

## Who Is This Fellow?

LaGrave Avenue Christian Church

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Luke 5:17-26

A father eagerly pours the concrete in the hole dug and erects a driveway basketball hoop. He has visions of teaching his son how to play the game of basketball. He has loved this game; the bright orange orb has provided him many benefits over the years. He wants to teach his son all that he has learned. The years go by, and that little boy soaks up his father's lessons, and obviously loves his father for it. He looks up at him with adoring eyes. The father relishes being his son's hero. But as all healthy boys do, he grows, becomes taller and stronger. One Saturday afternoon the son says, "Hey Dad. How about a game of one-on-one?" It had been awhile since the two had sparred, and with a wink he replies, "Sure, Son! Love to beat you yet again." ... But for the first time, the outcome of the rivalry is different. Of course, he couldn't help but to admire his son's youthful speed and agility. But the sound of "nothing but net" wasn't quite as sweet when he wasn't the one racking up the points. It seems, he wasn't the big man on the driveway anymore. He dared not suggest making it 2 out of 3, lest his pride take additional beating. The roles had been reversed. His son had schooled him, and he wasn't ready to take the lessons that his son had to teach him, even though the son had proved his worth.

In our text today, Luke shares a story of Jesus during his first ministry trip around Galilee. He frames this episode of teaching and healing with Pharisees and teachers of the law sitting there having something like their own one-on-one with Jesus. These learned men had come from as far away as Jerusalem.

However, if you would be reading the gospel according to Luke from the beginning for the very first time, you may be experiencing a replay. In Luke chapter 2 there is a similar setting, except the roles were reversed. "After three days they found him in the temple courts (in Jerusalem), sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers." You see, Jesus was just 12 years old.

Twenty years have passed since this scene. We don't know if any of the Luke 2 teachers are present in Luke 5. However, clearly there is a shift of authority and in who is teaching whom. Twice the readers of Luke have been told that Jesus taught and healed with authority. Here are the who's who of the Hebrew faith; they have come to learn about this man Jesus. Traveling preachers were not uncommon in first century Greco-Roman-Hebrew world, but Jesus seems different. He teaches and heals with an authority that draws crowds of people to him. Jesus also seems to have a profound command of the physical and the spiritual world, healing the body and casting out evil spirits. I imagine that the visiting teachers hoped that they would witness a healing. And then, of all things, a paralyzed man is lowered through the roof right in front of Jesus and the teachers. But Jesus doesn't heal. He demonstrates another skill on his resume. He forgives.

You know how you when you watch a basketball game and you see one of the opposing players travel, you have this immediate gut reaction. Now each of you may react differently. Some of you jump up and holler, "Travel!" And some of you sit there and shake your head knowing that clearly a rule had been broken.

That's how these learned men reacted. By stating that this man's sins were forgiven Jesus had clearly broken a rule, blasphemy; he had traveled into the territory of claiming divinity. In the Jewish faith forgiveness was possible, but it would be given by God, and forgiveness would be given at the end of time, on the Day of the Lord, at the eschaton. Jesus claiming to forgive this man was a double heresy. He was claiming that he, a man, could forgive and that it could be done now. "Who is this fellow?" They had an answer: He is a blasphemer; he claims to do things that only God can do.

Unlike the visiting teachers, the paralyzed man floating down and his toting friends seem to know exactly who Jesus is. Jesus' prior mercies of healing toward other people just like them, allow them to trust there is mercy for them also. They are so confident in their assessment of him that they will not allow themselves to be hindered by the burden of carrying the mat with their paralyzed friend on it.

The word has spread that Jesus of Nazareth is in town again and preaching at a home in the more well to do part of town. It's the part of town where the homes have tile roofs rather than simple thatched roofs. First, these men surely must have had to consider whether they dare show themselves there since they belong to the lower rungs of their society. And, their friend who was paralyzed probably was also bladder and bowel

incontinent. They didn't have plastic mattress liners to protect his mat. The odor undoubtedly offended everyone near him, and word is that there are Pharisees, teachers of the law, from Jerusalem there also. They are compelled to throw social conventions aside and decide to show up with their paralyzed friend. Second, as they approached the home they are met with swarms of people. However, they aren't hindered by the crowds standing between them and Jesus. It was just going to take some ingenuity. And third, nor are they hindered by any city ordinances about climbing up top of another person's home and dismantling their roof. Their belief in who Jesus was and in what he could do for their friend placed them on a journey which had only one ending, their own one-on-one interaction with Jesus. It was an action of trust in Jesus' supreme authority. Unwavering trust in Jesus' authority led to the mercy of His action in their lives despite any offense of smell or the stench of sin.

So, we have two groups of people exhibiting two very different faiths. One approaches Jesus with explicit wholehearted trust. The other approaches Jesus with implicit distrust.

Trust/Distrust is a curious thing. In my experience as a chaplain trust is a product of loving relationships and distrust is a product of woundedness in relationships which are supposed to be loving. One young woman I met with at Pine Rest had been disappointed by and hurt by the words of her addict mother. Her distrust of people's love had become a permanent fixture in her heart. She struggled to have any sort of lasting relationships with friends, family members or with God. Rather than trust, she was riddled with suspicion, anger, and ultimately shame that she was not good enough to be loved by her own mother.

