

It's quite the question, isn't it? "For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk?'" Jesus puts this before some scribes who were saying to themselves that He was blaspheming. Yet as God the Holy Spirit inspired St. Matthew to record this in the Gospel which has been handed down to us today, it's a question that we would do well to consider as well.

As we think on this question, we'll realize that the two parts of the question aren't exclusive, but are actually connect to each other in how God blesses us His children.

So then, which is easier? To say "Your sins are forgiven?" Or to tell a paralytic, "Rise and walk?" Maybe asking a related question would help our thoughts on this. Put yourself in the shoes of the paralytic. Which would you rather hear? "Your sins are forgiven?" Or, "Rise and walk?"

In fact, you probably don't even have to imagine being paralyzed to think about this. Think about coming to church. When you walk through the doors, it isn't as though your outside life is just left there in the parking lot and here you're just in your "spiritual life" as you sit in the pews. No, you come here, gathering together as God's people have done for millennia, and you come bearing the concerns and worries and troubles from the world.

You come here with concerns about your body and health, maybe even dealing with pain and suffering as you sit there. You come here with worries about your finances or your job, wondering if you'll make ends meet moving forward. You come here anxious about relationships, conflicts that have come up between you or others, or that might come up, and what you'll do to keep the peace. You come here worried about our community and nation and world; will this conflict in Israel blow up into something larger, and if so, what will you do?

And it's not just yourself. You come here worried about your family members and friends, their bodies, their lives, their souls, the things they're dealing with – like those who carried the paralytic to Jesus.

You come here with all sorts of concerns and burdens, in great need, like the paralytic. And what's one of the first things you hear in the service? "Upon this your confession, I, by virtue of my office as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

You come here will all those needs, and you receive... forgiveness. Is that what you needed to hear? Or is that just the easier thing to say?

Now maybe hearing those words in the absolution, that all your sins have been wiped away by your Lord Jesus Christ, is what you were truly desiring. Maybe you've been burdened by guilt throughout the week, or attacked by Satan as he brings up your faults and failures, and hearing that all your sins are forgiven provides the relief that you were after. And praise God for that!

But maybe, upon hearing those words, you're left feeling somewhat unfulfilled. Your sins are forgiven, and that's great, but what about your friend's cancer? Your sins are forgiven, but what about your recent medical bills and increased insurance premiums? Your sins are forgiven, but what about all the turmoil and frustration and anger with the upcoming elections?

Maybe you're feeling like the paralytic, or his friends, who came to Jesus probably expecting healing, but at first simply heard, "your sins are forgiven." Is it just the easier thing to say?

It might seem like it at first, but the reason Jesus starts with forgiveness is because it is exactly what is needed, for the paralytic and for all men. Why is that? It's because it deals with the root cause of all our problems: sin.

Sin is anything that is contrary to God's will, anything that goes against Him and His Word. When we sin, our sins separate us from God; they drive us away from Him. When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden, they were driven away, out of the Garden, away from God's presence, and our sins have been doing the same to us ever since.

Being separated from God causes problems because God is perfect good and the source of all goodness. Going away from Him, then, means we get bad things, things like suffering, and worry, and fear, and finally death. Sin causes the problems in our bodies, the problems in our relationships, the problems in our world. Sin corrupts us and causes us to see our God, not as our loving Creator and merciful Father who desires the absolute best for us, but instead as wrathful and unfair and unapproachable.

Sin is the root of all the problems, and so to deal with that root, God grants us forgiveness. Out of His grace and mercy, He takes our sins away, cleansing them by His blood on the cross, no longer counting them against us. Through the cross, we are again reconciled to God, given peace with our Creator. God is not our enemy, but once again our Father in heaven who we know loves us more than we can possibly imagine.

This restoration lets us see the world and our lives through a very different, and much better lens. We can look at the conflicts and dangers in the world and know that our God is in control of all things and is guiding them for our good, even if we don't understand how He does that.

We can face the uncertainties in our jobs and retirement funds and national economy without fear, because it is God who gives us our daily bread, and as Jesus teaches in the Scriptures, if we who are sinful – even evil – know to give good gifts to our children, how much more our heavenly Father, who is perfectly good and perfectly loving?

We can live our lives without fear of disease or death, because our lives are in the Lord's hands. Nothing can harm us apart from what God allows, and even when death finally comes, our Lord has conquered it through His death and made it into the doorway to heaven for Christians.

Because we are forgiven for the sake of Jesus, we can have absolute confidence in the promises given us in God's Word, that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Forgiveness allows us to see the world and our lives through the understanding that we have a God who loves us and who gives us exactly what He knows is best for us.

