

“Son, your sins are forgiven.” To hear those words! To know and be assured by Jesus that God is no longer angry with you, that you have nothing to fear standing in God’s presence, that you are free from the burden of guilt and shame!

If I could do anything for you, I would enable you to hear those words as if for the first time, spoken directly to you, because this is the great gift of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Son of man came to earth, and He brought forgiveness with Him. Jesus came with all the authority of God Himself, and He exercised that authority not by condemning or judging or punishing, but by forgiving! This is good news from heaven: when you come to Jesus, your sins are forgiven.

This passage is one of the great mountain peaks of Mark’s gospel, one of the very highest of high points. Not only does Jesus cast out demons, not only does He heal diseases, but He forgives sins! The people respond with amazement, and they give glory to God, and what is it that they say? “We never saw anything like this!”

They’ve seen exorcisms, they’ve seen healings, they’ve watched the priests give assurance of God’s forgiveness, but they have never seen a man claiming to exercise the divine heavenly right to enact forgiveness here on earth! When their priests pronounced forgiveness, they were reporting the results of God’s heavenly action. When Jesus said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” He was *doing* the forgiving right then and there, and the scribes understand exactly what that meant: “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” Exactly! This is Mark’s unbelievably grand and wonderful announcement: God is here on earth, granting forgiveness!

I’ve skipped right to the heart of the story, and what a story it is! Mark gives us a vivid, almost cinematic scene, as Jesus has returned home to Capernaum, most likely to Simon and Andrew’s house. Word gets out, the house fills up and overflows, and Jesus starts preaching the word.

Then, four men come to Jesus, bringing their paralyzed friend with them, and since they can’t get in through the door, they climb up the back staircase, and start unroofing the roof, digging through the layer of mud that sealed the thatch tight. The typical house in Capernaum had a flat roof, which was used as part of the house – as if your porch or deck were on top of the house instead of to the side. Making a hole in the roof was a demolition job – Jesus’ sermon was interrupted by banging and pounding and clouds of dust and chunks of roof. At this point, all eyes are on the roof, and as the paralyzed man is lowered down, everyone is looking to see what Jesus will do, and many of them are expecting a healing.

We aren't sure whether words were spoken or whether this man had some sort of reputation, or what exactly led Jesus to say what He said, but whatever people expected, they weren't expecting this. But for whatever reason, Jesus chooses this moment, surrounded by the crowd, in the context of preaching his kingdom message, to do something *far more important* than healing the frozen body of a paralytic. Jesus heals the soul of a sinner. Before he gives *temporary relief* to his body, He gives *eternal rest* to his soul.

It is not at all unlikely that the paralyzed man and the crowd understood his paralysis as connected to his sin in some way. All suffering is the result of sin. We don't know whether this specific suffering was due to some specific sin. The Bible certainly presents that possibility – sometimes suffering is the direct result of sin, certainly in the Garden of Eden, but also at various points in both Old and New Testaments, such as the death of David's illegitimate child with Bathsheba and the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira. Other times, however, like with Job in the Old Testament and the man born blind in John 9, we are specifically told that something other than personal sin is going on.

But we don't need to know the specifics of this man's sin in order to understand that there is a connection between sin and suffering, and that there is a connection between forgiveness and bringing an end to suffering. When sin is no more, suffering will be no more, and Jesus is giving us a preview of life in God's kingdom by tying the two together. Jesus came to deal with sin, and part of dealing with sin is removing the suffering that sin has caused. Jesus is *preaching* that the kingdom is at hand, and now through His actions He *pictures* what that kingdom is like.

But not everyone is ready for the kingdom to come. By forgiving sins, Jesus sets Himself apart from even the most glorious of Israel's mighty wonder-working prophets. And think about this: up until this point in Mark's gospel, a Muslim would celebrate Jesus. Jehovah's Witnesses appreciate the preaching, exorcising, healing Jesus. In Jesus' own day, the scribes might have gotten a bit worked up over Jesus' Sabbath day healings and contact with unclean lepers, but it isn't until Jesus forgives sins that all hell breaks loose!

In v.6-7, we see the beginnings of the charge that will ultimately result in the crucifixion. "He's blaspheming!" That is, He is claiming to be doing what only God could do. He is not just claiming to act on God's behalf, like a priest or prophet; He is claiming to *be* the forgiver of sins. Now, if this wasn't the impression that He meant to give, Jesus could have eased the scribes' fears by clarifying that He was acting on God's behalf, although if He did that He still would face the question of who had authorized Him to do that.

