

Faith and Works

Luke 5:17-26

The lake was calm and Jesus was tired. He had visited the small towns, farm villages, and country crossroads that freckle the hills and dales of Galilee. Now His first preaching tour was finished

The little boat sailed silently across the Sea of Galilee's deep blue waters, little waves slapping against hull and breezes popping the sail. At Capernaum they tied the boat up at the pier.

And Jesus slipped silently back into town, weary and footsore. As it was before left for this first tour of Galilee, Peter's humble house on a narrow side street was also Jesus' home.

After walking the dusty footpaths and donkey trails that spider-webbed Galilee, more than anything else the Master needed rest. But He was not to get it.

When He had come back to Capernaum several days afterward, it was heard that He was at home. Mark 2:1

Next door neighbors noticed Jesus was back home. Others caught a glimpse of Him through a window. And within a few hours, the news was buzzing all over town, from the bustling marketplace to the fish markets beside the water soaked piers.

Everyone was still talking about the miracle the Master performed in the synagogue and all the healings at Peter's house after sunset that same Sabbath. So without waiting to be invited, they streamed down the street and crowded into the house Christ now called home.

And many were gathered together, so that there was no longer room, not even near the door; Mark 2:2

Across town, another man also heard the miracle working Carpenter from Nazareth was back in Capernaum. But as much as he wanted to, he could not join the crowds that thronged Peter's house. He was paralyzed.

Then and now, many of those who need Jesus the most cannot get to him without help. Their fate rests with the faith and works of other people. People like us.

Faith Without Works

Fishermen and farmers, housewives and shopkeepers crowded into Peter's house. And still the people came.

When no one else could squeeze in, they crowded around the windows and doors. Most came out of curiosity. Some had seen Him heal brothers, sons, or wives. Others had only heard about the Nazarene's power to heal and came hoping to see a miracle.

Remembering that, it is strange that not one of the three Gospel accounts of this day record that any of those spectators bothered to bring anyone who suffered along with them.

Only one man was healed day. And when Jesus did heal the one man who was brought to Him, those watchers were utterly astounded.

They were all struck with astonishment and began glorifying God; and they were filled with fear, saying, "We have seen remarkable things today." Verse 26

We cannot say the crowds at Capernaum had no faith at all. They obviously believed that Jesus could heal and drive out demons. That was the main reason they crowded into and around Peter's house.

But their faith was so frail and feeble it never occurred to them to bring sick neighbors with them. They did not even see their own need for forgiveness and freedom. James called that dead faith, as limp and lifeless as the paralytic's legs.

...just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. James 2:26

But that does not mean they were a neutral force in the drama that took place at Peter's house that day. They not only failed to bring people in need to Jesus. They also kept others away from Him.

With neither knowledge nor intent, they became an obstacle that prevented the one man who did need Jesus from reaching Him. They crowded in shoulder to shoulder, packing the house so tightly the faithful friends who carried the paralytic could not get to Jesus.

Concerned only about themselves, it did not even occur to them to move out of the way and make room for those who did bring someone who needed the Savior.

People with faith that stops short of works always become obstacles that keep people from coming to Christ. Nevertheless, we do not hear one word of rebuke or criticism from our Lord's lips. He knew that would do no good.

Instead, Jesus offered those whose faith was too weak to produce works what every believer with immature or impotent faith needs.

...and He was speaking the Word to them. Mark 2:2

In his letter to the church at Rome, Paul described the process by which real, working faith is produced.

...faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ. Romans 10:17

The message Jesus preached that day had to do with His kingdom of life and love. He spoke of repentance and renewal, of commitment and consecration, of faith and forgiveness. He knew only His Word would plant the seed of a living faith in men's hearts.

Faith That Works

Four other men also appeared at Peter's house that day. And they stand in stark contrast to the rest of the eager crowd. When they heard that Jesus was back in town, their first thought was of a friend.

With legs like matchsticks, he laid on his mat, sweltering in the summer heat and trembling when winter winds swept in off the lake. The man's friends were thoroughly convinced that Peter's heavenly houseguest was the paralytic's only hope.

And since their friend was unable to get to Jesus by himself, they took matters into their own hands. With one man at each corner, they picked up the man, mat and all. Then they lugged him down the lane across town to Peter's house.

And some men were carrying on a bed a man who was paralyzed; and they were trying to bring him in and to set him down in front of Him. Verse 18

But when they rounded the last corner, the men's hearts sank. The house was packed. People crowded around the doors and windows, spilling out on the street. And no one would move to let them carry the litter inside. Nevertheless, the four friends were undaunted.

But not finding any way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down through the tiles with his stretcher, into the middle of the crowd, in front of Jesus. Verse 19

At the side of the house, steps led up to a flat roof. On starry summer evenings, that roof served as an open air patio for the family. So the four friends carried the paralytic up those steps to the roof.

Measuring with careful paces, they marked the place directly over the spot where the Savior stood. Then they broke up the surface of the clay asphalt that covered the roof.

With tools they found or borrowed, they scooped out the homemade mortar to the clay tiles beneath the surface. Finally, they lifted out the tiles, the sticks and slabs of stone that spanned the beams.

With debris showering the crowd below and even the Healer Himself, they found some lengths of rope among the nets and tackle Peter stored on the roof. Tying a rope to each corner, they carefully lowered the man on the mat through the ragged hole.

Jesus stopped His sermon in mid-sentence. Looking up at the man as he was lowered into the room, the Savior smiled a moment before He spoke.