What about the second thing that Jesus tells the paralytic, then? He tells us “Your sins are forgiven;” why doesn’t He also tell us “Rise and walk”? Here is where faith, which is connected to forgiveness, comes into play. Faith comes in because we are not told in the Scriptures why each of us specifically suffer the various things that we do.

The Bible does tell us that Jesus has died for all. All who repent of their sins are forgiven, because that forgiveness flows from the cross, which was God’s own sacrifice, made for all people. And I as a pastor can declare your sins forgiven, because Jesus Himself gave that authority to men when He declared, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.”

But God has not given pastors, or any men, the promise and guarantee of earthly healing to anyone who needs it. I’d love it if that were the case, but it isn’t.

This is one of the parts of the faith that is hard, very hard, for us to accept. God will always tell us, “Your sins are forgiven,” but He doesn’t always tell us “Rise and walk.” God, in His perfect wisdom and His perfect knowledge and His perfect love, knows that sometimes suffering is what is best for us.

Sometimes He uses it as discipline, to drive us away from sin and back to Him. It’s much better to suffer in this life and have eternal peace in the next versus a life full of pleasure here but endless torment in hell afterward. Other times, God may use suffering to take away our idols, removing those things that we would trust in and put our hope in instead of Him. Again, He does this for the sake of our eternal existence.

Still other times, He may allow His people to suffer for the sake of calling others to repent and believe in Him. Think of the people of Israel, His chosen, beloved people, suffering for four hundred years in Egypt, in part so that the peoples then living in the Promised Land would have time to repent and turn to Him. Or think of the countless martyrs throughout the Church’s history, who showed that Christ was worth dying for, and by their deaths brought countless others to saving faith.

Above all of these, think of Christ, hanging on the cross, suffering the torments of hell and crying out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” and through it winning forgiveness, life, and salvation for all humanity.

Or there could be other reasons, known only to God, for why you face the suffering you do. I don’t know. Again, as much as I would love to be able to speak a word from God and immediately take away your problems, the Lord God has not given that to me.

But He has not left us alone with our suffering. There are things He has given to speak, promises in the face of suffering that are certain and unbreakable. First and foremost, God loves you. This is absolutely certain, for all people, all the time. Whatever you face, in the midst of it you can be certain that God loves you. He has promised that He will never leave you nor forsake you.

Second, God knows what you are enduring. He is not oblivious or ignorant. He understands perfectly your situation; all the time. And He feels your suffering. Think about what He said to Saul when He confronted him on the road to Damascus. “Why are you persecuting me?” Not “my people.” “Me.” The Lord Jesus felt the pain of those families torn apart by Saul. He heard their cries from their

prison cells. He felt the pain as the rocks crushed St. Stephen. When His Church suffers, He suffers. When you suffer, He knows.

The third point is that God has not created you for suffering. He is not some sick, twisted tyrant who delights in such things. He is a God who desires that His people, indeed His whole creation, dwell in peace and joy. Just think of the well-known words spoken through the prophet Jeremiah. “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.”

He spoke those words to a people who had been hauled away in captivity in Babylon after watching their loved ones be slaughtered and their cities burned. The people had brought that suffering upon themselves by their sins, but God was using it to turn them back to Him, that He might bless them.

That brings me to the fourth point that I can make from the certainty of God’s Word. He has a future and a hope to give you as well. He has not created you for destruction, but desires that all be saved. He guides all things in this world, good and bad, for the sake of bringing His saints to Him in glory.

If He knows that suffering is the needful thing, then He will allow it, but only as is needed, and not a moment further. And when He knows it is best to deliver you, then at the very moment He knows is right, He will do so. He will not delay, nor leave you in your troubles any longer than is necessary.

Will that be tomorrow? Will that be a week from now? A month? A year? I don’t know. Perhaps you have a thorn in your flesh that will be there until this flesh is put into the ground. But as the Lord told St. Paul, He speaks to you as well: “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.”

We don’t know how long the paralytic man suffered, and he certainly did suffer. But when the Lord God knew the time was right, He caused the man to be brought to Him, forgave him all his sins, and by a word of power healed him, ending that suffering and bringing glory to God, both then and even now as we continue to read and believe His Word.

The Lord has spoken His word to you, that you are forgiven. You can be certain that whatever happens in your life, you have a God who loves you and is bringing about exactly what He knows is best for you. Sometimes that will seem pleasant; sometimes that will be very unpleasant.

But the day is coming, already set by our Father in heaven, when the Lord Jesus will descend to this earth and speak to all who have been forgiven, “Rise, leave your graves, and go to the home I have prepared for you in my Father’s house.” And so, take heart, your sins are forgiven.

In the name of Jesus, amen.