**THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

**SOUL SURGERY**

**Luke 5:12-32**

**INTRODUCTION**

Today we continue our series called, “The Gospel of Luke: Finding Certainty in a World of Doubt”. Last Sunday, we read about the miraculous catch of fish. Simon Peter and his fishing partners had been fishing all night and had caught nothing, but as soon as Jesus told them to set out into the water and lay down their nets, they caught so many fish that both their boats almost sank. This was an amazing miracle, but as we saw last Sunday, the miracle was not the point. The point was what the miracle taught about Jesus: that he has access to divine knowledge. And if he knows where the fish are, then he knows where our sins are. But in his mercy, he tells all who trust in him to not be afraid. He has paid the penalty for our sins, and now he has plans to use us to call others to faith in him.

There’s no question that people are drawn to the miraculous. Back in 1994, the so-called “Toronto Blessing” was breaking out at a church close to Pearson Airport. News of the Toronto Blessing spread rapidly around the world. At one point, this church became Toronto’s top tourist attraction. Airlines were giving people discounts if they were traveling to visit the church. By the end of 1995, about 2 years after the Toronto Blessing began, 600,000 first-time visitors had come to the church to see what was going on.

What did all these people come to see? It wasn’t the preaching. R.T. Kendall, the preacher who succeeded Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones at Westminster Chapel and a supporter of the Toronto Blessing, admitted that, “If you are empty-headed before the Toronto Blessing, you will be empty-headed afterwards.” People didn’t come to be taught. They came to be amazed. Night after night, thousands of people assembled together at the church as vast portions of the congregation would break out into hysterical, spontaneous, uncontrollable laughter. Many would fall over, believing that they had been “slain by the Spirit”. Others took on the persona of various animals, barking like dogs, roaring like lions, or clucking like chickens.

I will leave the question of whether this was from God or not to another day, though I can tell you right now that I believe that elements of the Toronto Blessing were clearly in error. But for the purposes of this message, I highlight the Toronto Blessing to illustrate the kinds of “miraculous” events that many evangelical Christians tend to be drawn to today. Christians today tend to want the spectacular. They want the eye-catching and the jaw-dropping. They want to witness the kind of thing that everyone, even the secular culture around us, will be talking about.

In our text today, we will see Jesus perform miracles. Elements of these miracles will be of the spectacular variety, the kind that lead witnesses to speak excitedly about them to their neighbours. But the point of our text today is that, as great as those miracles are, they are only meant to serve as signposts pointing to a greater miracle. This greater miracle is not spectacular. On the surface, it is not eye-catching or jaw-dropping. But if we probe a little deeper, we will find that it is infinitely more precious than any spectacular miracle we could ever witness.

The title of this message is **Soul Surgery**, and my aim today is to show you that **Freedom from Sin is the Greatest Miracle of All.** We will have three points today:

1. The Spectacular Miracle
2. The Sign Miracle
3. The Invisible Miracle

(1) **THE SPECTACULAR MIRACLE**

Our text today begins in verse 12: “While he was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy.” “Leprosy” in the Bible refers to a wide range of skin diseases that were highly contagious. It could involve swollen areas on the skin, boils, spots, or even areas on the skin that looked like they had been burned. Some strains of leprosy could spread to the nerves and slowly cause lepers to lose control of various parts of their bodies. Leprosy has been described as “a form of living death”, at least in part because lepers could look like the walking dead.

As their bodies slowly decayed, lepers suffered another kind of living death in the form of social isolation. In Leviticus 13, God required lepers in Israel to wear torn clothes, let their hair hang loose, and cry out, “Unclean, unclean” so that it would be immediately apparent to others that they were lepers. To be “unclean” was not just a physical term. It was a religious term. To be “unclean” was to be unfit to be near God’s people or to labour in God’s service. The lepers’ declaration warned those around them that, if they came near, they also would become “unclean”. Therefore, lepers had to live alone, apart from the rest of God’s people.

What we see in verse 12 is a leper breaking from protocol. The leper sees Jesus, and instead of crying out, “Unclean! Unclean!” to warn Jesus to keep his distance, he comes to Jesus, falls on his face, and begs him with these desperate words: “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.” Notice what the leper says: “If you *will*, you *can* make me clean.” The issue here for the leper is not whether Jesus *can* heal him. The issue is whether Jesus *will* heal him. The leper has heard of Jesus, the miracle-worker, and believes that he has the power to heal him. And now, in his desperation to finally be freed from his “living death”, he comes to Jesus for help, hoping that he will use his power to heal him.

What would you do if you were there? We may not be lepers, but we all have pain in our lives. We have all faced “living death” in one form or another, because all of us live in a sinful, broken world. Our “living death” could be in the form of physical sickness or disease, or it could be in the form of broken relationships and conflict. The point is that, like the leper, all of us have problems that we can’t deal with ourselves.

