

**MATTHEW 9:1–8.** (EHV)

Jesus got into a boat, crossed over, and came to his own town. There people brought to him a man who was paralyzed, lying on a stretcher. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, **“Take heart, son! Your sins are forgiven.”** Then some of the experts in the law said among themselves, **“This fellow is blaspheming!”** Since Jesus knew their thoughts, he said, **“Why are you thinking evil in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up 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 paralyzed man, **“Get up, take your stretcher, and go home.”** The man got up and went home. When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe and glorified God, who had given such authority to men.

What gives you joy?

As most, if not all, of you know, I recently became a father. After my wife gave birth, it seemed like a long time before I finally got to hold my baby girl and the doctor and the nurses left the room, and I was finally alone with my wife and daughter. I don't remember everything I said and did, but I do remember looking down at her and saying, “We've been waiting for you for a long time.” It was a pretty joyful moment.

What gives you joy? Holding your son or daughter in your arms? Watching a child or grandchild compete? Watching the birth of a calf? Sitting around the dinner table with family? Playing cards with friends? Curling up on the couch with an improving book? Listening to your favorite music? A sunny 78-degree day with no wind? A good soaking summer rain?

These things all provide joy at least to some people, but none of them provide the greatest joy that can be had. It only stands to reason that the greatest joy a person could have would be 1) if there was something he needed infinitely more than anything else, and 2) if he could know for certain that that need had been completely met.

Guess what, friends? I can tell you for a fact on the basis of our Scripture text this morning that Jesus's forgiveness is the greatest joy we all have, for precisely those two reasons. Jesus's forgiveness is our greatest need, and it is our greatest certainty.

**1. Jesus's Forgiveness Is Our Greatest Need**

A growing crowd had forced Jesus to leave his hometown of Capernaum not long before this. But if he had thought that he would be greeted by just a handful of people when he returned, he would have been mistaken. You see, Jesus had won their love by preaching the gospel and healing many sick and demon-possessed people. One of them had even offered to leave behind his former life and follow Jesus wherever he might go. The crowd had all piled up on shore as Jesus was departing, and had watched him sailing away in the boat across the Sea of Galilee.

Some from that same crowd probably then watched a furious storm come up without warning on the Sea of Galilee. As they dispersed to their homes, they were probably thinking one thing above all, “I wonder if Jesus is okay?”

Now he was back safe and sound, and doubtless some of his disciples were telling them how Jesus had calmed the storm and what amazing things he had done on the other side of the

lake. And so the crowds thronged to him. Mark tells us that so many gathered in the house he was staying at that there wasn't any room left, not even outside the door.

This proved to be problematic for some men who were bringing their friend to see Jesus. He was paralyzed, lying on a stretcher, on which he probably lived most of his life. They couldn't even get their friend near the door.

So they improvised. Houses back then didn't have tiled or steel roofs. They had flat roofs that, with a little effort, could be taken apart. A Galilean might go up to his roof to take in a nice evening lake view with a drink in hand. These men went up to take in the view inside the house. Once they determined Jesus's location in the house, they hoisted their friend on the roof, and then lowered him through the opening right in front of Jesus as he was preaching.

Now at this point we might expect Jesus to take note of this commotion above him and to prevent it before it got too far. The situation was getting ridiculous. But he didn't "blow up" at the men who were taking apart the roof above his head and interrupting him. He saw the faith of the men and the paralytic, and he actually stopped and turned his attention to the man on the stretcher. In fact, Jesus called him "son."

"Take heart, son! Your sins are forgiven."

What a thing to say at that point! When wise and able people are confronted with someone in great need, they prioritize their response by ranking the person's needs. Let's say you come upon a man lying on the side of the road next to a mangled motorcycle. He isn't breathing and his leg is jutting out a weird angle. What would you do first? Try to set the bone? No, you would perform CPR. Or imagine that you went in for open heart surgery and, just as the cardiac surgeon was about to begin his work in your open chest cavity, he happened to glance at your teeth. "Oh my goodness, this woman has horrible plaque buildup. Hand me my periodontal scaler, would you, nurse?" How unthinkable!

Take note, then, that Jesus, who had already healed a paralyzed man in Capernaum, after ranking this man's needs, says this: "Your sins are forgiven."

And not only that, but he tells him to cheer up because of it! Maybe we could tolerate Jesus's procedure if, after telling the man his sins were forgiven, he healed him and *then* told him, "There you go. Cheer up now." But not only did Jesus expect the man to be cheerful and joyful already now as he lay there unable to move, we are not even given any indication that Jesus had any intention of healing this man's paralysis at all! It was only *after* the experts in the law began thinking accusing thoughts about Jesus that Jesus addressed the man's paralysis. Jesus could only adopt this procedure if he knew that his forgiveness was this man's greatest need.

