

Methods for Preaching & Teaching the Miracles

There are several issues that can be considered in relation to Jesus' ministry of miracles. One important question to ask is what is meant in saying that Jesus' atonement brings physical healing. Some in the charismatic tradition would claim that there is all manner of healing in the atonement. But is it guaranteed that we have all the power for healing if we just claim it? Is that what Matthew is saying? I will argue, no. Among other things, one should notice that Paul did not make that claim, which we know since he told Timothy to drink a little wine for his stomach problems, instead of saying, "Come visit me and I will heal you." Furthermore, Matthew even says a couple of times that when Jesus went to Nazareth, He could not perform many miracles there. The miracles are not things He simply performs autonomously. They are rather an act of the triune God. The Spirit empowers Jesus' ministry and His miracles are the things that the Father has appointed for the Son to do.

Instead of saying that all healing is available in the atonement, it is better to say that every benefit that we have as Christians comes from the atonement. Everybody will not get everything they want. I am certainly not an advocate of the 'health and wellness Gospel,' however it is true that whatever blessings we get do not come to us by accident or happenstance, but through the atonement. There is no blessing that is ruled out or is impossible. We are not forbidden to ask for anything that we need or for the heart's many legitimate desires. So we can ask and we may receive, but in this life "it is appointed to men once to die," and unless the Lord comes first, we are all going to die. That means we are all going to have an illness from which we do not recover. And there is no hesitation about that in the Bible. It is a glib idea to claim that everything is there for our faith to lay claim to, and if we do not get what we want, it is because of a lack of faith. That idea overlooks those basic facts of life that are confirmed by the Scriptures.

One of the most difficult things to consider regarding the life of Christ is to try to figure out when His humanity is working and when His deity is working, and I am not sure we can ever sort that out completely. For example, we read in Scripture that He could read people's minds. But is He reading minds by His divine power or by some human power? Our quick answer today is that, if He is divine then of course He has knowledge of all things. But let us not answer too fast, because it is also true that Jesus was the best listener that ever lived and the best at picking up clues. When we are talking to each other, part of the time we are thinking: "I wonder if I am making sense. I wonder if she thinks I am a geek. I wonder if I can think of something clever to say next." That habit makes it difficult for us to really listen. But Jesus was not worried about self image and self protection, and He was not wondering what people thought about Him. He could really listen because He was not tangled up in sin, trying to look good and sound important and all those things that we do. Maybe He could pick up on clues that nobody else could. So is it His deity or His humanity that enables Him to read minds? Really, it is the whole man. Therefore, it may be best to say that sometimes Jesus' deity is at the forefront, but on other occasions His humanity is at the forefront. It is difficult and even foolish to separate them because He was one person.

One thing we must remember is that the Scriptures make it clear that Jesus' humanity was genuine. He is portrayed at various times as astonished or distraught or upset. We see Him get tired and at one point He says that "even the Son of Man does not know the hour," which exhibits less than omniscient knowledge. We explain this by saying that sometimes Jesus lays aside some of His divine prerogatives in order to have a genuine human life. If He was constantly drawing on His omnipotence, it would almost invalidate the genuineness of His human life.

One of my goals in this course, and an emphasis in this lecture, is not merely to teach you what is in the Bible, but to teach you how to get more out of the Bible. I am not going to go over every miracle. Instead I will cover one in detail as an example of how to study and teach a miracle passage. The particular miracle of this study is from Luke 5:17-26, the healing of the paralytic. When we study a biblical passage we must begin with putting it in its context. To do so, consider the text surrounding the immediate passage and ask questions such as: What is the setting? Who is in the scene?

Luke 5:17-26—What else is Luke telling us about near the scene of the healing of the paralytic? Not long before, Jesus called His disciples. He was performing other healings. There was probably some connection between those two. Jesus provides a catch of a great number of fish and then He tells the disciples that from now on they are going to catch men. This indicates to them that His power is for them and the mission He will give them. That made it easier for people to respond to Him. So a good statement of the setting would “calling disciples and performing miracles.” And of course, it takes place in a house on a day when Jesus was teaching and the power of the Lord was with Him for healing.

Who was present in the scene? Pharisees and scribes were there. The text says they “were sitting there.” They wanted to hear what Jesus had to say, but maybe not to learn from Him. Maybe instead it was to find out whether they liked what He said. The disciples were also there, and the crowd. Of course, there were the paralytic and his friends and the homeowner as well. This is an excellent list so far, except we have forgotten the most important character. Remember that God is the hero of every story in Scripture—God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. So, do not leave Jesus off the list, or the Holy Spirit, who was present for healing.

In this particular scene, it is also important to think about the language of power that Luke uses. He says that ‘power’ was present to heal, which reminds us that Jesus did heal by power, and as a manifestation of His power. Luke repeatedly mentions that power was at Jesus’ disposal. Here Jesus had power to heal. In other places there is power to trust, the power of faith, and He has power to overcome the strong man. In other words, Jesus’ ministry is not static, as though He merely did anything He wanted, anytime He wanted. This gives Him what seems to be a more genuine ministry. When He wanted to go somewhere, He did not simply transport Himself; He walked there. In all things, Jesus relied on the Father and the Spirit to lead, guide, and empower Him. In this case, the power was present heal.

