

Catalog No. 5275
Mark 2:1-12
6th Message
Scott Grant
February 10, 2008

A STORY OF FORGIVENESS

SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK

I keep hearing this voice. I hear it not with my ears but with my heart. I don't hear words per se, but I have no trouble understanding the meaning of the voice. If I were to give it words, the voice tells me, in response to even my best efforts, "Not quite good enough." The voice makes me feel as if I can earn the validation I crave if I do just a little better. The voice deceives me, however. For doing a little better, or even a lot better, never silences the voice for long. Maybe you hear the voice, too, or something like it.

The voice even poses as the voice of God. On the other hand, if the gospel is true and I believe it, then the voice is a liar. From God's perspective, I am good enough—not based on what I do but based on who I am as a child of God. I believe the gospel, yes. But I need something that will help me move forgiveness of sins from the realm of abstract belief to the personal tissues of my heart. A story can help me—particularly a story that features a voice which counteracts the voice of the imposter. Mark 2:1-12 is such a story.

Mark 2:1-12:

When He had come back to Capernaum several days afterward, it was heard that He was at home. And many were gathered together, so that there was no longer room, not even near the door; and He was speaking the word to them. And they came, bringing to Him a paralytic, carried by four men. Being unable to get to Him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above Him; and when they had dug an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic was lying. 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 you reasoning about these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven'; or to say, 'Get up, and 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, saying, “We have never seen anything like this.”(1)

Carrying people to Jesus

When Jesus first visited the city of Capernaum in the region of Galilee, he drew a crowd because he cast out demons and healed the sick. Despite his popularity, Jesus left Capernaum to preach about the kingdom of God in other parts of Galilee. However, crowds followed him to such an extent that he couldn't enter a city openly. Now, he slips back into Capernaum, but the city nevertheless becomes aware of his presence and a crowd, once again, gathers at the house where he is staying.(2) The house, in essence, becomes a synagogue as Jesus speaks “the word,” which presumably concerns the nearness of the kingdom of God.

Jesus comes to the attention of four men who are intent on bringing a paralyzed man to him and are undeterred by the crowd that blocks their way. They tear a hole in the roof to lower the man down to Jesus—not a minor undertaking even in their day inasmuch as they had to dig an opening, most likely through branches and mud. Instead of rebuking the men for damaging the roof and interrupting his sermon, Jesus observes their faith. When he first came to Galilee, Jesus preached that men and women should believe, or have faith in, the good news that God's kingdom is drawing near (Mark 1:15).(3) We wouldn't have expected, however, that disregard for etiquette and property qualifies as faith.

It is probably no accident, in Mark's narrative, that Jesus has thus far called four disciples and that four men who aren't his disciples carry a friend to Jesus. The four stretcher-bearers did what disciples are supposed to do: they broke through barriers to bring their friend into the healing presence of Jesus. Sometimes, as in the house in Capernaum, the people around Jesus, often inadvertently, prevent others from getting to him. Some, based on previous experience with churches, dismiss “organized religion.” Others have preconceptions of churches based on partial and often distorted information and therefore assume that the church isn't worth their time. The challenges of bringing people to Jesus today are immense, but we shouldn't be discouraged by the barriers of bad history and current misconceptions. Instead, we should continue chipping away at them, like the friends of the paralyzed man chipped away at the roof. Faith demands that we endeavor to break through the barriers, whatever they are, even if it means tearing a hole in the roof of the church. How do we break through the barriers? The same way the four friends did: with costly love—with love that bears burdens, takes chances, and cares enough to expose itself to rebuke.

As disciples of Jesus, we're stretcher-bearers. But we also occasionally find ourselves flat on our backs. At such times, we need to confess our need, expose it to other disciples, and let them pick us up, put us on a stretcher, and take us to Jesus. Acknowledging need doesn't come easy for many of us in our culture, which emphasizes self-reliance. Not wanting to be a burden, though, is often a mask for pride. Need doesn't keep us from Jesus; pride keeps us from Jesus. Faith demands not only that we break through barriers to bring people to Jesus but also that we allow others to break through barriers to bring us to Jesus.

