

## Without a Prayer

Luke 5:17-26

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**Summary:** For the first time in Jesus' earthly ministry, He is not only going to heal someone from a physical illness, but He is going to announce His divine power to forgive sins—a power only reserved for God Himself. As Jesus displays his spiritual healing through an example of spiritual healing, we will see that while healing for our bodies is a blessing, healing for our souls will last throughout eternity.

One author reported an incident that occurred back in 1968 on a flight headed for New York—a routine and normally very boring flight. But this time it proved to be otherwise.

As they began their descent, the landing gear would not engage. The pilot tried everything, but the gears would not lock into place. He informed ground control and was instructed to circle the landing field while the emergency crew coated the runway with foam and fire trucks and emergency vehicles moved into position.

Meanwhile, the passengers were told what was happening; a sense of dread settled on everyone. As they began their final descent, the passengers were instructed to bend forward with their heads between their knees and grab their ankles. Sounds of sobbing and desperate

cries of terror filled the cabin. It was one of those “I can't believe this is happening to me” experiences.

Then, with the landing only moments away, the pilot announced over the intercom: “At this moment, in accordance with International Aviation Codes established at Geneva, it is my obligation to inform you that if you believe in God you should commence prayer.”

The landing occurred successfully—apart from extensive damage to the airplane—no one was injured. Even the airline didn't say much about it in the aftermath.

In fact, a relative of one of the passengers called the airline the very next day and asked about that unknown Geneva prayer rule, and the response was a cool, reserved, “No comment at this time.”

Amazing. The only thing that brought out into the open a rather well-hidden rule was a crisis. Pushed to the brink, back to the wall, right up to the wire, all escape routes closed; only then are people willing to recognize God.

Charles R. Swindoll, *The Finishing Touch: Becoming God's Masterpiece* (Word Publishing, 1994), p. 550

After reading this incident, it occurred to me that we've seen similar things happen—in moments of crisis, or tragedy, or in the face of some great dilemma—whether individually, nationally, or globally, it isn't unusual to hear this prayer rule dusted off and brought out into the open, once again.

The truth is, when people don't have a prayer, they are most likely to begin praying.



Has there been a time in your life when you prayed because of a great need? What happened? What did you learn from that experience?

When there's no other option but God, people are often ready to go to God, and many of them, in fact, become thankful for that crisis, because it brought them to their knees and ended up changing their lives forever.

Something like that is about to happen in the life of one very desperate man. He's

introduced to us in *Luke chapter 5*, so turn there.

This man is not introduced by his name, but by his illness. Dr. Luke informs us in **verse 18** that this man was helplessly paralyzed.

Now, before we watch Jesus deal with this man's illness, Luke introduces to us the audience. This is the first time that religious leaders have shown up to listen to Jesus teach, and watch Him heal the sick.

They're sitting on the front row—**notice verse 17:**

*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*

Since this is our first encounter with these religious leaders, and for those who are new in the faith: the teachers of the law were the scribes. Many of them were Pharisees as well and they handled legal matters for the nation.

They were the experts—the attorneys at Mosaic law—and they are here in Luke chapter 5 to basically take the minutes and copy down everything Jesus says, in order to discover some legal error in his teaching or ministry.

The other group is known as the Pharisees, and that term sort of says it all. Pharisee meant “Separated One.”

During the 400 years between Malachi and Matthew, this group had grown in prominence as men committed to defining, teaching, and keeping the law of Moses.

They were separated from the ordinary Jewish person because they were essentially so much better at keeping the law.

And we’re not just talking about the Law of Moses; we’re talking about the Oral Law that had developed and expanded over the previous 400 years.

For instance, the law of Moses forbade working on the Sabbath, so the nation of Israel naturally wondered how to define *work*.

Was it chopping wood, washing dishes, or how about pulling weeds in the yard, that should be against the law!

So, what’s work, exactly?

Over the years, the Pharisee’s provided the answer, and they defined work into 39 different categories, which they called, “Fathers of Work.” And then each of the 39 categories were sub-divided into thousands of rules and regulations that defined work.

