

God's Way Is Possible – Part 2

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

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Delivered On: March 06, 2010

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Last Sabbath we began a short two week series under the title, "God's Way *Is* Possible." The word "*is*" in the title is intentionally italicized to give it emphasis, because from the very start, even in heaven, Lucifer advanced the notion that God's way is *not* possible. That strategy worked with many of the angels up there, and it has proven sadly successful down here. Many think that "you can't really do what God asks," and if you try, you will be the most miserable person on earth. It's not really possible to please God. Not true!

Jesus came to this earth to show us that it is possible to follow God. He lived here as we do; He accepted our nature. He didn't use His own divine power to conquer the devil's temptations, but relied entirely on the strength of the Holy Spirit, the same divine power available to us. Throughout the Bible, Old Testament and New, we find snapshots of moments when God's people were in a right relationship with Him. Both Testaments give the same story of the battle between good and evil, the struggle between sin and righteousness and the same loving God Who desperately wants to give us victory through Him. Salvation is not "different" in the Old Testament; the book of Romans and Hebrews 11 makes it clear that the saints of old prospered by faith.

Last week we considered three such pictures given in the Old Testament; the conversation with God and Cain, the experience of Israel on the Day of Atonement, and the amazing statement made by God through Balaam. God told Cain, "If you do well, will you not be accepted," asserting the possibility that it *is* possible to "do well and be accepted." The smoke of Abel's sacrifice testified to this reality.

On the Day of Atonement, the whole congregation were "clean" from their sins, through the grace and mercy of Christ, typified in the animal sacrifices. We know this because there is no record of a high priest being smitten while conducting this ceremony, which is what would have happened when he went into the very presence of God in the Most Holy Place if there had been sin in the encampment.

We marveled at the statement by the Lord when He said in Balaam's second speech, "I have not observed iniquity in Jacob." I hope that statement lodges deeply in your heart, you apply it to yourself, cling to it by faith and claim the promise that is embedded in that statement. You will likewise say, "Oh, what God has done," as you consider the miracle of redemption. In Christ, God sees not our sins, but only the perfect righteousness of Jesus, and He sees us as though we had never sinned. May that be your experience and mine every day, every moment.

Now today we are going to look at three pictures in the New Testament, in which is recorded the life and ministry of Jesus. As it turns out, these three accounts all come from the pen of doctor Luke. Jesus' mission was to "declare Him," that is, to make understandable the Person and ways of God. His whole ministry breathed the promise that "God's way *is* possible." His invitation was, "Come unto Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." Matthew 11:28-30.

On a certain occasion early in Christ's ministry, He came to "His own city," that is, Capernaum, on the northwestern shore of Galilee, called this because He spent so much time there. "Now it happened on a certain day, as He was teaching, that there were Pharisees and teachers of the law sitting by, who had come out of every town of Galilee, Judea, and Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was present to heal

them. Then behold, men brought on a bed a man who was paralyzed. And they sought to bring him in and lay him before Him. And when they could not find how they might bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the housetop and let him down with his bed through the tiling into the midst before Jesus. So when He saw their faith, He said to him, 'Man, your sins are forgiven you.'" Luke 5:17-20.

This poor man suffered a paralysis that had left him crippled. His friends brought him, being carried on a stretcher to Jesus, but because of the crowd that had gathered at the house where He was teaching and healing, they couldn't easily enter the building. So, they resorted to dismantling the roof so that they could let the paralytic down into the presence of the Teacher.

This man suffered not only the crippling effects of his paralysis. He had been led to believe that he was rejected of God and without hope. The scribes and Pharisees taught that conditions such as his were direct evidence that God had abandoned him, which resulted in the torture of his soul being greater than that of his body. But somehow he sensed there was hope in Jesus! Somehow a glimmer of light was shining through the darkness of his despair. And he had good friends to help him in his hour of need.

Ridden by guilt, demoralized in spirit he found himself being lowered before the Master, with the eyes of the crowd now on him. What would Jesus say? What would the people think? What would the owner of the house do, with his roof being torn apart? It didn't matter; he needed help! All other avenues of assistance were long since exhausted. He had no other recourse than to find a way to meet Jesus. When we let nothing separate us from Jesus' presence, help will be ours too.

As Jesus looked at him, He read his thoughts. He saw the pain of body and the ache of his heart. He knew exactly what this man needed. His first words spoke directly to his greatest need. "Man, your sins are forgiven you." Look carefully: can you see the expression on this man's face, changing from uncertainty and woe to joy and relief! These words came with authority and assurance. They spoke to his heart and found a home. Even if he never took one step with those faltering legs, life now had new meaning. He was free from his guilt and despair. One with authority had declared him to be right with God, free from his transgressions. Despite the teachings about a vengeful and heartless God with which he had been raised, he now felt a liberty and peace he had never felt before. Even if he never stepped from that matted gurney, happiness spilled over in his heart.

