

Who Can Forgive Sins?

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Mark 2:1-12

Think for a moment about this question, “What is my greatest need?” Of all our needs, which of them is paramount? What need surpasses them all? Someone once wrote, “If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator. If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist. If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist. If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer. But our greatest need is forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior.” Without question, our greatest need is to escape the wrath of God. The writer of Hebrews says, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” Hebrews 10:31. Think about this...what is it that sends people to Hell? Most of us with good theology would say sin. But it’s not just sin that sends people to Hell, it’s unforgiven sin that sends people to Hell. Because of that, our greatest need is to be forgiven. Our text this morning begins as another story of healing, but it unexpectedly turns into a story about forgiveness and Jesus’ identity as God. With our greatest need in mind, Mark, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit says:

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. 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. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” 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’? 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!” Mark 2:1–12

I. DELIGHTED CROWDS (vs. 1-2)

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.

Our text last week concluded with Jesus instructing the leper, whom he has cleansed, “See that [he] said nothing to anyone”. Unfortunately, that’s not what happened. Instead, the leper went out and began to freely spread the news. In verse 45, Mark tells us that the result of the leper’s disobedience was that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was in desolate places. Jesus and the leper traded places. Because of the ministry distraction created by the leper, Jesus has returned home to Capernaum (along the north shore of the Sea of Galilee), presumably to Peter’s home, where a swelling crowd again greets him.

Look at verses 1 and 2. Mark writes, “Many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And he was preaching the word to them.” The scene here is that of a relatively small home that is literally packed shoulder to shoulder with people eager to see and hear Jesus. Though they’ll hate Him later, they love Him now. At least they love what He is *doing* for them. It’s presumable that the crowd wasn’t only composed of those residing in Capernaum, but also those who had heard of Jesus’ return and had come in from surrounding towns. Remember that Jesus has quickly become somewhat of an icon in and around Capernaum (v.28).

The crowds play an important role in the Gospel of Mark. Mark mentions the crowds who were either around Jesus or followed Him some 40 times in the first 10 chapters. But to Jesus, the swelling crowds weren’t a sign of ministry success. As a matter of fact, the single most common attribute of the crowds in Mark’s gospel is that they obstruct access to Jesus.¹ They were eager for a look-see, but Mark never describes the crowds turning to Jesus in faith and repentance – like the gospel requires. It’s important to note that being in the crowd isn’t the same as being a disciple.

We must not forget the power of unbelief and the depth of man’s enmity against God. The crowds in Capernaum heard the most faultless preaching, and saw it confirmed by the most surprising miracles, and yet they remained dead in their trespasses and sins. We need reminding that the same gospel, which is the aroma of life to some, is the smell of death to others (cf. 2 Corinthians 2:16), and that the same fire that melts wax also hardens clay. Nothing, in fact, seems to harden a man’s heart so much as to hear the gospel regularly, and yet deliberately [dabble] in sin and the world.²

The crowd that had funneled into Peter’s house was as large as it was diverse. Packed into the house, and spilling out the front door into the street, were the wealthy and the poor, the healthy

¹ James R. Edwards, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

² J.C. Ryle, *Mark: Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2012), 22.

and the sick, young people and old people, all jockeying for position to hear the One who healed diseases, cast out demons, and taught with greater authority than their Scribes and Pharisees. The scene is as exciting as it is tense! While Mark's account focuses on the capacity of the crowd – its size. Luke's account focuses on the composition of the crowd – its attendees. And look who's sitting front and center... Luke writes, "As He was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem" Luke 5:17. The Scribes and Pharisees were the "doctors of the Law". Can you imagine the furrowed eyebrows as Jesus stood and preached eyeball to eyeball with the very authorities, which His teaching was said to have superseded?

Recently, a young man asked me what the content of Jesus' preaching was. If you look back at verses 14 and 15 of chapter 1, Jesus says, "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." Was Jesus preaching the cross at this early point in his ministry? I think He was – in its bud form. Just as redemptive revelation is progressive in Scripture, so I think the detail that accompanied Jesus' gospel message was also progressive and increased as He neared the cross. However much detail was present in Jesus' gospel message early in His ministry, we must conclude that there was sufficient detail for those who heard it to respond in faith and repentance and be converted. Unfortunately, the crowd was excited for all the wrong reasons. They were curious, not convicted; happy, but not humbled; aroused, but not repentant. They were delighted to watch and listen to Jesus, but their delight was like the person who goes to the circus. They were there to watch the show, not to follow and obey the ringmaster.

II. DETERMINED FAITH (vs. 3-5)

And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. 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. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Look at verses 3 and 4. Mark writes, "And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. 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." While other sick and disabled individuals were presumably amongst the crowd as Jesus taught, four men with an unbridled determination, unable to get their friend to Jesus through the thick wall of people (Luke 5:19), scaled the small house and began to dig through the roof.

