

“The Greatest Need of All”

Mark 2:1-12

Someone handed me a little book not long ago with a title that really got my attention: “How to Be a Christian Without Being Religious” by Fritz Ridenour. It is actually a tract on the book of Romans which the author wrote in the 1960s. In the preface to the book, he says this:

“Being a Christian is not about obeying laws and rules. It’s not about being ‘religious’—that is, trying to find God or please Him through your own futile efforts. Being a Christian is knowing—deep in your soul—that through His marvelous grace God has reached down and found you, and all you have to do is trust Him with your life.”

Are you a religious person? Because of the baggage that is associated with the word ‘religion’ in our day, we now try to avoid that label as much as we can. We live in a secular society that claims there is no such thing as absolute truth, where all ideas are seen as equally valid. And ‘religion’ is frowned upon while spirituality is upheld as a virtue. We even say things like this, “Christianity is not a religion, it is a relationship.” And I most certainly agree with the notion that the Christian faith is indeed a relationship with God through faith in Christ. But not to be the devil’s advocate, I want to push back against the popular idea that this word religion is a bad word. Some people have come to see all religion as bad. While there is bad religion, even the Bible says that there is an undefiled and sincere form of religion. For instance:

James 1:26-27—“If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, the person’s religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans

and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”

“Religion” —*ceremonial observance; the adjective form of the word (religious) means to be ceremonious in worship*

The word ‘religion’ in English comes from a Latin word that means to bind, as in bound to obligation. It carries the idea of revering something. Rome used this Latin word ‘religio’ to refer to the obligation of an oath when captured soldiers would make an oath to their captors, the idea of veneration, bound in a sense of obligation. ‘Religious’ people are bound and obligated to that which is ultimate. And therefore by that definition, everyone is religious. The real issue is whether or not a person has come to embrace the truth and thereby be changed by the truth. True religion isn’t merely outward observance—it is inward transformation.

The fact of the matter is that a lot of people have put their faith in religion and not Jesus. And what I mean by that is that they think they’re scoring ‘brownie points’ with God on the basis of their performance. If you have your Bibles, find your place with me in Mark chapter 2. We’ve been working our way through the gospel of Mark, the shortest of the four gospels. And now having come to the second chapter, our emphasis will shift a bit. If the emphasis in chapter one has been on the authority of Jesus as the Son of the God, we’re going to see how that authority is questioned by the religious leaders of Israel. Now, I want to show you from the next couple of chapters why “Jesus Is Greater Than Religion.” Jesus does what religion cannot do. A religious person can be a lot like someone running on a treadmill—there’s constant motion, real effort, and a sense of forward progress, but ultimately they’re not getting anywhere. On a treadmill, you can run with all you’ve got, sweat profusely, and feel accomplished, yet you remain in the same place. In the same way, a person can be deeply committed

to religious activities such as attending church, keeping rules, maintaining traditions, doing good works—and yet never truly move closer to God. There is movement, but no transformation. Plenty of effort, but no arrival at anything. But an encounter with Jesus changes your life. (Read)

There are few things more dangerous than being convinced you are right about God, but being wrong. In the first century, no group appeared more spiritually devout, morally disciplined, or biblically informed than the scribes and Pharisees. They were the careful guardians of tradition, the interpreters of the Law, and seen as models of religious devotion. And yet when God in the flesh stood before them, instead of recognizing Him, they resisted Him. In chapters 2-3, Mark shows us how the conflict with the religious leaders begins to build until it erupts in hostile intentions against Jesus. In fact, I want to show you how Mark presents a deliberate escalation:

- Their suspicion of Jesus (2:1-12)
- Their criticism of Jesus (2:13-17)
- Their challenge to Jesus (2:18-22)
- Their accusation of Jesus (2:23-28)
- Their hostility toward Jesus (3:1-6)

Don't forget that the greatest opponents to Jesus were also the most religious. His fiercest critics were self-righteous religious leaders. Their pride fueled their hatred. Religion is man's attempt to court favor with God. It is climbing the ladder of accomplishment. But religion has never saved anyone. Because by itself, religion is powerless to reverse the curse of sin and death. It may treat symptoms, but it cannot address the source of problem—sin in the heart.

