

THE REAL JESUS: HIS MINISTRY

Week Three | June 3, 2018 | Jesus is Sovereign Over Sin

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Before your group meets next time, spend some time alone in God's Word reading through this week's text, Luke 5:17–32. Pray that God, through His Spirit, would bring to life the truth of this text and how it applies to your life.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Because Jesus is God, He has the authority to forgive sin.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

While Jesus has the authority and power to care for our physical needs, He shows us that He can also meet our greatest need, forgiveness of sin.

MEDITATE

And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." (Luke 5:32).

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart and mind for the truths of this week. This section will help to introduce the focus of this week's lesson.

Q: Do you think it is more of a miracle for someone to be physically healed or for them to be forgiven of sin? Why?

Best-selling author, professor, intellectual, and religious studies scholar, Reza Aslan, argues that there is an insurmountable gap between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. He argues that the Christ of faith is the religious figure people believe in and are devoted to. This Christ, he argues, is infinitely malleable. He can take on whatever shape, race, politics, heritage, or history the individual worshiper or community wants. For example, the Jesus worshiped in America is different from the one worshiped in China, or Ethiopia, or India. In one place He may be imagined as a blond-haired, blue-eyed white man, in another He may bear striking resemblance to the Buddha, and in another He may be pictured alongside a pantheon of local gods. Many think the Christ of faith can be whatever you need Him to be, and He can take on whatever identity you want Him to have.

In contrast, says Aslan, the Jesus in history is a real man who is frozen into place. You cannot create your own idea of Him any more than you create your own idea of Abraham Lincoln or Alexander the Great. To get to the “Real Jesus,” you have to remove the layers of myth, imagination, and tradition that come through the biblical account and the Church’s interpretation throughout history. “The more I probed the Bible,” Reza Aslan says in the introduction to his wildly popular book, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, “the more distance I discovered between Jesus of the gospels and the Jesus of history.” Aslan goes on to argue that the Bible is not an historically reliable document and is only useful for learning about the mythical interpretation of the life of Jesus. Therefore, we cannot consult it for accurate, non-biased historical information and must treat it as a non-historical text, like we would any work of fiction. Aslan does not discourage belief in and devotion to the Christ of faith. In fact, he himself says that he is a follower of Jesus, though he recognizes that he has his own version of Jesus, which he carefully distinguishes from the “real,” historical Jesus.

The book of Luke refuses any notion of a chasm between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith. Luke bridges this gap by creating an account not of the Jesus of history or of the Christ of faith, but of the Jesus of *testimony*. Rather than propagating a fictitious story, direct eyewitnesses provide traceable historical truth that has enormous personal ramifications for those who hear it. Luke’s account prohibits us from inventing Jesus in the image of our own culture or preferences by grounding Him in the facts of history. On the other hand, Luke also keeps us from looking at Jesus sterilely, the way an archeologist would examine an artifact. He teaches us that Jesus is not just a piece of history, He is Lord of history. What He accomplished two thousand years ago on a cross in the Middle East has the ability to radically change each of our lives today.

This perceived chasm between Jesus' humanity and His divinity did not necessarily start with recent scholarship. It was a question asked by many people during Jesus' day, especially those in religious leadership. Through His ministry, Jesus proved He was able to perform incredible miracles like healing the blind, crippled, and diseased. He turned water into wine and provided food out of nowhere for thousands of people. But, skeptics could have interpreted the miraculous events as a freak coincidence or some kind of unusual supernatural power.

However, the Jewish people were very well versed in a theology of forgiveness. One thing God alone has the ability to do is forgive sin. Perhaps they had a category for human miracle workers, but there is no category for a human who can wipe away a person's sin standing before a holy God. When Jesus begins not only to heal people's bodies but forgive their sin, He declares He is far more than an historical man. He is God Himself. Such a claim closes the gap between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith.

🗣️: *Discuss the idea of the "Christ of faith." Can you think of ways your concept of Jesus bears more resemblance to your cultural, ethnic, and historical context than it does the Bible?*

🗣️: *What dangers come from having a division between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith?*

📌 UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

As we continue our study of Jesus' ministry and consider misconceptions that Luke helps us overcome about the "Real Jesus," we will specifically consider how Jesus' claim that He has authority to forgive sin helps us overcome one very popular misconception, that the Jesus of history is different from the Christ of faith. We will consider three passages in which Jesus shows the people around Him that He is really man and also really God.

