

Authority to Forgive

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[0 : 00] Mark chapter 2 beginning in verse 1. 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 one, 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 this?

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 you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.

[1 : 06] 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.

Let's pray. Father, Father, as we take the next several minutes to meditate on Your Word, our prayer is that You would make it plain to us.

I pray that as we read about the forgiveness of this man's sins, that we would rejoice because we too have been forgiven. Do not ever let us take for granted the great gift of the washing away of our sins by the blood of Christ.

Help us to cherish it. Help us to love it. And long to bring the hope of forgiveness and life to others. We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen. So for the last few weeks, we have seen Mark describe the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, starting at His baptism by John the Baptist and leading all the way up to His first sort of preaching circuit.

[2 : 29] In fact, in Mark 1.39, this is what we're told about that preaching circuit, that He went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues, and casting out demons. And I've said over and over that as Mark recounts these early days of Jesus' ministry, he highlights the authority of Jesus.

Specifically, he highlights the sovereign authority of the Word of Christ in calling His disciples, in teaching in the synagogue, in casting out demons, and in healing the sick.

But the emphasis, I think, for both Mark and for Jesus is on the importance of Jesus' preaching. The way in which the Word of Christ shows itself as authentic and sovereign in His preaching.

In fact, that's the reason, if you remember, that's the reason that He left Capernaum. Where half of chapter 1 takes place, Jesus just sort of leaves because of the pressing crowds and all of the demands for healing and demonic oppression to be released from all those things.

All of those demands on Jesus left very little room for the actual preaching of the Gospel. And so, Jesus left Capernaum. And now, here, in chapter 2, after going and preaching to all the surrounding towns, now we find Him back at His home base.

[3 : 48] Take a look at verse 1. Mark writes, And when He returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that He was at home. So, Capernaum is home now.

Literally, the text says that He was in the house. Now, probably He's in Peter and Simon's, Simon and Andrew's house again, where He had been earlier when He healed Peter's mother-in-law.

But for all practical purposes, this has now really become the closest thing that Jesus has to an actual home of His own. So, here He is back in Capernaum. But notice that this time, He's able to keep His presence there a secret for at least a few days.

And I say that because if you look at the phrase, after some days, that phrase should probably be attached to, it was reported. It's not that Jesus... Mark is not saying that Jesus' preaching tour in the surrounding areas only lasted for a few days.

That's not what He's saying. You have to, in most of our translations, you have to take the comma and you have to move it to the end of the word Capernaum and then you can kind of see it. So, this is how I read that verse.

[4 : 58] And when He had returned to Capernaum, after some days, it was reported that He was at home. So, He's been at home for a while and He has a few days of calm and quiet before the people discover that He's back in town.

And then we're told that it was reported that He was back. So, eventually, after a few days, we don't know, three or four days or a week or two weeks, but eventually the news just began to spread quickly so that in verse 2, what we find out is that there were many that were gathered together so that there was no more room, not even at the door.

Now, the average home in Capernaum at this point in time would have held about 50 people if they were all sort of standing and all kind of closely together, if they're all crammed in there really nice and tight.

So, Mark says you've got a full house, so, I don't know, maybe 40 or 50 people. And apparently, though, it's not just the house, but the area around the house is full of people too because Mark says that the doorway, the entryway to the house is blocked.

So, this is a pretty good-sized crowd, probably even larger than the crowd that led Jesus to decide to leave Capernaum in the first place.

[6 : 11] But this time around, we're told that Jesus will not be kept from preaching because of all the pressing crowds. At the end of verse 2, Mark says, and He was preaching the Word to them.

So, at least to some degree, here we are in chapter 2, and we haven't left this theme of the Word of Jesus. That really shouldn't surprise us at all, though. We're not going to leave that theme at all.

That theme is going to follow us all the way through to the end of this book. But there is sort of a... there is a subtle shift that takes place at the beginning of chapter 2.

In chapter 1, we don't see anything other than positive responses to the Word of Christ. So, the disciples are called, and they immediately follow and obey.

Jesus preaches in the synagogue, and the people are amazed at His teaching. Now, though, we're going to begin to see opposition.