Jesus forgives our sins

The four men wouldn't have expected Jesus, who previously healed many men and women in Capernaum, to ignore the paralyzed man's condition and instead speak to him about his sins. True, the Scriptures in general and sometimes specific ways linked sin and illness, but the four men came to Jesus hoping not that he would forgive the paralyzed man but that he would heal him.⁽⁴⁾ Furthermore, everyone knew that you went to, or looked to, the temple in Jerusalem, not a house in Capernaum, for God's forgiveness.

Thus far, Jesus has cast out demons and healed the sick—signs that God is defeating evil and establishing his rule on earth. Now, Jesus takes on sin as well. John the Baptist preached about forgiveness of sins apart from the temple (Mark 1:4-5). John prepared the way for Jesus, who assumes leadership of the counter-temple movement. If Jesus can cast out demons, heal the sick, and forgive sins, then the kingdom of God is drawing near, just as he said it was.

Because of the Biblical link between sin and illness, which some were all too eager to mention, this man would have had cause to question his standing in the kingdom of God (John 9:2). The man shares the faith of his stretcher-bearers inasmuch as he allows them to thrust him into the presence of Jesus. On that basis, Jesus literally says, "Child, your sins are forgiven." Jesus sees him as a child of God, and God forgives his children. The kingdom of God is on the march and even sweeps up a man who can't walk.

What does Jesus do for us when we enter his presence? He forgives our sins. We may be concerned with something else—paralysis, for example. Our deepest problem, however, is sin, which alienates us from our creator. Our greatest need, therefore, is for our creator to forgive us for the ways we have distanced ourselves from him so that we might be reconciled to him. We come to Jesus with a need, but he looks beneath the need to address the real need. The voice I hear, for example, makes me believe that I need to do better. What I really need, though, is for God to forgive me and for me to believe he forgives me. No one else but Jesus can say to you, with certainty and tenderness, "Child, your sins are forgiven." Jesus forgives our sins and unites us with God. Hear him speak to you. Hear the tenderness in his voice. Let his words tear away the barrier in your heart until you can see that there's nothing between you and God any longer.

How might we hear Jesus speak to us? Perhaps through Ernest Hemingway's *The Capital of the World*, which features the story of a young Spaniard who runs away to Madrid. His father places an advertisement in a newspaper that reads, "Paco meet me at Hotel Montana noon Tuesday All is forgiven Papa." Paco is a common name in Spain. When the father approaches the hotel, he finds 800 young men named Paco waiting for their fathers.⁽⁵⁾

We're all like young men who have run away from home. Whether or not we need or want our earthly father's forgiveness, maybe something in our hearts tells us we need and want our heavenly Father's forgiveness. Somewhere, we want to read a message that tells us that our Father forgives us. Jesus posts Papa's message for us: "Child, your sins are forgiven."

Jesus upstages the temple

This is all too much for the scribes, experts in the Jewish law. They knew better than anyone that Jesus was upstaging the temple. From their perspective, he's upstaging God himself, who forgives sins, yes, but only in connection with the temple and its priests. Also, and perhaps more to the point, Jesus is undermining the scribes' authority as interpreters of the law. People in Capernaum have already recognized Jesus' teaching as more authoritative than that of the scribes (Mark 1:22).

In their hearts, the scribes accuse Jesus of blasphemy: slander against God, a capital offense (Leviticus 24:10-16). Later, the high priest would raise the charge publicly, whereupon the Jewish leaders would hand Jesus over to their Roman rulers for crucifixion (Mark 14:64). Whereas the four stretcher-bearers courageously make a public scene, the scribes sheepishly sit and stew. Inadvertently, and in so many words, the scribes, just like the synagogue-goers in Mark 1:27, raise the question for Mark's narrative, "Who is this?" Mark, of course, answered the question in his prologue: Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, God's final king. As readers, we want to know how the question plays out in the narrative. In this way, Mark draws us in and asks the question of us. Indeed, who is this?

