

Russell Kelfer

Who Can Forgive Sins?

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Series: Let God Be God

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

10602 Mossbank, San Antonio, TX 78230 • (210) 226-0000 / 1-800-375-7778 • www.dtm.org • dtm@dtm.org

Who Can Forgive Sins?

Have you ever recognized how relative is the passage of time? To a little child who has been asked to sit in the corner as punishment, fifteen minutes seems like an eternity. To his mother, who is glad for the peace and quiet, it seems like only a fleeting moment. To someone who barely misses the last bus into town, three minutes is forever, but to someone who is saying goodbye to a friend, those same three minutes are an eternity.

In that regard, time is relative. It represents, in experience, not actual minutes, but the quality of what those minutes actually accomplish. This is certainly true of time spent alone with God. It is, to a large degree, what you make of it.

You can sit there in a semi-stupor waiting for the time to pass, or you can plead with God to make you alert to His Spirit. You can passively scan the Word as one scans the front page of the newspaper, or you can search the Scriptures with unparalleled intensity as one searches for hidden treasure. In one case, you have legalistically done your duty, but you have realistically missed the point.

Can you imagine being granted time alone with the President of the United States, then wandering in twenty minutes late, yawning and falling asleep as he spoke to you? You say, "Of course not! He's the Chief Executive of our country." Ah, how much more of an honor to be granted an audience with the King of Kings. How miraculous for the Creator God of heaven and earth to hear you call His name, and stop immediately just to listen to what you have to say! Is not that the greatest honor of all? Should not the quality of those times increase with every divine encounter?

An appointment with God: the greatest privilege ever granted to man. God forgive us for having taken it lightly. Jesus never took the Father for granted, nor did He ever consider time alone with the Father a thing to be taken casually. He clutched at it. He longed for it. He treasured and cherished every second of it.

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For the Son of God, who created time, understood the value of time in preparing for eternity.

When our last study ended, Jesus had been forced into one of life's solitary places to flee the self-serving mobs who wanted His miracles, but had missed His message. While in the solitary place, the Master *kept withdrawing into the wilderness and praying*. The next verse, the beginning of today's study says:

Now after some days he went again into Capernaum.

(Mark 2:1 TLOCIS)

"After some days", you and I would have been looking at our watches, tugging at the Master's sleeve and arguing, "But Jesus, Your days are numbered! You have a job to do and time seems to be running out. Jesus, how can You take so much time to pray when there's so much work to be done?"

I believe the Master would have answered us, "Oh, My child, just give the Father all the time He needs to change you, and He'll have all the time He needs to use you to change the world."

Time is no problem for God. He invented it. He carved it out of the endlessness of eternity to give man a frame of reference and to demonstrate the contrast between light and darkness. But time has never been a constraint to God. If need be, He makes the sun stand still! God only allowed His own Son *three years* on planet earth to design, develop and build His church; *three years* to bring into being the most vital of His creations, the Bride of Christ. Just three years.

Yet, Jesus was never hurried, never frantic, never anxious, never too rushed to retreat to a solitary place to be alone with His Father. And once there, He stayed for days. Why? *Because it was the most important thing He had to do*. Now Jesus lives in us and spending time with the Father is *still the most important thing He has to do*. Our study will look at this issue.

The outline looks like this:

- I. The Audience
- II. The Incident
- III. The Issue
- IV. The Exclamation

Three passages used to describe this event are from The Life of Christ in Stereo. (¹Matthew 9:2-8, ²Mark 2:1-12, ³Luke 5:17-26).

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It combines these three passages to give us a complete picture of what took place.

²Now after some days, He went again into Capernaum. ³And it came to pass, on a certain day that, as He was teaching, there were ¹some of the scribes, ³Pharisees and teachers of the law sitting by, who had come out of every town of Galilee, and from Judea and Jerusalem. ²Then the word spread around that he was at home, and [immediately] so many came together that there was no longer any room, not even about the door. And he was telling them the Word, ³and the Lord's power was present for him to heal.