[7 : 14] It'll begin to stir a little bit here in this passage, against the Word of Jesus, and against the authority of Jesus. We'll come back to that in just a minute. The main reason, though, that Mark actually gives these details about the size of the crowd, about the door being blocked, and all those sorts of things, is so that He can emphasize the plight of the men that He's going to introduce in the next verse.

If you look in verse 3, we're told, And they came, bringing to Him a paralytic carried by four men. And then verse 4 adds that they could not get near Him because of the crowd.

Now, I don't know who the they are at the beginning of verse 3, but it sounds like, if you look at it, it seems as though it's a different group than the four men. As if it's a larger group of people, maybe a few friends, a few friends, or maybe family member, they bring Him, and yet, He's carried by the four men.

So I think maybe there's a larger group of people who are bringing the man there, but four men are responsible for carrying Him. Either way, no matter how you read it, Mark focuses our attention pretty quickly on the four men who are actually carrying Him.

And it's pretty obvious that these men are desperate to get their friend to Jesus. He's paralyzed, after all. I think a lot of times we don't think about the course that an illness might take or an injury might take in a world in which there's no modern medical care.

[8 : 49] Just think about it for a minute. Imagine being paralyzed or having a friend who's paralyzed with no physical rehabilitation.

Nothing. So there's no hope of improved mobility at all because they don't know how to do that. They don't have that kind of rehab. There's certainly no hope of actual restoration of his former

abilities, which must have placed a huge burden on this guy's friends and family.

I mean, for all we know, he might not have even been able to eat without help. He probably couldn't go to the restroom without someone helping him. And as time goes on, things are just going to get worse.

His muscles, if they haven't already, his muscles will atrophy. Eventually, he'll begin to form blood clots. And then, really, apart from some other sudden and immediate cause of death, this man is doomed to a long, slow, painful decline until his body eventually just gives up altogether.

We don't think about that because we live in an era where if you're in a terrible accident, you're immediately surrounded by all sorts of technological advances that allow you to have some degree of improved life.

[10:07] But not so in this man's case. Now, try to put yourself in the position of these friends of his. Imagine that you have a loved one who's in a condition like that and imagine just for a moment that there's been some sort of new treatment created and that there's only one doctor who knows how to administer that treatment and then he's come to your hometown for some reason to put on a seminar maybe.

I mean, you would do everything in your power to get your friend to him. I mean, wouldn't even just the glimmer of hope that there's somebody who might be able to do something to improve his situation in some way, wouldn't that cause you to overcome all odds and do anything that you could to get him there?

Well, here the situation's even better because Jesus doesn't come to town with a new medical technique. He hasn't arrived in Capernaum selling the latest miracle drug. Just a word, just a touch. Anything from Jesus and sickness and injury are gone. So there's crowds. That's not a problem. The doorway's blocked.

That's not an issue. Nothing's going to stand in the way of these men. I'm sure that you know the story. Verse 4 gives us just a really brief account of the details.

[11:33] It says, Now most of the rooftops at this time would have been flat rooftops.

They would have had wooden beams that would have sort of crossed each other in a crosshatch sort of pattern. They would have packed on top of that layers of straw and mud all sort of mixed together so that as it dried it would insulate the home from rain and wind and other sorts of conditions.

So that if you climbed up on top of the roof which would have been easy to do because it would have been really common to have a ladder on the side of the house or at least a ladder on the side of one of the nearby buildings. It wouldn't have been a problem for them to get up there and they could have literally climbed up to the roof and dug a hole through the roof because it's basically like a dirt roof.

And that's exactly what they do. They dig a hole through the roof. They make a hole and then each man probably with a rope tied to a corner of this sort of straw.

It's more like a mat than a bed. Cornered off and they lower him down to the floor right sort of in the middle of the crowd. And the interesting thing is that Jesus imagine he sees a man being lowered.

[12:55] Clearly the man's crippled. He can't move. He can't help himself. He's in a desperate situation and Jesus does not immediately heal the man. In fact, he does something better.

In verse 5 it says, And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, Son, your sins are forgiven. Now I don't think that Jesus' point is that this man's illness is the result of some sin he committed.