Mark also portrays Jesus as a Spirit-endowed prophet who is able to discern the reasoning of the scribes. Jesus won't let them get away with their silent deliberations. He saw courageous faith in the four men but perceives only cowardly reasoning in the scribes. He both surfaces their reasoning and challenges it. Jesus asks them whether it is easier to say to the paralyzed man, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Get up, and pick up your pallet and walk." Jesus is telling the scribes:

"What's the big deal? It's easy to declare that someone's sins are forgiven. It takes no courage because you don't have to back it up with evidence. No one can really tell whether you're a phony or not. It's harder to command a paralyzed man to walk. That takes courage. I mean, who's going to say something like that unless he believes he can make it happen? Everyone will know instantly whether he's a phony or not. I did the easy thing, and you've got a problem with it. If I had done the hard thing, you'd be fine with it. Why? Because you don't want to consider the possibility that the kingdom of God is being established in and through me. If you were interested, then you'd be impressed by the healing of a paralyzed man—the hard thing that just might validate the in-breaking of the kingdom. Why is it, then, that you're more upset when I talk about forgiveness of sins, the easy thing? Because it's not so easy to write me off as a phony. You know that I've already healed men and women in this city and all over Galilee and that I've drawn a crowd wherever I've gone. But this is the first time you've heard me declare someone's sins forgiven. And you know what that means: it means that I'm claiming that the kingdom of God is being established in and through me. We both know that it's an easy thing to claim but a hard thing to prove, but what really troubles you is that it looks like I'm proving it, which poses a threat to your authority and your way of life."

Having done the easy thing, and having laid bare the scribes' reasoning, Jesus now does the hard thing: he commands the paralyzed man to walk. He does so in part for the benefit of the scribes: that they may "know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." In Daniel 7:13-14, the Son of Man, representing the people of God, is depicted as rising above his enemies to receive from God an everlasting kingdom. Jesus,

for the first time in Mark, obliquely identifies himself as the Son of Man, the true leader and representative of God's people. By carefully choosing the title "Son of Man" over more overt Messianic titles with nationalistic overtones, and by not plainly identifying himself as the Son of Man, Jesus is making a coded Messianic claim that welcomes those who are open to him without allowing those who are opposed to him to pin him down. As the Son of Man, he claims for himself heavenly authority to forgive sins on earth. Jesus wants the scribes to know that he is the Son of Man and that such authority is rightly his. Indeed, Jesus presses the scribes to consider that his authority exceeds theirs. If they submit to him, they'll be swept up into the kingdom of God along with the paralyzed man.

Jesus upstages alternative ways of dealing with sin. The most popular method in our day is to deny its existence. Our world doesn't attribute its problems to alienation from God. The word "sin" is probably used more often jokingly than seriously. Denial, however, doesn't make sin go away. It only turns it into a silent killer that twists and corrupts our personalities. Many who deny sin think the problem is ignorance and the answer is education. They reason that if everyone were just as smart as they were, the world's problems would go away. Some of the smartest people, though, commit the most heinous crimes. Some of us deal with sin, whether we name it sin or not, by flagellating ourselves with self-condemning thoughts. We don't trust Jesus to deal with our sins; therefore, we punish ourselves. All we succeed in doing, however, is feeling bad about ourselves. Others of us prefer self-help. We recognize some inadequacy in ourselves and resolve to do better. Or we ask God to help us do better. But no matter how much better we do, we never do well enough to satisfy our consciences.

The scribes of our day, who present themselves as authorities in the ways of life, trot out these and other methods for successful living. Only Jesus, however, effectively addresses the real problem. The forgiveness that Jesus offers works its way into our hearts to liberate us in the deepest parts of our being. Nothing and no one else deals effectively with sin: neither temple nor mosque, neither denial nor education, neither self-condemnation nor self-help. Only Jesus can offer us God's forgiveness.

Jesus not only deals effectively with sin, he also surfaces and challenges our faulty methods of dealing with it, just as he exposed the flawed reasoning of the scribes. He shows us, through his Holy Spirit, the ineffectiveness of our methods. Oftentimes, he allows sin to do its life-wrecking work in us so that we might turn to him. If you, like me, fall back on self-condemnation and self-help, and are starting to realize that such approaches never yield the validation you crave, then perhaps Jesus, through this story, is surfacing and challenging your faulty methods.