Drs. Henry Cloud and John Townsend write about this concept in their book *How People Grow*. They point out that trust is only possible where acceptance is given. They write, "Acceptance is a bridge to developing safe and growth-producing relationships, both with God and with people. We can't grow unless we trust that we are both known and loved." Trust is critical for fulfilling relationship with people and with God.

When explaining this text in his commentaries, John Calvin notes, "...our inclination is strong to distrust, that is we never venture to believe that God is merciful to us." If we are prone to distrust God's mercy for us, in some way what we believe about our relationship with God is wrong. First, perhaps we don't believe we need mercy from God. Or second, perhaps we can't believe that God would extend mercy to someone like us.

We are seeing a trend in our culture to disbelieve that we are needful of God's mercy. This is evidenced in a 2017 country music hit song. Country music artist Luke Bryan released a song entitled *I Believe Most People Are Good*. He croons a long list of feel good things that he believes in and sings repeatedly "I believe most people are good." Below the YouTube video of this song there is a long list of favorable comments. One fan states, "Keep the faith people, spread kindness through your actions and words."

It could be argued that this statement, along with all of Luke Bryan's lyrics, are not blatantly false, but they do indicate in what our culture values and they point toward a misdirected trust. That is a trust in the goodness of humankind as the ultimate hope for this life on earth.

Luke Bryan also sings about his hope for eternal life, "I believe them streets of gold are worth the work," he sings. It seems he believes that one can trust their own hard work and goodness for the entry into heaven.

But this points to an incomplete understanding about who God is. It intimates that God is a deity who settles for our efforts as being good enough. But our God doesn't settle for good enough. But would a basketball coach ever say to the player, "Ah, it's alright. 7 out of 10 free throws is good enough."? Never. And neither is our God alright with good enough. He is a just God, and he deals in perfection.

When perfection is the standard we are also at risk of believing that God could never extend us mercy because we are so far from perfect. The effects of sin in our lives have left us broken. Perhaps from our poor choices, actions or inactions. And perhaps from the choices, actions or inactions of others in our lives. All of it makes our relationship with God also broken.

The hard truth is; we aren't good enough. God is holy and he wants holiness for us too. Sadly, we aren't trustworthy for perfection, we need Jesus. Which begs the question, "Who is this fellow?" And, "Is Jesus trustworthy to help me?"

In today's text Jesus proves that he is the real deal. He stakes a claim that he should be the number one draft pick. He dominates the court of life. He is a triple threat to the Enemy. He teaches. He heals. He forgives. He is the Son of Man.

Nobody but God knows the state of a person's faith, like he did with the five men. Nobody but God can forgive the sins that offend God. Nobody but God knows the thought in a person's mind, like he did with the

Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. Nobody but God can instantaneously heal a paralyzed person, like he did in this story. Jesus wants to make it clear that he is claiming divinity.

Jesus could not have been clearer about this intention when he addressed the teachers of the Law. Like a schoolteacher writing the daily lesson objective on the white board for all students to see, he said, “I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” Jesus calls himself the Son of Man knowing that the teachers of the Law will think of the heavenly vision recorded in Daniel 7, “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence.” A title like Son of Man may seem like an emphasis on Jesus’ earthly humanity. However, Jesus is actually emphasizing his perfect and heavenly deity. In Daniel the Son of Man was escorted on the clouds of heaven into the presence of God almighty, the Ancient of Days. First, the Son of Man must have been a holy being to be brought in front of God Almighty. Second, Daniel’s vision is set in the heavenly realms, and the Son of Man rides on heavenly clouds. Claiming to be the Son of Man is claiming that his origin was in heaven, and he was completely holy.

The next verse in Daniel supports Jesus’ claim to have the authority to do heavenly things, like forgiving. Verse 14 says, “He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” Jesus is the fulfillment of that vision. He does have authority given straight from the Ancient of Days, Almighty God – authority and power to do all these things in heaven and on earth.

But, why should we trust Jesus, when he wields so much power? We humans can be leery of people and institutions who wield great amounts of power. Lord Acton was a Roman Catholic in the 1800s who had grave concerns about the authority the Catholic Church was assigning to the Pope. In this context he wrote this now famous quote, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.” However, we need not fear Jesus’ use of his power and authority because Jesus is Son of Man from Heaven and is holy. He is incorruptible. In other words, Jesus is completely trustworthy!

Earlier I quoted Calvin, but I didn’t provide you the entire quote. Hear all of his thought, “Our inclination is strong to distrust, that is we never venture to believe that God is merciful to us ... until he draws near and speaks mercy to us.” Here is the best news of all. In His blessed mercy, Jesus drew so near to us humans that he could smell the stench of our foul sin yet does not recoil from us. He lived among us in all our brokenness until it finally put him to death. And because he is trustworthy Jesus still draws near and whispers sweet mercies to us despite our ongoing battle with sin. Our sin does offend our God, but He is not content to leave us there. Without fail, He draws near to us and whispers the mercy of love, healing, and forgiveness.

Finally, Jesus commanded the paralyzed man to pick up his mat and go home. Of course, Jesus and all those present didn’t care to have the foul mat remain after the man walked away. However, a church father, St. Augustine of Hippo, not even 350 years removed from Jesus suggested in one of his sermons that the foul mat symbolizes the sin in our flesh that we must carry with us every day. But it is a burden that doesn’t have to master us any longer. We can carry our mat and praise the Son of Man because he is completely trustworthy and bears our burden with us.

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