How do we try to deal with our problems and our pain? Do we turn to ourselves, or do we turn to Jesus? Jesus may not be physically present with us, but at any time of any day, we can turn to Jesus through prayer. Do you pray about your pain, coming to Jesus to help you do what you cannot do yourself? If you never come to Jesus through prayer, then you either doubt Jesus’ power, or you doubt Jesus’ willingness. You either don’t believe that he can help you, or you don’t believe that he would ever be willing to help you. The leper wasn’t like that. He came to Jesus, because he believed both that Jesus was powerful, and that he may be willing to use that power to help him. God uses the weak things of the world to shame the strong, and in this case, he’s using the leper to challenge us to have greater faith in Jesus.

The leper’s act of faith leads to this beautiful response from Jesus in verse 13: “And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, ‘I will; be clean.’ And immediately the leprosy left him.’” Now this was a spectacular miracle of the highest order, the kind that would have gotten everyone talking. This man who had been “full of leprosy”, an unclean social outcast, had been healed and cleansed *immediately* with a touch and a word. Just imagine his broken, swollen, and burned skin turning healthy and pure right before your eyes. This is the sort of spectacular miracle that would draw thousands of people from all over the world to witness. And yet, the spectacular nature of the healing isn’t the main point of our text. It’s not Luke’s main focus, and it’s not Jesus’ main focus. Let me give you three reasons from our text why this is so.

The first relates to *how* Jesus heals the leper: he touches him. Why does Luke include this seemingly insignificant detail? Luke wants to tell us not just about what Jesus did, but who Jesus is. Jesus could have healed the leper with a word. He could have rebuked the disease as he had done earlier in the Gospel of Luke, but he doesn’t. Instead, he chooses to heal him with a touch.

Many of us would have recoiled at the sight of the leper. He would have been ugly, so ugly that he would have looked barely human. Touching him would have been the last thing on our minds! But Jesus has a tenderness and compassion for people that we lack, and in his compassion, he reaches out and touches the man. It may not seem like a lot, but in this simple touch, he gave the man a gift he had not enjoyed in a very long time – the gift of human touch.

It was a touch only Jesus could give, for he alone has the power to cleanse the unclean. If any other man had touched the leper, the uncleanness of the leper would have made the other man unclean as well. But here, we see the cleanness of Jesus making the unclean leper clean. In other words, this powerful little touch, which likely only lasted a few seconds, shows us that the most significant part of this miracle is not how spectacular it was, but how it reveals the unique compassion and authority of Jesus.

The second reason why the focus of our text is not on the spectacular nature of the miracle relates to the instructions that Jesus gives to the now ex-leper in verse 14: “And he charged him to tell no one, but ‘go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a proof to them.’” Jesus instructs the now ex-leper to show himself to the priest, so that the priest could declare him to be ritually clean and formally restore him to fellowship with God’s people.

But notice the other part of the instruction: “Tell no one”. That’s not the kind of instruction you give when you want people to come see the spectacular miracle you’ve just done. You would be saying, “Go and tell everyone! Tell your family, your friends, your neighbours, your acquaintances. Tell them what I’ve done for you, and bring them to me!” But Jesus doesn’t do this. He doesn’t want to draw attention to the miracle, because he knows that people will place undue attention on the miracle, rather than on him. And so, he says, “Tell no one”.

Third, notice what Jesus does when the crowds end up flocking to him anyways in verses 15-16: “But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities.” Somehow, news of this miraculous healing had spread throughout the land, and now everyone wanted a piece of Jesus.

Anyone trying to build a public platform would be drooling all over this. It was an opportunity to build a bigger following. But that’s not what Jesus did. Verse 16 tells us, “But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.”

For us, a busy schedule means less time with God. For Jesus, a busy schedule meant more time with God. When we see fruit, we become self-sufficient. When Jesus saw fruit, he became God-dependent. Jesus shows us where his priorities are. It wasn’t on building a public platform. It was on pleasing God his father. Jesus couldn’t have been more indifferent to the spectacular nature of the miracle he had just done, and the subsequent opportunities he had to build a large following, because he didn’t heal the leper in order to wow people. He healed the leper to testify to deeper truths about who he is and what he had come to do.

(2) **THE SIGN MIRACLE**

But what has Jesus come to do? The healing of the leper points us to truths about Jesus, but do they also point us to truths about us? The next miracle in our text will tell us that the answer is “yes”, which leads to our second point: The Sign Miracle.

