

I. Introduction

A. When you read the Gospels you can't help but be struck by the number of miracles Jesus performs. And a good number of them are healings. As Christ moves from village to village preaching about the Kingdom of God – bringing news that is better than anyone can hope for or comprehend, Good News that ultimately pivots around him – He heals the sick.

B. On the one hand this is not a surprise. Everything Luke has reported so far has indicated that Jesus is not simply a man. From the angel's initial report that Zechariah and Elizabeth would have a son who would prepare the way for the Messiah, through Mary's virginal conception and the reaction of most who come in contact with the infant Jesus – cousins, shepherds, wise men, Simeon and Anna – it's clear, everything about him was "engineered to amaze." The brief glimpse we get of Jesus at 12 suggests that He's working to be the first to perfectly fulfill the Law, the Trinitarian moment at his baptism, his forty day fast and fight with Satan – it shows He is not like you and me. And then in chapters 4 and 5 of his Gospel, we've noted how Luke emphasizes that:

1. Jesus makes big claims – He is the Messiah (the fulfillment of the Hebrew prophecies) and He has come to change the world;

2. And that He has unique abilities. In recent weeks we've noted that He can defeat evil and control nature. Today we look at his power to heal – something he does perfectly, consistently and without requiring any co-pay, which makes him enormously popular.

C. Today's passage adds two other powers: the ability to heal and the ability to forgive sins. Let's take these one at a time.

II. First, Jesus heals a leper, which begins at Luke 5:12

A. Before I read it let me say just a few things about leprosy.

1. When we hear the term we think of Hanson’s Disease – which is what the word *leprosy* has been limited to in the last two hundred years. Biblical leprosy likely covers other ailments – all kinds of skin disorders – some of which are contagious and others which are not, but all of which carry a lot of freight. In fact, in the first century, the physical problems associated with being a leper were secondary to the emotional, social, economic and spiritual ramifications of this disease. Lepers were cut off. They were pariahs. They were forced to live outside the gates. No one would touch them. Everything they touched was burned. They couldn’t work, they couldn’t visit friends, they couldn’t go to the Temple, if they were around anyone they were forced to cry out “unclean, unclean” to be sure no one bumped into them.

2. A second thing to realize about leprosy is that, in much the same way that physical blindness is used as a metaphor for failing to see spiritual truth, leprosy was often used to describe the condition of being spiritually unclean. It was linked to God’s judgment. In Numbers 12, Miriam (Moses’s sister) was given leprosy because of her sin. In 2 Chronicles 29 the same thing happens to King Uzziah. God cursed them with leprosy because of their pride. In the mind of a first century Jew, leprosy was punishment from God. So, in ways both symbolic and real they were cut off from God and everything else.¹

B. Here’s the text:

1. ¹² While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.”

2. ¹³ Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” And immediately the leprosy left him.

3. ¹⁴ Then Jesus ordered him, “Don’t tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.”

C. The leper had probably taken great risk coming into the village. It’s likely that some would be throwing things at him to chase him away. People did not want lepers coming into town. But he wants to get to Jesus and be healed. And so he asks. And Jesus touches him and he’s healed. Four amazing things happen at this moment.

1. First: Jesus touched the man. He didn't have to. He will not touch the paralytic in the next section, just say, "get up and walk." Hey, in Luke 7 he isn't even in the same zip code with the person he heals. Jesus touches the leper as a way of caring for him. No one had touched this guy in years. He was a pariah. He was a disfigured, poor, ugly outcast who smelled bad. No one had gotten close to him in years. No one had given him a hug. No one had shaken his hand. If he touched something they burned it. And now Jesus touches him. In *The Gift of Pain*, a book co-written by Philip Yancey and Dr. Paul Brand, Brand, a missionary surgeon working in India and specializing in leprosy, said that when he would examine patients and touch them they would often start to weep. Leprosy is not contagious. But people believe that it is. When he touches them they are overwhelmed. Jesus touches this man.

2. Second: Jesus demonstrated his power to heal. No one had been healed of leprosy in hundreds of years. Moses and Miriam were both given leprosy and cured of it by God. Naaman, the Syrian general, was cured by God during the time of Elisha. But this man was the first to be healed of leprosy in 850 years. Leprosy was a death sentence. Jesus overpowers it. We need to see this as a huge arrow pointing to Christ and emphasizing that everyone should be paying attention to Him. Healing was Jesus's calling card. It highlighted his power and identified who he was. It made the case that He was more than a man.

