

Title: Who Says?
Text: Matthew 9.1-8
Theme: The authority of Christ
Series: Matthew #51
Prop Stmt: The right to forgive is God's.

Read Text:

J. Bdziszewski (boo-jee-SHEF-ski) was an atheistic philosopher of religion who taught at University of Texas. He had his PhD in ethics and passionately attempted to defend the notion that we make our own rules for right and wrong therefore we each create our own moral structures. He no longer embraces atheism. He wrote a book explaining his shift entitled, "Escape from Nihilism" in which he wrote:

"I have already noted in passing that everything goes wrong without God. This is true even of the good things he has given us, such as our minds. One of the good things I've been given is a stronger than average mind. I don't make the observation to boast; human beings are given diverse gifts to serve him in diverse ways. The problem is that a strong mind that refuses the call to serve God has its own way of going wrong. When some people fell from God they rob and kill. When others flee from God they do a lot of drugs and have a lot of sex. When I fled from God I didn't do any of those things; my way of fleeing was to get stupid. Though it always comes a surprise to intellectuals, there are some forms of stupidity that one must be highly intelligent and educated to achieve. God keeps them in his arsenal to pull down mulish pride, and I discovered them all. That is how I ended up doing a doctoral dissertation to prove that we make up the difference between good and evil and that we aren't responsible for what we do. I remember now that I even taught these things to students. Now that's sin.

It was also agony. You cannot imagine what a person has to do to himself – well, if you are like I was, maybe you can – what a person has to do to himself to go on believing such nonsense. St. Paul said that the knowledge of God's law is 'written on our hearts, our consciences also bearing witness.' The way natural law thinkers put this is to say that they constitute the deep structures of our minds. That means that as long as we have minds, we can't *not* know them. Well, I was unusually determined not to know them; therefore I had to destroy my mind. I resisted the temptation to believe in good with as much energy as some saints resist the temptation to neglect good. For instance, I loved my wife and children, but I was determined to regard this love as merely a subjective preference with no real and objective value. Think what this did to my capacity to love them. After all, love is a commitment of the will to the true good of another person, and how can one's will be committed to the true good of another person if he denies the reality of good, denies the reality of persons, and denies that his commitments are in his control?

Visualize a man opening up the access panels of his mind and pulling out all the components that have God's image stamped on them. The problem is that they all have God's image stamped on them, so the man can never stop. No matter how many he pulls

out, there are still more to pull. I was that man. Because I pulled out more and more, there was less and less that I could think about. But because there was less and less that I could think about, I thought I was becoming more and more focused. Because I believed things that filled me with dread, I thought I was smarter and braver than the people who didn't believe them. I thought I saw an emptiness at the heart of the universe that was hidden from their foolish eyes. But I was the fool."

What was it for Bdziszewski that compelled him to believe in God? It was the concept of grace and forgiveness. Here was his struggle. He could not deny the reality of forgiveness, but he wanted to deny the reality of God. But forgiveness is a shirt that has "made in heaven" on the label. You cannot wear it or talk about it and deny God.

But, in this account that Matthew (Mark and Luke) records, the people in the audience are not denying the existence of God and they clearly understand that there is a connection between forgiveness and God. What they do not yet understand is how deep our need of forgiveness really is and how our need of forgiveness can only be met in Christ. Nor do they understand that Christ is God.

1. Forgiveness is the biggest issue. (1-2)

Christ and the disciples are back in Capernaum. The people on the other side of the lake pleaded with Jesus to leave them and he did. Now, he is back in the city that was like his base of operations and (according to Mark and Luke) is in a house teaching. Remember that Jesus had already been there and had healed a number of people. This man was obviously not healed. As a paralytic, he could not get himself to Jesus. Perhaps, his friends decided that if Jesus ever came back that they were not going to let this opportunity pass them by again. So, word gets out that Jesus is back and these guys carry their friend on a stretcher or pallet. The wording suggests that he is probably a quadriplegic. When you look carefully at v.2 you begin to see how desperate this man and his friends are. In fact, Mark and Luke tell us that they could not get into the house because of the crowd, so they carry the man up on the roof. Then, they remove a portion of the roof over the place in the house where Christ was. I cannot imagine that when the debris began to fall down upon the people in the room and when the homeowner realized that these guys were ripping up his roof that he was very happy about it. But these guys were desperate to get their buddy to Jesus. After getting the opening wide enough they began to lower him.