And indeed it was. You see, both Jesus and this man knew what sin is and what it deserves. Sin is anything contrary to God's holy law which is summed up in the Ten Commandments. And since it is contrary to God's holy law, it deserves the opposite of what God is and gives. God is, God gives, life—temporal life on earth and eternal life in heaven. And so sin deserves death—death on earth and eternal death in hell.

And both Jesus and this man knew that God's holy law still condemned this man of sin, even though he could not hurt, much less murder, anybody; even though he could not commit adultery, not only because he was paralyzed but also because very few women would even find him attractive; even though he could not rob a bank or break into his neighbor's house or pickpocket anyone. Oh sure, perhaps he could still curse someone and take God's name in vain

and tell lies and gossip, but Jesus and this man knew none of those were the main reason God's law condemned him.

God's law is first and foremost aimed at the heart. And as the man heard God's word and examined his heart and listened to his conscience, he knew that God didn't need to see him swing a sword; he could see his hatred. He knew that God didn't need to see a woman who was not his wife crawl into his stretcher with him; he could see his lust. He knew that God didn't need to hear a guard sound the alarm; he could see his covetousness. God could see that his sinful heart did not love him above all else. Maybe he sometimes even blamed God for his paralysis.

The paralytic had all the time in the world to lie there and inhabit and explore his thoughts and wishes. And his conscience told him, correctly, that before God he was just as bad as any criminal, just as bad at heart as the experts in the law who were about to accuse Jesus of blasphemy. He knew he deserved much worse than the stretcher he lay on. He deserved to lie paralyzed on a bed of fire for all eternity.

Jesus's forgiveness *was* this man's greatest need.

Brothers and sisters, it is ours too. Jesus tells us through the apostle Paul that we are all by nature dead in our sins and objects of God's wrath. He tells us that there is no one who does good, not even one. Jesus tells us why through David in the psalms. He tells us that we were conceived and born in sin, from sinful parents. That's why we also don't love God above all else by nature.

And if you have any doubts about your condition and what it deserves, listen to the conscience God gave you. And if you've told your conscience to be quiet so many times that it's been reduced to a timid whisper, then take a cue from Solomon and look at the meaninglessness of your life without Jesus's forgiveness. Not one thing that you've done will last forever or mean anything one day apart from Jesus. And if you think you've found sufficient meaning in your hobbies or habits or work or charity, then finally look at your mortality. Death is the result of sin, nothing more and nothing less. And it is only a small foretaste of the eternal death to come that we all deserve.

Jesus's forgiveness is our greatest need too.

## **2. Jesus's Forgiveness Is Our Greatest Certainty**

At this point we'd love just to say, "Yeah, Jesus's forgiveness is our greatest need, but there his forgiveness is, right there!" Except there's one small problem. It's a problem that the experts in the law detected immediately. "Then some of the experts in the law said among themselves, 'This fellow is blaspheming!'"

The problem is this: Who is Jesus to forgive sins? Sure, if someone tripped Jesus as he was walking down the road, and then felt bad and apologized, Jesus could forgive him. Even the experts in the law knew that there is a personal, earthly forgiveness that people can give.

But to encounter someone you've never met before and to tell him in a general way, objectively, that his sins are forgiven? If I stood up here and said to all of you, "You all get free hunting and fishing licenses and state park passes next year," far from rejoicing, you would instead rightly ask me, "What authority do you have to give those things?" If every sin is

ultimately contrary to *God's* law, then only *God* has the authority forgive sin. And Jesus certainly wasn't *God*...was he?

We have already begun to suspect that he is. For we saw that the paralytic did indeed cheer up. We don't hear him objecting to Jesus's procedure at all. And we ourselves cheered up when we heard him say it. Something about his authority, the convincing way in which he said it, gave a pat on the shoulder of our heart and said, "This guy's serious, and he's right."

But there's more evidence. "Since Jesus knew their thoughts, he said, 'Why are you thinking evil in your hearts?'" Did you hear it? Jesus knew what the experts in the law were thinking! And Jesus called those thoughts *evil*. That means they were wrong. They thought Jesus was blaspheming because he was essentially claiming to be *God*. But Jesus essentially told them, "You are wrong. I am *not* blaspheming. I *am* *God*."

