



“Take Your Bed and Go”: Sermon on Matthew 9:2-8

The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity (October 11, 1534)¹

MARTIN LUTHER

And just then some people were carrying a paralyzed man lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.” Then some of the scribes said to themselves, “This man is blaspheming.” But Jesus, perceiving their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand 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 paralytic – “Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.” And he stood up and went to his home. When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings. (Matt 9:2-8)

THE FIRST THING [WE WILL TALK ABOUT TODAY]² IS [NOTHING LESS THAN] THE sum total of the gospel – for it is the gospel that teaches us about the forgiveness of sins. This teaching is for Christians, of course, because we receive the forgiveness of sins only through Christ and only in his name. Many peoples have produced fine long books about good works and human responsibilities, but, in

¹The original text for this sermon (primarily Latin, some German) is in *WA* 37:549-550. The translation is by Frederick J. Gaiser. A contemporary German version is available in Martin Luther, *Ausgewählte Werke*, vol. 3, *Ausgewählte Predigten* (Stuttgart: Calwer Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1935) 70-73.

²Words in brackets are not in the original text but are provided for clarity in this English version.

This is the third in a series of sermons by Martin Luther, hitherto unavailable in English, published by Word & World in 1996 to observe the 450th anniversary of the death of the reformer.

truth, [they have written] nothing about the remission of sins. Under the papacy, we were so blind that we thought we could achieve the forgiveness of sins through things like vows and pilgrimages. And so we struggled to gain the forgiveness of sins in the name of our own good works rather than in the name of Christ. But the forgiveness of sins is freely given to us for Christ's sake, and our sins are remitted only in his name. Thus, whoever forgives my sins in the name of Christ truly forgives them.

So, a thought that should never cross our mind is this: "Although the paralyzed man was a sinner, one who even bore in his body the punishment for his sins, Christ pronounced him righteous, saying, 'Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.' But I, since I am totally submerged in sins, have no Christ who could liberate me from them."

No, here is where we must recall Christ's own testimony. He said, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15). [So this good news of forgiveness is surely meant for us also.]³

The second thing [we want to talk about] is related to Christ's word: "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." If Christ urges the paralyzed man [to take heart], to be of good spirit, the man apparently had a troubled conscience; for happy people do not require comfort. This observation is confirmed by the fact that those secure and carefree spirits who have no sense of sin do not, in fact, seize upon the forgiveness of sins. Christ depicts the [very] nature of sin here: sin accuses people and condemns them, driving them to despair. If I recognize that I am a sinner, I will, of course, assume that God is angry with me. As Paul says, "For the law brings wrath" (Rom 4:15). But if God hates me, then I am hated by all angels and all creatures. Thus, it is finally unavoidable that I will be driven to despair—just as Dr. Krause in Halle, oppressed by his sin, cried out, "Behold, I see how Christ, the Son of Man, accuses me before his Father in heaven!"⁴ This is the nature of sin. But the God we imagine is the God we get—which is why Dr. Krause could not withstand these terrors (as, indeed, no mortal could), and thus took his own life. In this way, sin condemns us, and no human power can prevent it without the help of Christ the mediator, without his own intervention.

Here Christ consoles the paralyzed man, who is terrified by his sins, saying that he should be of good spirits. Then he calls him "son"; moreover, he says that his sins are forgiven, that the Father and the man are reconciled in that the man believes in the Father. May we also believe that, in the name of Christ, we have the forgiveness of sins. And more: when my neighbor says to me, "Take heart, my brother, [or when the neighbor says to you, "Take heart, my sister,] your sins are forgiven in the name of Christ," [we] should confidently believe him [for what he says is most certainly true.]⁵

³The *WA* indicates that Luther amplified his thought here, but does not include the content. The sentence in brackets is a suggestion offered for this translation.

⁴Dr. Johannes Krause, counselor to Cardinal Albrecht in Halle, committed suicide on November 1, 1527. Luther frequently mentions this case (see *WA*, *Br* 4:294, lines 11-22).

⁵See footnote 3.

This, in all its simplicity, is the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins. In teaching it, Christ wants to liberate us from the evil of agreeing with the impious [Pharisees] by charging that [in daring to forgive sins] Christ blasphemes against God. If one had asked the Pharisees how one should gain the remission of sins, they would have answered, “[We are made righteous] by observing the ceremonies of the Mosaic law.” But God commands only that we hold fast to Christ and listen to him. It is, after all God who says, “Listen to *him!*” (Matt 17:5); and what *he* teaches is the forgiveness of sins!⁶

The third part [of this sermon is based on Christ’s word to the paralytic], “Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.” In order to show that he has the authority to forgive sins, Christ confirms it with this sign: he heals the paralytic. Now that he has pardoned his trespasses, he orders him to take up his bed and go home. In other words, now that, through Christ, the paralytic is reconciled with God the Father, he should diligently carry out the work of his vocation at home. Thus, the papists teach falsely [when they say] that the forgiveness of sins must be earned by works. Christ teaches differently, namely, that works must follow forgiveness. You must mark this well. Our fear, of course, is that, after we are gone, other teachers will come and claim that works must come first – just as the papists have taught up to now. They cry that this teaching of ours – this doctrine of the free remission of sins – is [too] pleasant, a sweet deal whereby no one has to do anything. These people are totally ignorant, which is why they speak this way about our teaching. They have never known the power of sin! If they once felt its danger, they would speak differently about it. Christ forgives sins freely. He is no usurer, no shopkeeper in the forgiveness-of-sins market. He will not collect interest on the forgiveness that he freely gives. Now that we have received from him the forgiveness of our sins, [all] he wants is that we do the work of our vocation, that we help our neighbor, [thus bearing the fruit of our faith].⁷ ⊕

⁶The last clause in Luther’s text is “Hic est doctor remissionis peccatorum.” One could translate, “This man is the doctor of remission of sins!”

⁷The WA indicates that Luther added something here that is, however, not included in the original text. The contemporary German version suggests “bearing the fruit of our faith” (*Ausgewählte Predigten*, 73).