And behold, ²there came men bringing him ³a man who was paralyzed, ¹lying on a pallet ²which was borne by four; ³and they sought how to bring him in and lay him before him. ²And when they could not get near him for the crowd, ³they went up on the housetop and ²tore open the roof above where he was; and on making the opening, ³they lowered him with a pallet down through the tiles, right into the midst before Jesus. Seeing their faith, he said ¹to the paralytic, "Take courage, young ³man. ²*Your sins are forgiven you.*"

But ¹behold, ³the scribes and Pharisees began to ponder ²in their hearts, ³saying, "Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? ² Why does this man speak thus? ³Who can forgive sins but *God alone*?" ²Then Jesus, knowing at once in his spirit that they reasoned thus within themselves, ³answered and said to them, ²Why do you ask yourselves these things? ¹Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, ²to say to the paralytic, '*Your sins are forgiven you,*' or to say '*Arise and take up your pallet and walk*?' But that you may know that the Son of Man *has authority* on the earth to forgive sins, (he said to the paralytic) "*I say to you, arise, take up your pallet and go home.*"

And immediately, he rose up before them all, ³and taking up that on which he had lain, he went off to his home, praising God; ²so that ¹the crowds who had seen it ²were all seized with amazement, and glorified God; ¹who had given such power to men. ³And they were filled with awe, saying, ²"We never saw such as this! ³We have seen strange things today."

(¹Mt 9:2-8. ²Mk 2:1-12, ³Lk 5:17-26 TLOCIS)¹

¹ The Life of Christ in Stereo: The Four Gospels Speak in Harmony; by Johnston M. Cheney; © 1969 Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, Portland, Oregon

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THE AUDIENCE

So the Master returns to Capernaum after a protracted period alone with the Father, and there He is greeted by none other than a gathering of the I.C.H.

I.C.H. stands for International Congress of Hypocrites. Scribes, Pharisees and teachers of the law had congregated from every town in Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem as well. The theme of their convention was “*Let’s Roast the Carpenter*”; and as soon as Jesus got there, a crowd of them formed around Him, a crowd so large that even the exits were blocked. It was a dream come true for the average pastor, but no doubt it was a nightmare for the Capernaum Fire Marshall.

There were no telephones yet, but “Tell-a-Scribe” was about the same thing. The word had spread quickly that Jesus was home, and the crowd quickly grew to unmanageable proportions. The King of Eternity was surrounded by pious, self-righteous religious authorities who were standing eye-to-eye with God *and didn’t even know it*.

That didn’t bother Jesus. He was never intimidated by opposition. He entered the world to battle the powers of darkness. Their arrows of destruction came as no surprise to Him. The pity is that the opposition came from the very ones who had made a career of studying His word. *They had so much knowledge that they had lost their sense of need.*

THE INCIDENT

So much for the background, now for the incident itself. So it was mobsville at the Capernaum Home Bible Study that night. All of the religious authorities from the surrounding area had converged in one place because the word was out that this controversial carpenter was back in town. They weren’t there to be taught. They were there to bait a trap for the Master. But they were there in such force, packed in like sardines, that there was no room left for those who really desired an encounter with the King.

Meanwhile, outside that crowded house that night, there walked four men whose religious training hardly qualified them to attend this prestigious conclave. They were just “plain folks” who had a “buddy with a need,” and quite a need it was. Their friend couldn’t walk. He was paralyzed. And they had heard

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stories about this man Jesus that gave them reason to believe that if they could just somehow get their friend to meet the Master personally, his whole life might change.

The man was a perfect picture in the physical realm of fallen man in the spiritual realm. He was paralyzed, helpless. Just as you and I without Jesus cannot walk with the Father, so this man, *until he came to Jesus, couldn't walk at all*. And he was powerless to help himself. He couldn't even get to Jesus unless someone else interceded for him. What a perfect picture of why we need to band together to pray for the lost. Here is a portrait of four men, recognizing the desperation of a friend, standing in the gap on behalf of that friend to get that friend to Jesus.

Now look at the intensity with which they interceded. There were obstacles, of course, There always are. When we see the obstacles, we oftentimes give up. But these men, seeing the human impossibility of what they desired, simply intensified their intercession. Interestingly enough, this man, paralyzed and helpless, couldn't get to Jesus because the religious giants of his day were in his way. No comment.

Look at what these four friends did next. They climbed up the roof of the house, carrying with them their paralyzed friend, opened a hole in the ceiling and lowered the man's helpless body on a stretcher right in front of Jesus. They simply *would not take no for an answer*. Their own personal welfare was not the issue. They could have been arrested for breaking and entering or sued for damages. They could have even been expelled from the synagogue for disrupting a meeting where the theological giants of their day were present. No matter. They had *only one thing on their minds*—that their friend come to Jesus.