The action begins when some men have a friend who needs to be healed, but the house is full. They get to the house and they cannot get in. They are blocked by the crowd, yet they are determined to get their friend to Jesus. Of course they have walked there, who knows how many hours. This idea of an obstacle is an extremely important one in biblical narrative. This particular obstacle—the crowd keeping them away—reminds us of other scenes with crowds. For example, the woman with a flow of blood wanted to get to Jesus, but she could not because of the crowds, so all she was able to do was touch the hem of His garment. There is also the father of an epileptic boy, who wanted to bring the boy to Jesus to be healed, but Jesus was being transfigured on a mountain, so all he could do was to go to the disciples, and they could not do anything. The father finally made it to Jesus, but by the time he did, his confidence had been shaken. So he used the phrase, “If You can,” when speaking to Jesus, which was as if to say, “I already saw Your disciples cannot do it, can You?” In another case, with the Syro-Phoenician woman, Jesus originally allowed His disciples to rebuff her, and He Himself began to put her off, to test her, but she pressed on.

One of the things Jesus does when people come to Him for healing is to test them by allowing an obstacle. The obstacle for the men in Luke 5 is that they cannot get in. But then somebody has an idea. “We should just tear a hole in the roof.” It is not unreasonable that someone might think of this because

almost every house in Palestine, any house of any size, had a flat roof on which people slept at night. There was no air conditioning, you understand, so that was the way they cooled off. It was also used for drying vegetables and storing things and so forth, so they had steps on the outside going up to the roof. The men went up onto the roof. They believe they must get in the house and they will do whatever it takes. Can you imagine what it was like for the people inside that full house? They are listening to Jesus, when suddenly the men on the roof start smashing and banging up there. Everything in the house must have stopped while people looked up, wondering what was going on. Then there comes a man, lowered down on a little stretcher, maybe with a rope on each corner. And as the people look up, there is a shaft of sunlight blazing through the hole, and dust floating everywhere, and the heads of the men are peeking down through the hole.

What do you think the man and his friends expected to hear besides, “Stop that! Leave my roof alone!”? They were certainly hoping to hear Jesus say, “You are healed. Rise and walk.” But what did Jesus say instead? He said, “Your sins are forgiven.” If you were one of those friends, you might say, “Wait, that is really nice of you; I am glad you have forgiven my friend his sins, but that is not why we are here.” And others are there listening too, namely the Pharisees. What did they say? They said, “He cannot do that!”

What is the objection of the Pharisees about? Let me illustrate it. Let us imagine you have a neighbor who has been annoying you for weeks. He has a bad habit that bothers you and one day you reach a breaking point and you just walk over and punch him in the face with no warning. After doing that, you walk over to your other neighbor and say, “Will you forgive me for punching him?” What is wrong with that picture? You have asked the wrong person for forgiveness. That second neighbor may find it easy to forgive you, but it would be irrelevant, because you did not hurt him. Real forgiveness can only come from the one you offended, the one you punched. This is the Pharisees’ line of thinking. In a sense, they are saying, “Jesus, forgiving this man who is a stranger to you does not make any sense. You can only be offended by somebody you know.” Of course, there is one exception. If you sin against your neighbor, your sin is between you and him, but there is always one other party involved in that exchange—God. God is offended by every sin. When Jesus forgives someone that everybody knows is a stranger to Him, they are not stupid, and they realize that Jesus is saying the man did something to offend Him, even though they had not met before. The only explanation for this is that Jesus is claiming deity. So the Pharisees say Jesus is blaspheming by claiming deity because, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

Imagine you are the paralytic for a moment. You want to be healed, but Jesus says you are forgiven and that is not what you want. Then while dangling there in mid-air, with dust all over you, hoping your friends’ hands are not getting tired, Jesus and the Pharisees break into a theological discourse. And you probably think, “What about me? I came to be healed.”

Jesus responds to everyone’s doubts with questions of His own. He says in Luke 5:22-23, “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’?” Of course it is easier to say “Your sins are forgiven” because no one ever really knows if it has happened. Even if your sins really are forgiven, you can never be proven to be right because it would be an invisible, spiritual reality. But then Jesus says, “That you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.” This is the way Jesus will prove that He is truly able to say that someone’s sins are forgiven.

The mark of the climax in a narrative in the Bible is the moment when you are holding your breath and asking the question, “What is going to happen next?” In this narrative, this is certainly the climax. If the

man does not get up, Jesus is a blasphemer. But if he does get up, it means Jesus does have the right to forgive sin.

In the biblical world, people believed that there was an intimate connection between sin and suffering, or sin and disease. Really they overdid it back then, because the connection is not ironclad. You cannot pinpoint the specific sin committed which caused each instance of suffering in a person's life. Sometimes God does chastise, though I have no idea how often. Sometimes, for instance, there is a connection between sin and illness. If you drink alcohol in massive quantities, you suffer liver damage and kidney damage—that one is pretty obvious. But there can be even more to it than that. In 1 Corinthians 10, 11 Paul writes about abuses occurring during the Lord's Supper, and one of the results is that people died.