The story of the paralytic man in Mark 2 illustrates just how Jesus does what religion cannot do, for we find here the account of a man who was helpless in every way. Being paralyzed, there is no way that he could ever work his way to heaven. Religion could diagnose his symptoms, but it could not provide him with a cure. But he has an encounter with Jesus that changes his life. Let's look at several things in the text. To begin with, we see:

1—A broken MAN (2:1-3)

“And when He returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that He was at home. And many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And He was preaching the word to them. And they came, bringing to Him a paralytic carried by four men.”

By way of context, Mark tells us how crowds of people had been coming to see Jesus as He has been going about the region preaching the gospel and healing the sick. Having come back to Capernaum which was His home base, crowds begin to gather when they learn that He is in the house. Verse 2 says that so many had gathered that there is no more room, not even at the door. There is no video stream or overflow rooms or anything like that. The house was bursting at the seams with people who had a sense of expectancy that something unusual was going to happen. The atmosphere was charged, they were anticipating that God would do something. Now why is that? Luke tells us in his account:

Luke 5:17—“And the power of the Lord was with Him to heal.”

Wherever He was, there was power—the power of God to heal broken lives. It was true then, and it is still true today! And notice it says in verse 2 that Jesus was preaching the word to them. This was the reason that He had come, just as He had said:

Mark 1:38-39—“And He said to them, ‘Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.’ And He went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.”

Jesus came preaching. He came proclaiming the Word of God to the people, to bring spiritual understanding, and to call men and women to repentance and faith. The word had begun to spread far and wide of what Jesus had been doing, and somehow the word made it to this ‘paralytic.’ That’s how verse 3 refers to him, someone with palsy, a disease that had left him totally debilitated. There is no mention of how long he had been in this condition, nor of how he had come to be in this condition. The point is that he couldn’t do anything about his condition. But somewhere along the way, he had heard about Jesus. And it is also clear he has friends who do everything they can to bring him to Jesus. Then we also see:

2—A visible FAITH (2:4)

“And when they could not get near Him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above Him, and when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the paralytic lay.”

When the men couldn’t get to Jesus because of the crowd, verse 4 says that they begin to remove the roof in order to make an opening through which they will let the man down. Don’t imagine the roof in the same way you would the roof to your house, pitched and with an attic space. That’s not how houses were built in first century Israel. One writer explains it this way:

Kent Hughes — *“The typical Syrian roof was constructed of timbers laid parallel to each other about two or three feet apart. Then crosswise over the timbers, sticks were laid close to each other, thus forming the basic roof. Upon this was laid reeds, branches of trees, and thistles. The whole thing was overlaid with*

about a foot of earth, which was then packed down to resist water. All told, the roof was about two feet thick. During the spring, grass flourished on these primitive roofs.”

You can just imagine what that must have been like. Jesus is speaking. Next thing you know, chunks of dirt and debris began to fall as sunlight pours through the widening hole above. Finally, a paralyzed man on a handmade stretcher descends by ropes tied to its four corners.

Pay attention that verse 5 says ‘Jesus saw their faith.’ That means they were moved to action by their belief in Jesus. Their willingness to carry the man, climb the roof, and then lower him down demonstrated a real trust that Jesus could and would help. Faith, in the biblical sense, is not merely internal belief but outward dependence expressed through action. Their faith was visible, not simply verbal.