1. JESUS MEETS OUR GREATEST NEED

2. JESUS IS OUR GREATEST FRIEND

+ This next section will help show what God's Word says about this week's particular focus. Read through the Scripture passages and connect the text to this week's biblical truth.

JESUS MEETS OUR GREATEST NEED

LUKE 5:17-26

- Q: *Why do you think Jesus commended the man's friends for their faith? What did their actions demonstrate about what they believed about Jesus?*
- Q: *Why did the Pharisees think Jesus was blaspheming?*

You can feel the tension of the scene just reading Luke's account of this story. A group of Pharisees and teachers of the Law had come from various cities to form an investigative committee to examine Jesus' teaching and ministry, looking for any theological ground to denounce Him. Seated around Him in front of the crowd, they listened eagerly for anything worthy of criticism. In the midst of this hostility and suspicion, Jesus calmly taught about the kingdom of God. While He was speaking, a group of friends carried a paralyzed man on a bed, trying to bring him to Jesus to be healed. They knew if they could just get their friend to the feet of Jesus, he would be restored. What faith! They demonstrated true friendship—bringing one another closer to Jesus.

They know they are incapable of fixing their friend's problems, but they know the One who is. But there was a huge obstacle in their way. They were unable to get through the crowds to get to Jesus. So, they got creative. They cut a hole in the roof of the house where Jesus was teaching. Imagine what the homeowners thought about that! Imagine what Jesus thought as He was sitting there teaching and suddenly a man is lowered through the roof right in front of Him! They didn't let apparent obstacles discourage them from taking their friend to Jesus. They also weren't afraid of annoying Jesus or interrupting Him. They had the faith of children who, by any means possible and without any sense of appropriate or inappropriate timing, bring their requests to the Lord.

- Q: *What do these men teach us about the meaning of Christian friendship? Examine the friendships in your life in light of their example.*
- Q: *What ways can you “rip open the roof” for your friends to help them see Jesus?*
- Q: *Do you go to Jesus with the same boldness the men in this story did? Do you try to resolve the problem yourself or resign to live with the status quo? What keeps you from boldly taking your needs to the feet of Jesus?*

In contrast to the friends who pushed through obstacles and social judgment to bring their paralyzed friend to Christ, verse 17 tells us the Pharisees were just “sitting there.” As Kent Hughes points out, they were the real paralytics. He writes, “As religious leaders charged with the care of their people, they should have been directing traffic to Jesus. Or at least when the roof parted, they should have reached up to receive the poor cripple. But instead of love they showed indifference. Instead of faith they issued criticism. Both attitudes hinder faith and healing.” Rather than desiring to see the paralytic healed and restored, they were more interested in trapping Jesus. Jesus was fully aware that they were out to get Him, and He decided to give them what they were looking for.

It was obvious to everyone what this man’s greatest problem was. He was paralyzed. He couldn’t get off his bed, much less live an independent life. But, when Jesus saw him, He identified the man’s true and greatest need; he was a sinner in need of forgiveness. Jesus saw the condition of his soul as well as that of his body. Thabiti Anyabwile notes, “You can be paralyzed, unable to get around without your friends, lying motionless on your sickbed, and yet still be *full* of sin!” In Matthew 18:8, Jesus reaffirms the truth that our greatest need is spiritual forgiveness. He says, “And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into eternal fire.”

Jesus is not saying our physical bodies or circumstances don’t matter. In fact, His ministry proves He cares about healing and restoration and actively provides it. However, He wants us to understand that God’s punishment is far worse than paralysis. It is better to come limping and wounded into heaven than go sprinting into hell. If Jesus had merely healed the man’s paralysis, He would have withheld what he needed most. It is easy for us to see what lacks or what hurts in our lives and want to fix those specific circumstances. But Jesus goes to the heart of the problem. He transforms us completely, starting from the inside.

In Luke 5:20, Jesus says, “Man, your sins are forgiven you.” This caused the Pharisees to lose their minds. They finally caught Jesus on huge theological grounds. Only God can forgive sins! For Jesus to claim the ability and authority to forgive meant He was putting Himself in the place of God! This is textbook blasphemy. The Pharisees did have a correct theology of forgiveness. Only God can forgive sin. They got that right. What they got wrong was their assumption that Jesus was not God. They had a gap in their own minds between God and the man standing before them.

