

Absolution, The Power To Forgive Sins.

Text: Matt 9:1-8

Suggested Hymns:

176, 793, 311, 293, 514

1) What Absolution is

2) Does This Power Still Exist

And Is To Be Practised In The World

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Matthew 9:1-8, ¹ *So He got into a boat, crossed over, and came to His own city.* ² *Then behold, they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, “Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you.”*

³ *And at once some of the scribes said within themselves, “This Man blasphemes!”* ⁴ *But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? ⁵ For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Arise and walk’? ⁶ But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins” — then He said to the paralytic, “Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.”* ⁷ *And he arose and departed to his house.*

⁸ *Now when the multitudes saw it, they marveled and glorified God, who had given such power to men.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

It was a great miracle which Christ performed, healing the man who had been *a paralytic*. Probably the man had been sick for many years. He was helpless, could not move a limb, and had to suffer great pains.

And what does Jesus do for this unfortunate man, when his friends by means of a rope, let down the bed, on which he was lying through an opening in the roof into the room where Jesus was?

It would have been a great thing had Jesus merely halted the disease, so that the man gradually would have regained his strength and the use of his limbs.

But Jesus does a great deal more. He not only eliminates the disease at once, but, at the same time, imparts vigour and strength to the body that had been worn out by the palsy.

Jesus says, ***“Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.”*** And what is done? Scarcely was the word spoken, when, as we are informed, ***7 And he arose and departed to his house.***

This was an astounding miracle, showing that Jesus is the true God with whom nothing is impossible.

This miracle, however, is not the greatest thing recorded in our Gospel. Jesus did for the paralytic something still greater. Before performing the miracle, He said to him, ***“Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you.”***

He forgave him his sins; and as soon as the words were spoken, the man’s sins were actually, forgiven.

For it was for the very purpose of showing that the man’s sins were really forgiven that Christ performed the miracle of healing him.

Now is it not a much greater thing to have your sins forgiven than to be healed by a miracle? ***5 For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Arise and walk’?*** The answer involved in this question is: Forgiving the sins is greater than healing by miracle.

This greater thing, absolution, which means the power to forgive sins, is our theme for today. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. What Absolution Is.

What is absolution? That is shown in our text. When Jesus said to the paralytic man, ***“Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you,”*** He pronounced the absolution.

Absolution is the authoritative declaration that the sins are forgiven. Because Jesus authoritatively declared to this man that his sins are forgiven, the scribes were shocked. We read, ***3 And at once some of the scribes said within themselves, “This Man blasphemeth!”***

And not only did they say this within themselves, but we read in Luke 5:21 that ***the scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, “Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?”***

They knew that God alone can forgive sins. And that absolution is not man's forgiveness, but God's forgiveness, declared to man, and declared to him with such power and authority that thereby his sins are really forgiven.

We must not look upon absolution as if thereby the sin itself was obliterated and made undone. No; the sin itself remains as an act which has once been performed and which stands once for all.

But when God absolves the sinner, He turns away His face from the crime of his sins so as not to see them, although they are still there. As we are told in the prophecies of Micah, Micah 7:19, that God *will cast all our sins Into the depths of the sea.*

Likewise we read in Psalm 103:10–12, ¹⁰ *He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities.* ¹¹ *For as the heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him;* ¹² *As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.*

So we must well remember that our sins will always stand as acts that have been performed; but as soon as we have obtained absolution these acts no longer stand as accusations against us because they are forgiven.

Here many people hold a wrong understanding. They think, when God confers absolution, or forgives sin, He merely shows mercy and allows sin to go unpunished, as though He does not care, and generously waived His right to punish the sinner.

But no, my friends, God never forgives sin at the expense of His holiness and justice. God is so perfectly holy that He cannot let a single sin go unpunished. He punished your transgressions upon His beloved Son Jesus Christ, and only for Christ's sake and in Christ Jesus does He show mercy and forgive sins. Without Christ there is absolutely no forgiveness.

Only when you believe in the Saviour Jesus, who has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, who was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities¹ — only then can you expect absolution, or the forgiveness of your sins.

For how did the Lord Jesus come to confer absolution on the paralytic man? Are we not expressly told that this was done when *“Jesus saw their faith”*? If

this man did not have faith he never would have heard the comforting words, ***“Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you.”***

And we must distinguish God’s forgiveness of sin from His removing the consequences of sin. When God forgives a sin, it does not follow that He always stops its consequences. In the case before us Jesus did both. He forgave the man’s sin and also took away the consequences of sin.

The absolution and the removal of the man’s disease were two distinct acts. The forgiveness of Christ did not remove the paralysis. That was done by a separate distinct act, by a miracle.

A drunkard or smoker, for instance, who has ruined his health beyond repair, may come to repentance and obtain perfect, full forgiveness; but that forgiveness does not restore his health.

Divine pardon does not interfere with the laws of the universe. It is a law that penalty follows the transgression. Forgiveness does not alter the penalty, but it alters the attitude with which the penalty is accepted. It is a fearful truth that, so far as we know, the consequences of an act must be borne by the transgressor.