Verse 17 introduces a class of people into the Gospel of Luke who will be key characters throughout the rest of this book. They are the “Pharisees and teachers of the law”. The Pharisees were a religious sect that existed to keep the nation of Israel completely faithful to the Mosaic law. They did that by creating countless rules that attempted to address every scenario, contingency, and implication of the Scriptures, and they expected all faithful Jews to abide by all of these rules. They were aided by the “teachers of the law”, who were also called “scribes”. They were religious lawyers who helped the Pharisees develop their complex and lengthy lists of rules and regulations. Both Pharisees and teachers of the law are present in our text, and they are about to witness Jesus do something amazing, for as the end of verse 17 says, “The power of the Lord was with him to heal”.

Our text continues in verses 18-19: “And behold, some men were bringing on a bed a man who was paralyzed, 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.”

In those days, houses had two levels. The first was on the ground level, and the second was on the roof, which was flat. The roof was made up of wooden beams, which were laid across the walls, and the spaces between the beams were covered with a layer of clay and reeds. People would access the roof via stairs on the outside of the house.

For this group of men to get their paralyzed friend to Jesus, they had to carry him up the stairs, make a hole in the roof through the clay and reeds, and fashion a rig that was strong enough to gently lower their friend into the house. They must have really believed that Jesus could help their friend in order for them to go through all that trouble! The same goes for the paralyzed man. After all, he’s the one who had to endure the embarrassment of interrupting the meeting with his descent from the sky.

This doesn’t escape Jesus’ notice. He sees all that the friends did, and all that the paralyzed man endured, just to get an audience with him. And rather than scold them for interrupting the meeting, he commends them for their faith.

But now, Jesus does something very unexpected. He doesn’t address the problem they want him to address. Instead, he addresses the man’s deeper problem: his sin problem. Jesus tells him in verse 20, “Man, your sins are forgiven you.” The paralyzed man wasn’t brought to Jesus to have his sins forgiven. He was brought to Jesus to be healed of his paralysis. But rather than heal him of his physical illness, Jesus chooses to heal him of his spiritual illness: “Man, your sins are forgiven you.”

I wonder how many of us can relate to this. I certainly can. I first came to Jesus as a seventeen year old, not because I thought I needed help with my sin problem, but because I thought I needed help with my “meaning of life” problem. I felt that living my life for things that would ultimately fade away in human history was, in the end, a futile, meaningless existence. I wanted to live my life for something that would last. I wanted my life to transcend the fleeting nature of this world. That’s why I turned to Jesus for help.

My “meaning of life” problem was a very real problem, and Jesus helped me tremendously with it. But it wasn’t my deepest problem. My deepest problem was my sin. I didn’t know it at the time, but my deepest problem was that I had offended God. I had offended God by my pride. I had offended God by my lust. I had offended God by my selfishness. The power of sin in my life, and the eternal wrath that I had incurred as a result of my sin, were far greater problems than my crisis of meaning.

But though I was almost completely ignorant of my deepest problem when I came to Jesus, Jesus didn’t turn me away. He received me with open arms. He helped me with the problem I brought to him, and then he gently showed me my deepest problem. He convicted me of my sin, and then he revealed to me that he had forgiven me of my sin and freed me from my sin through his death on the cross. He took the penalty that I deserved on himself, so that he could help me with my deepest problem. Such is the mercy of Jesus my Saviour. Though we come to him in ignorance, he doesn’t turn us away. Instead, he helps us to see the problem of our sin, in order that we may receive his gift of forgiveness.

Jesus’ statement that the paralyzed man’s sins were forgiven had massive theological implications that were not lost on the religious experts around him. Verse 21: “And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, ‘Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?’”

The Pharisees were wrong about a lot of things, but they were right about this: only God can forgive sins. They recognized that, when we sin, we sin against God. God has made us to live a certain way, and when we fail to do so, we offend him and require his forgiveness. So when Jesus declared that the paralyzed man’s sins were forgiven, he was making a massive statement about himself. He was declaring himself to be God.

The Pharisees and scribes understood this, which is why they respond with these words in verse 21: “Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” Blasphemy was any abusive speech or action directed against God, and it was punishable by death. Here, the Pharisees accused Jesus of blasphemy because he was claiming an exclusively divine prerogative. He was claiming to do what only God could do.

How does Jesus respond? He doesn’t say, “No, no, you have it all wrong. I’m not forgiving the man’s sins. I’m just telling him that God has forgiven him of his sin. I’m not giving him forgiveness. I’m just giving him the message that God has forgiven him.” Jesus doesn’t say that. Instead, he does something to prove that he does indeed have authority to forgive sins, and by possessing that authority, he is none other than God himself.

This leads us to another spectacular miracle in verses 22-25: “When Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answered them, ‘Why do you question in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the man who was paralyzed—“I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home.’ And immediately he rose up before them and picked up what he had been lying on and went home, glorifying God.”

Healing a man of paralysis definitely falls in the category of the “spectacular miracles”. It’s the kind of thing that made the crowds amazed and filled with awe, as verse 26 tells us. But the healing wasn’t the point. It was meant to make a point, the point that something greater than the miracle had just taken place: the forgiveness of the man’s sins. Jesus had authority to forgive the man’s sins, because Jesus carried with him the very authority of God, and in order to prove to his doubters that he had this authority, he healed the man of his paralysis.