After a miracle, it is important to look at the following sayings, the following words, and see what light they shed. If you want to get the main point of a miracle, you look two places. You look to the climax and you look to the sayings that follow. In those places you will usually find the core message. The climax of this narrative indicates that Jesus does have the right to forgive sins. He is divine. He is God, and He has proven it. He has given a tangible sign of His power. In looking to the subsequent action, another point is made. The crowd gives an inadequate response to what they have seen. Yes, they were amazed. They praised God and said, "We have seen remarkable things." Those comments sound good on the surface, but what is missing is that they did not say they saw God. They should not have merely praised God; they should have worshipped God who was among them. They should have said, "He is God. He is Lord. He does have the authority to forgive sins." While their responses are not incredulous, they are a long way from faith.

One thing that helps get at the main point of a narrative is to list the various characters and determine the main point for each of them. So among Jesus, the Pharisees and scribes, the paralytic and his friends, the homeowner and the crowd, each one of these characters will have a main point. Before doing that, it is also helpful to determine which of the three kinds of narrative this is: a quest, a test, or a choice. For Jesus this episode is a test. It is a test of His power to forgive sins. For the Pharisees and the scribes, it is a choice. They face the choice to believe or not. For the paralytic and his friends, it is certainly a quest. You will not find a nice match up like that with every narrative. But this passage illustrates clearly several of the principles of interpretation that we want to put into practice.

What is the point taught from Jesus and His test? He passes the test. Jesus is who He says He is. Jesus is God. He has the authority and the power, not only to heal, but also to forgive. The Pharisees and the scribes face the choice between sticking with the past of their pride, their position, and their status in Israel, and repenting to believe in Jesus. What they should do now is eat their words, but they do not. They choose the path of preserving their own dignity instead of telling the truth. The paralytic and friends show how vital it is to persevere. Sometimes Christians get a little too caught up in the ideas of the 'open door' or the 'closed door.' Someone might be praying about becoming a missionary or going to seminary or starting a new ministry or getting married or trying some new job or learning some new skill and he wants to see if the Lord opens the door or closes the door. A truly Christian view recognizes that sometimes the door is open, sometimes the door is closed, and sometimes you must tear the door off its hinges. God does not make everything easy for His people. In the quest stories of the Bible, time after time, God throws up obstacles, puts people off, makes them face some barrier, and after they face that barrier and persevere, then God gives in to them.

What are the applications we take from these points? The application for the unbeliever involves focusing on Jesus' story, becoming acquainted with the claims of Christ and the fact that He validates

His claims. Jesus does not merely claim to be a great man; He claims to be God and He gives proof. Those who most need to focus on the story of the Pharisees and the scribes are those who need to consider the evidence of God's claim on their life. Sometimes people get caught up in theologizing and fail to draw any conclusions from our theology. The evidence is there, but we need to act upon it. This can apply to both believers and unbelievers. It especially applies to people who have gone to church, know a little bit about the Bible, maybe even have joined a church at some point, and though they never really decided it was wrong, they just drifted away. Those people need to be real, to confront the evidence, and act upon it. And finally, for those like the paralytic and his friends, the main application has already been made above, that we need to persevere and not give up at the first obstacle. But there is a second point as well. In the text, Jesus did not mention just the paralytic's faith; Luke says "Jesus saw *their* faith." It would be hard to believe that any one of those friends by himself could have pulled off what they did together. Not only is there the matter of courage to tear a hole in the roof, and the physical difficulties involved, but also the willingness to take such a risk, to do such a rash thing and to believe that God would actually bless it. It takes a community to accomplish the mission of the Gospel.

There are some steps you can take in order to read miracle stories in a theologically informed and Christ-centered way. First, all miracles are Christ-centered. God is the hero; Christ is the hero of all of the miracle stories. All of them in some way or another point to who Jesus is or what He does or what His ministry is all about. They all show that He is Lord and God. In them we see He is Lord of nature, of disease, of demons, over all things—rich and poor, male and female, sin and disease, Jew and Gentile. The miracles also reveal something about Jesus' human side. When a motive is given in the Bible for why Jesus heals, that motive is always compassion. Repeatedly we read: "Jesus' compassion moved Him to heal the crowds." He had compassion on the thousands of people who were following him for three days without food, so He gave them bread. He had compassion on the blind man who called out as He was on the road to Jerusalem. He had compassion on the widow whose only son had died. Jesus often acts out of His emotion, out of His love for people. Jesus' miracles always bring healing and restoration. They always point beyond themselves to the overall redemptive work of Christ. We are not just saved from sin in the sense of escaping punishment; we are saved entirely. There is no end to the scope of Christ's redemptive work. No, we do not receive all the benefits now. We only taste the fullness of redemption, but there will be no limit to it. There is no realm of life that God's love in Christ's redemption cannot touch.