Forgiveness does not stop them; but by consoling the mind it transforms them into blessings. This is God’s forgiveness; and absolution is the conveyance to the conscience of the conviction of forgiveness. To absolve is to free, to comfort by strengthening, and to give repose from fear.”

Many Jews assumed that anyone suffering a great affliction must have committed a terrible sin and was being punished for it. Some sins do have natural consequences that are frightful.

But we also read in John 9:2-3, ² ***And His disciples asked Him, saying, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”*** ³ ***Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him.***

Therefore we have no right to judge the heart of anyone suffering affliction. Our Christian duty is to do what we can for all who need help, not just for those we consider worthy of being helped.

So out of Christian charity we refuse to judge this paralytic. His suffering may have been intensified because he knew what many thought about his

affliction. Some, like Job's friends, may even have accused him of terrible secret sins and urged him to confess them.

All this aside, as a sinful human being he could think of many "ordinary" sins for which God might justly punish him. As he lay helpless day after day, he had a great deal of time to ponder his sinfulness. So Jesus met the man's greatest need when he declared, *"Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you."*

2. Does This Power Still Exist And Is To Be Practised In The World.

Having considered what absolution really is, let us ask whether this power still exists and is it to be practised on earth.

Christ told the paralytic man to walk so that those who were witnesses of this miracle might know *"that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins"*

Therefore we say that Christ delegated to His Church the same power which He had exercised Himself. Jesus said to His disciples in John 20:23, ²³ *If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."*

But here some people object and reply that, that promise had reference only to the apostles, that they were supernaturally gifted to distinguish genuine from pretended repentance; to absolve, therefore, was their natural prerogative; but that we have no right to say it extends beyond the apostles.

We therefore bring the question to a point by referring to an instance in which an apostle did absolve. Let us examine whether St. Paul confined the prerogative to himself. We read in 2 Corinthians 2:10, ¹⁰ *Now whom you forgive anything, I also forgive. For if indeed I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven that one for your sakes in the presence of Christ.*

Note well that the apostle here absolves a man whose excommunication he had previously required. But upon what does he base his absolution? Upon a certain mysterious power vested in his own person because he was an apostle? No; he says, *"For your sakes."*

He absolved the man because the congregation absolved him. The power of absolution therefore belonged to the Church and to the apostle through the Church.

It was a power belonging to all Christians: to the apostle because he was a Christian, not because he was an apostle. A priestly power, no doubt, because Christ has made all Christians kings and priests.

With the help of this additional light let us now turn again to examine the meaning of that expression in our text, “*the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins*”

Note the form of words — not Christ as God, but Christ as Son of man. It was clearly said by Him not solely with reference to His divine, but rather with regard to His human nature, as the Son of man; that is, as man.

Thus we may take it as a rule: when Christ calls Himself Son of man, He is asserting His humanity. Who, then, can deny that this power of absolution still exists? Has Christ’s humanity been abolished? Has not His humanity been exalted, so that He is the Head of that mystical body, the Church? Does not the Absolver live, and does not His power remain intact ?

But the question is: Shall this power be exercised which Christ has given to His Church, or shall we, like the scribes in our text, consider it blasphemy when one Christian says to another, “*I forgive you your sins*”?

The answer to this question may be gathered from the last verse of our Gospel, where we are told, ⁸ *Now when the multitudes saw it, they marveled and glorified God, who had given such power to men.*

To *men* God has given such power. The plural is used. So it is a power which pertains to members of the human race as long as the world remains. It is a power upon earth. But would there be any cause for marvelling and glorifying God if this power was not exercised? No; absolution is to be pronounced in our days as well as it was done in the days of St. Paul.

Let us not be disturbed by the objections of those who call the practice of absolution in the Lutheran church a remnant of popery. There is the greatest difference between the absolution of a Roman priest, who claims to derive his absolving power from the pope, and that of a Lutheran pastor, who is nothing but the voice of the Church and the instrument of the congregation proclaiming forgiveness in the name of God.

When in our Worship Service the minister, himself a sinner, says to the congregation, “*I forgive you all your sins,*” he declares a divine fact, he does not create it. There is no magic in his absolution. He can no more forgive whom God has not forgiven, by the formula of absolution, than he can transform a demon into an angel.

The pastor declares what every Christian has a right to declare, but what, for the sake of order, is done by one in the name of all, by the called and accepted minister, who does not forgive by his own power, but by the power of the congregation; and not in his own name, but in the name of God and in the person of Christ.

This is why the Pastor says, *in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ forgive you all your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

Let us highly value and prize the doctrine of the absolution, which is one of the distinctive doctrines of the Lutheran church, and when we hear the blessed words, “*forgive you your sins,*” let us in no way doubt, but firmly believe that this is as valid and certain in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us Himself.

Thus we shall have the true benefit of this comforting absolution and, like the multitudes in our Gospel, glorify God who has given such power to men. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Isaiah 53:4-5