These four men pull out all stops and do what is necessary to get their friend to Jesus. There is some application here for us. Do we bring people nearer to Christ and help them get closer to Him, or do we put up unnecessary roadblocks and necessitate that they do spiritual gymnastics in order to get nearer to us, let alone get nearer to the Lord Jesus? It reminds me of something that the Apostle Paul wrote in:

1 Corinthians 9:22—“I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.”

Paul is not saying he compromised truth or changed the gospel to fit people. Rather, he is describing a ‘missional flexibility.’ It is a willingness to lay aside his personal rights, preferences, and cultural comforts in order to remove any unnecessary barriers to the gospel. When he says that he became ‘all things to all people’ he means:

- To Jews, he adapted to their customs (without trusting in the law for salvation).
- To Gentiles, he lived free from Jewish ceremonial expectations (without abandoning God's moral law).
- To the weak, he limited his freedoms so as not to hinder their faith.

Paul adjusted his approach, not his message, so as many people as possible could hear and respond to the gospel. Now, you see a living illustration of that very same principle here in the actions of the paralytic's friends. They refuse to be stopped by obstacles. A crowded house could have been an excuse, but instead they do what they have to do. They get creative. Climbing the roof and lowering their friend was costly, inconvenient, and likely disruptive. Can you imagine what it must have been like? Jesus is speaking, and suddenly pieces of the roof begin to be pulled apart. And then a man is let down through. They take a risk. And notice that the paralytic can contribute nothing physically. They have to carry him the entire way. The point is that they are simply doing whatever it takes to get someone to Jesus.

What about you? What about our collective efforts as a church? What 'roofs' need to be broken apart so that we can get broken people to the Savior?

3—A gracious SAVIOR (2:5)

“And when Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’”

I imagine that ever since the man first heard of the miracle working Man from Galilee, he had dreamed of hearing Him say, “Take up your bed and walk!” He assumed that his greatest problem was physical, therefore his greatest need was

physical healing. But the eyes of Jesus look beyond the surface and into the very depths of our heart. The crowd only saw a paralytic man in need of healing, but the Lord Jesus saw a man in need of divine reconciliation. I like how one person says it:

Charles Swindoll — *“And that is the principal difference between humanity’s agenda and God’s plan for the world. We place a premium on our present physical bodies, which will someday cease functioning and return to the ground. But our immaterial part will continue after our physical bodies, which will one day be resurrected into eternal torment apart from God or in eternal glory with Him (John 5:28-29). In light of eternity, the physical healing of a mortal body pales in comparison to the spiritual healing of a sin-sick soul.”*

Jesus says, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” It reveals that He is primarily concerned with the man’s deepest need, not merely his most obvious one. Though the paralytic man is brought for physical healing, Jesus addresses his spiritual condition first, thereby showing that sin—not sickness—is humanity’s greatest problem. And by directly pronouncing forgiveness, Jesus makes a profound claim to divine authority, doing what only God can do. His use of the word ‘son’ or ‘child’ conveys a sense of acceptance, assuring the man of His personal care rather than mere clinical intervention. And it illustrates for us how forgiveness is an act of grace, not something earned, and faith is the means through which this grace is received. Jesus’ words show us that He comes not just to improve our circumstances, but to reconcile us to God at the heart level.

4—A critical QUESTION (2:6-9)

“Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ‘Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but

God alone?’ And immediately Jesus, perceiving in His spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, ‘Why do you question these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk?’”

Upon hearing Jesus declare the man’s sins are forgiven, the scribes raise their eyebrows. Mark says they begin to question in their hearts. The word means internal dialogue. Why does He speak like that? Who does this Man think that He is? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone? This is what was going on in their minds. It was an outrageous thing to them to hear Jesus say that He could forgive the man’s sins. And what begins as suspicion here will lead to murderous intentions by the time we get to the next chapter.

Mark 3:6—“The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against Him, how to destroy Him.”

Donald Barnhouse — *“Despite the nature of Jesus’ ministry—its compassion, power, and joy—this group was not drawn to Jesus. On the contrary, the more wonderful the words and works of Christ, the more hostile this group of men became. The more hope He brought to a despairing people, the more they feared and hated Him. The more life and health He imparted, the more determined they became that He must be destroyed.”*

Today, when we hear the word ‘Pharisee,’ it brings images to mind of hypocritical, judgmental people. But in Jesus’ day, being called a Pharisee was a badge of honor. To be called a Pharisee was the highest complement to the first century Jew. For they were considered to be the model of spiritual virtue. They excelled in everything that was to be admired spiritually and religiously. They were zealous for God, committed to Judaism, theologically and doctrinally precise.