But Jesus didn't stop there. He went the second mile, which is His nature. He healed not only his soul, but also his body. "And the scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, 'Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?' But when Jesus perceived their thoughts, He answered and said to them, 'Why are you reasoning in your heart? Which is easier to say, "Your sins are forgiven you," or to say, "Rise up and walk"? But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins,' --He said to the man who was paralyzed, 'I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.' Immediately he rose up before them, took up what he had been lying on, and departed to his own house, glorifying God." Luke 5:21-25.

I suppose one could argue that to recite the words, "Your sins are forgiven," is easier to say because the proof of it is more difficult to demonstrate. No doubt that thought crossed the minds of the Pharisees who were there to criticize the methods and mission of Jesus. Beyond that of course, they struggled with the concept that this humble Teacher, this One Who had grown up in Nazareth of all places, could be the Yahweh of the Scriptures. Their minds were blinded to the truth of God's plan in the incarnation of Christ. The promises made to Moses and Abraham and the seers that followed, were lost on them. They willingly set aside the prophecies of the past and the testimony of current events as to His divinity. But this Jesus was indeed the God of the universe! He was the One Who had "spoken and it was done, commanded and it stood fast." Psalm 33:6, 9.

Being the God of the universe, He most certainly had authority to forgive sins. No other human being, no earthly priest or pontiff can rightfully utter those words, but Jesus, the Divine Son of God was entirely within His right to make the claim. Coming from earthly lips, those words would indeed constitute "blasphemy," which is what brought concern to the Pharisees. But Jesus was not a mere man; He was the Christ, the Son of God.

He didn't leave the Pharisees without evidence as to His claim of being able to forgive sins. It might have been possible for anyone to let those words come from their lips, without any physical, visible way of

knowing whether or not they were true. But in this case, such was not to be. Christ would present them with tangible proof of His claim. "But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins," --He said to the man who was paralyzed, 'I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.' Immediately he rose up before them, took up what he had been lying on, and departed to his own house, glorifying God."

I wonder about that poor man. When he woke up that morning, did he have any sensation of the change that was going to come to his life that day? Did he think, "This is the last time I'm ever going to place these useless legs on this pallet"? I don't know if he did or not. It will be exciting to speak with him and hear his story personally. But one thing is sure. When that day was over, he knew that God loved him, he knew that he was accepted by him, and he knew that he was right with Him. Jesus had made it clear that God's way *is* possible.

The same Jesus lives today to make intercession for you. He is ready to pronounce the same blessing in your behalf as to the paralytic. It may be that you have the ability to walk in the physical sense, as this man did not. But your "walk" in the Lord may have been imperfect; your spiritual life may have been "crippled." Too many times you have "fallen" in temptation and sin. Today your heart and soul can be healed by the words of Jesus, "Your sins are forgiven you." Hear Him say that to you right now! As that man did in Capernaum, you can leave here today glorifying God for His amazing love. His way *is* possible!

Later in the book of Luke, Jesus told a story about two worshipers. The one boasted of all his attainments. His testimony was, "God, I thank You that I am not like other men--extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess." Luke 18:11, 12. What's so sad about this is that the Pharisee evidently felt that it was his attainments which would recommend him to God. His was a righteousness based on self. It was totally inadequate. He might have been dressed in sumptuous robes as he came to the temple, but before God he was naked. Unless he later repented, he will be among those who on that day parade their accomplishments before God only to hear His words, "I never knew you." His check-list religion was devoid of real faith and piety. It was like Cain's worship, based on the faulty foundation of self-righteousness. According to the word of Jesus, this man left the temple as he had come, which was in a state of spiritual poverty.

The other worshiper, identified as a publican, recognizing his unworthiness prayed, "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner." Luke 18:13. Publicans, or tax collectors, were among the most despised of society in Jesus' day. They, being Jews themselves, purchased the franchise which enabled them to collect taxes on behalf of the detested Romans, and were left largely unsupervised in their collection techniques. Thus overreaching and fraud were rampant, and the bank accounts of the publicans mounted equally as did the hatred of their fellowmen toward them.

Nevertheless, among them were some who knew in their heart of hearts that no amount of wealth can silence a guilty conscience, and no stockpile of gold can give peace to a troubled soul. Among these tax collectors was Levi, called Matthew, who was called from his tax collection booth to be a follower of Jesus, an invitation that shocked the people. His became the privilege of writing a biographical account of the life of Jesus, the one which appears first in our New Testament.

Among those who were tax collectors was Zacchaeus, a "chief" tax collector who desired to find a new way of living. Being short of stature, he climbed into a sycamore tree so that he could see when the Master would pass his way through Jericho. How surprised and blessed he was when Jesus said that He wanted to eat at his house. That day salvation came to the home and heart of Zacchaeus. Luke 19. By the way, Jesus wants to come to your "house" and eat with you today too!

