

The Greatest Miracle of All, Part 1

Luke 5:17-20

Hear in Luke 5, join me in verse 17. Follow along, as I read the account. "On one of those days, as he," as Jesus, "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. 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, they went up on the roof, let him down with his bed through the tiles into the midst before Jesus. And when he saw their faith, he said, 'Man, your sins are forgiven you.'

"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, 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.' Immediately
he rose up before them and picked up what he had been lying on
and went home, glorifying God. And amazement seized them all,
and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, 'We
have seen extraordinary things today.'"

Incredible account, isn't it? It really does grip the
imagination, holds our attention from start to finish. We can
actually divide these verses from verse 17-26, you actually
divide this account into two sections. First section, which is
what we'll cover today, that's verses 17-20. Luke is really
introducing us to the scene there. And as we are introduced to
the scene, there's a tension that builds and it brings us to the
climax, in the greatest miracle of all, which is the forgiveness
of sins. That leads us right into the second section, verses 21-
26. As the tension ramps up again, and builds to yet another
climax of really what's a lesser miracle, as Jesus makes the
paralytic stand up and walk home.

There's a certain verb that's repeated in the final verse
of each of those two sections, once in verse 20 and once in
verse 26. And that verb connects the two sections thematically,
it's the verb to see, to see. In Greek, it's *horao*. The final

sentence in verse 26, the testimony of the crowd, "We have seen extraordinary things today."

And that word that's translated there, extraordinary things, that's the word *paradoxos*. And that's where we get our own word, English word, paradox. The word paradox refers to what seems to be, what is apparently a contradiction. Something that's unexplainable to us, something that doesn't seem to make sense at first glance. What seemed to be contradictory to them was this, "How can a man forgive sin?" The other paradox in the text is connected not to what they saw, but to what Jesus saw. So back up to verse 20 and notice what prompted his pronouncement of forgiveness. Again, that word *horao*, when he saw their faith. Same verb used in verses 20 and verse 26, the verb *horao*. Jesus was there seeing something and he was seeing something deeper. And what he saw was a paradox of a different kind.

He was watching the paradox of forgiveness unfold before this crowded room. Question is this, here's the paradox: How can a holy God, one who gives laws, one who judges according to those laws impartially, one who is utterly inflexible in his administration of justice, one who will not bend those rules one fraction of a degree, even for the sake of compassion, even for

the, for pity's sake because a judge like that would be perverting justice not upholding it right? So how can a God like that, forgive a guilty sinner?

That's another, different kind of paradox, isn't it? Here's the language that Paul used in Romans 3:26. How can God remain just not budging a single millimeter from the demands of holy justice, and yet justify the guilty sinner? Paul answered that paradox even as he raised it there in Romans 3:26, that God put forth Jesus to satisfy the dreadful demands of God's holy justice, "so that God may be both just, and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus Christ."

Folks, that is the greatest miracle God has ever performed. It reveals the profound depths of the many facets of his holy character. The forgiveness of the guilty sinner reveals God's holiness, reveals his justice, reveals his mercy, reveals his compassion, his power, his goodness, and ultimately, it reveals his great wisdom.

How can he bring these two things in tension? How can he bring them together? The demands of justice and his desire to show mercy. It's great wisdom, involves matters of incredible paradox; one in the incarnation of the Son of God, who became the sinless Son of man, the other in the forgiveness of sin, on

the basis of faith. We know all that simply as the gospel. Amen? Like all the miraculous works of salvation that God performs this one too, happened in a historical context. There was something that happened in time and space, there was a real life situation with a real life drama that was unfolding. This one happened in a very crowded room, some of whom were critics. Some were undecided, others were believing.

Take a look then at point one in your outline. Though it was a room full of Pharisees, for Jesus, this was an occasion for influence, an occasion for influence and we'll see that in just a moment. Look at verse 17, says "On one of those days, as he was teaching." There is Jesus again teaching. Then Mark tells us that they were all crowded into a local home in Capernaum, probably Peter's home.

In the previous account, we know that Jesus cleansed the leper, he'd been out and about in Galilee with his disciples. He was not at Capernaum, but according to Matthew chapter 9, verse 1, "He has returned to his own city." He's returned to Capernaum. And again, it's likely they were in Peter's home, but continuing on in 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," Stop there for a second.

Let's introduce ourselves to these characters. I know you're familiar with some of these, but let me unpack it just a little bit for you. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law. Who are they? And what are they doin' there? The presence of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law in Capernaum, of all places, is a really, really big deal. It's easy for us to read right past that and not to understand how significant this is. These guys did not come visiting Capernaum, a fishing village on a whim. They were there for a purpose. They were there as an official delegation.

