

THE MOST CRIPPLING CONDITION OF ALL

Luke 5v17-26

Today we will be looking at a paralyzed man whose life was changed after meeting Jesus. Most of us know people who are paralyzed by something or other – but it's not always physical.

Kara Messina was paralyzed by obsessions, eating disorders, and broken relationships. She craved acceptance. She imagined that if she were thin she would be happy. Her weight came to matter more than her family, her job. She tried every self-help remedy she could find but nothing helped. She eventually joined a therapy group and found others who were suffering just like her. She admits, *"I was miserable for years and years"*. Then one day she typed "God" into *iTunes*. I'll tell you later what happened. For the moment, let's look at the Gospel of Luke ch.5.

¹⁷One day as (Jesus) was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law, who had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem, were sitting there. Do you sense the tense atmosphere? Jesus was being watched. The healing of the leprous man has set the Jewish authorities in motion because it was one of their categories of Messianic Miracle. So they come from every direction and sat watching and listening. This first stage, checking out a Messianic claimant, was to be done in silence. This is an important detail of the story.

But their presence didn't inhibit Jesus. **And the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick.** This has such a glorious ring about it.

¹⁸Some men came carrying a paralytic on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. There was no NHS or disability benefit in New Testament times. This man was totally dependent on others to help him; he relied on handouts. And he does seem to have had good friends – friends who believed that his best hope was Jesus. After all, others were being healed; perhaps Jesus would heal him. But there was a problem. So many important onlookers were there that many of the needy couldn't get a look in.

But this man's friends were not easily deterred. **¹⁹When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof.** These houses had an external staircase; the roof was flat and made of beams laid from wall to wall with the gap between filled in, and loose tiles added. Coffins were sometimes taken in and out of these houses via the roof ... **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.**

²⁰ Jesus saw their faith: their faith was visible – it was demonstrated in action. The friends had fought through challenges and made strenuous efforts to get the man to Jesus. What a stir this must have caused.

But the real surprise in this story is the focus; it turns out *not* to be this one man's physical condition but his *spiritual condition*. In fact, *everyone's* spiritual condition! So, although this *'One to one with Jesus'* is life changing – the paralysed man is a spectator for much of the time as Jesus speaks of the most crippling condition of all.

1. THE PROVOCATIVE PRONOUNCEMENT

When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven." Sins? Jesus, don't you understand, this man's problem is paralysis?

What is this all about then? Does this mean that suffering is the result of sin? On the one hand, "no"! Jesus did not teach that suffering was a direct consequence of or punishment for some specific sin. The Jews of the day thought like that, but Jesus rejected this. (John 9v1-3) It can happen of course, but this is not a formula you can apply to everyone who suffers.

On the other hand, "yes". All human suffering is the result of sin; it is a consequence of humanity's rebellion from God and sin invading creation as a result. By starting with sin instead of sickness Jesus is saying that this is the most crippling condition even more than this man's physical condition.

The message of the Bible is that "sin" is humanity's number one enemy. The wars, the injustice, the cruelty and abuse that have tormented men and women through human history are caused by sin. "*Sins*" (plural) are symptoms of a condition called "*sin*" (singular). The Greek word throughout is ἁμαρτία (*hamartia*) which means a violation of God's standards, literally a failure to hit the mark. It describes an offense against God whether by *commission* (things you have done) or *omission* (things you should have done, but didn't!) According to the Bible it is not just a few people who are sinners – those who hit the headlines because they are murderers or child abusers, but *everyone*; "*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*"

I have a confession to make. This week I watched *Eastenders*. I was lured by the previews and the 25th Anniversary live edition, so I set the digital box to record the show. I now know *who killed Archie!* If you don't believe in the power of sin to wreck lives and relationships, just watch *Eastenders* now and then. It is TV drama of course, but it is a concentrated version of reality. In fact the series has been praised for hitting all the big issues society faces. But if you make sense of the world with a Bible open - then you will recognise the power of sin behind every situation; behind every villain and every victim in the story lines.

Sin is everyone's great enemy. It is this which really cripples, paralyses and disables men and women, not just physically, but mentally, emotionally, socially and spiritually. It is crucial to deal with this condition.

But, Jesus is also being *provocative* here, saying "**Friend, your sins are forgiven.**" Hence the next stage of the incident:

2. THE SILENT CHALLENGE

²¹**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?"** The inquisitors didn't articulate their challenge - they didn't need to; it was obvious to Jesus. And they were theologically correct.