Seeing their faith, He said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." Verse 20

Luke's careful account is very specific. Jesus was not moved by the faith of the man on the mat. He was impressed with the faith of the man's four friends.

Their faith was worlds away from that of everyone else who came that day. They not only believed Jesus could help and heal their friend. They also acted upon that faith.

They knew if only they could get the paralytic to Jesus, his life would be restored: body, soul and spirit. Their faith was so determined, even when obstacles appeared that made their goal seem impossible, they did not give up.

It didn't matter if it meant some hard work and even considerable expense. After all, someone would have to pay to have Peter's roof repaired. But that made no difference to them. They did not care what it might take or what it might cost. They were determined to put their faith into action.

Jesus responded to their faith with more than mere words of praise. He did what He always does when He sees people who trust Him so much they act upon their faith and refuse to be discouraged by any obstacle.

He poured out His power into the life of the man who so needed His touch. That is the reward of a living faith.

Works Without Faith

The crowd would not make room for the paralytic and his four porters. But they did make room for other men. Luke identified those men as scribes: Pharisees who were doctors and teachers of the law.

...and there were some Pharisees and teachers of the law sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem; Verse 17

They had also heard stories about the Carpenter from Nazareth and the miracles He performed. But they did not come to see a miracle. They came to weigh His words and see if He was as dangerous as they all feared He was.

This was the opening salvo of a long campaign of determined opposition to Jesus. Before it was all finished, they would lace together a dark fabric of lies and bribery to capture and kill Him. And that is surprising.

After all, it easy to admire these men with their rich robes and perfumed beards. No one could boast a more complete or comprehensive obedience to the Holy Scriptures recorded in the Old Testament than these scribes. Most of them could quote the entire Pentateuch.

And that is not all. They devoted their lives to obeying the minutest regulation Moses left. They even tithed the garden spices they grew.

But while they worshiped and worked, prayed and praised God, they had no faith in Jesus at all. Even as they sat and listened, they never seriously considered believing in Jesus as their Messiah, let alone committing their lives to Him.

The four men on the roof expected the Master to heal their friend. So His first words to the paralytic surprised his four friends. But the same statement astounded and upset the scribes.

Friend, your sins are forgiven you. Verse 20

While the Savior stopped short of saying precisely who was forgiving the man's sins, the tense of the verb He used removed all doubt. We might paraphrase Jesus' declaration: your sins are forgiven right here and right now, this very moment.

The scribes understood that to mean Jesus was saying He Himself was forgiving the man's sin.

The scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, "Who is this man who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone?" Verses 21

Luke's account leaves no room for us to disagree with those scribes. Instantly perceiving their thoughts, Jesus openly confronted them. But He did more than that.

He did what they least expected Him to do. He read their hearts and minds like they read the old temple scrolls.

But Jesus, aware of their reasonings, answered and said to them, "Why are you reasoning in your hearts?" Verse 22

The Savior's question was itself a proof that He was more than a mere man. After all, only God can read men's thoughts.

You understand my thought from afar. Psalm 139:2

But Jesus did not stop there. He went on to ask a second question that linked spiritual forgiveness with physical healing.

Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins have been forgiven you,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? Verse 23

Our Lord's argument was simple, really. Granted, only God can forgive sin. But then God is also the only One who can heal diseases. David's psalm says so.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits; Who pardons all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases; Psalm 103:2-3

Our Lord continued with words that many of those who stood shoulder to shoulder in Peter's house did not fully understand. But the scribes who sat with fierce faces and folded arms did.

But, so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins," Verse 24

As experts in both the Law and the prophets, the scribes knew what the Master meant when He called Himself the Son of Man. They remembered what Daniel wrote.

I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed. Daniel 7:13-14

Daniel's prophecy was clear to the scribes. The Son of Man was the Messiah. And as such, He alone was given dominion, glory and a kingdom spanning both time and space. He was and is Lord over all the universe with eternal, everlasting Lordship over all creation.

Finally, to seal His argument, Jesus offered indisputable proof He was and is and ever shall be the eternal, creator God.

He said to the paralytic — "I say to you, get up, and pick up your stretcher and go home." Immediately he got up before them, and picked up what he had been lying on, and went home glorifying God. Verses 24-25

God's Son was the only Man at Peter's house that day who could see the paralytic's sin. More important still, He was also the only One who could see that those sins were instantly forgiven and forever obliterated.

Like us, the scribes could not see the wonders God works in a heart. But they could see the miracles He worked on the man's body. So when the man stretched out his legs, climbed to his feet, and walked out of the house, the Master's enemies were left without a reply.

Only God could heal like that: not with rituals or potions, but just as He had created the stars and the sun. With a simple command!

The scribes were left without an argument. Tragically, when they left Peter's house, they were also without faith. And the crowd that stood by and witnessed the miracle were not much better.

They were all struck with astonishment and began glorifying God; and they were filled with fear, saying, "We have seen remarkable things today." Verse 26

The crowd did leave with wonder and praise on their lips. But that is where they stopped. There is no record that any of them ran home to fetch back sick relatives.

And even if they did not have any sickness among their families or friends, all of them had sins that held them in the dark chains of death and despair. Yet none of them came asking Jesus to grant them forgiveness.

Their error seems slight and insignificant. Once again, their faith stopped short of works. Yes, Jesus could heal and forgive. They believed that. But they did not allow Him to heal them or forgive their sins.

And that always is an eternal error.