They obeyed the law, at least externally. They even made up extra rules in just case they were missing anything.

The scribes and Pharisees were the interpreters of the law. Before Jesus had arrived on the scene, they were the final authority on all spiritual matters. They had been seen as the official guides to God. But now that Jesus had come, all of that was being turned upside down. Jesus exposed the emptiness of their self-righteous system. And that's why they end up hating Him rather than coming to the honest understanding of their own sin and need for grace.

Now, I want you to see how they're correct in their doctrine—only God can forgive sins. But they are right and wrong at the same time. They're wrong in their conclusions, for they accuse Jesus of blasphemy, or putting Himself in the place of God. If Jesus can forgive sin, what does that say about His identity?

Notice that Jesus does not ask them which is easier to do, but which is easier to say. Is it easier to say, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Take up your bed and walk?" To say that one's sins are forgiven is easier to say because it is invisible and internal. But physical healing is something visible and external. It would be immediately obvious to everyone if Jesus' word of healing failed. But watch what happens—

5—A proven AUTHORITY (2:10-12)

"But 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, rise, pick up your bed, and go home." And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!"

Only God can forgive sin, but Jesus is God in the flesh! In order for them to know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sin, Jesus tells the paralytic to take up his bed and walk. The miracle is proof of His authority and it leaves the religious authorities a witness that can't be denied. And so Mark says the man immediately got up and went out, much to the amazement of everyone present.

Men and women, let's not miss the main emphasis of this text. Jesus has come to do what religion cannot do. Jesus does what only God can do because He is God. Religion cannot make lame men whole or dead men live. To be forgiven of sin and reconciled to God is our greatest need!

Before we finish up, I want to give you a few principles for application in your own life. We need to remember that:

- **The deepest needs of our lives are not physical, but spiritual**

It is important that we remember this in a world that tells us that the things which are seen are really all that matter. I'm not saying that our physical problems aren't real. Whether it is our health, or our relationships with other people, our family situation and home life. Problems will often manifest themselves in these physical areas. And while there may be some helpful practices along the way that deal with the surface issues in our lives, may we never, ever forget that the greatest need of all is spiritual. Our sins need to be forgiven.

- **Jesus has the authority to forgive sins, not just treat symptoms**

Religion deals with surface issues and treats symptoms, but the gospel of Jesus addresses sin in the heart. Because He is God in the flesh, Jesus could say to the man, "Your sins are forgiven." The proof that He is able to forgive his sins is the man's physical healing. To us, it may sound like an easier thing to forgive sin

than to heal sickness. But the price of this man's forgiveness would be something that Jesus would pay by means of His own death on a cross! I can't help but wonder if the man in Mark 2 was also present later at the cross, or in the crowd at Pentecost when Peter preached the gospel and said:

Acts 2:28—“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.”

- **It is possible to be theologically right and spiritually wrong at the same time**

Friend, you can say all the right things, affirm the right things, and promote the right things, while still remaining lost in your sin. The scribes and Pharisees fall into this category. They had their religion, but they didn't have the righteousness which comes only through faith in Christ. And I don't know about you, but I don't want to make the same mistake of letting religion take the place of a relationship with Jesus.

- **The gospel deals with both the root and results of sin**

When Jesus tells the paralytic, “Rise, pick up your bed, and go home,” that's exactly what he does. Jesus had forgiven the man's sin, and He had healed the man's body. And it is a wonderful picture of the full effect of the gospel. We live in a world that is rocking and reeling from the effects of sin. We see it everyday, both in our lives and in the lives of the people around us. But friend, Jesus has come to deal with the root and the results of sin. By His death, resurrection, and endless life, Jesus reverses the effects of the fall—and broken lives are made whole in Him. Let's pray.