

# Truth for Today

*The Bible Explained*

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## Luke's Gospel: The Paralytic and Levi

Good morning and welcome to *Truth for Today*, where we are continuing with our series on Luke's Gospel. Last week, Ian Britton considered Luke 5:1-16, so I will deal with Luke 5:17-32. The series continues next week by Paul Thomson bringing some thoughts from Luke 5:33-6:11. The title of my talk today is "Levi and the Paralytic", which obviously suggests its two principal parts. Part one, concerning the paralysed man, will be from Luke 5:17-26 while part two will cover Luke 5:27-32.

We must not consider the healing miracle, described for us in Luke 5:17-26, in isolation from the preceding verses, as the Lord Jesus had already cast out unclean spirits from a man in the synagogue, at Capernaum (Luke 4:31-37), which had established Him in the public eye. Luke 4:37 states just this: "*And reports about him went out into every place in the surrounding region.*"

On leaving the synagogue, He effected a more private restoration to health of Simon's mother-in-law, when she was ill with a high fever (Luke 4:38-39). So complete and immediate was this healing, she rose up at once to resume her domestic duties (Luke 4:38). By now the fame of the Lord's healing power had spread, with further implications, as Luke 4:40 tells us: "*Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them.*"

So we can see from this that the ability of the Lord as a healer was already established amongst the population at large, in the towns and villages of Galilee.

If you were listening to *Truth for Today* last week, you would have learned how the Lord Jesus met a man in the last stages of leprosy, yet was able to make him free of the disease (Luke 5:12-16). Such a miracle would, and did, amaze the people of the unnamed Galilean city, so much so that Luke 5:15 informs us: "*But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities.*"

I have deliberately reported the reaction to these healing miracles of the Lord, in order to emphasise the growing attention, and respect, that was given to Jesus of Nazareth by the common people, who lived around Lake Galilee. Before I comment about how this unlooked-for curiosity of the masses affected the ministry of the Lord, I ought to have said that all the quotations from Scripture this morning will be from the English Standard Version of the Bible, unless otherwise stated.

Now back to our passage, where I trust you have not forgotten that our allocated portion this morning is from Luke 5:17-32. I now read Luke 5:17: "*On one of those days, as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with him to heal.*"

This is the first time that the Pharisees are mentioned in this Gospel, so an important milestone had been reached in the journey of the Lord Jesus. It is pertinent for us to notice that this attendance on His teaching, by the august visitors from Jerusalem and Judea, was not a co-incidence. Clearly, this was an arranged meeting between the Pharisees, scribes and teachers of the law to assess the words and actions of this carpenter from Nazareth. William Barclay's comments about this verse are: "The Scribes and the Pharisees had arrived on the scene. The opposition which would never be satisfied until it had killed Jesus had emerged into the open."

To understand the basis for the enmity that eventually developed in the hearts of the Pharisees, we must understand their attitude to the Law. They believed that in order to be a faithful nation, and to be recognised as the people of God, they must be true to the basic principles of the Ten Commandments. In order to do this, they had elaborated the commandments with further regulations.

As an example, we will consider the commandment about not working on the Sabbath Day, which one can read in Exodus 20:8-11. The difficult problem was the definition of work. Many years ago I attended a lecture at the Jewish Museum, in London, where the lecturer was giving examples of how a pious Jew would seek to obey the commandment about not working on the Sabbath. He told us that outside of one's home, on the seventh day, it was

legitimate to wear things but not to carry anything. The lecturer's father was so zealous for the Law, that he would empty his pockets before he went out. Handkerchiefs, which he needed, would be tied together and slipped through the loops on his trousers, meaning he was wearing and not carrying them. On reaching the synagogue, he could untie them and return them to his pocket, as it was acceptable to carry things indoors. In New Testament times, it was much the same, with work being defined under thirty-nine headings, and even these were subdivided, meaning a whole mountain of rules and regulations emerged.

One can well imagine then the consternation, two thousand years ago, when a teacher came from Nazareth, of all places, preaching that the Law was made for man and not man for the Law. In Matthew 11:28 the Lord is recorded as saying: *"Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."* This was an invitation to those who found the burden of law-keeping impossible, and this the Pharisees could not accept. Consequently, to use a modern expression, Jesus of Nazareth was a marked man. We shall further consider this point in a few minutes.

