possess the authority to forgive sins he tells the man to rise, pick up his stretcher, and go home. The man rises, picks up his stretcher and departs. The healing takes place immediately, just as was the case with the leper. The man leaves, praising and glorifying God for God’s saving action.

Jesus applies Daniel’s “Son of Man” term to himself and thus reveals more of his identity. This is the first of 25 times that this phrase will appear in Luke. The Jews saw the term as applying to the Messiah. There might also be a contrast between “man,” how Jesus addressed the paralytic, and “Son of Man.” Man might be a reference to Adam, the first man, and Son of Man to the second Adam. Jesus came to deal with what went wrong with the human race and call to himself a new humanity.

And amazement seized them all, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, “We have seen extraordinary things today.” (Luke 5:26)

The story ends with a three-fold reaction from the crowd. They are seized with amazement, the usual response from people to what Jesus does. Like the healed man, they glorify God. And finally, they are all full of awe, full of fear of the Lord.

The word “extraordinary” is the Greek word *paradoxos* from which we get our word paradox. A paradox is something that you would not normally expect, something that is contrary. The paradox is seeing a lame man walk. The paradox is also that something unseen, forgiveness, is more spectacular than what is seen, the physical healing.

Our study began with a man full of leprosy and ends with people full of an awareness of being in the presence of transcendence. Jesus is living out what he said in chapter 4:

**The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.** (Luke 4:18–19)

The two stories are linked by the element of sin. The second story makes this clear. The leper and the paralytic were captives of sin. Their condition manifested the effects of sin. Sin makes us social outcasts, causes us to hide and pretend, and separates us from God and others. Sin also paralyzes us. We lose movement, our world shrinks, and we become enslaved, powerless. The effects of sin seem irreversible and irreparable. We’ve botched the beginning of the song and there is no way we can get a clean slate.

The two stories are also linked by the element of faith, the faith of the leper and the faith of the friends, probably also the faith of the paralytic himself. They believe that Jesus can do something. When we have done everything wrong, we can come to Jesus and receive his merciful and compassionate touch. Sometimes we are so paralyzed with sin we cannot even make our own way to Jesus. But Jesus has faithful friends who get us to where we need to be and won’t take no for an answer.

What these miracles point to is that Jesus brings restoration. “They restore people. Miracles are performed by Jesus out of love and are done to restore humans to God and to others.”⁴ Most of you know that I grew up in Nebraska and went to college in Lincoln. And I have mentioned on several occasions that college for me was a dark and sin-laden time. I became a Christian at the end of college and then left for California. But over the years, every time I went back to visit family a dark, oppressive cloud would fall over me. I could envision myself wandering the streets and would wonder how I got so lost. When I returned home here in California all the weird feelings would disappear.

Last October my nephew was getting married outside of Omaha and I planned to attend the wedding. But as the day approached fear and apprehension began to creep in. I was afraid of experiencing all those weird and dark feelings again. I really wanted to cancel, but nonetheless got on a plane.

On the plane to Nebraska I was reading a book, and something really caught my attention: “One particular important feeling that often lies at the root of fear is guilt. The part of self that is dangerous in this situation is the self that is felt, in some nonspecific way, to have failed or done something dreadfully bad.”⁵

I started talking to God about whether or not I felt guilt over my dark college days. I knew I was forgiven but maybe I had been carrying guilt for the “bad” things I had done. I realized that I had walked away from Nebraska after college and never really experienced my restored life in Nebraska. I had tried to analyze and figure out this darkness for years so that I could explain it away. But now I simply released my guilt to the Lord on plane.

Something amazing happened. I had a great time and felt light the entire weekend. I walked around campus and downtown and none of the old, weird feelings surfaced. I was experiencing something I had never experienced before in that town.

On the last night, right about dusk, I went for a long walk on a path near my brother’s house. Open space, white billowy clouds, reddish tinge in the sky – it was a beautiful, crisp fall evening. As I walked I started praising God for the weekend, thanking him for this miracle. I was even raising my hands as a way of visualizing the release of this guilt to him. (Maybe I am just a charismatic at heart.) As I threw my hands up in the air, a flock of maybe 50 birds flew right over my head. And that was a sign to me that God had sent those birds to carry my guilt far away.

Even though we have been forgiven, and that forgiveness has an ongoing reality in our lives, there are still places of darkness, guilt, sin, shame, or fear that need to be touched by God and healed, places that need to be exposed to the love of God. This is why we come to church. We don’t come to church to be seen by others or to perform a religious duty. We come to be touched by Jesus and be restored. And so moment by moment we turn to Jesus for his love, grace, and healing. Restoration is the miracle of God’s mercy.

Perhaps you feel like an outcast this morning, separated from God and others. Perhaps you feel paralyzed by sin or guilt or darkness. Perhaps you long for restoration. Perhaps you long to start over. Maybe God brought something up this morning. We have some time this morning for you to talk to God about this and perhaps there are things you simply want to release to him. I would invite you to let Jesus touch you.

May we as God's people experience what the witnesses to the healing of the paralytic experienced: "And amazement seized them all, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, 'We have seen extraordinary things today.'" (Luke 5:26)

1 David Lyle Jeffrey, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: BrazosPress, 2012), 80

2 Scot McKnight, *The Jesus Creed* (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2004), 159

3 M.J. Selman, *New Bible Dictionary, Third Edition* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 489.

4 McKnight, *The Jesus Creed*, 154

5 David Benner, *Surrender to Love* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 41

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