Pharisees were, they were a fairly small sect of Jews, only about 6000 of them in Israel during Jesus' day. But they were devout. These guys were serious minded men. Well educated layman actually. And though they were relatively few in number, their influence far outweighed their numbers. They had a massive, popular appeal. There were men of very significant influence among the masses.

Back in Maccabean revolt in 168 BC, that's when the Pharisees sect rose into prominence in that period, almost 200 years before Jesus' ministry here. They were known as

separatists; they were like an ancient holiness movement.

Pharisee actually means separated ones. It comes from the Hebrew verb *parad*, which means to divide or to separate. Josephus, he gives us a lot of information about the Pharisees he spends time describing the Pharisees in his *Antiquities of the Jews*. And he calls it one of the three influential sects within Judaism at that time, along with the Essenes and the Sadducees.

All of those, the Pharisees, the Essenes, the Sadducees, all three of those groups were reactions to the spread of Greco Roman culture at that time and since called Hellenism. The Essenes, they resisted the spirit of Hellenism by running away from it completely. They were strict separatists think like monks, they wanted to get out of there, out of the cities, away from Hellenism, live in caves in the deserts and all the rest. You may remember the Dead Sea Scrolls they were discovered at a community of Essenes called the Qumran community. That was a commune of Essenes.

So the Essenes ran away from Hellenism, the Sadducees, they were exactly the opposite. They were the liberals who embraced Hellenism, and they used it for their own political and economic advantage. Very political, thoroughly immersed in the culture, that was the Sadducees. And remember, those are the guys that

are running the temple. Those are the guys who are in charge of the worship in Israel, that irked people. Like the Pharisees, they were very different, they agreed with the Essenes, who saw the Sadducees compromise and their embrace of Hellenistic culture as completely reprehensible, even a reason for God's wrath and judgment on the nation.

But the radical departure from society like the Essenes wanted to do, that was totally impractical. They also saw it as wrongheaded. The Pharisees, they decided we can't leave society, we need to stay in society, because we need to influence people. Eventually, they wanted to reinvigorate and reform the Jewish faith. But they remain separate themselves, from the Hellenizing forces, the pagan culture, they were trying to adhere as strictly as possible to the Torah.

Pharisees were, as I said, they were laymen. They were typically businessman, merchants, they were intelligent, they were business wise, they were savvy, often wealthy. In the practice of religion though, they were laymen. They were well studied. They were fairly well educated, but they held no official positions. So when people listened to the Pharisees, it was kind of like listening to a well educated layman of great influence. You know, the, the people who were in official

positions, the priests and those kind of people, synagogue rulers.

People could look at them and say, Well, you've got an interest in what you're saying, after all, you're getting paid to do what you do, kind of like pastors. Uh, that's the pastor, he's paid to be good. But the, the Pharisees as laymen, not so much. They're doing that because they're convinced of the truth of what they're saying. They're men of deep conviction. They're the theological conservatives of their day.

They really did believe the Scriptures; they spoke in categories of sin and righteousness. They hoped in the coming Messiah to break the power of the Romans, to fulfill God's restoration promises. And it was through their apparent piety, their outward observance of the law that the Pharisees garnered widespread respect among the people. And as I said, they exerted significant influence, disproportionate to their numbers. That's a brief explanation of the Pharisees.

What about the teachers of the law? Luke uses the word *nomodidaskalos*. Literally law teachers. It's interesting, he's, he's using a term that's not very common in Scripture. It's only used three times in the New Testament. And he's referring to a group that we more commonly know as the scribes, teachers of the

law. He uses the word in Acts 5:34 to describe Gamaliel. And then in a critical way, Paul uses it in 1 Timothy 1:7 to describe those who “Desire to be teachers of the law,” why do they desire to be teachers of the law, without understanding the true nature of the law because they want honor, they want respect.

This class of scholars, the scribes, the teachers of the law, they originated around the time of Ezra, a man of great learning and highly respected. Ezra is kind of like the quintessential prototype of the, of the scribes. He was one of the chief figures of post Exilic Judaism. And he was part of a class of law experts called scribes. In a day when not everybody could write and read and scribes were very important, especially in the transmission of the scripture from one copy to another, the scribes were very important.

They arose to instruct, judge among the people. James Edwards, a commentator describes them as, “those who taught Torah in synagogues, and issued binding decisions on its interpretation.” These guys have great influence. Very, very intelligent men came into the office of scribe. The scribes combined the offices of the Torah professor, the law professor,

a teacher, a moralist, a civil lawyer and in that order. James Edwards goes on to say, "The erudition and prestige of scribes reached legendary proportions by the first century, surpassing on occasion that of the high priest. Commoners deferred to scribes as they walked through the streets. The first seats in the synagogue were reserved for the scribes and people rose to their feet when they entered a room."