To prove that Jesus wasn’t just going around saying “Your sins are forgiven,” but truly has the authority to do so, He gives them a visibly verifiable sign of His power. He tells the paralyzed man to stand up, pick up his bed, and go home. While the miracle of physical healing was incredible, it pointed to a greater miracle that happened—the man’s sins were forgiven. The man’s faith was counted to him as righteousness on the basis of Jesus’ coming sacrifice on the cross, where He would pay the debt of the man’s sins.

🕒: *If you were one of the witnesses of this miracle, what would your reaction be? How would you respond to Jesus?*

🕒: *What do you pray about the most? Do you find yourself more concerned about your physical needs or your spiritual needs? Which do you functionally treat as your greatest problem, need, or hope?*

JESUS IS OUR GREATEST FRIEND

🕒 LUKE 5:27-32

🕒: *What kind of person was Levi?*

🕒: *What was the Pharisees’ criticism of Jesus?*

There was almost nothing about Jesus' ministry that pleased the Jewish religious leaders. They believed the Messiah would come, but they had a preconceived idea of what he would be. For them, the Messiah would be born in the greatest house to the most noble family. He would be a great warrior who would free the Jews from Roman oppression and establish them as an international power. But from the very beginning, Jesus' life ran contrary to all their expectations. He was born to ordinary people in a town that was too small to be notable. Rather than being born like a king in a great palace, He was born in a stable! He was no warrior or politician, but instead a carpenter.

If His upbringing wasn't enough to offend the Pharisees' expectations, Jesus' earthly ministry certainly was. He did not hobnob with the leaders in the temple or establish influential political connections. He didn't even spend His time with respected people in the community who were known for their religious devotion. Instead, Jesus chose to invest in the outcast and hated in society—the sinners. How could it be that a Holy God, the King of the universe, would associate with sinners, much less befriend them?

In Luke 5:27–32, we are introduced to a man named Levi, who, as the text says, was a tax collector. Tax collectors were not respectable in that society. They held a position of power granted by the government, but they abused that power by cheating people. They had very little accountability to keep them honest and frequently overcharged people, keeping the extra money for themselves. Everyone knew tax collectors were sleazy criminals who just happened to be sanctioned by the government, and an enemy government at that! More than criminals, tax collectors were traitors. They were Jews who had abandoned their loyalty to their people to take a profitable job with the Roman government. They were in cahoots with the enemy and had a hand in Jewish oppression. With this context in mind, imagine how the Jews felt when they saw Jesus, the Messiah, befriend tax collectors. On the other hand, imagine how the tax collector, Levi, felt when he heard Jesus call out to Him. Levi was sitting at his booth, collecting taxes and his usual profit, when Jesus said to him, “Follow me.”

What made Jesus identify Levi as someone He wanted as a disciple? He was not spiritually respected; he was vehemently hated. He was not an honest person; he was unapologetically corrupt. He wasn't even seeking God. He was perfectly content to continue living the life he had been living. And yet, Jesus went to Him and said, “Follow me.” Jesus didn't ask him to clean up his act first. Instead, Jesus' call interrupted Levi right in the midst of his sin!

🔗: *Read Ephesians 2:1–7. In what way are all Christians former “Levis?”*

🔗: *What is it about Jesus' life and ministry that unravels your expectations of Him?*

Q: *Can you think of people in our society today whom we would consider “tax collectors?” Who are the hated and outcast, possibly even for good reason?*

Like the disciples before him, Levi leaves everything—his dishonestly earned wealth, his corrupt profession, his *life*—and follows Jesus. In the case of other disciples, Jesus transformed their profession. For example, instead of merely being fishermen, they became “fishers of men.” Their work was something that was used for the advancement of the gospel. But Levi had to walk away from a lucrative, but corrupt, profession. Through the words “Follow me,” Jesus puts a big demand on Levi, but He calls him to a better treasure than the world could ever give. By letting go of everything and following Jesus, Levi the outcast will become Levi the disciple. Jesus’ call is radical, but so is His grace. Following Jesus is not something we add to our lives, it is something that takes over our lives. To go with his new identity and his new life, Levi gets a new name. You might recognize it. It’s Matthew.