3. Third: Jesus overpowered religion. This is perhaps the most remarkable and overlooked. When someone dirty and someone clean touch, the clean doesn't get on the dirty, right. It's the other way around – the dirt gets on the clean and now the clean is also dirty. Well, that's a great visual for how much of the religious law worked. It was designed to prevent people from becoming defiled. And it shows how – if you are unclean – you go through a series of rituals and sacrifices to be made clean. In one moment Jesus upends all of that. In touching this leper He turns the whole system on its ear. He doesn't say, "Oops, I touched a leper, now I'm unclean." He infects the leper with health. His righteousness overpowers the disease and makes this man fit for the presence of God! Please note, the message is not, "you are healed," but "you are clean." Jesus is not simply another religious leader telling us what to do – what religious deeds to perform – in order to be clean. He overpowers religion. He replaces the system. He bypasses the Temple.

4. Four: Jesus is putting the religious leaders on notice. He not only overpowers sickness and impurity, verse 14 reads, “Then Jesus ordered him, “Don’t tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.” Go to the Temple and alert the priests that you have been healed. We don’t have any record that the man does this. But it’s likely that he did, given how many of the religious elite show up to start monitoring Jesus. Word quickly gets out, “a leper has been healed!” Let me keep reading.

III. This moves us into the second miracle – another healing.

A. This one is also all about Jesus. This time it highlights his power to forgive. Let me read this. Luke 5:17f

B. ¹⁷One day Jesus was teaching, and Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there. They had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem.

1. As I noted, it appears that the leper reported to the priests at the temple. Word was out that this unschooled, upstart from Nazareth had cured him. Everyone is now forced to pay attention to this upstart.

C. And the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal the sick. ¹⁸Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. ¹⁹When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd

1. Everyone is trying to get to Jesus. Every blogger is writing about him. Half the tweets are about him. The crowds are now unmanageable. He is virtually unapproachable.

D. ¹⁸Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. ¹⁹When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus.

1. Whoever owns the home is not happy. It may be Peter’s mother-in-law. If you go to Capernaum you can visit the site. Anyway, someone is certainly wondering, “who’s going to pay for this?”

E. ²⁰When Jesus saw their faith, he said, “Friend, your sins are forgiven.”

1. This is an odd thing to say, and something that left two groups a bit confused and frustrated. The first was the paralyzed man's friends. They're thinking, "Forgiven. OK, that's nice. But we didn't risk a law suit cutting a hole in the roof so you can say, 'Your sins are forgiven.' We want you to help him walk." The second would be the Pharisees, who are steaming, "He can't say that. Who does he think he is? The only one who can forgive sins is God."

F. V21: The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

1. Now, in fairness to the Pharisees, they are right. They get it. Jesus is hanging out a shingle that says: Jesus of Nazareth: Carpenter, Rabbi, God. Jesus is claiming that all sins were against him because they are his laws that we break.

2. This isn't me apologizing to you for something and you saying, "I forgive you." By which you mean: we're good; I'm not going to seek revenge; I'm not going to try to get even. This is a bit like a third party entering the mix. It would be like me wronging you and someone else – someone you don't even know saying to me, "I forgive you." Hello, who are you? And – and! – this isn't simply, "I forgive you." But "your sins are forgiven."

3. Jesus is making a big claim here. The only one who can forgive sins is God. And by the way, the process for that goes on with a sacrifice at the Temple. The religious leaders are hearing what Jesus is saying and fuming. You can't say what you are saying.

G. V22. Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, "Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'?"

1. Jesus gives them a riddle. Pay attention here. This one goes right over our heads at first. Which is easier to say: "your sins are forgiven" or "rise and walk"? It seems like the answer is, "your sins are forgiven," because it's impossible to verify. You can claim they are when they are not. But you can't bluff healing a paralyzed man. Everyone will be able to see the results. It seems that the answer is, it's easier to say "your sins are forgiven" and Jesus is taking the easy path. But He is not. It cost Jesus far more to be able to forgive sins. It will drive him to the cross. He will have to become immobile himself – be nailed to the cross – to deal with the sins of this immobile man. He will have to become an outcast himself to deal with the sins of the leper. Healing is draining for Jesus. Power goes out of him. He gets tired, but he doesn't have to suffer and die. The question is a riddle. He's pushing them to think this through. Then, he goes on.