But instead, Jesus *raises the stakes* by demonstrating divine power again, this time to heal. He's not acting as a priest; He acts as 'the Son of Man'. That's the term that Jesus seems to prefer for Himself, and the best place to look to help us understand what that description means is Daniel 7. In Daniel 7, the prophet Daniel sees one like a "son of man" come before the Ancient of Days, and the son of man is given authority and an everlasting kingdom. Heavenly authority for ruling the earth. And this fits exactly with Jesus' words: in order to demonstrate that the Son of Man has *authority on earth* to forgive sins, He heals the paralytic.

And by proposing this test, He's arguing from the lesser to the greater. "Which is easier to say?" Jesus asks, "Your sins are forgiven" or "Rise, take up your bed, and walk?" Notice that He's talking about which is easier *to say*. He's not asking which is easier to *accomplish* – forgiveness or healing. Plenty of prophets have healed; no one has forgiven sins! He's talking about demonstration, or proof. Anybody can *claim* to forgive sins, because forgiveness is invisible! How would you disprove forgiveness?

But in order to establish His authority to forgive, Jesus provides a test: if he's lying, if He really is a blasphemer, then God will not validate His blasphemy by allowing Him to heal. So if the harder thing to demonstrate happens according to Jesus' word, then the scribes have no reason to question Jesus on the easier thing, the pronouncement of forgiveness.

It's impossible to re-create the tension of that moment; you already know what happened. Jesus turns to the paralytic and tells him to rise, pick up his bed, and go home, and a paralyzed man stands up and walks out to the amazement of the crowd. And in their amazement, the crowd *worships God*. And that's really the point of Jesus' miracles – certainly they are meant to bless the individuals that He heals, but they are done *publicly* in order to call forth faith and worship.

And in particular, they are giving glory to God for doing something they've never seen before. They have never seen a man offer God's own forgiveness on earth, and prove it by undoing the effects of sin right in front of their eyes. Jesus was already capturing everyone's attention as a teacher, an exorcist, and a healer, but now He has forgiven sin and reversed the effects of sin. This is the unique work of the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God.

That's the story; now I want to draw out some lessons and applications for us. First is a theological lesson, one that Muslims, JW's, and other heretics resist: the scribes are absolutely correct that only God can forgive sins. They knew all about prophets and priests – servants of God who were given special divine power, but the authority on earth to forgive sins was not something that could be given to a man. In order to forgive sins against God, you have to *be* God!

And so the scribes are correct in their evaluation: for a mere man, even Moses or Aaron or Elijah, to claim the right to forgive sins would be blasphemous, deceptive, and wicked. But they are wrong in their *application*, because they are wrong in their *identification*. Jesus is not a mere man. Jesus is God come in the flesh. When Jesus forgives sins, God forgives sins, *because Jesus is God*. So when Muslims speak of Jesus as a powerful prophet, when Jehovah's Witnesses speak of Jesus as the Son of God (by which they mean a divinely empowered man), they are wrong, because they do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. That's the first lesson: Mark 2 shows us that Jesus is God.

Second lesson has two parts: forgiveness of sins comes *through Jesus in response to faith*. First part: forgiveness comes ***through Jesus*** – the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. No one else on earth has this authority. Second part: forgiveness is extended ***in response to faith***. Look at v. 5: when Jesus *saw their faith*, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Faith is the instrument by which we receive God's forgiveness through Christ.

So what does this mean for you? This is what it means: come to Jesus in faith, and He will forgive your sins! Of course, the first step is knowing that you are a sinner. Mark 2 doesn't address that question, but Romans 3 does: all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. The Bible only has two categories: people who *are* Jesus, and people who *need* Jesus. Since you aren't Jesus, you fall into the second category: you are a sinner, which means you need Jesus, the only one on earth who has the authority to forgive sins.

Since that's you, Mark 2 shows you what you need to do: come to Jesus. Fight through the crowd, dig through the roof, overcome every obstacle, and come to Jesus, putting your faith in Him that He can save you and forgive you. This story is written in the Bible in order to convince you to do just that!

But Mark 2 also shows us what it means to be a true friend: a true friend brings you to Jesus. Can you imagine loving your friends enough to be willing to go around breaking and entering and committing property damage for them? What are you willing to do to bring your friends to Jesus? Many of us struggle even to be willing to *speak* to our friends about Jesus, and so these four men here in Mark's gospel are exhorting you to go further. Of course I'm not telling you to go break into someone's house in order to bring them to Jesus. *But it would be better to do that than to leave them in their sins*. You know the one man on earth who can forgive their sins! Do whatever it takes to bring them to Jesus.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*