This is where things really begin to intensify. The issue, we would normally think is that this man is paralyzed and he desperately needs help. On the one hand, we could say that his physical condition is a clear example of our spiritual condition. He is needy. He cannot save himself. He has no hope apart from Christ, etc. So, if Jesus heals him, we could say that his physical healing is an example of what Jesus can do to the entire person. Fair enough. But, Jesus does not talk about his physical condition does he?

Matthew sets the scene carefully. There are the men who brought the paralytic that Jesus sees. There is the paralytic who is lying on this stretcher before Christ and there are the

people who are gathered around, some of whom are scribes. Basically there are 5 audiences. 1) The Friends – don't know everything about Jesus yet, but believe he can help. 2) The Paralytic – doesn't know everything about Jesus yet, is afraid, and desperately needs help. 3) Scribes – Don't know everything about Jesus, don't need his help and are here to investigate. 4) Crowd – don't know everything about Jesus either, but what he does is amazing (like the friends) 5) Disciples – following, learning, always being surprised.

Jesus sees the faith of these men for their friend and then speaks to the paralytic, but he does not say what you think he is going to say. He says, "Take heart, my son, your sins are forgiven." Why does Jesus say that? There are two possible reasons. 1) While the man needed physical healing, Jesus knew that his deeper problem was his sin. So, instead of just addressing the man's physical problem, Jesus addressed the problem of his soul. And yet, if the man came to Jesus to be healed, the response of Jesus would initially seem to overlook his presenting need. Anyway, I think there is a second and more likely reason why Jesus said this. 2) The man had a troubled conscience and was aware that his physical condition was a result of his sin. Perhaps he had a neck injury as a result of doing something sinful and he was now a quadriplegic. Jesus knew what the real problem was didn't he? When Jesus tells him that his sins are forgiven, Jesus is relieving this man of a burden that was crushing him. While that was not the case of everyone Jesus healed, I am suggesting that this man's physical condition was a daily reminder of his guilt and he was not only helpless, he was hopeless. He was hopeless until he heard about Jesus, right? Do you see what is going on here? This man looks like us. And his friends look like the people who God used to bring us to Jesus.

A. We need forgiveness.

Whether or not this man actually knew it (and I think he did), he needed forgiveness. But, how can we get forgiveness? We can only get forgiveness from the one that we have sinned against.

During W.W.II, a young German soldier, around 19 years old was severely wounded and was going to die. This soldier knew that he was going to die. He knew that he was going to face God and he was terrified. He was terrified because he knew some of what the Nazi's had done to the Jews. He was terrified because he knew what he had done to some Jews and in a few minutes, he was going to face God. The soldier asked if he could speak to a Jew. So, a Jew who was on a work gang in the prison camp was grabbed, seemingly at random and was thrown into the room with this soldier. There, the German soldier asked the Jew for forgiveness. Could that Jewish man forgive the German soldier? Who has the right to forgive? The person who was sinned against is the one who forgives. Forgiveness is so important, ...

B. Forgiveness is more important than physical healing.

Jesus knew this, which is why he responded this way. Of course, he also knew that when he said this, that some of the people in the audience would be offended. But notice this

please, because it happens over and over. In spite of the fact that Jesus knew that they would be offended when he said this, he said it anyway. He said it because they needed to hear it. They needed to know that he was God and that he had the authority to forgive sin. He was not going to hide something from them for the sake of peace and unity and approval ratings when the truth that he was hiding was the truth that they needed in order to be forgiven. Which brings us to the next verse and the next point.

2. **Forgiveness is the biggest problem.** (3-6)

They knew this much. They knew that only God has the right to forgive sin, so when Jesus said that he had forgiven this man of his sin, the scribes are stunned. It is still early in the ministry of Christ and while there appears to be some growing awareness of the ministry of Jesus, I do not think that the scribes and Pharisees have formally met yet to discuss Christ. They do not yet see him as a threat. But, that is about to change. So again, they know this much. They know that...