H. V24: “But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.”

1. Son of Man is the way Jesus often refers to himself. It’s a bold claim to be God but one that few people get.

2. But I want you to know that the Son of Man has the ability to deal with your biggest need – to forgive your sins – so I’ll give you proof of who I am and that I am able to do what you most need by healing you of your inability to walk.

I. V25: Immediately the paralyzed man stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. ²⁶ Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, “We have seen remarkable things today.”

1. Don’t miss this, there is often a big difference between what we think we need and what we really need. The leper’s biggest problem was not leprosy, it was that he was unclean – cut off from a holy God. The man who is unable to walk’s biggest problem is not that he cannot walk, it’s his sin – that cuts him off from God. Jesus provides them with what they need.

J. Last week I read a provocative statement: God doesn’t overwhelm us with a compelling proof for his existence; he overwhelms us with a compelling person. There is no one like Jesus.

K. This is an amazing passage. What we see here is that Jesus cannot not help those who are suffering. He lovingly moves towards the broken – the ones few are paying attention to. And he makes their life better. He uses his power to care for those who are physically, emotionally, economically or socially suffering. Some have argued that during the three years he moved about the area he pretty much took care of everyone’s illnesses.

L. But the principle reason Jesus heals is to show us who He is. He’s not focused on providing temporary help for those who need it but on providing eternal help. The big story here is not that we can be healed of every temporal challenge. The big story here is that Jesus is God. He has the power to cleanse people from all that alienates and separates them from God and others. He has the power to forgive sins.

M. The miracles we find in the Gospels are principally offered as proof that Jesus is not simply another prophet. He’s not just another rabbi or reformer. He is bigger than that.²

N. Please realize, everyone Jesus healed here died. It wasn't a permanent fix. We will see Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead – demonstrating his power over death itself. But Lazarus will die again. The physical healings were not permanent. The big story here is not “God wants you rich and healthy” but God wants you reconciled to Himself.

IV. There is more to note.

A. Jesus's miracles are not simply proof that He has power, they also point to the way things should be and will be.³ You see this when you compare Christ's actions with others who have awesome power. You have to go to fictional literature to find other examples. No one in real life has the powers Jesus has. But when you compare Christ's miracles to the legends of Merlin, the genie in Aladdin or any of the powers of Marvel's Super Heroes, you see the difference. When these people are challenged to prove who they are they often display their power in some outlandish way. Watch me melt the top of that mountain with my x-ray vision. Ask me to do something – anything – and I'll prove it. Do you remember Robin Williams as the genie in Aladdin singing, “You've Never Had a Friend Like Me.” Where one of the lines is:

1. Can your friends do this? Do your friends do that?
Do your friends pull this out their little hat? Can your friends go, poof? Well, looky here. Can your friends go, Abracadabra, let 'er rip And then make the sucker disappear?
2. Jesus demonstrates his power but it's never to show off, it's always to help. His miracles point to the way things should be and will be.

B. Christ's actions in these passages will start to galvanize the opposition of the religious elite, those whose message he is undermining. His life, lifestyle, teaching, claims and power all challenge their teaching and authority. He commits blasphemy. He undermines the Temple. He has definitely made it onto their radar with the events recorded here and we will watch them grow more and more frustrated by Him and more and more convinced that he has to be stopped.

C. There is more here, but I want you to be amazed by the right thing. The healing is important. But it's a sidelight. The focus here is on Christ's ability to cleanse us – just like he cleanses a leper, who is symbolically and literally cut off from everyone. And in the event that the crowd misses this, when he heals the next person he says, “your sins are forgiven.” He is focused on what matters most and he is doing what only God can do. We need to be focused on what Jesus wants us to focus on. And we need to be amazed with him.

D. However, this passage and others raise the question, can Jesus heal us today? “Will God heal me now? Mike, I get that you want to focus us on other aspects of this passage, but I want to be healed. Can God heal me? Will God heal me? I believe He is God, but I want to be well.” I understand that, so let me say just a few words on this as we prepare for Holy Communion and as we look ahead to this Thursday time for prayer.

V. Here are four questions about healing.

A. Does God still heal today?

1. Yes, I’m certain that He does. We’re broken in every way – spiritually, physically, emotionally and intellectually. It’s not that we are as bad as we can be, but the poison runs through the whole system. Every area of our life is affected by sin. God is certainly in the business of restoring spiritual health. And I see lots of movement in terms of emotional health as well.