William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke (Westminster, 1975), p. 60

It became a full-time job to just keep up with all the rules.

I’ll give you another illustration: the prophet Jeremiah forbade carrying a burden on the Sabbath day, so what exactly qualified something as a *burden*?

Here came the Pharisees again, and they defined a burden—and I quote— “milk enough for one swallow and food equal in weight to a dried fig.”

Ibid

So—get this straight—if you lifted anything to your mouth that weighed more than one dried fig, that was carrying a burden.

So how much does a dried fig weigh? I’m googling things I’ve never googled before.

I found out that a fresh fig weighs 50 grams, but that didn’t help much, so I searched a little longer and the closest I came to an answer was that 44 dried figs equaled one pound.

So, anything heavier than  $1/44^{\text{th}}$  of a pound would be a burden because that would weigh more than one dried fig.

Let me break it down for you even further: if you go to McDonald’s for lunch today—which I am not recommending; Bojangles is so much closer—but when you lift that Big Mac to your mouth for a bite, you are lifting 30 times more weight than a dried fig.

And when you leave McDonald’s, you will have broken the law of the Pharisee, not to mention the laws of nutrition!

Listen, we can't imagine how the law had become an immense burden—that was the burden.

And according to Josephus, the First Century Jewish historian, during the days of Jesus there were 6,000 Pharisees whose full-time job were making sure you didn't step out of line and go to McDonald's!

Because heaven knows, what mattered more than justice and holiness and compassion and integrity was how many dried figs you could lift to your mouth, at one time, and still, supposedly, be right with God.

So here they are, sitting in the front, along with their attorneys at law—the scribes—ready and waiting to catch Jesus stepping out of line.

Now let's get into this scene—**verse 18**:

*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...*

*Luke 5:18-19a*

Stop here for a moment. These men were trying to get their friend in to see Jesus, but the crowd is in the way.

It usually is.

The crowd never helps people find their way to Jesus.

But the more convicting thought that occurred to me here is whether or not we as believers—by the way we live and talk and work and act around others—are *showing people the way or are we in the way*.

Now Luke describes this man here in **verse 18** as **paralyzed**.

*Paraletikos* is the adjectival form found in the Gospel accounts, it gives us the word paralytic.

Ralph Earle, Word Meanings in the New Testament (Baker, 1986), p. 60

Luke uses the more medically correct term for this man, who suffered from some illness which had made him **paralyzed**.

We're not told what it was; what we do know is that there wasn't any way he could get to Jesus unless his friends carried him. He literally didn't have a prayer, which provides here another illustration of the gospel enterprise—this happens to be a picture of the great commission.

We are delivering the gospel to people who are spiritually paralyzed; we are bringing people to Jesus, for without Him they do not have a prayer. But we deliver the gospel to them and introduce them to Jesus.



How do you explain to someone that they are spiritually paralyzed without turning them off to your message? In what way can we balance truth and love in God's gospel message?

I love the persistence of these friends of his; they are carrying his mattress—his mat, which they have turned into a stretcher.

Bruce B. Barton, *Life Application Bible Commentary: Luke* (Tyndale, 1997), p. 122

But they can't get anywhere near the Lord. There's just no way; the entire city has turned out; the house is jammed and the crowd is standing out in front blocking their way in.

I love the fact that none of them said to each other; "The crowd's too big; we'll never get through; this must not be God's will."

R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: Volume 1* (Crossway Books, 1998), p. 176

No, they said, "Let's try the roof." **Verse 19 again:**

*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.*

*Luke 5:19*

In this typical first century home, the roof was the second floor, open to the sky. The roof was the ceiling of the first floor below.

Luke uses the word here for ceramic tiles—a more expensive home, a larger home—the tiles would have been laid down for strength and then covered with dirt or plaster for waterproofing.

So, these men are digging through the outer layer and then peeling up these tiles. You can imagine the mess it was making inside the house! I wondered how the homeowner was going to explain this to his insurance company.

