

There are four things only God can do. Only God can see faith in someone's heart. Only God can forgive sins. Only God can see unbelief in someone's heart. Only God can heal diseases. But when Jesus healed this paralyzed man, he taught something very important. And the crowd got what he was teaching. It is that God has given this authority to men. God has become a man. And this man sees faith in the heart. This man forgives sins. This man sees unbelief in the heart. This man heals diseases. This Man is God.

Faith is a divine gift. It is hidden from the eyes of the world. All we can see is the evidence of faith. We can hear someone confess Christ. We can see how someone lives as a Christian. But we can't look into his heart. Only God can do that. Only the one who gives faith can see faith. These friends of this paralyzed man had faith. How can we recognize this faith? Look at what they are doing. They are bringing their friend to Jesus. They love their friend. Love is a fruit of faith. They run to Jesus. Faith runs to Jesus in times of trouble. When a husband and wife have faith in Jesus, and God blesses them with a child, what do they do? They bring the child to be baptized into Christ. They teach the child about Jesus, bringing him to hear his Word, raising him to know the same Savior they know. They love him. This is why they bring him to Jesus. This is proof that they have faith.

But you might say, "Lots of people bring their kids to church. That doesn't mean they have faith." That's true. There are hypocrites mingled into the church. The crowd gathering around Jesus was the visible church on earth. They were gathered around him to hear his Word. But there were also those whose hearts were evil, accusing Jesus of blasphemy because they didn't believe he was the Lord in the flesh. Hypocrites are always mixed into the visible church.

But Jesus can see this. Jesus, the Man who is also God – Jesus, God in the flesh – can see all hearts. So we don't need to worry about reading hearts. We aren't the lords of the church. Jesus is. We can't read hearts. Jesus can. We can only hold people accountable to what they say and do. If we hear someone say something false, then we are to correct him. If we see someone falling into open sin, then we are to call him back to repentance. And as far as reading hearts, we leave that to the head of the church, Jesus Christ.

When these friends of the paralyzed man brought him to Jesus, we could assume that they just wanted their friend to be healed. After all, lots of people go to those who claim to have healing powers. Lots of people come to church, hoping that it will turn their lives around. But do they trust in God to save them? Faith is much more than a mere knowledge of the facts. It's much more than a mere admiration of Jesus. Faith is a confidence in Jesus to save you from sin and eternal condemnation.

So Jesus confirms that these men have faith. He does this by speaking to their friend. He says to him, "Cheer up, son! Your sins are forgiven!" This is the key, which Christ has given to his church on earth, to set sinners free from the bonds of sin and guilt. It is his Word. This Word marks and identifies the church. No one but God himself can give this to the church. It is his Word, his good news, his precious gospel. Only God can tell a man in such a miserable and hopeless position to cheer up. And by saying this, Jesus is identifying faith. The Word of God not only creates faith. It also identifies it. It points it out. How do you know you have faith? Where do you find the certainty of your faith? You don't find it in your own reason or strength. No, you turn to the Word of Jesus.

These words, "Cheer up, son! Your sins are forgiven!" are the very ground of faith. They reveal the difference between a generic knowledge of God and a special, particular trust in God's mercy in Jesus Christ. Jesus, God in the flesh, was heading to the cross to bear that man's sins in his own body. The

cause of all sickness, all pain, all death and condemnation is the sinful condition we all inherit from Adam. Only Man can take the place of man. And only God can take away sin. Faith recognizes this fact, so faith clings to the one thing needful. Faith lays hold of the forgiveness Jesus both earned and proclaims to poor sinners. Only God can make a miserable sinner his cheerful child. This is what his gospel does. And this precious gospel identifies his holy Christian Church on earth. Wherever people are gathering to hear this pure gospel and to receive the sacraments given by Jesus, then you can know that there is the holy Christian Church. While our eyes can't fully see it, we know from the Word of Jesus that it is there. And we can be confident that our Father who sees in secret will watch over his little flock, covering her with the righteousness of his Son, and strengthening her by the power of his Holy Spirit.