A. **The one offended must be the one who forgives.**

We do not realize how serious of a problem forgiveness really is. People have said to me, "I know that God has forgiven me, but I can't forgive myself." What?! Are you kidding me? That doesn't make sense. That is wrong on several different levels. 1) Do you think that it is easier for God to forgive than for you to forgive? In other words, is your sense of justice and righteousness and purity higher than God's? Are you more deeply offended at sin than God is? Not on your life. 2) The issue is not forgiving yourself. What do you mean by forgiving yourself? You are not the one who is offended. You are the one who has caused the offense. The one offended must be the one who forgives.

But here is why I believe people say that we need to learn to forgive ourselves. I believe that when we sin, we really do not want to own it. We really do not want to admit that we are capable of doing something like that, so we say such things as: "I can't believe that I just did that. Or, "that is not like me. Ask anybody who knows me and they will tell you that that was completely out of character." Well guess what? Those people really don't know you, do they? Because when you say "that is not like me" or "that is just not me" the obvious question is, "well, who was it then?" If you were the one who did it, then it really was like you. But unless you own it, then you will play this game and pretend to be embarrassed and instead of repenting and turning to Christ, you forfeit grace by trying to earn your own forgiveness. Consider this.

Suppose that you and your son are in the car because you are going out to eat and to a Tigers' game to celebrate his graduation from college. Not only that but your son's fiancé and her family are joining you for the evening because your son has just accepted a job offer and now, the pieces of life are starting to fall together. You have so much to celebrate! On your way to the restaurant, however, a drunk driver runs a red light and t-bones the side of your car and your son is instantly killed. The drunk driver is fine, but you find out that he is driving on a suspended license and is driving a stolen car and has between 15-20 warrants out for his arrest for other violations.

Now let's suppose that a week later I come up to you and say, "Hey I visited that guy who killed your son and told him not to worry about it because I had forgiven him. Everything was cool now." Your offense at my words would be off the charts because I had no right to forgive. The one offended must be the one who forgives.

B. God is the ultimate offended party.

Jesus was asked one time, "What is the greatest commandment?" And he said that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul and mind and that the second greatest is to love your neighbor as yourself. Therefore, we recognize that there is a connection between the way we treat others and our relationship with God. When we sin against others, we are ultimately sinning against God. So, while we need to seek the forgiveness of others, we ultimately must have the forgiveness of God because God is the ultimate offended party.

David grasped this. After committing adultery with Bathsheba, and arranging for the death of her husband Uriah, David confessed his sin (Psalm 51) to God, "Against you and you only have I sinned." Wait a minute; we are tempted to say. What about Uriah? What about the other soldiers who served with him? What about the shame that David brought upon his family and the kingdom? Actually, David is correct. Before it was a sin against others, it was a sin against God. Our failure to love others is first and foremost the result of our failure to love God. Since God is the ultimate offended party, we must have his forgiveness. Even if we secure the forgiveness of everyone else around us, if we do not have the forgiveness of God, we are not forgiven because sin is ultimately against God. Therefore...

C. Only God can truly forgive.

Now, the scribes knew this. They realized that by claiming to forgive sin, Jesus was claiming to be God. So, they began to reason amongst themselves. "Did we just hear what we thought we heard?" This part of their theology was right. They knew that no man has the right to absolve someone of sin. Only God can do that. Was Jesus being deceitful? Was Jesus delusional? Was Jesus just telling this man something that would make him feel good in the moment but was not really true?

Jesus does not avoid conflict does he? He does not soften his words and spin his statement, retract his words and try to backpedal at all. In fact, notice what Jesus says. "Why do you think evil in your hearts?" Jesus was identifying and labeling their thoughts as being evil. What exactly was evil? They were accusing him of blaspheming because he was claiming to be God. It would be blasphemy unless it was true. But, if it was true, then they are the ones who are actually committing blasphemy.

Ok, let's stop here for a second and make certain that we all understand blasphemy, because whatever it is, it sounds so bad that no one wants to do it. Actually, the word means to slander. When the name of God is used in an inappropriate way, that is when

someone claims that God said or did something that he didn't, that would be blasphemy. On the other hand, if I claim to do something that only God can do, then I am guilty of blasphemy because I am dragging God down to my level.