I mean that's always possible. But since neither Jesus nor Mark say that and since Jesus in other places in the gospel seems to go out of his way to insist that not all sickness, not all accidents are punishment for sin, I would say that Jesus is not making any direct connection between the man's sin and his physical condition.

Now the people probably believed that. The people as they saw this man being lowered down probably saw him as a terrible sinner who had done something to bring this calamity on himself. But I don't think that Jesus would have seen things necessarily that way. I'll show you what I mean. In John chapter 9 it's a story of a blind man and we're told that he was blind from birth.

[14:13] And the disciples of Jesus say, Lord, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? And Jesus responds and says to him, neither this man nor his parents sinned, but he was born this way in order that the works of God might be displayed in him.

So the disciples, like everyone else, just assumed that his blindness was because of some sin. And Jesus says, not this time. It's just not. Or consider Luke chapter 13 where Jesus explains why an accident, or he explains why an accident, a reason why for an accident happening is not that these people had sinned.

There's an incident that had happened where a tower had collapsed and fallen and killed several people and Jesus says, hey, those 18 people upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and it killed them. He says, do you think that they were worse sinners than the rest of you? And then he says, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

In other words, that accident didn't befall these people because they were worse than anyone else or because they had committed a specific sin to deserve it. It had happened for other reasons.

[15:40] There may be, at times, a connection between someone's sin and bad things that happened to them, but Jesus says that we should not automatically assume that that's the case every time.

So that I don't think that Jesus forgives this man's sins because his sins have caused his paralysis. He forgives the man's sins because this man needs forgiveness more than he needs healing. that's true for all of us. It would be the most pressing need for every cancer patient or every stroke victim or everyone injured in a car accident and everyone is for our sins to be covered by the blood of Christ and forgiven by God.

There's three things that I think we should probably highlight in verse 5 where we're told that Jesus forgave him of his sins. First thing that we need to notice is that Jesus' statement about forgiveness is in response to the faith of the paralytic's friends.

Now, that faith was probably shared by the paralytic but Mark never tells us that. But the thing to notice is that the forgiveness of sins in Scripture always follows faith and repentance.

[16:58] That's why the Apostle Paul tells us that justification which our sins are transferred to Christ and his righteousness is transferred to us. Paul says that justification happens by faith alone so that there is an unbreakable connection between human faith and divine forgiveness.

It's always there. Second thing that we should notice here is that Jesus speaks to this man as an authority figure. See that in how he addresses him. Literally, Jesus calls him child.

So that in terms of authority, Jesus relates to this man the way that a parent would relate to a child. Jesus is the boss and he's in control and the man is at his mercy.

And the third thing to notice from this verse is that Jesus demonstrates that authority that he has by pronouncing forgiveness over the man. Do you notice that Jesus does not say God will forgive your sins?

That's not what he says. He says emphatically your sins are forgiven. That's unbelievable in this context. He doesn't have to go to the temple.

[18:12] You're not going to send him to the temple to make sacrifices? He doesn't have to wait for the day of atonement? No, none of those things. Just you're forgiven. And so enter the opposition now.

Verse 6 says, Now some of the scribes were sitting there. Luke, when he tells this story, tells us that it was the scribes and the Pharisees who were present. And Luke also tells us when he tells this story that it was at this time that they began to question Jesus' actions.

In other words, I don't think that these scribes, I don't think they came on this particular day so that they could challenge Jesus. I think they came because just like everybody else, they were curious. They wanted to see this great teacher. They wanted to see the miracles that he could work. I mean, you've got to remember that he's in Capernaum. In chapter 1, he taught at the synagogue in Capernaum.

And these scribes would have been there when he taught. And yet, there's no indication from Mark or any of the other gospel writers, there's no indication that when he taught at the synagogue in Capernaum that first time that there was any opposition, that anyone was angry with him or opposed him in any way.

[19:32] So that I think that this right here, this event is where the opposition to Jesus begins. In fact, this story is told in both Matthew and Luke.

And in all three of these gospels where we find this story, this particular incident is the first time in those gospels that we see the religious leaders begin to have a negative reaction toward Jesus.