Only God can forgive sins – because “sin” is a violation of *God’s* standards. Yes, one individual can forgive another when they have been personally sinned against; but this was not what Jesus was doing here. Jesus was claiming authority to forgive anyone’s sins, including this man’s. He was claiming to be able to do what only God can do. No wonder there was a silent challenge.

When it comes to the issue of “sin” there are still challenges but they tend to be different. We are more likely to hear this challenge: *Who believes in sin anymore?* Recently this question was raised on a radio discussion following the conviction of two small boys who tortured and almost killed two other boys. Were they evil boys or victims of their “toxic” home life – plied with drugs and watching extreme horror and pornographic movies from the age of six? It raised the wider issues of parenting, the availability of drugs and the kind of films accepted without question today. The Bible says you can trace every evil act, every crime and wrongdoing to the same root issue: men and women are infected with a terrible disease of the soul called *sin*. With some it is seen dramatically – but everyone suffers from the same condition.

But back to our incident in Luke’s Gospel: behind the silent challenge, no doubt, they were thinking: *“Jesus of Nazareth, you are just a big talker. Who can forgive sins but God alone?”* What will Jesus’ response be? Typically, he doesn’t give a straight answer; he answers with a question of his own.

3. THE CRYPTIC QUESTION

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’?” At first glance the answer to his question is straightforward – it is easier *to say* “Your sins are forgiven” *than to heal* a crippled man. If Jesus is a fake healer it will be evident to everyone if the paralysed man doesn’t get up. But how could saying “your sins are forgiven” be verified?

But it is possible that the question was more cryptic. Jesus could be saying the opposite, that *it is easier to heal a crippled man* than to announce the forgiveness of sins. Other healers might restore the sick but they could never forgive sins. Was Jesus even looking ahead to his death on the cross? That was no *easy* way. It would be very costly for Jesus to complete the work of being able to forgive sins.

Jesus left the question hanging. He didn’t wait for a reply because he knew they wouldn’t say anything at this stage of checking him out.

4. THE VISIBLE PROOF

²⁴**But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins....” He said to the paralyzed man, “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.”** ²⁵**Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God.** Here was visible proof of Jesus’ authority.

It presented the Jewish authorities with a particular problem. They believed that sickness was the direct result of sin. They agreed with the words of a famous rabbi: *“A sick man does not recover from his sickness until all his sins are forgiven him.”* So

according to their own logic, if the man was healed it must mean his sins *had been* forgiven! Jesus must have the authority to forgive sins! Jesus had turned their twisted logic against them.

²⁶Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, "We have seen remarkable things today." It is always some transforming change which demonstrates the reality of Jesus claims; in this case physical healing. It is still the same: it may be some dramatic healing or a person being set free from addiction or a marriage restored. But the most important sign is that of a transformed life. It is this which substantiates the claims of Jesus.

To close, let me complete Kara's story, the young woman paralyzed by obsessions. One day she typed "God" into *iTunes* and it came up with downloads from a church called HTB. After listening, this led her to a Sunday morning at the church and then to an *Alpha* course. Round about half way through *Alpha* she realised she had a Heavenly Father who loved and accepted her. She came to a point where she was able to say: "I give my life to Jesus. Whatever you want me to do, I'll do." She describes her different mindset now: "Everything I do is through God's grace. Each day I ask for guidance and the gift of abstinence from obsessive behaviours. I feel completely accepted, completely loved." You can read her full story, and other similar personal stories, in the most recent issue of 'Alpha News'.

We also have an Alpha course that has just started which you or a friend may like to link in to. Or you may feel in such need that you are ready to call out to Jesus here and now – to receive his mercy and be set free from this crippling condition of sin. That is why he came and why he died on a cross. That is why he was raised from the dead – so that you can be set free and have a new life, resurrection life.

John Wilthew. February 2010

Group Discussion Questions

THE MOST CRIPPLING CONDITION OF ALL

Read Luke 5v17-26.

What does this dramatic incident teach us about Jesus ministry of healing the sick, then - and even today?

What does this incident tell us about friendship? What situations are you or other group members facing where this kind of friendship is seriously needed?

What do you understand to be the relationship between sin and sickness? Are you in line with Jesus in your thinking?

What do TV *soaps* tell us about human nature? And who *did* kill Archie in *Eastenders*?

How might you go about explaining to an interested enquirer that sin is the most crippling condition of all for everyone? And what would you then say to explain that Jesus is able to forgive sins?

As far as you are concerned, what kind of thing best substantiates the claims of Jesus?