Don't miss this: Jesus could have looked up and said, "Hey, you really don't need to go through all this trouble; your faith in my healing ability is obvious; just keep your friend up there and I'll heal him right now with a word, alright: Okay, be healed! Now run along, have a great day."

No, no, Jesus wants this paralytic lowered right into the living room because He has something more in mind than healing.

You see, according to rabbinical theology, physical infirmity was a sign of divine displeasure.

They were teaching the people, "the greater the sickness the greater the sinner." Just look at this man! Experiencing terrible judgment from God because he was evidently a terrible sinner. He's paralyzed, how much more helpless can you be?

To them, this man didn't have a prayer!

Add to that the fact that one rabbi, whose writings have survived the centuries, wrote, "No one gets up from his sick-bed until his sins are forgiven."

Darrell L. Bock, Luke, Volume 1 (Baker Academic, 1994), p. 484

God is the one displeased with sin; God is the one punishing the sinner with paralysis; God is the only one who can forgive sin; so, in order for this man to be healed, his sins need to be forgiven.

J. Dwight Pentecost, The Words and Works of Jesus Christ (Zondervan, 1981), p. 153

You see, Jesus is setting this up.

Which is why Jesus isn't in any hurry here; we don't know how long it took to make an opening in that ceiling, but Jesus wanted him to be lowered right down in front of all these Pharisees and scribes.

They have their legal pads out; they're getting it all down; they think they've got Jesus cornered here; they think *He* doesn't have a prayer.

Oh no, Jesus has them cornered. They are sitting in the front row for a demonstration of deity.

And that's exactly why Jesus doesn't heal this man right away. Look what happens first—**verse 20**:

*And when he saw their faith, he said, "Man, your sins are forgiven you."*

*Luke 5:20*

Sins—plural—every one of them!

Your sins are gone; all of them are literally, *dismissed*!

R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel (Augsburg Publishing, 1946), p. 296

Your sins are now sent away!

This is the distinctive element of Christianity: forgiveness. Sins are erased. That's the gospel. Your sins have been dismissed; God has chosen to forgive and forget your sins by the atoning work of Christ who died, was buried and rose again to prove it all was true.

Jesus is claiming to do what David said God could do in Psalm 103, to put your sins away as far as the east is from the west, to dismiss them forever, and if He remembers them no more, neither should you.

Barton, p. 124

What Jesus has *dismissed*, don't keep *digging* up.

Now this is the first time in the Gospel accounts where Jesus has said anything like this, claimed any kind of power to do this.

The scribes certainly dropped their legal pads in shock, and the Pharisees are fainting; they didn't see this one coming! In fact, none of them know what to say!

But then they get mad—**verse 21**:

*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...*

*Luke 5:21-22a*

The verb to **perceive** means, “to know fully; to thoroughly know their thoughts.”

Bock, p. 484

They hadn’t said anything out loud yet, but Jesus can read their minds.

By the way, has it occurred to you lately that you can’t hide anything from Jesus? He knew every one of that paralytic’s sins and he knows everyone of their thoughts.

Again, Jesus is fulfilling David’s description of God, paraphrased from Psalm 139:

“Lord, I am an open book to You; Even from a distance, you know what I’m thinking. You know everything I’m going to say before I start the first sentence.”

The Message, Psalm 139

You know what’s happening here? This is deity on display!

Jesus completely blows their minds by telling them exactly what they’re thinking before they ever start speaking.

**Verse 22 again:**

*When Jesus perceived their  
thoughts, he answered  
them, “Why do you  
question in your hearts?  
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.”*

*Luke 5:22-24*

Jesus tells them what they were thinking, “It’s easy to tell someone that their invisible sins have been forgiven, because nobody can verify it, but a visible healing can be immediately verified, and to prove that something spiritual happened, I’m going to prove it by making something physical happen.”

And He says to this man, literally, “Get up, take your mat and start walking and don’t stop walking until you get home.”

Now, for this paralyzed man to immediately get up and start walking home is going to demand a series of instantaneous miracles:

- muscle memory of how to walk implanted in his brain;
- physical balance restored;
- atrophied muscles instantly regenerated;
- nerves regenerated and nerve signals refiring;
- damaged spinal tissue healed;
- muscles and tendons and joints operating instantly and perfectly in order for him to immediately get up and walk home.