We look now at the details of the healing of the paralysed man, which is the central point of the event described in the first section of our passage from Luke 5:17-32. I read now Luke 5:18-19: *"And behold, some men were bringing on a bed a man who was paralysed, and they were seeking to bring him in and lay him before Jesus, but finding no way to bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the midst before Jesus."*

I want to stop here for a moment to draw two practical lessons for each of us this morning. Firstly, the aim of the men who carried the paralysed man was to get him to Jesus. When I was employed in the machine shop of Rolls-Royce, in the 1950s, there was a man who was scorned by some as a 'Come to Jesus preacher'. I might say at this point that he was also respected by many for his Christian faith and life style. My point is that there is no better service than that of seeking to bring men to the Lord. He is the only One in whom there is salvation and life. My second point is for us to note their determination. When they could not find a way through the crowd with their friend, they resorted to lowering him through the roof. We need to seek every lawful opportunity to carry the Christian Gospel to the world in which we live. This is one reason why Premier Radio is so important today in broadcasting the message that Jesus is Lord.

The Scripture tells us, in Luke 5:25, of the complete cure that was effected to this poor man. He rose up in front of the crowd, and in the presence of the Pharisees, picked up his bed that he had occupied for so long and returned home singing the praises of God. He knew from whence his healing had come.

We now return to the Pharisees and their anger with the Lord, because as they watched Him give power back to the disabled man, they were not pleased that the man had got his life back, but intensely displeased. They also heard the Lord declare that the man's sins were forgiven. Such a proclamation was totally against their understanding of the Law. We must admit, however, that they were correct in their believing that none but God can forgive sin.

Luke 5:23-24 tells us why He (Jesus) could legitimately claim to forgive sins: *"But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins - he said to the man who was paralysed - 'I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home.'"*

Again, it is the same today. The Lord Jesus, by virtue of who He is and what He has done, can forgive us our sins. The question that must be asked now is: Are we believers in the Lord Jesus? Only you can answer that question.

At this point, I feel I ought to enlarge upon this thought that salvation is in the Lord. To my mind, (and this is the view of all the *Truth for Today* team) the New Testament insists that Jesus is God incarnate. This is a tremendous truth which some people turn away from as impossible to accept. When the Apostle Peter exclaimed, in Matthew 16:16, that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, he was told by the Lord that God in heaven had revealed it to him. I believe it is the same today. The realisation that Jesus is the Son of God is at the centre of the Christian Gospel as John 3:16, a verse so beloved by many, states: *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."*

If we change the message, it is not the Gospel that the Apostles preached, so we change it at our peril.

We have noticed the effect of the Lord's words and actions on the paralysed man, and also the effects upon the Pharisees, so notice now how the bystanders reacted. We find this in Luke 5:26: *"And amazement seized them all, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, 'We have seen extraordinary things today.'"*

Again the question must be asked of us all, this morning, whether the presence of God in our lives evokes such a response. Are we a praising people who glorify God because of who He is and what He has done? I am not much concerned in what form this response takes, as much as its sincerity and reality. Are our affections increased as the Holy Spirit causes us to meditate upon the wonder and majesty of God, as revealed in the Scriptures?

If you have just joined us, can I welcome you to this consideration of Luke 5:17-32, brought to you by *Truth for Today*? We are just about to move on to look at Luke 5:27-32, which concerns the call of Levi to discipleship. Please excuse me if I seem patronising when I say that Levi is the name for the man we know better as Matthew, the apostle. I only say this as there may be some listening who are not as familiar with the New Testament as most of you. Let us read Luke 5:27-28: *"After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, 'Follow me.' And leaving everything, he rose and followed him."*

The fact that Levi was a tax-collector comes before us this morning with a mildness that masks the hatred that such a job generated in the public at large, in first century Palestine. Tax-collecting meant not only accepting the Roman occupation, but being a willing accomplice to extracting as much money as was possible from their fellow citizens.

