

Which is Easier?

Looking over the Gospel lesson, in preparation for today's sermon, the concept of seeing, particularly the concept of "seeing faith in action," stuck out like a sore thumb. And this should come as no surprise to anyone. In fact, that's one of the *main points* of this lesson. We're told that Jesus *saw* the faith of the men bringing the paralytic to Him. ***The evidence of such faith was real. It was tangible.*** These men knew Jesus. They believed in Jesus, so they brought their friend to Jesus, and they weren't going to let crowds and roofs get in the way of being in the presence of Jesus. Jesus *saw* their faith; faith that was willing to destroy a roof in order to get their buddy down in front of the Good Physician. Such faith was *physically* making itself known. There wasn't a disconnect between faith and action. ***Their actions confessed their faith, and their faith was witnessed in their actions.*** Faith puts its money where its mouth is, right? Faith doesn't just talk a good game. Faith actually "walks the walk."

But here's the thing: Did you notice how all this talk about seeing faith in action tends to put all the focus on the guys who brought the paralytic to Jesus? I mean... it makes sense. I understand. ***But what about Jesus?*** Like I just said, with the concept of "seeing" front and center in the text, all the focus winds up getting put on the visible, tangible actions of the faithful men. But what about Jesus? ***What about the visible, tangible, undeniable actions of Jesus?***

Now, here is where we would immediately look to the healing of the paralytic, which—again—makes perfect sense. But... *why* did Jesus perform this miraculous healing? Is it because He had compassion for the poor sap on the stretcher? Yes. Is it because He had compassion for the men who were so intent on getting their suffering friend in front of Jesus that they were willing to destroy someone's roof in order to make that happen? Also, yes. But neither of these are the *primary reason* for the miraculous action our Lord took that day.

"Which is easier, to say your sins are forgiven or to say to a lame man 'walk'?" Jesus is addressing this question to the Pharisees in attendance, who (as Scripture tells us) were all thinking evil in their hearts, *"who does this guy think He is, forgiving the sins of that paralytic wretch? Only God can forgive sin."* Remember: Jesus hadn't healed the guy yet. In fact, there was no indication that He even *intended* on healing the guy. The roof breaks open, interrupting the dinner down below, as the paralytic man is lowered down in front of Jesus. The only words out of Jesus' mouth are, *"Take heart, son. Be at peace. Your sins are forgiven."* That's it. That's all that was said. *"Your sins are forgiven."* Nothing at all about rising and walking.

"Who does this guy think He is, forgiving sins?!" The implication is that only God has the authority to forgive sins, and Jesus clearly isn't God! Jesus

responds to that evil, “Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—He then said to the paralytic—“Rise, pick up your bed and go home.”

I want you to think about this. ***Jesus actually does the more difficult thing here***, commanding a lame man to walk (something no one else can do, not with any positive effect, at least). You can say that a person’s sins are forgiven. That’s easy... but there’s no real proof of it, is there? You can’t *see* if a person’s sins are actually forgiven, but you *can* see when a lame man stands up and walks. By means of this miracle, Jesus shows that if He has authority over the more difficult thing, then He certainly has authority over the easier thing.

So, again I ask, ***why*** did Jesus perform this miracle? Why did He do the more difficult thing? Answer: Because your Lord desires the death of no man. He desires that no man would perish in unbelief and sin. He performs this miracle for the Pharisees’ sake so that they might see and believe that He is God in the flesh. Your Lord does this easy thing (for Him), forgiving the sins of a suffering man, and they call it “blasphemy.” It’s ironic when you think about it. They blaspheme their God and Lord as they themselves accuse Him of blasphemy. Your merciful Lord didn’t want them to remain in that state of damning unbelief though. Jesus does this ***more difficult, miraculous thing***, commanding the lame man to walk, so that these evil men could see with their own eyes the fact that ***Jesus does have the power and authority to forgive sins***. Again, if He has authority over the more difficult thing (healing lameness), then He most certainly has authority over the easier thing (forgiveness).

And that brings us to today. ***Forgiveness is... easy?*** That’s the point Jesus is making. It’s more difficult to command a lame man to walk than it is to forgive sins, and Jesus handled the more difficult part rather easily, wouldn’t you say? So, yeah..., according to Jesus, forgiveness is ***easy***.

I don’t know about you, but I really struggle with that! I’m not going to stand before you, telling you how *easy* it is to forgive someone. It’s **not**, not for any of us children of Adam, at least. Why do you think our Lord teaches us to ***pray*** for this ability to forgive others as we ourselves are forgiven? Left to our own devices, we won’t forgive others in the same way God forgives us. We ***don’t***. Without the Lord working in us, we can’t, won’t, and we don’t forgive others their trespasses as we ourselves are forgiven. This is why we are to pray.