(3) **THE INVISIBLE MIRACLE**

Now we come to the conclusion of our trilogy of miracles and our third point: the Invisible Miracle. It is the clearest example of the three, showing us that the greatest of miracles is not done in the body, but in the soul.

This miracle is found in verses 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.’” Now you may be thinking, “Wait a second. There’s no miracle here. All we have is a man getting up from his chair and walking. What’s so miraculous about that?” Jesus is going to tell us a little later on, but first let’s follow Levi home and see what happens next.

Verse 29: “And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them.” Tax collectors were a despised lot for a couple reasons. The first is that they were seen as betraying their people by working for the Romans. The second reason is that they would charge exorbitant surcharges for their tax collecting services. They were seen as crooks and robbers, who had not only betrayed their own people, but were exploiting them as well.

So when the Pharisees and scribes saw Jesus not only speaking to a tax collector, but enjoying drinks and a meal at a tax collector’s house with a whole bunch of tax collectors, they ask in verse 30: “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” They wanted to know why Jesus, a man who claimed divine status, would lower himself to the level of the scum of the world.

Jesus replies with words that both comfort the sinner and condemn the self-righteous in verses 31-32: “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.’”

Jesus defends his company with the tax collectors by saying that he has come to heal the sick. What’s Jesus saying? He’s not saying that he’s come to heal the physically sick, because none of the tax collectors are sick. Therefore, he must be talking about a different kind of sickness: the sickness of sin. Jesus says in verse 32, “I have not come to call the righteous but *sinners* to repentance.” The sick he has come to heal are sick with *sin*. They may not have a disease of the body, but they have a far worse disease of the soul.

Every one of us is sick with sin, even the Pharisees, and even the best person you can think of. They may think they are well and have no need of a physician, but they are plagued with the same disease as the worst sinner you can think of. It is a disease worse than leprosy, because it doesn’t just corrupt our bodies. It corrupts our minds and our wills from turning towards God. It is an ailment worse than paralysis, because it doesn’t just keep us from moving. It keeps us from moving towards God. It a disease of the soul with no human cure, and that no human physician can heal.

But Jesus can heal us if we would turn to him in repentance. Jesus says he has come to call sinners to *repentance*, which is simply turning away from sin and turning towards Jesus. Repentance looks like what the leper and the paralyzed man did. They came to Jesus with their physical needs, just as we must come to Jesus with our spiritual needs. And if we come to Jesus, he will heal us of our sin.

The spectacular miracles of physical healing point to the greater miracle that Jesus wants to do in all of us. Jesus cleansed the leper to demonstrate his tender compassion towards anyone who comes to him. Jesus healed the paralyzed man’s body to display his authority to forgive the sins of anyone who comes to him. And now, in this third miracle in calling Levi to follow him, he shows that he has the power to help us repent. We may not have seen it, but in this third, invisible miracle, Jesus did surgery in Levi’s soul, healing him of his sin sickness and drawing him back to God.

Charles Spurgeon helps us put this into perspective when he says:

“The resurrection of the natural man to natural life is a great wonder; who would not go a thousand miles to see such a thing performed? The raising up of the dead spirit to spiritual life, this is a greater wonder by far.” - Spurgeon

**CONCLUSION**

If you’re a Christian, our text today reminds us to never forget the miracle of our own conversion. No one is born a Christian, and no one can make themselves a Christian. All of us needed the great physician of the soul to do a miracle in us. We needed him to cure us of our sin sickness by forgiving us of our sin and freeing us from its power. That is a greater miracle than any miracle we could see with our eyes.

And the more we grasp the greatness of the miracle of our own conversion, then the more faith we will have to bring our friends to Jesus. We will be like the paralyzed man’s friends, who go to the greatest lengths to bring their friends to Jesus, because we have an unshakeable confidence that Jesus has the power to help them. We will be like Jesus himself, who had table fellowship with the greatest of sinners, because we know that Jesus can soften even the hardest of hearts. Let us regularly give thanks to God for the great miracle he has done in our lives, and pray that he would do the same in the lives of those around us.

And if you’ve never put your trust in Christ before, then God is calling you to come to Jesus today. You may not understand everything you’ve heard. You may not know exactly what sin is, and what the gospel is. But perhaps you do know that there’s something wrong with the world, and that there’s something wrong with you. Come to Jesus like the leper, who had nothing to say except, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.” Come to Jesus like the paralyzed man, who didn’t know what his real problem was. Jesus will not condemn you. He will stretch out his arm and touch you with compassion, and he will invite you into the journey of knowing him, following him, and experiencing freedom from your sin, which is the greatest miracle of all.