I think these scribes are there because they were curious. There wouldn't have been anything about his performing miracles or even the fact that he taught in the synagogue that would have caused them to oppose him.

But right here, Jesus goes a step and we should probably even say Jesus goes a big, giant leap beyond teaching and healing. From here on out, the opposition is just going to grow.

So that in this verse, the scribes begin questioning in their hearts. By the time you move down to verse 16, they're openly complaining. But not quite to him yet. They're complaining to his disciples about his actions.

[20 : 41] And then when you move down to verse 24, they finally build up the courage to complain directly to Jesus. But not to complain to Jesus about what Jesus is doing. They're complaining to Jesus about what his disciples are doing.

And then by the time you get to chapter 3, verse 6, we're told that they've begun to counsel with the Herodians against him how to destroy him. And in 11 chapters later in this gospel, after conflict upon conflict between the religious leaders and Jesus, they managed to have him arrested and beaten and led away to the cross.

So that the growing pattern of opposition is first complaining to themselves, and then they move to complain to his disciples, and then they complain to him about his disciples, and then finally they just decide altogether to oppose him and try to do everything that they can to take him down.

And Mark wants us to feel that progression. Sometimes when we move really slowly through a book of the Bible like we're doing here, sometimes we have a tendency to sort of miss the forest for the trees.

We get into the details, and we don't notice the overarching themes, we don't notice the progression of things as they unfold in the big picture. And I want you right now at the beginning of this development, I want you to see it so that you can pay attention to it in the coming weeks and even the coming months as it unfolds throughout the gospel of Mark.

[22 : 22] Because the same kind of opposition is going to come against God's people in every age. It just is. And if we can learn to notice it in its earliest stages, we'll be more prepared for how to deal with it.

But if we're not wise, and we don't see it coming and slowly building, it'll take us by surprise, and we won't know what to do. We won't have developed any sort of reply, any sort of strategy.

Jesus sees it, He knows it's there, and He knows it's only going to increase and grow. Jesus is never taken by surprise by His enemies.

And if we're wise, we won't be either. We have to pay attention as it develops. Now, what makes the religious leaders so angry in this passage is the fact that Jesus assumes that He has the authority to forgive sins.

Listen to their words in verse 7. They say, Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming. Who can forgive sins but God alone?

[23 : 31] So in their minds, and they're not wrong about this, Jesus is putting Himself in the place of God. He's claiming a right that belongs only to God.

So they accuse Him of blasphemy, which is really the worst charge that a Jew could bring against another Jew. You see, Jesus claims about His own authority, His claims about His own identity, or really they're the core issue in every age and for every single person.

That's why in chapter 8 of Mark, Jesus asks His disciples, Who do people say that I am? And then He turns and He says to them, Who do you say that I am? Islam says that Jesus is merely a prophet.

Judaism sees Jesus as at best a good teacher and at worst a deceiver and false Messiah.

Jehovah's Witnesses view Jesus as the highest of all angelic beings.

Mormons claim that Jesus was the first spirit child of God the Father and that He worked Himself up to Godhood. Probably, probably most of the people around us believe that Jesus was a good man and a good teacher.

[24 : 47] And that's going to be about as far as most people will take it. They may even use biblical phrases. They may call Him the Son of God. They may say a lot of things that on the surface sound right, but it really gets down to it and you really begin to see the claims that Jesus makes for Himself.

Most people don't want any part of that. Everybody believes something about the identity of Jesus, even if they've never articulated it or taken the time to put it into words.

Everybody believes something about Jesus. And in this text and throughout the Gospels, Jesus claims rights and privileges that belong only to God.

The New Testament writers unequivocally make it known that Jesus is fully divine. And as our confession says, He is distinct from the Father and from the Spirit.

That He is the second member of the Godhead. And as God, He has all the rights in the world to offer forgiveness to those who trust in Him. You see, these scribes understood the kind of claim that Jesus was making.

[25 : 58] And if Jesus were not who the New Testament tells us He is, then He would be a blasphemer. C.S. Lewis famously wrote that Jesus must be either Lord, liar, or lunatic.