It was common in Jesus' day for homes to have a stone staircase that led to a deck-like roof composed of some 18-24 inches of tightly compacted dirt, clay, sand, and stone that overlaid wooden beams. The roof of homes often served as a place to catch some fresh air, dry laundry, eat a meal, sleep, and pray. If Peter's home didn't have a staircase, it's possible that the men

climbed the stairs to an adjacent house and then stepped from one roof to the other. Getting their friend on the roof of Peter's house wasn't the only obstacle in front of these men. Once on the roof, they would have had to dig a hole through the roof that was large enough that their friend could be lowered down to Jesus. They literally had to "uncover" (ἀποστεγάζω) the roof. I think it's safe to say that these four men were resolved to get their paralyzed friend in front of Jesus no matter what the cost. While this isn't the thrust of the text, there is some fitting application here... These four men were doing whatever it took to bring their friend to Jesus; this is a picture of our ministry as fishers of men!

Can you imagine the scene here? Jesus is preaching the gospel and all of a sudden, commotion can be heard from the roof. Whether Jesus continued preaching or paused at this point – we don't know. At some point the roof overhead begins to crumble and the dirt cascades down on the perfectly kept garments of the religious leaders who were in the front row. Then a shaft of light pierces the room as a small hole is opened in the roof. Eager to get their friend to Jesus, the men continue to dig away the roof until the hole is large enough to lower the paralyzed man down. Again, we can only wish that all men were as persistent in bring the lost to Christ.

Look at Jesus' response in verse 5. He isn't frustrated, annoyed, or put-off because of the interruption - Quite the contrary. Mark writes, "And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Here is a man who was paralyzed, unable to bring himself to Jesus, but hoping to be healed and Jesus leads with, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Such a statement almost seems irrelevant to the immediate situation. What's going on here? What we are witnessing is more than a healing – it's salvation.

The man obviously was brought to Jesus for healing from his paralysis, but it's interesting to note that Jesus looks at him alone, not the other four, and says, "Your sins are forgiven." I think the paralyzed man wanted to be healed, but more than that I think he wanted to be forgiven. A survey of most commentaries seems to leave you with the impression that the paralytic came to Jesus for physical healing and what he got was spiritual healing. In other words, Jesus gave the paralyzed man more than he was asking for. I have a problem with that though. Two things accompany conversion – repentance and faith. Jesus doesn't forgive sins apart from repentance and faith in the gospel. In Romans 10:17 Paul writes, "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." At some point, this paralyzed man heard the gospel. It's possible that he was in attendance at the synagogue when Jesus cast the unclean spirit out of a man. Perhaps he was present at the home of Peter's mother-in-law later that same evening as the "whole city" gathered and brought their sick and oppressed to Jesus. It's possible that he heard the gospel as he was lowered to the feet of Jesus. When he was exposed to the gospel we don't know, but we do know that while he undoubtedly wanted healing from his physical condition, he also earnestly desired healing from his spiritual condition. And so, in this moment apart from any works, on the basis of His own authority, Jesus justifies the man and forgives him of his sin.

The glorious message of Christianity, the message that sets Christianity apart from every other worldview and religious system under the sun is that Jesus Christ, the eternal, incarnate, Son of God stands ready to forgive sinners. Paul writes, “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace” Ephesians 1:7. Again in Colossians 1:14 Paul says, “[In Christ] we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” One chapter later he says, “And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses” Colossians 2:13. John remind us, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” John 1:9.

And this isn't just a New Testament theme. Listen to how God introduces Himself in Exodus 34, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” Exodus 34:6–7. David's heart seems to bubble over in Psalm 103 when he exclaims, “Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy” Psalms 103:1–4. God speaks again through the prophet Isaiah when he says, “I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins” Isaiah 43:25. Forgiveness is glorious, but it isn't free. Forgiveness is offered on the basis that another – Jesus Christ – pays our sin penalty.

A father and his daughter were once walking through the grass on the Canadian prairie. In the distance, they saw a prairie fire, and they realized that it would soon engulf them. The father knew there was only one way of escape: they would quickly start a fire right where they were and burn a large patch of grass. When the huge fire drew near, they then would stand on the section that had already burned. When the flames did approach them, the girl was terrified but her father assured her, ‘The flames can't get to us. We are standing where the fire has already been. Are you standing forgiven in Christ - where the fire has already been? Forgiveness is the greatest miracle that Jesus ever performs. Why?

1. It meets the greatest need.
2. It costs the greatest price.
3. It brings the greatest blessings.³

Let me say a brief word concerning affliction. Great is the temptation to gristle under the burden of difficult circumstances. But affliction and difficult circumstances are often the means that God uses for our benefit and blessing. If this man had never been paralyzed, he might very well have

³ Warren Wiersbe, TBEC: New Testament Matthew – Galatians Vol. 1 (Colorado Springs: David Cook, 1989), 115.

kept his sheep on the hills of Galilee all his life and never been brought to Christ. There are probably many similar stories in this room this morning. How many of you have learned wisdom as a result of enduring affliction? How many have suffered bereavements, which have actually proved to be mercies? How many losses have proved to be real gains? How many sicknesses have led to the Great Physician of souls, sent us running to our Bibles, plucked us out of the world, revealed our foolishness, and taught us to pray? Many can say, like David, "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes" Psalm 119:71. Friends, listen to me. We can be sure that there is a needs-be (purpose) for every cross and a wise reason for every trial. Every sickness, sorrow, and loss is a gracious message from God and is meant to call us nearer to Him.⁴ They are meant to remind us that this world is not your home.