Martin Lloyd-Jones, one of the 20th century's most noted preachers, told of when he, as a guest, preached a sermon at the University of Oxford chapel. Immediately after he finished, the wife of the principal came rushing to him and said:

Well, do you know that you are literally the first man I have ever heard in this chapel who has preached to us as if we were sinners. All the preachers who come here, because it is a college chapel in Oxford, have obviously been taking exceptional pains to prepare learned, intellectual sermons, think we are all great intellects. To start with, the poor fellows often show that they do not have too much intellect themselves, but they have obviously been straining in an attempt to produce the last ounce of learning and culture, and the result is that we go away absolutely unfed

and unmoved. We have listened to these essays and our souls are left dry. They do not seem to understand that though we live in Oxford, we are nevertheless sinners.(6)

Lloyd-Jones ignored a popular way of dealing with sin—intellectualism, which fathoms itself too smart for God—and went straight to the heart of the matter. The real problem is that we’re sinners. The real solution is forgiveness.

Walk in newness of life

After addressing the scribes, Jesus resumes giving his full attention to the paralyzed man. Jesus commands him not simply to get up but to get up and go home so that the scribes and everyone else can see that he has been healed.

Literally, the man, who had been lowered like a corpse into a tomb, “was raised.” Mark often portrays healings in ways that foreshadow the resurrection of the healer. The healings of Jesus are connected to his resurrection, which will be the sure signal that the kingdom of God is being established and that disease and death, not to mention sin and Satan, will be defeated. The healing of a paralyzed man, even more than some other healings, heralded the arrival of the kingdom of God in that the prophet Isaiah predicted such (Isaiah 35:6).

The man’s healing served as confirmation for him that his sins had been forgiven and that he was a child of God. Earlier, the man was only able to enter the house where Jesus was staying because some companions carried him on a stretcher and tore a hole in the roof. Now, he walks to his own house under his own power. The crowd, which didn’t make way for the man’s arrival, has no problem making way for his exit. As in the synagogue, so in the house: everyone is “amazed” (Mark 1:27).

This time, the crowd also glorifies God. The scribes silently accused Jesus of blasphemy for supposedly usurping the authority of God, but the crowd connects the work of Jesus to God. The scribes asked, “Why does that man speak that way (*outō*)?” The crowd, on the other hand, says, “We have never seen anything like this (*outō*).” The crowd inadvertently joins Jesus in pressing the scribes to consider his authority.

If Jesus says to us, “Child, your sins are forgiven,” does he also say, “I say to you, get up, pick up your pallet, and go home”? In the deepest sense, yes. We were dead in our “trespasses and sins.” One might even say we were paralyzed by our sins—unable to walk forward in life as God intended. Guilt, which often manifests itself in the feeling that we’re not good enough, paralyzes us. It makes us think, “Why even try?” But we who believe in Christ have died with him and been raised to new life. Therefore, we “walk in newness of life” and “in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called.” Jesus empowers us, through forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit, to know the love of God, to be filled with it through and through so that it motivates our steps. Yes, Jesus tells us to get up and walk, to believe we have nothing left to prove and to move and live and breathe in freedom as forgiven men and women. When we do so, we glorify God, and perhaps others will take notice, as those who took notice when the paralyzed man got up and walked. And if vestiges of the old age—such as paralysis, decay, and death—linger with our outer person while our inner person is being renewed day by day, we can trust that such afflictions are producing for us an “eternal weight of glory” (Ephesians 2:1, 3:14-19, 4:1; Romans 6:3-4, 2 Corinthians 4:16-17). If you find

yourself pining for a freedom you do not yet have, then Jesus has more work to do in your heart.

What troubles people in our day, just as it troubled the scribes, is not so much that Jesus articulated a new way of dealing with sin. No, what troubles people is anything that might suggest that his way is the only way. If his way is the only way, then everyone else's way falls short—and everyone falls short of the glory of God. What today authenticates Jesus' view of sin? The same thing that authenticated it in the day of the scribes: he healed a paralyzed man. The miracles of Jesus heralded the in-breaking of the kingdom of God, which featured the decisive, once-and-for-all forgiveness of sins. What do people do today to discount Jesus' way of dealing with sins? They dismiss the miracles. That way, they can pick and choose from his teaching if they like, live as they see fit, and keep their sins to themselves if they please.