What an indictment of our own spiritual impotence. How long has it been since we were so burdened that a lost friend come to know Jesus that we stayed awake all night tearing open the ceiling of heaven with tears, until we knew we had broken through and lowered right into the Master's midst the one for whom we prayed? How long since we've fasted and prayed for the lost on the mission fields around the world until the powers of darkness trembled as the Lord spoke and the mountains and hills broke forth into singing?

Our generation has more tools at our disposal to reach the lost than any generation in history, but tools do not win the

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world. The power of God in answer to prayer wins the world. And if we tend to deify the tools or the systems or methods, we deny God the glory due His name and actually rob God of the power He has made available to us.

The church does not need more programs. The church needs more prayer. Then men and women around the world will find themselves at the feet of Jesus, drawn by the prayers of those who cared. Jesus was in awe at the faith of these four. The Scripture reads, “When Jesus saw their faith. He said to the paralytic, ‘Take courage, young man, your sins are forgiven you’.” Don’t ever believe God does not honor the persistence of those who intercede for others. *Theirs was the faith* that made this man whole.

THE ISSUE

That was quite a miracle that those giants of Judaism witnessed that night in Capernaum. No doubt, you would imagine, they broke out in cheers and applauded, for a man who had been totally paralyzed was set free. Not so. They were not there to approve, but rather to prove that this man from Galilee was not the Son of God. So, instead of rejoicing, they murmured among themselves saying, “Who can forgive sins but God?”

Their question was valid. No one but God can forgive sins. It was their assumption that was wrong. They assumed that Jesus could not be God because He didn’t do things their way. That, too, hasn’t changed. You and I, even today, tend to discount what God might be doing in the world, even in our world, if He doesn’t do it in harmony with our religious system.

We say, “But that’s not the way it’s always been done.” Beloved, we need to remember two things:

1- Ours is a creative God. He does not live in a cookie-cutter world, nor does He confine Himself to a preconceived method, lest the creature defy the method rather than the creative Creator who used it.

2- God uses whatever He has to work with, imperfect though it is. We tend to believe that unless a group dots the “i’s” and crosses the “t’s” the way we do, God cannot use them. That’s simply not true. We are so prone to limit the awesome power of God.

The question is, “Who are we to determine who God can or

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cannot use?” Ought we not rather to marvel that He can use the likes of us? How surprised we will be when we get to heaven and see the ones God has used to change the world. We may have been so occupied arguing over incidentals, that we missed them altogether. These theological masterminds went back to their textbooks on systematic theology to the chapter marked, “*Who Can Forgive Sins?*” They got so busy arguing about the doctrinal ramifications of what Jesus had said that they missed the spiritual ramifications of what Jesus had said; namely that He was God.

Now, had Jesus simply said, “Rise up and walk,” they would have been satisfied. Man can heal. Satan can heal. God can heal. *But only God can forgive sins.* Only God can take a man or woman who is paralyzed with the cancer of sin and through His Word make him whole. *Only God can forgive sins.* If these heroes of the Hebrew hierarchy were to stand by silently, they would be admitting that Jesus was God. “*Who can forgive sins?*” they whispered. “*I can!*” Jesus dramatically answered.

They didn’t think that He had even heard them. What fools. Jesus knows exactly where every man stands with Him. Once again, Jesus graphically explains why He was performing physical miracles. He cared that this man was paralyzed. He cared that he could not walk. He cared. But Jesus could have made him walk and *had He not forgiven the man his sins*, the man would have now been a *walking dead man*—physically free, but spiritually bound. What would that profit a man? What if he were to have gained the whole world and lost his own soul?

Once again, Jesus healed this man physically to demonstrate visibly what was happening spiritually in this man’s heart. His sins had been forgiven. That’s the miracle! It is possible that others could have made him walk again. But who can forgive sins? *Only God.* So Jesus rebuked the legalistic leaders of the Church of Self-Righteousness once again with these words,

¹“Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, ²to say to the paralytic, ‘*Your sins are forgiven you,*’ or to say ‘*Arise and take up your pallet and walk?*’ But that you may know that the Son of man *has authority* on the earth to forgive sins, (he said to the paralytic) “*I say to you, arise, take up your pallet and go home.*”

(Mt 9:4-6; Mk 2:9-11 TLOCIS)

That’s why He healed the man. So the world might know that

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Jesus was God. So these religious rebels would know that Jesus had the authority to forgive sins.