And we shouldn't be shaken by the fact that hypocrites are mingled in. God will expose them for what they are, if not in this life then on the last day. It is often a discouraging and fearful thing when hypocrites are exposed. But God doesn't make them known in order to discourage us. No, he casts his light on the darkness in order to warn his sheep about those who would lead them astray. In the meantime, he doesn't leave it to us to speculate about who these people are. We can recognize who is weak, who needs to be admonished and called to repentance. God wants us to hope all things, expecting these people to listen to his Word when we speak it to them. We should be hopeful at all times that those who are in error would be convinced by what the Scriptures say. Throughout all this, God teaches us patience toward one another.

But there are certainly times when he reveals the true, dark colors of hypocrites. They scoff at God's Word as they stubbornly refuse to listen to anything the Bible has to say. When God makes it open and public who these people are, when they refuse to listen to the church as she calls them to repentance, then they are, as Jesus says, to be considered like tax collectors and heathen (Matt 18). They are impenitent unbelievers. This is the other key Christ has given his church.

The Bible scholars mixed in with the crowd were thinking evil thoughts toward Jesus. They said he was blaspheming. This is because they knew that only God could forgive sins. Psalm 130 says that there is forgiveness in God, and this is why he is to be feared. God is the one who pardons and condemns. The Bible scholars were right about that. But being right about what God says is not the same thing as having faith in God. The Bible scholars refused to believe that God had come in the flesh. They refused to believe that Jesus was true God. They would not embrace Jesus as their only Savior. Their unbelief was evil, hidden deep in their hearts. And Jesus could see it. So he called them out on it.

"Why do you think evil in your hearts?" He asked them. "Is it easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk?'" Jesus said this to expose their hypocrisy to the rest of the people. So to prove that he had the authority to forgive sins, he said to the paralyzed man, "Get up, take your bed, and go home." Sure enough, the paralyzed man was healed. He got up and went home, just as Jesus said.

Now, consider this. Why did Jesus heal the paralyzed man? Of course, he loved and cared about the man. But he loves and cares about all his sheep. The paralyzed man had faith in the gospel. Christ announced to him the forgiveness of sins. That was enough for him. That is enough for the church where the Holy Spirit daily and richly forgives my sins and the sins of all believers. If Jesus pronouncing the forgiveness of sins to that man marked and identified the faith created in his heart, then Jesus healing that man exposed the unbelief in the hearts of the hypocrites. This teaches us what Jesus will do on the last day. On this day, when he raises up all flesh and he gives eternal life to all who believe in

him, he will expose all the works of darkness for what they are. All those who grumble at Jesus' words and condemn his sheep will finally be made known and silenced.

The reaction of the crowd after this reflects the reaction of the church whenever hypocrites are exposed. It's a fearful thing. As Paul says to Timothy (1 Tim 5:20), "Those who keep on sinning, rebuke in front of everyone in order to make the others fear." Jesus exercised the authority of God that day. He exercised the office of the keys, the authority he has given to his church on earth to forgive the sins of those who repent and to bind the sins of those who refuse to repent. The binding key is never fun to witness. And yet, it is inseparable from the loosing key. So it's understandable that there would be mixed emotions. When the crowd saw this they marveled. They were amazed. Literally the text says that they were afraid. And yet, at the same time, they praised and glorified God, because he has given this authority to men.

The most unpleasant part of my job as a pastor is when I have to tell someone that, because of his refusal to repent of his sins, I cannot give him communion. Sometimes people repent, and this is a great joy. Other times, they refuse to repent, and they reveal that they don't care about God's Word. And as much as it is unpleasant for me to witness, it is just as unpleasant for the rest of the church to witness. And yet, God works through this unpleasantness. The crowd of believers saw that their own teachers didn't believe in Jesus. Jesus revealed it to them. That certainly gave them no pleasure to see. But even through these uncomfortable moments, Jesus is always confirming his authority to forgive sins. As much as it brings sorrow to see hypocrites exposed, the joy of the gospel received by faith outweighs all sorrows.

God works through his Word to pierce deep into our hearts with his Holy Spirit. There he creates and strengthens faith, freeing us from a guilty conscience with the blood he poured out for us on the cross. Only God can fully see this happening. And yet, he gives it all to us in his Word. So while we begin only to see in part, he promises that we will fully see and know just as he sees and knows us. What only he can do he has given to us in his Son Jesus Christ. Therefore, in fear of him, we glorify God for giving such authority to men. Amen.