

Is Jesus God Because He Forgave Sins?

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During antiquity, rabbis and Greek theistic philosophers taught that God possesses certain prerogatives that belong only to him. Judaism claimed that one of them is the forgiveness of sins. Judaism even determined that the Messiah would not possess the authority to forgive sins in this final sense.

Many Christians have also believed that the forgiveness of sins is a prerogative that belongs only to God. Therefore, they have asserted that those instances recorded in the New Testament (NT) gospels, in which Jesus verbally forgave sins not committed against him, attest to his being God.

Only Luke relates one such instance. A woman of ill repute anointed Jesus' feet with perfume while she simultaneously wept profusely (Luke 7.36-50). Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins have been forgiven" (v. 48). Those present wondered to themselves, "Who is this man who even forgives sins?" (v. 49). They believed that only God could do that.

All three synoptic gospels report another similar episode, and these accounts are more thoroughly developed. In this episode, Jesus was teaching in an overcrowded house when a paralytic man was let down through the roof as the man was lying on his bed-pallet (Matthew 9.1-8; Mark 2.1-12; Luke 5.17-26). Mark relates, "And Jesus seeing their faith said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.' But some of the scribes were sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, 'Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?' Immediately Jesus, aware in His spirit that they were reasoning that way within themselves, said to them, 'Why are reasoning about these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven;" or to say, "Get up, pick up your pallet and walk"?' But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'—He said to the paralytic, 'I say to you, get up, pick up your pallet and go home.' And he got up and immediately picked up the pallet and went out in the sight of everyone, so that they were all amazed and were glorifying God" (Mark 2.5-12).

Therefore, these scribes, who supposedly were experts in the Law of Moses (Torah), accused Jesus of blasphemy since they thought he claimed a prerogative that belongs only to God. In the Torah, insulting God's dignity was the primary basis of blasphemy. And the Torah demanded the death penalty for it (Leviticus 24.15-16; cf. Numbers 15.30-31).

Jesus no doubt posed his question for the benefit of the crowd. These people would have known of the traditional precept behind the scribes' thinking. The common answer to Jesus' question would have been that it is impossible for anyone to heal a paralytic, but if Jesus healed him it would demonstrate that he had authority to forgive the man's sins.

Afterwards, on other occasions Jesus claimed authority to judge on judgment day (Matthew 16.27; 25.31-46). Once he announced, "For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son" (John 5.22). Surely such authority includes the right to do so prior to judgment day, such as when the paralytic was brought to him.

God has delegated authority to forgive sins in a final sense to others besides Jesus. And when he has done so, the recipients of this authority usually have not been perceived as being God. The best Old Testament (OT) example is "the angel of the LORD." God had instructed the wandering Israelites regarding this patron angel of Israel, "Behold, I am

going to send an angel before you to guard you along the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared. Be on your guard before him and obey his voice; do not be rebellious toward him, for he will not pardon your transgression, since My name is in him” (Exodus 23.20-21). This “angel” certainly was someone other than God himself.

Furthermore, when Peter proclaimed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, Jesus announced to him, “I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16.18-19 New Revised Standard Version). Jesus here used heaven as a euphemism for God, meaning that God would approve of it.

The second time this occurred, Jesus was more specific. It seems to have involved, among other things, both the forgiveness of sins and the refusal to forgive sins by calling down judgment from heaven. For, Matthew records that this same promise of Jesus was given in the context of forgiveness (Matthew 18.15-17, 21-35).

Jesus made this even clearer during one of his post-resurrection appearances. It was when he mysteriously breathed the Holy Spirit onto his disciples. Then he said to them, “If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained” (John 20.23). R.E. Brown paraphrases it, “When you forgive men’s sins, at that moment God forgives those sins and they remain forgiven.” This bestowal of the Holy Spirit and Jesus’ proclamation about possessing authority to forgive sins represents the transference of this divine power and authority from Jesus unto his disciples. The result, of course, is the church’s continuation of Jesus’ ministry on earth after he ascended into heaven.

It therefore must be concluded that if God grants the authority to forgive sins to both angels and men, and it does not indicate that they are God, Jesus possessing the authority to forgive sins does not require that he is God either. Neither does Jesus’ authority to judge on judgment day indicate that he is God. And since this prerogative does not belong to Jesus inherently, but has been granted to him by the Father (John 5.22, 27; 8.16), it too reveals that Jesus was always subordinate to God and therefore could not have been God.