For example, when a person says, "(God) damn it" or "(God) damn you" they are guilty of slandering God, because only God has the authority and right to damn. This is why I don't think it really matters whether or not you say "God." In this case, Jesus is being accused of doing the opposite thing. He is accused of forgiving someone of their sin. So, what does Jesus do? Jesus really starts bearing down on this doesn't he? Because here is the point that they and we must grasp. Forgiveness is the biggest problem and that problem can only be remedied by Christ. Only God can truly forgive because God forgives through Christ and that is what Christ is seeking to establish. Here is his argument:

What is easier, healing a body or forgiving sin? Now, we might be tempted to answer that by saying that it is easier to tell someone that their sin is forgiven because how can someone prove otherwise, whereas, if you say "rise and walk" which would obviously imply that the person is healed, then the person would have to actually rise and walk which would mean that the person would actually be healed. But, that is NOT how these scribes were thinking. They were well versed in the Old Testament law. They knew many examples of people who were healed, but they did not know of a single example of an Old Testament prophet or king declaring on his own that someone's sins were forgiven.

Jesus was claiming that he was doing the more difficult of the two. He was actually forgiving this man of his sin. However, in order to demonstrate his right to forgive sin, Jesus exercised his authority over the affect of sin and he healed the man. He fixed the easier and obvious problem to illustrate his power to do address the more difficult one. He then wrote him a script for 3-6 months of physical and occupational therapy because this guy was going to need to a lot of help to get these muscles working again – right? No, this man immediately rose and went home.

3. **Forgiveness is the greatest testimony.** (7-8)

The celebration that night had to have been incredible. Other than the bill for the roof repair, this man, his family and his friends had much to celebrate. I would have loved to have heard them tell the story over and over. Each one played a part, but Jesus was the hero. And best of all, this man was not just healed, but his heart was whole. And that night he could sleep with a conscience that was clean because his sins were forgiven.

The crowds saw it, and (notice this) they were both afraid and glorified God. At the moment, they had no category in their minds for Jesus. We know that he was God in human flesh. They were learning that. And one of the ways they were learning that was from this man who had been carried in on a stretcher who was now, walking home.

A. **Ours to receive.**

Forgiveness is a promise that God offers you, but it is only yours, in the same way that it was this man's. It is only yours through Christ, because only Christ can put away your sin. This is why this happened. Christ is demonstrating that he alone can forgive sin. We find out why. We find out that he alone is able to do it because he is the only One who can and did die in our place and paid the penalty that we deserved. Jesus knew what he was going to do for this man, which is why he could declare him forgiven. In our case, we can see what Jesus has already done and accept it. And when we do, we have something to say and something to share. Forgiveness is not only ours to receive, but it is ours to share.

B. Ours to offer.

We can offer the promise of ultimate forgiveness when we tell others about the gospel. We can point people to Jesus and put the gospel on display when we forgive others from our hearts.

Simon Wiesenthal was the young Jewish boy who was working on a labor gang when he was yanked from his work and shoved into the room with the German soldier who was dying. Standing there, representing all of the Jews, the dying soldier asked for forgiveness. Simon agonized over this. He thought, only the offended has the right to forgive and since most of the offended were dead, including all of Simon's family, Simon wondered, how can those who have not suffered and died, like himself, extend forgiveness for those who have. At that moment he did not know what else to think. The soldier was dying. He wanted forgiveness. Simon did not believe that it was his to give. His conclusion was that there is no forgiveness for the Nazis. Having worked this out in short order in his mind, he, without saying a word, turned and walked out of the room. Long after the war was over, Simon continued to agonize over this. He wrote this down and sent the account to some of the world's leading ethicists asking them if what he had done was the right thing.

Simon did not believe that he had the right to forgive, but Jesus does. And while we cannot speak on behalf of people who are sinned against, we can repeat the promises of our Savior to every single person who turns from their sin and comes to him in faith. "Take heart, your sins are forgiven." Who says? The King – Jesus! And if Jesus, whose offense is the deepest, will forgive, so must we.