Jesus makes it easy for us to determine whether he's a phony or not: he said God would raise him from the dead. If God didn't raise him from the dead, Jesus isn't worth our time. Those who doubt whether forgiveness of sins comes through Jesus Christ might therefore investigate, with an open mind and heart, whether he rose from the dead. For if Christ has not been raised, then faith in him is worthless and those who believe in him are still in their sins (1 Corinthians 15:17). On the other hand, if he has been raised, then those who believe in him will be raised as well. The paralyzed man got up and went out in the sight of everyone. Jesus got up and went out in front of all creation and appeared in bodily form to more than 500 people at one time (1 Corinthians 15:6). The resurrection is the sure sign that our biggest problem is sin, that Jesus deals effectively with sin, and that those who believe in him are children of God.

The presence of the scribes in this scene reminds us of the costly nature of the forgiveness that Jesus offers. He publicly forgives the paralyzed man in the presence of the secret police. The scribes' charge of blasphemy would gain momentum and finally send Jesus to the cross. In the end, forgiving the man cost Jesus his life. If the four friends in the story demonstrate costly love by carrying their friend and removing the roof, Jesus embodies costly love by carrying our sins and removing the barrier between God and us (Isaiah 53:4, 1 Peter 2:24, 2 Corinthians 3:14). Costly love is love you can trust. Costly love helps you walk in newness of life.

Jesus makes life possible

Some years ago, I led a Bible study in the East Bay that was attended by a young man named Jon Thompson, the son of Roy Thompson, one of our missionaries. As a boy, Jon had been struck by a car while crossing a street and was paralyzed from the waist down. He was handy with his wheelchair, though, and even entered races for the disabled. In his twenties, he discovered that he had contracted HIV as a result of a blood transfusion he had received after the accident. Jon believed in Jesus. His legs were paralyzed, but not his spirit. I believe he walked in newness of life. He lived with an infectious freedom, even while an infectious disease was devastating his already-mangled body. Many people drew encouragement from his oft-quoted line: "Jesus doesn't make life easy; he just makes it possible." He died of AIDS-related complications a few days before his 30th birthday. A reckless driver robbed Jon of his legs, and a horrible disease robbed him of his life.

A few days before he died, though, he had a dream in which he saw Jesus and felt the grass between his toes. The bulletin for his memorial service featured a simple drawing of a wheelchair with a “for sale” sign attached to it. The headline above the drawing read, “No longer needed.”

I surmise that when Jon was alive, Jesus spoke forgiveness into his life. In one way or another, Jesus told him, “Child, your sins are forgiven.” Even in a wheelchair, he walked as a free man in newness of life. After Jon died, I like to think Jesus told him something like this: “Jon, get up, pick up your wheelchair—and throw that thing away!”

Jesus doesn’t make life easy; he makes newness of life possible. Don’t let sin, guilt, and fear paralyze you. Don’t listen to the voice that says, “Not quite good enough.” Believe in Jesus. Listen to him. Receive the forgiveness he offers. Continue listening to him, and continue allowing the forgiveness that he offers to do its liberating work. If God forgives you through costly love and if he gives you the Holy Spirit so that you may know him, then you can begin walking in newness of life.

Notes

(1) Literary structure:

A Many hear Jesus teach (1-2)

B Jesus forgives paralyzed man (3-5)

C Scribes ponder two questions (6-7)

C’ Jesus asks two questions (8-9)

B’ Jesus heals paralyzed man (10-11)

A’ Everyone sees Jesus heal (12)

(2) Jesus bypasses the synagogue (*sunagōgē*), which “gathers” (*sunagō*) people to learn about God, but the people of Capernaum are “gathered” at a house to learn from him.

(3) The noun translated “faith” (*pistis*) in Mark 2:5 comes from the verb translated “believe” (*pisteuō*) in Mark 1:15.

(4) For links between sin and illness, see Numbers 12:9-15; 2 Chronicles 7:13-14, 26:16-21; Psalm 103:3; Isaiah 19:22, 38:16-17.

(5) Ernest Hemingway, *The Short Stories* (New York: Scribner Classics).

(6) Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Preachers and Preaching* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House), 126.

Discovery Publishing © 2008, the publications ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. To receive additional copies of this message or a tape (a complete catalog is also available) contact: Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, CA 94306. Phone (650) 494-0623. Fax (650) 494-1268. www.pbc.org/dp. We suggest a 50-cent donation per printed message to help with this ministry. Scripture quotations are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE (“NASB”), © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995, 1996 by the Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.