And that's true. It's absolutely true. If Jesus really did and said the sorts of things that we read in this story, there's not really any other option.

If He's not Lord and God, as Thomas proclaims in the Gospel of John, then He's either the grossest of liars and a charlatan, or He was completely insane. One of the two.

These Jewish leaders, they just sort of lump liar and lunatic together into one category and they just call it blasphemy. And even though that word only passes through their minds, Jesus knows it.

He knows their thoughts and He knows the intention of their hearts. So He asks them a question, pointedly. Why do you question these things in your hearts?

[27 : 06] Which is easier to say to the paralytic, your sins are forgiven, or to say rise, take up your bed and walk? See, if Jesus, if He can't forgive sins, then His statement to the paralytic is really just words.

I mean, they're blasphemous words, but they're still, in the end, they're just words. They don't do anything. But how would they know? I mean, if you're there in Capernaum, in Peter's house, how do you know if He can actually forgive sins?

How do the scribes know? How do the crowds know? How does the paralytic even know that He's really been forgiven? I mean, I guess they could wait until Judgment Day to find out, but that seems a little bit late.

By then, it's just too late to do anything about it. How do they know if His words actually have the power to do what He claims? Well, Jesus has a solution for that.

He's going to prove that His words are authoritative, because it's true, anybody can pronounce forgiveness, but only a fool would pronounce healing if he couldn't really heal someone.

[28 : 13] Only a fool would do that. And so Jesus speaks a command to the man, a command that he can only obey if Jesus is who He claims to be. He says in verse 11, I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.

And Mark tells us, and he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all. So there's your proof. And the response of the crowd is really no different than the response of the crowd in the synagogue.

It says they were all amazed and glorified God saying, we've never seen anything like this. And that's absolutely true. They've never seen a paralytic just get up and walk.

They've probably seen at least a few people who claim to be able to work miracles. But they've never seen anything like this. And yet still, I think Mark wants us to see more than what they saw.

See, the crowds are amazed by the power of Jesus to heal. In fact, when Jesus asked his disciples who people said that he was, they responded and said, well, some say John the Baptist and others say Elijah and still others say that you're one of the prophets.

[29 : 27] So the crowds knew that Jesus was somebody special. They believed that he had power. They just didn't understand his claims. And then on the other side, the scribes, the religiously educated, they understood the claims of Jesus, but they didn't believe them.

Either one of those is a deadly combination. It's never enough to sincerely believe that Jesus is powerful or wise or good or any of a hundred things that we might say about him.

You have to really know who he is. And if you want others to know who he is and trust in his power, then you have to be honest with him.

You have to honestly tell him who he is and what he claims and what he demands. There's no sugarcoating. There's no dumbing it down. There's no smoothing out the rough edges. For us as a church, that's the approach that I want us to take, that I hope that we always take to the truth.

I mean, we're not here and as we grow, the Lord blesses, we will never be here to entertain people. I hope that we don't hate entertainment.

[30 : 41] I hope that we don't run away from entertainment. I hope that we always embrace laughing together and having a good time together, but we're not here for the purpose of entertainment. We're not here to make people feel better about themselves, even though I hope that we do what Paul tells us to do and comfort one another with the comfort by which we have been comforted.

We should do that, but that's not why we're here. We're here to do something that no other organization on the face of the earth can do. Proclaim the truth, to love the truth, to stand for the truth, and to draw others into the truth.

Only faith in the truth about Jesus can save the people that we're called to reach, and us, from sin. That's what the paralytic learned. That's what Jesus' disciples learned on this day, and if we learn anything, anything else from this story, it's not about the bravery of the four friends.

It's not even about their faith. It's the power of Jesus to forgive those who trust in Him. Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Take this word and apply it to our hearts, so that we rejoice when we think about what we have in Christ, so that we rejoice when we realize the gift of forgiveness that He's given us, so that we would not hold back when it comes to sharing the message of the gospel of forgiveness through the blood of Christ with others.

[32 : 30] God, let us rejoice in the forgiveness that we have, and let us, when the time comes, let us sing for joy because of the forgiveness that we have in Jesus.

It's in His name that we pray. Amen.