And to prove it Jesus asked them a question, "Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk?'" There are two ways the experts in the law might have answered it, but they come out in the same place. On the one hand, they could have said, "Both are easy, Jesus. Anyone can *say*, 'Your sins are forgiven,' and anyone can *say*, 'Get up and walk.' What is *hard* is actually to accomplish those things just by saying it." Pope Pius IX, who lived during the 1800s, is responsible for getting approved the Roman Catholic doctrine that the pope is infallible. According to this doctrine, when he speaks officially, he cannot be wrong. According to another Roman Catholic bishop who lived at the same time, Pius went out for a walk to try out his new infallibility one day. He encountered a paralyzed man and, feeling good and spry, told him, "Get up and walk!" The man instantly jumped to his feet...only to crumple in a heap a moment later, to Pius's great disappointment. Saying it was easy enough; accomplishing it was considerably more difficult.

On the other hand, the teachers of the law could have answered according to their senses: "Well, Jesus, I suppose, as I see this man lying here helpless on the stretcher, I must confess that I think telling this man to get up and walk would be more difficult."

Whatever answer they thought or gave amounted to this: Only *God* could do either or both. That's precisely the thought Jesus wanted them to think as he continued. "'But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,' he then said to the paralyzed man, 'Get up, take your stretcher, and go home.' The man got up and went home."

The paralytic, already filled with joy, must have had a smile crawling up one side of his face as Jesus engaged the experts in the law. He must have been thinking, "Go ahead, Jesus. You don't need to; you've already filled me with the greatest joy I could have. But if you want to show these men who you are, I'm ready." And as soon as Jesus spoke the words, in the joy of faith he jumped up, never doubting that his legs would now hold him, never doubting that he would be able to do something he had no practice at, to walk, all the way home.

If Jesus could do that, if he did do that, then what he had told the paralytic was also true. His sins were forgiven. And if Jesus had the authority to forgive his sins, he was *God*.

Friends, we not only have the same certainty of forgiveness from this account, we have even greater proof. For after Jesus did this, he went to the cross. And there he offered up his holy life to *God* as a substitute for our sinful one. There he paid the death-price for our sinful condition and for all of our sins. There he said, "It is done. It is finished," and then he died. And

the devil and his demons sneered. “This fellow is blaspheming. Who can pay for sin and completely eradicate its guilt and power but God alone? And God cannot die!”

And on Easter morning, it’s as if Jesus turned to the devil and his demons in their unbelief, so that we might turn to him in faith, and he said, “So that you and all the world may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...” Then he got up and he left his bed and he walked right out of that tomb.

And our certainty is greater still. Note that Jesus didn’t refer to himself as the Son of *God*, but as the Son of *Man*. He wanted us to know that what the crowd said is true: God has given such authority to *humans*! Because Jesus has risen from the dead, I can say to you and you can say to each other with authority—not our own, but Jesus’s authority—“Cheer up! Rejoice! All your sins are forgiven! You shall not die, but live!” And you can be just as certain of it as if Jesus himself had said it, because he *is* saying it, through you and through me.

Most of you know that I like telling stories from the life of an immigrant Lutheran pastor named Johannes Strieter. About 160 years ago, Pastor Strieter encountered a woman who had no joy. Her husband came to Pastor Strieter and told him that his wife was going out of her mind. He had heard that such a person should have her insanity beaten out of her, and wanted to know if he should try it.

“No, no, no,” Pastor Strieter said, “how is that going to help? You must be kind to her.” When he himself went to talk to her, he learned that one child after another had died at birth, and so she thought God was punishing her for her sins. Pastor Strieter kept pointing her to the Savior and reciting passages, but to no avail. She remained just as joyless as before.

Finally, he was on brink of despairing that his woman could be helped. He implored her, “Do you really *want* to be saved?”

“Oh sure!” the woman exclaimed.

“Good,” Pastor Strieter replied, “and God wants it too, and he affirms it with an oath. Now who’s going to prevent it?”

And suddenly the woman raised her head and, with joy beaming from her face, she cried out, “That’s true, isn’t it!” And from then on she was happy—not because her dear little children came back to life, but because her greatest need had been met. She was forgiven.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus has enabled us to rejoice and be glad even in a worsening economy, even in sickness, even in paralysis, even in the havoc of natural disasters, even with cancer or some other terminal illness, even in death. He has enabled us to rejoice and be glad because his forgiveness is our greatest need, and his forgiveness is our greatest certainty. His forgiveness means that, whatever may happen here, no one and no thing can rob us of the certainty that one day, when Jesus returns, he will tell us, “Get up and go home.”

And we will stand up from our graves, and go with him to heaven.

Is there any greater joy than that? No, there is not. And that joy is ours. Amen.