THE EXCLAMATION

The man got up and walked away, praising God. Because he could walk? Partly. But he could get hit by a donkey on his way home and be paralyzed again. No, he praised God because a burden had been lifted that he had carried all his life, the burden of sin. Yes, he could walk. But, more important, *he could walk with God*. He didn't praise God alone. The angels in heaven broke out in an anthem of "Amazing Grace," and many of those who witnessed what happened were filled with awe, saying, "We never saw such as this. We have seen strange things today."

How filled with awe are you when someone comes to Christ? How often do you fall to your knees in adoration and praise simply because Jesus reached down and said to someone paralyzed by sin, "Your sins are forgiven."? Oh, Beloved, that is the miracle. We are all standing in the wings like cheerleaders begging God to make someone walk or make someone see or make someone well. And well we should praise Him if He does. But those are not the miracles that last. Every time God says, "Your sins are forgiven," that is the miracle of miracles. That is our cue to fall on our faces before a Holy God and shout, "Alleluia! The Lord God Omnipotent reigneth!" *For who can forgive sins...but God?*

You see, that's why Satan has concocted so many smoke screens in today's religious environment; *anything he can do to cloud the real issue of life he will do*. He will glamorize the church so men will be attracted to a place. He will glamorize men so men will be attracted to personalities rather than the person of Christ. He will glamorize doctrine so men will be drawn to a new exclusive kind of legalism rather than be set free by the blood of Christ. He will glamorize emotions so men will glorify their experience rather than experience the consistency of Christ. He will glamorize miracles to draw attention to what God can do for man, thus minimizing the fact that God has already done for man everything eternal that must be done. He will do anything, *even anything religious*, to cloud the one basic issue of life, *that only God can forgive sins*.

That's why Jesus came to earth. He came to build the church, but He came to build it out of people, not bricks. He uses men only as vessels to demonstrate His grace, not as showcases to

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demonstrate their talents. He teaches doctrine, but not to divide the church and make men exclusive, but rather to solidify the church and give it a foundation for living as a family. He came to challenge us emotionally, but not to give our emotions the reins of our lives. He came to perform miracles, but only to draw attention to the miracle of miracles—*that only God can forgive sins*.

So, Christian, answer this question: “What is the greatest thing that ever happened to you?” I’ll answer it for you. The greatest thing that ever happened to you happened the day you asked Christ to come into your life. Something amazing happened. You cried out to God to save you. You accepted His incredible sacrifice on your behalf and allowed His death to atone for your sins. Literally, hundreds of things took place in that instant. But one thing that happened so changed your life that the chains that bound you to the past dissolved in an ocean of grace and you were, for the first time in your life, free.

Do you know what that was? Your sins were forgiven. The chalkboard of eternity that listed all the sins you had ever committed against God or man was wiped clean in one fell swoop. God looked at you through the blood of His Son, and He saw you just as if you had never sinned. *No one but God could do that*. Satan couldn’t. That’s why he hates it so. The church couldn’t, though it has tried for centuries to share in the glory. Man couldn’t, though some might imply that they can. *Only God can forgive sins*. That was the message that traumatized those first century Pharisees, and that is the message that will revolutionize the world in which you live.

So please don’t go out in the marketplace telling men about your church. Men can build a church. Please don’t go boasting about your experience. Satan can generate experiences. Don’t go condescendingly arguing doctrine. Men aren’t impressed with what you know. Instead, go sharing one message every man needs to hear with everyone where you work, everyone in your neighborhood and everyone in your family. The message is *only God can forgive sins*. Try it! That’s what they want to hear. That’s what they need to hear. And praise God, that’s the wonderful message our God has given us to tell them. *Only God can forgive sins, and Jesus is God*. Remember, Jesus, our Savior, died for one primary reason—to take away the sins of the world. That’s the good news. Everyone you meet can, like this helpless paralytic,

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be set free at last *to walk with God.*

Let's go tell it. Let's go shout it.

God does forgive sins.

God will forgive sins.

God can forgive sins.

And only God can.

What a message! What a life! What a God!

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