2. The other day I was reminded of something that happened to a friend. He was asked to pray for someone who was sick. He did. A while later this man’s wife called to say, “I wanted to thank you for praying for my husband. He was healed.” And he said, “I thought, wow, it worked.” She said, “He died. But your prayer made a difference. He was healed. He had been such an angry man for so long and after your time with him he became very sweet and we enjoyed the last days of his life.”

3. Does God heal today? Yes. I do not believe that there are healers. No one has the magnitude of power we see in Jesus. He never misfired. He batted 1000 percent. Not even the apostles came close to this. I do not believe that there are healers but I do believe we are to pray for healing. In James 5 we read:

a) Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord.

4. I believe that God is still healing today – on all fronts: spiritually, socially, emotionally and physically. To be more specific, I believe that he extends life.

5. That is what I'd say is happening with my Dad. As many of you know, he was diagnosed with a particularly aggressive form of Leukemia back in the late summer. He was told that he had 5 – 6 weeks to live. I'll see him next weekend. He is motoring on. He's slowed down some, but he's doing pretty well. And there are two data points I hold onto. First, the many people who tell me that they are praying for him, and second, the hematologists amazement at how well he is doing. Every single blood test seems to surprise him. It looks to me like God is extending his life. He will die. As will I. As will you. Death has been defeated but not yet destroyed. In 1 Cor. 15 we are told that the last enemy to be destroyed will be death. Christ's healings point ahead to a time when things will be as they are supposed to be. That day is not yet here. My Dad will die, but I am very grateful for the way his life has been extended – and that thanks goes to God and to the medical profession.

6. Medicine sure seems to be the primary way God works. We have an ordered world. One that we can figure out. And some do and they help us. And I'm very glad that they do.

7. Have any miracles occurred in his treatment. Medical miracles? I don't know. Spiritual miracles – yes! I've seen some real changes in my Dad over the last 25 years. And for him to say, "There is no bad ending for me." If I live I have things I like to do and people I love. If I die I go to heaven. I'm good either way." There are some profound spiritual miracles that have taken place to get to that point.

B. Should we expect to be healed? Should we expect physical healing when we pray?

1. It's not my experience that miracles happen very often. If they did they wouldn't be miracles. But we pray and are clear what we are praying for. And sometimes we see what we were asking for fulfilled. And sometimes not. And sometimes when they answer is no we are very sad and sometimes we later come to see the answer – the no – as a good thing.

2. The key verse from our text today on this topic is vs. 12: "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."

C. What do we do if we are sick?

1. We pray. We go to the doctor and we pray.

D. What do we pray for?

1. We pray for what we want! We are very clear about what our desire is, even as we pray as the leper, “if you are willing, you can make me clean.”

E. If you are struggling and would like to be prayed for, we have prayer every week up front after the service. And this week – on Thursday – there will be an extended prayer time. Between 7 & 8:30 in the sanctuary at LF there will be music playing and there will be teams of people – elders and members of the 1 to 1 ministry team who would welcome a chance to pray for you, whatever the issue.

VI. Let me turn our thoughts now to the table set before us.

A. Earlier in the sermon I compared Jesus with the genie in Aladdin and also with Superman and other Super Heroes. I pointed out how Christ’s power was demonstrated in other ways – his miracles point back to the way things were and ahead to the way they will be. Well there is another difference. The powers of Superman make him invulnerable. Not so with Christ. In a remarkable way, his powers make him weak. They make him more vulnerable because He bears our brokenness. Somehow He takes it upon himself. He doesn’t come to judge evil but to bear it for us. And in so doing he died. And He did that for you and me. We come to this table to remember that death, to acknowledge our sin and to affirm that in yet another way, Jesus is Amazing.

¹ The Book of Leviticus – one of the five books written by Moses – devotes two chapters to leprosy and how people with leprosy were to be dealt with in order to keep everyone else safe. You can read Leviticus 13 and 14 for yourself. It’s confusing stuff that no longer applies today. What you need to understand is that part of The Law was specifically designed to keep the Jewish nation moving forward so that they can deliver the Messiah. This section includes dietary laws and public health regulations that leave us baffled and do not apply to us who live in the New Covenant.

² These are temporary healings. They are amazing. Some have suggested that during his three years of public ministry Jesus largely wiped out illness in the whole region. B.B. Warfield, a great 19th century Princeton Theologian, wrote:

³ Thanks to Tim Keller for this point, in his sermon on Matthew 8 entitled, “Healing the Sick.” He develops the idea that Jesus’s miracles provide us with: proof, a pointer and a pattern