And that’s just considering others who may have hurt us and sinned against us. ***What about forgiving ourselves?*** I think that’s the *most* difficult thing for anyone to do. The devil knows how to drive us from God’s tender mercy and loving grace, and one of the ***easiest*** ways to do this is to get us to languish in guilt.

How many times have you heard it said, “*I know God forgives me, but I just can’t forgive myself*”? The problem with that is that as long as you don’t forgive yourself, you *are* doubting God’s forgiveness. Many a person flees from the forgiving mercy and grace of God—***the loving presence of God***—not because He doesn’t forgive them, but because they haven’t forgiven themselves. Thank God the authority to forgive your sins doesn’t hinge on you, ***but on Him***.

And that’s where I want to direct your attention/focus in these last few minutes—to ***Him***. Look to this cross. Your Lord does, not just the more difficult thing, but the thing that is ***utterly impossible*** for us children of Adam to do (as if commanding a lame person to walk again wasn’t already impossible): He pays—in full—the wage for each and every sin. **No one else can do this.** You could live a thousand life times, full of charity and good works, and yet not one single sin would ever be atoned for. Good works availeth us not. And it’s from this cross that our Lord Christ, with His divine authority, bespeaks us totally and completely forgiven. “*It is finished.*”

Those simple words—“*It is finished*”—so easy, so beautiful, so powerful, are spoken for us and our sake; for our assurance and peace, even as we languish and suffer and grieve and worry. *It is finished*. Think about this: If the same God who has authority to turn water into wine or to walk on water and command the wind and the waves to be immediately calmed or to heal the lame, the blind, the leprous; if the same God who has authority to raise people from the dead; to lay down His own life and take it up again three days later; the same God to all authority in heaven and earth has been given, says, “*it is finished,*” declaring you forgiven in the eyes of God, then it is most certainly true.

Think on this: If the same Word of God, by His divine power and authority, creates all of creation by simply speaking a word (“*let there be,*” and there is), then this same Word-made-flesh also has the divine power and authority to do something, by His own admission, ***that is far more easier, which is to pronounce you forgiven...*** which He does, not just from His cross, but in the very real and tangible means of absolution (which is spoken in His stead, by His command, and by His authority). You hear these words today in your presence, in your ears. Let there be no doubt! And He does this—again—for our sake; for our confidence and assurance.

The old hymn asks, “*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*” The answer is “no.” None of us were there that day. None of us were there to see the blood pouring out from His ravaged body. None of us were there to see the sky turn black or the earth quake. None of us were there to hear Him cry out to God as He was suffering the true hellish wrath of being forsaken for sins He did not commit. None of us were there to hear those beautiful words of victory, “*It is finished.*” ***And as a consequence of our absence, it can/does become easy for us***

to doubt. We don't *feel* forgiven. If we really are forgiven and God is truly at peace with us, then why are things still so bad? Why do we still suffer?

This is why our Lord continues to come to us in the very visible, tangible means of His Word and Sacraments. Consider the waters of Holy Baptism, where He brings this cruciform reality to you, making it your own. ***Let there be no doubt!*** Baptized into Christ, you *are* forgiven in Christ, united to Him and the blood-bought forgiveness He poured out on His cross. In very real and tangible ways your Lord comes to you in His holy supper, once again assuring you of your total and complete forgiveness. “*As often as you do this, remember what I have said.*” It's here that we do taste and see the goodness of our Lord, our Immanuel, our God with us, not in terrifying power and wrath, but in loving mercy and tender grace, giving to us the proof of His victory over sin, death, and the devil.

To be sure, there's a *LOT* more that could be said on all this, but we'll just call it a day. I've said enough. Understood in the God-given gift that is repentant faith, ***it's so simple, so powerful, so beautiful, and for this we thank God.*** May this same almighty God, in whom all authority in heaven and earth resides, grant you the open ears of faith so that you may be able, with eyes that have been opened in faith, ***to see Him and His love for you, not just here in this holy place and His holy actions/means of grace, but in every waking moment of your life.*** May you, like the crowd responding to Jesus when the lame man rose up and walked at His command, be always “walking the walk” of repentant faith, ***rejoicing and glorifying Him*** in all that you say, think, and do for the loving forgiveness that is ***undeniably and undoubtedly*** yours in Christ. May others see you walking as one who has been resurrected to new life in Christ, and may they give glory to God, our light, our life, and our salvation.

AMEN