In our country today, though we might not enjoy paying taxes, we know that it is a fair system to which most of us are subject. Not so in Levi's time where, according to William Barclay, murderers, robbers and tax-collectors were classed together, and were all barred from the Synagogue. This, then, was the type of man that the Lord called to be one of the original twelve disciples. If we place this incident in its context of the early chapters of Luke's Gospel, we see that God's grace has been showered upon a demoniac, a leper, a paralysed man and now a despised outcast. Respectable people would no more touch a man full of leprosy than they would a tax-collector.

Let us not fail to notice the response of Levi to the gracious invitation of the Lord. Whereas he had formerly been occupied in what one has called 'the pleasant task of receiving money', an occupation that most enjoy, he was now diverted from this to follow this penniless, itinerant preacher, who had nowhere to call home (see Matthew 17:24-27 and Luke 9:58). This was a complete and dramatic change, all caused by the gracious call of the Lord. We must not overlook that to call such a man as Levi was as great a miracle as healing the leper or the paralytic man. Many of us are so preoccupied with the accumulation of wealth that all other matters are banished from our minds. When I was very young, there was a popular song which had the refrain, *"Money is the root of all evil"*, which I would sing except you would rapidly turn down the volume! My point is, that the Scripture in 1 Timothy 6:10 states, *"it is the love of money that is a root of all kinds of evils."* As the Lord said later in His ministry: *"No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money"* (Luke 16:13, Matthew 6:24). Levi made his choice by leaving everything and following Jesus. Which master do we serve?

I want us to notice that there is a similarity in the actions of both persons we are considering this morning. The paralysed man rose up and carried his bed away. I presume he had lain on this for many years, so his action meant he was leaving the security of a condition he had endured, if not enjoyed, to venture into a new condition of things. Levi, too, rose up leaving the security of his money table, to venture into the unknown in company with Jesus. He did not know what the future held, yet he was content to face it as a companion of the Lord. Surely it is the same with us. The implications of being a Christian mean that we go wherever our Master takes us. Only recently, I heard about a Christian who gave up a well-paid job in the Health Service in order to work in a Bible school. The Lord very rarely leads us into fame and fortune. We serve because we love the Lord and hear our Master's voice. As Tozer once remarked in one of his books: *"Before the judgment seat of Christ my service will be judged not only by how much I have done but by how much I could have done!"* Levi left **everything**, rose up and followed Him.

Luke 5:29 informs us of Levi's further response: *And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors."*

How precious to see that Levi's first desire was to invite his friends and fellow tax-collectors to meet his new Friend, whom Luke later calls, *"the Friend of publicans and sinners"* (Luke 7:34). This is a very practical passage, which raises many challenges to us as we talk today. Do we gently, not aggressively, share our faith with our friends and work colleagues? Luke 5:29 also states that Levi made the feast for Jesus, meaning that the Lord was at the centre of the celebrations, not left out on the fringe.

As we approach the end of our time together this morning, there are two more points that I want to centre upon. The first is the response of the Pharisees, which we can read in Luke 5:30: *"And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?'"*

Again comes the carping criticism that we have already noticed. As far as they were concerned, this group of people were beyond redemption, for they ignored the Law to mix socially with Gentiles. Pity the poor disciples, for have you noticed it is they who were criticised (Luke 5:33). In the history of Christianity such matters have never altered. Here the disciples bore the ignominy and shame of following the Lord. Paul, in 2 Timothy 1:8, tells us not to be ashamed of the testimony of the Lord. Many in this present age suffer intense persecution through their faithfulness to the Lord. Let us never cease to pray for them.

My last point, and we cannot miss this out, is Luke 5:32, the last verse of our allotted portion: *"I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."*

How precious are these words to each one of us who, when in our spiritual poverty, came and were accepted of Him. A commentary that I regularly use puts it this way: "While the gospel of grace and forgiveness is for everyone, repentance is a prerequisite to its reception. The tax-collector met this prerequisite, but not the Pharisee" (The Expositor's Bible Commentary).

Levi demonstrated repentance by turning his back upon his former life to embrace a new life. As Isaac Watts wrote many years ago:

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
That were an offering far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

Good morning and thank you for listening.

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