So when you think of the scribes, when you think of these law teachers, law professors, think of men who are respected. People defer to them, people get out of their way, they rise when they enter a room. They're honored, they're revered. They were quoted as authoritative sources, their words were used in debate, to settle arguments. So together, the scribes, the Pharisees, they posed a formidable force of influence.

These are devout men, pious men, they're learned, they're scholarly. These are men who wielded the greatest influence over the entire Jewish culture and nation. So here in Capernaum, they've arrived, is a weighty, influential force of Judaism and if we think about this in terms of like today's evangelicalism, it would be like all the celebrated, popular leaders of the evangelical world, names on all the books, speaking at all the conferences, and along with all the best scholars and seminary

professors in all the evangelical seminaries, and all of them together visited one of our homes here in Greeley Colorado. That's what it's like.

You can imagine that these villagers in Capernaum are absolutely thrilled. Hey, we're on the map. We are important. We're honored that this important religious delegation would pay us a visit. Why are they there? These Pharisees, these law professors, they're not there as fans. They came to inspect Jesus' ministry. They're there to examine his methods. They're there to determine whether or not they're going to give him their stamp of approval. They're most certainly not there to learn from Jesus. They're there to judge him. They're there to give him a grade.

What prompted their coming? We talked about this a couple of weeks ago, Jesus had recently healed a leper, and the word about that healing had spread to talk about how he had done that healing in a most unconventional unorthodox manner. He actually touched the leper with his bare hands. That leper's cleansing here was undeniable, but the jury was still out as to whether or not Jesus had become unclean in the process.

Jesus presented a pretty significant theological dilemma for the law experts who are all looking all through their books

to see, what do we do with this? They'd never encountered any of this in any of their categories. Jesus was a phenomenon that seminary did not prepare them for. So the fact that these Pharisees, these law scholars came to Capernaum from all over Galilee and Judea, even from Jerusalem itself.

You got to understand this indicates a fairly significant amount of planning, and communication, and logistical coordination. No cell phones in that day, no Facebook, no spreading the word easily. This didn't happen just all of a sudden, they had to plan for this. They weren't there out of the mere curiosity. Luke wants us to see that, they're not there as fans. They've come to pass judgment. They came to scrutinize, to criticize, and give their for or against judgment.

In fact, when Luke introduces them, it, it's significant that he doesn't just tell them they're there as in physically present. Luke notes, their posture there in verse 17, doesn't it? He says they're sitting there. Quite a contrast, isn't it? Jesus is actively teaching. He's engaged in positive ministry, the Pharisees, the scribes, they are passively sitting there on their thrones, criticizing, passing judgment, wholly negative act in its portrayal here. So there's hostility implied by their presence in verse 17. They come to pass judgment and then they

wanted to return and instruct the people of Israel, whether or not to trust or distrust Jesus, they'd have considered this to be their duty, their ministry, like their service to the nation. They're like watchdogs over Israel to keep them protected from all harmful influences and Jesus just might be that to Israel.

It's impossible, really to overstate the significance of the fact that this official delegation is here present on this day, these religious leaders, you know, I'm just speaking negatively, but positively, they represented a pretty enormous amount of influence over the people. They shaped their thinking. They influenced their opinions. The Pharisees and the scribes are the ones who actually taught and shaped people's theology, how they thought about God, how they thought about life.

They determine what was socially and culturally acceptable or unacceptable. So practically speaking, if these conservative religious establishment, if these people were on your side, well smooth sailing for the rest of your ministry, right? Doors are wide open to you. They would be your defenders, they would be your advocates, they would be giving you access through doors that would otherwise be locked to you. But offend them in any way, rock the boat just a little, you can forget it; your career is over in Israel.

You might as well give up any aspirations of influence, any desire for prominence. Forget fulfilling any ambitions to ascend into leadership and influence over the people. Oh, and you better forget about being Messiah. So verse 17, Jesus is teaching; Pharisees and scribes, they're sitting there. Front row seats of honor, no doubt and the rest of the Capernaum, packed all around them, craning their necks over each other's shoulders to see who's who, whose doing what, who's reacting.

You can picture the scene, Mark tells us that the place was packed Mark 2:2, "Many were gathered together so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And Jesus was preaching the word to them." So that's the occasion. It was an occasion here for significant influence. Impress the Pharisees and law experts you had it made, offend them, you're relegated to the outside. All Jesus needed now was to impress them, which should be pretty easy, right?