Immediately after he responds to the call, Matthew invites Jesus over for a party! What better response is there to God’s grace and forgiveness? What better place to commune with Jesus than around a table? And who better to invite to the party to see what wonderful thing has happened than your best friends? As Ligon Duncan rightly puts it, “No man who has tasted grace wants to go to heaven alone. If you don’t care about other sinners joining you in glory, then you just don’t know grace.” Matthew had just experienced going from hated outsider to beloved insider. He immediately desires for other outsiders to share in this experience. Matthew is already developing a particular desire that Jesus has, that outsiders would be made insiders.

Jesus accepts the invitation. He spends a long evening with Matthew and his tax-collector friends. Think about how offensive this was to the broader culture. It was bad enough when Jesus talked to a tax collector, even worse when He invited him to be one of His disciples. Now he is sharing food around a table as if he were one of them, or as if they were one with Him. Instead of keeping the outcast far away, He brought them near. By having a meal with the tax collectors and sinners, Jesus was proclaiming that something huge was coming that would change everything. Through His death on the cross, He was going to make a way for enemies to become friends.

In this passage, Jesus calls the spiritual health of the religious leaders into question. When they criticize Jesus for hanging out with sinners, Jesus responds in a clever way. Doctors don’t treat healthy patients, only sick ones. In the same way, He hasn’t come to heal the spiritually healthy, but the spiritually sick, those “dead in the trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1).

At first, this response probably appealed to the Pharisees because they thought of themselves as spiritually healthy. They had earned their righteousness. Clearly, they didn’t need Jesus like other sinners do. In reality, there is a lot of irony in what Jesus said. The truth is not that the Pharisees don’t need Jesus, it’s that they don’t think they need

Jesus. There is nothing more dangerous than being sick and thinking you are well. The only people who can get well are those who know they are sick. In this story we see two types of people, spiritually sick sinners and spiritually sick hypocrites. Before we were healed (saved), we all fit into one of those two categories. Jesus comes to heal both.

🔗: *In what ways does this story close the gap between the man Jesus and the God of the universe for both the Pharisees and Levi?*

🔗: *In what way can you identify with Levi? In what way can you identify with the Pharisees?*

NEXT STEPS

+ *Connect the truths from God's Word to your daily life. Process how what you've learned this week will impact the way you live beyond today and into the future.*

🔗: *Think about the weightiness of Jesus' words, "Follow me." These aren't just words for Levi, they are also directed to you. Have you left everything to follow Christ? Are there things you want to take care of or achieve first before you completely give Christ your life?*

🔗: *Reflect on your own heart. Do you have any room for boasting in your right standing before God? Do you believe you have something to offer Him or a reason He should approve of you?*

🔗: *If you see Jesus as merely a historical figure (the Jesus of history) or like your own personal expression of religious devotion (the Christ of faith), how would you see the issue of sin before God?*

🔗: *What are some helpful ways to talk about sin in a culture where it is not a popular topic?*

PRAY

+ *Use these prayer points to connect your time in prayer to this week's focus.*

- God, thank You that You neither ignore the problem of sin nor do you crush sinners. Instead, You paid the price for our sin and offer us forgiveness.
- Father, remind me often of Your great love for us that led you to “rip open the roof” of our sinful world by sending Your Son to save us.
- Holy Spirit, reveal the areas of sin and hypocrisy in my life, and lead me to repentance by Your kindness.
- Jesus, thank You that You are neither merely a historical figure nor a character of our invention, but You stand in the gap between God and man as our mediator.

COMMENTARY

LUKE 5:19 The houses at the time had stairs on the outside that led up to the roof so the men were able to access it without going through the crowded house. The roofs were flat, but only the homes of wealthy people had roofs made of tile.

LUKE 5:30 Jewish dining laws were complex and of great cultural importance. Because they followed strict dietary rules, Jews could not eat certain foods or food that was cooked in pans that had formerly been used to cook food that was considered unclean. As a result, they always ate far away from the Gentiles, in their own exclusive groups, since eating with others would have exposed them to “uncleanliness.” By eating with sinners, Jesus shows that complete and final “cleanliness” comes not from perfectly maintaining the Law, but through faith in Him.

**All exegetical content and commentary resourcing for this lesson were provided by the ESV Study Bible Commentary Notes, Preaching the Word: Luke, and Christ Centered Exposition (Luke).*