Jesus' frequent association with tax collectors became proverbial. He came to seek and save the lost, not those who thought they were righteous. He was the soul-Doctor Who came to heal the needy and afflicted, not those who were "well." The truth is that no one is righteous; there are none who are "well" in the spiritual sense. Jesus did in fact come to save all, but His offer of salvation will be ineffective toward those who don't feel a need. If you do feel a need, if you do sense your spiritual poverty, if you feel you're not "good enough," you're the very one He came to save! That's what this story about the two worshipers states, in tones that are loud and clear.

The worshiper first mentioned, the Pharisee, went away still in his state of self-righteousness, a state of sin, because he felt no need of saving grace, but the other went away with a right standing with God. The words of Jesus are, "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified." Luke 18:14.

What does it mean to be "justified"? I realize that theologians use large words and difficult concepts sometimes, but God's way is very simple. When Jesus spoke, you didn't need a dictionary! To be "justified" means you're put right with God. It's when the judge raps his gavel and says, "Not guilty." Here we have the story of a man whose past was not pretty, but falling upon the mercy of the Lord, he was declared to be "justified," "right with God." As God looked at the publican, He said, "I have not observed iniquity in him." God's way *is* possible! You can leave this temple today "justified." You can leave this church today, knowing that you are put right with God and have the peace He wants to give you reign in your heart.

Lastly, we consider the moving account of the thief on the cross, recorded by Luke in chapter 23. While the other Gospel writers note the presence of the two thieves crucified with Him, only Luke tells us of the conversion of one of them. Here was a person, condemned to die the execution reserved for the worst of criminals. No doubt he put up a mighty struggle when they drove the spikes through his limbs. The air was filled with his curses and epithets.

And yet, as he beheld the Savior on the cross next to him, his heart was softened, changed. That's what happens when we see Jesus on the cross for our sins. If we would only look, contemplate and understand what happened there at Calvary, our hearts will be softened and changed like his was. An amazing but reasonable way of thinking came to this man. He came to realize that he was there because he justly deserved the cross, but that Jesus did not. That's a remarkable growth in responsible thinking. The thief's death was an *execution*; Jesus' death was a *sacrifice*. When we open our hearts to the Holy Spirit's instruction, we come to see that we do deserve death, in fact the *second* death for our sins. That's what justice would bring. But God operates within His system of justice *and* mercy, so that though we deserve to die, He can nevertheless save us because of the great victory of Jesus on the cross.

That day, three died on Calvary. One died *in* sin. That was the other thief. We have no record that he repented and confessed faith in Jesus. Maybe he did. Maybe the testimony of his colleague bore fruit of which we will have no knowledge until we get to heaven. If not, he died in his sins. The other thief died *to* sin. He actually died two deaths that day. When they broke his legs and he was no longer able to lift himself up so that his lungs could expand and he could breathe, he succumbed to the "first" death, which the Bible also calls "sleep." But he also died "to" sin; that is, he surrendered his heart and life, what was remaining of it, to God. This surrender is a type of dying, because through it, we give our will, our choices to God. In a strangely realistic way, he fulfilled the invitation of Christ, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Matthew 16:24. This "denying" of self is a type of death, which everyone who would follow Christ must experience.

The third One died *for* sin. That was Jesus, accomplishing His remarkable mission to die for sinners that He might justify them. He also died two deaths that day; the first death and the second death. That is, He experienced the total separation from God that lost sinners will feel on the last day. His cry, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me," is the plea of a lost soul, the abandonment and rejection that ultimately will come to those who refuse His mercy.

The thief's dying prayer, "Remember me," was answered quickly and affirmatively by the Lord. "Truly I say to you today, you will be with Me in paradise." Keep in mind that punctuation in the Bible didn't exist until it was added by Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, in the 13th century. By that time, the belief that a person went to heaven immediately when they died, not supported by Scripture, had taken firm root in the minds of many. Therefore the comma in this verse, as it is printed by most Bibles of today, gives the misleading impression that this thief went to Paradise that very day. He did not. The Bible account is that the dead rest in their graves unconsciously until the resurrection. Even Jesus, Who supposedly said, "you will be with Me today in Paradise," said Sunday morning to Mary, "I have not yet ascended to My Father." John 20:17. A simple changing of the comma in this sentence gives the more accurate meaning, "Today (when it looks like I don't have a kingdom, when it looks like there's no tomorrow), *today* I say to you, you will be with Me in Paradise."

When Jesus spoke those words, peace filled the heart of the repentant thief. His life may have been a mess, but he received the assurance of forgiveness from the lips that never lied. There might have been an unnatural darkness that covered the mount that afternoon, but there was light and peace in the thief's heart. He knew that God's way is possible!

You can hear these words of Jesus speak to your heart also today. He is ready to say to you as He did to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven you." He is ready to say to you as He said concerning the publican, "You are justified." He is ready to say to you today as He did the thief, "You will be with Me in Paradise." Will you allow Him to speak those words to you today? Will you believe them and allow His Spirit to work those changes which will prepare you for His coming? Are you willing to let go of every sin, every impediment which is slowing your spiritual growth? Will you surrender your will to Him just now so that He can begin the work which will result in the exclamation, "Oh, what God has done"? God's way *is* possible!