III. DISBELIEVING HEARTS (vs. 6-8)

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?"

In verses 6-8, the focus of the story momentarily shifts from the paralytic to the Scribes. What began as a heartwarming healing has suddenly become a perilous confrontation over religious authority.⁵ As soon as Jesus absolved the paralytic of his sin, religious red flags started to wave in the minds of the Scribes and Pharisees. You see, the Scribes and Pharisees, as self-righteous and status-minded as they often were, would have never dared to claim the ability to forgive sins. The forgiveness of sins was exclusively God's prerogative. The narrative continues in verses 6 and 7 where Mark writes, "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?"

The Pharisees are murmuring in their hearts and Jesus hears all of it. This is as glorious as it is terrifying. Jesus knew the hearts of the Pharisee and He knows ours as well. David, speaking of the Lord (Yahweh) in Psalm 139:1-2 says, "O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar." The fact that Jesus responded to the thoughts of the Pharisees should have been a dead giveaway that the man in front of them was no ordinary man.

The Pharisees were right in the fact that God alone has the authority to forgive sin. They were right that it was blasphemy for any man to claim to possess the authority that belongs to God alone. The sentence for blasphemy was severe. Leviticus 24:16 says, "Whoever blasphemes the

⁴ J.C. Ryle, 23.

⁵ Edwards, 74.

name of the LORD shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall *stone* him. The sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death." In his pronouncement of divine pardon, Jesus signed His death warrant. This is the very charge that leads to His crucifixion.

IV. DEMONSTRATION OF DEITY (vs. 9-12)

Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'? 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!"

It's interesting to note that the Scribes ask the question in verse 7, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Jesus answered their question in verse 10. He says, "I want you to know that I, the Son of Man, have authority on earth to forgive sins." How is Jesus going to validate His claim to have forgiven the paralytic of his sins? He is going to heal the man of his physical infirmities right before their eyes.

Jesus asks, what almost sounds tauntingly, "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'? From the crowd's perspective, it's easier to say that a man's sins are forgiven. Why? Because there isn't any way to validate or confirm it. So Jesus proves His ability to pardon the paralytics' sin by healing his paralysis. Jesus' authority to forgive sins is no less effective because it's invisible, but to remove any questions as to the state or condition of the man's spiritual status, Jesus also changes the state of the man's physical status. And this change can be verified by everyone in attendance! You see, when Jesus caused the paralytic to walk before the eyes of His critics, they were forced to recognize that His declaration of forgiveness had been effective.

Jesus goes on in verses 10-11 to say, "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." These two verses are blossoming with significance. The word "know" is the Greek word εἰδῆτε, which means to have a deep down perception or absolute knowledge. Jesus' purpose in healing the man's paralysis is that those who observed it would have a knowledge that cannot be denied. The word translated "power" or "authority" basically means "out of being." The power or authority that Jesus is getting ready to exercise is resident to Him by virtue of His being. There are no tricks, no hocus pocus, just divine power.

What a display before a wondering crowd! Someday those newly restored limbs would wither, but just as Jesus said of all of those who have been born again, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live" John 11:25. Again we see the incomparable authority of Christ. No angel in heaven, no man on earth, no church council, no minister of any denomination, can take away from a sinner's conscience the load of guilt and give him peace with God. They may point to the fountain. They may declare with authority whose sins God is willing to forgive. But they cannot take away sin by their own authority. This is prerogative of God alone, and it is prerogative He has put in the hands of His Son, Jesus Christ.⁶

Mark concludes with the response of the crowd. He writes, "They were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!" Unfortunately, that's as far as their response seems to go. Luke 5:26 says they were filled with awe or fear. He uses the Greek word φόβος, from which we get phobia. It's a combination of panic, confusion, awe, and reverence, but it falls short of repentance and faith. It falls short of acknowledging Jesus for who He really is. Matthew's account of this story sheds some light on the crowd's reaction. Matthew writes, "When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men." To the crowds, Jesus was a mere man, not their Messiah.

The purpose of Jesus' miracles was to demonstrate his deity. Healing the paralytic physically served to confirm his authority to heal him spiritually. Jesus came to save sinners – to be the sacrifice that forgiveness requires. And praise be to God He's still saving sinners today. He still says to spiritual paralytics, "Son, your sins be forgiven." Has He said it to you? Are you standing where the fire has already been?

CLOSING BENEDICTION

As we bring our corporate worship to a close this morning, hear this benediction from Romans 5:8-9, "But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God." And all God's people said, "Amen!" Go in peace!

⁶J.C. Ryle, 24.