And that's exactly what happened.  
Imagine these guys on the front row now!

Well, you don't have to imagine, Luke tells us in **verse 26**:

*And amazement seized them all, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, "We have seen extraordinary things today."*

*Luke 5:26*

No kidding!

Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights from Luke* (Zondervan, 2012), p. 132

You could translate it: we have seen unbelievable things; unexpected things; marvelous things.

David E. Garland, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke* (Zondervan, 2011), p. 244

Two sets of miracles have taken place here, one verifying the other—spiritual regeneration and physical regeneration.

His sins were forgiven, and his body was healed.

By the way, don't overlook the fact that the greater miracle of the two was spiritual. Why? Well, because physical healing would be temporary during his lifetime; he will eventually grow old and die.

Physical restoration was tremendous, but it was temporary.

But the spiritual miracle of regeneration—the forgiveness of this man's sins—was eternal. His faith in Jesus would take him

beyond this life, to eternal life with his Savior.



**Why was the physical healing less important than the spiritual healing for this man? Is the same true for us today?**

Let me offer a couple of observations from this amazing scene:

**Only helpless sinners understand their true need to be forgiven by God.**

This is a picture of total helplessness. People without a prayer are the ones who are ready to make the most important prayer of their lives—coming in faith to Jesus and finding forgiveness.

I remember reading the story told by Hugh Redwood, an old preacher from England. He told the story of a woman who lived in the dock district in London 200 years ago. She lived with a Chinese man and they had, what they called back then, a half-cast baby. She was an outcast to her society. She heard of a ladies Bible study in a church not too far away and decided to make the effort to go—recognizing her spiritual need. She went and enjoyed the study of God's word; it was new to her, and she returned the next week and the next, bringing her baby with her, because on that occasion there



was no one to keep him. Then the Vicar came to her and said, “Ma’am, you cannot return any longer, the other women do not want you and your baby here.” Tears filled her eyes and she looked at this religious leader and said, “I know I’m a sinner but isn’t there anywhere that a sinner can go?”

People turned away by the religious world, people who know they are stained with sin, they are never turned away by Jesus.

The Bible says, ***“Call upon the name of the Lord and you shall be saved.” (Acts 2:21).***

**Only forgiven sinners understand the true joy of singing praise to God.**

We read here in verse 25 that he went home glorifying God—and then, verse 26—all of them (mark that, all of them) joined in glorifying God as well, being filled with awe.

This is the only verse I can think of where I’m even given the slightest impression that an entire group of Pharisees and scribes believed in who Jesus was. A revival just sort of breaks out right here in this man’s home.

By the way, these Pharisees will not be the last to leave their religious pride and good works in the dust in favor of a relationship with Christ.

In fact, the apostle Paul will give his testimony in Acts chapter 23 and verse 6

where he tells us that he was at one time a Pharisee.

But here they all are, in this house that used to have a ceiling. They are all glorifying God after witnessing sins forgiven, and a life restored.

And to this day, a song of praise comes from the heart of people who realize that without the Lord’s forgiveness, we don’t stand a chance; we don’t have a prayer.

How about you? Have you run out of options? Have you tried religion and come up empty? Maybe you realize today that you don’t have a prayer—apart from Christ.

But when you come to Jesus, and ask Him for forgiveness, He will dismiss them as far as the east is from the west, and you will understand, like this man, the reason we all have, as believers, for singing praise to God.

The word Luke uses here for glorifying God comes from the verb *doxazo*, which gives us our word *doxology*.

A song of praise to God.

Why don’t we stand and sing that Doxology that we know so well, and praise God from whom all blessings flow:

*Praise God from whom all  
blessings flow*

*Praise Him all creatures  
here below*

*Praise him above Ye  
heavenly host*

*Praise Father, Son and Holy  
Ghost—amen.*

Lord Jesus, you've forgiven us and set us  
up on spiritual feet of faith. Start walking!  
Keep walking until we arrive home!

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