

The Authority to Forgive Sins

A Sermon on Mark 2:1-12

Preached by Paul Liberati, April 11, 2021

*But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth
to forgive sins, I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to
your house – Mark 2:10-11*

One of the questions that people ask, at least from time to time, is about the purpose of the miracles of the Lord Jesus Christ; those miracles that he performed during his earthly ministry. Another way that we could put that question is: What was the relationship between his miracles of healing and restoration, and the saving mission that he came to accomplish?

To answer that question, we could say that, first of all, we can be absolutely sure that his miracles were not designed to eliminate the sum total of this world's suffering—no, not even in the days of our Lord Jesus Christ. That much is clear as we look at the gospel records that, even with the many hundreds (maybe thousands) of people that Jesus healed, we know it was never his intention to heal every sickness and every disease of every individual that he saw.

In John chapter 5 that Jesus came to the pool of Bethesda and there the Bible says their layup “*a great multitude*” of sick and suffering people, and there, John describes them as being “*blind*” and “*lame*” and “*paralyzed,*” and all of them were gathered around the pool that day. John says that they were “*waiting for the stirring of the water*” in order that they might be healed. But when Jesus came to the pool, we see that he did not come to heal everyone who was there. Instead, he came for a single man, that he chose out, from the midst of that crowd. And even though that man gave very little (if any) evidence of true and

saving faith Jesus nevertheless healed him, and then he slipped away from the rest of the crowd.

Now, later on of course, we know that Jesus found the man; he came back and he called that man to repentance, and he warned him of the destruction that awaits for those who do not turn to him in faith. But the point that I'm making here is that even though he had the power to do so, Jesus had no intention of healing every person that he saw. On this occasion it was just that one man who turned out to be the unworthy recipient of the Lord's love and grace, *and sovereign mercy*.

Well that's the negative side of how we would answer the question: What was the purpose of the Lord's miracles? But on the positive side, I think we can say a lot more. I think we can say exactly what the Bible teaches about this question, and that is, that the miracles of the Lord Jesus Christ were designed to confirm the truth of the message that he preached. That is: the miracles were designed to *certify* the truth of the gospel.

In fact, that's what the apostle Paul says in Hebrews chapter 2, as he gives us an exhortation to persevere in the Christian Faith. As he turns to his readers, and to us, he says that *"we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things that we have heard lest at any time we should drift away."* And then in verse 3 he reminds us that, because of all the miracles that Jesus did, you and I have absolutely no reason to reject the message of Jesus Christ. In verse 3, he says: *"How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard him?"* And then he says, *"God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will."*

And so the point of raising this question is just to say that the whole reason that Jesus performed in the miracles that he did (in addition to the fact that he's full of love and compassion for his people) was to show us that everything he says to us, in the Gospel, is trustworthy and true. We can trust in the word of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Well if you look at the passage that we're dealing with today, you'll see that at least in the big picture, this is exactly what we find in our text. When Jesus turns and he says to

the paralytic man: “*Son your sins are forgiven you,*” the Pharisees began to question what he said. They raised doubts about the truth of his word. And so then, immediately, in order to certify the truth of his word, Jesus turns to the paralytic and he heals his disease. He says in verse 10, that he's doing this miracle *in order that they might know* that the Son of man has power on earth to forgive us of our sins. And so, you can see there that the miracle serves to confirm. It serves to verify and certify the truth of his word.

But you know, when you see that in the big picture of this passage, you begin to realize that this story that we're looking at this morning is not about the physical healing of this man. Rather it's about the necessity, and it is about the priority, of our personal reconciliation with God. And right here, in the middle of this text, standing out in big bold letters if you will, at the heart and center of everything that we see, is the message that this reconciliation with God is only found in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so as we look at our passage for this morning, let's keep this in mind; this is the big picture, this is the main point. We should see here that no matter what we think is important in this life, Jesus wants us to know that the forgiveness of our sins is, and should be, at the top of the list.

The Attraction of the Lord's Ministry

As we go through this passage then, we begin in verses 1 and 2, where Mark, as he usually does, opens up the story by giving us some details about the context. And look at what he says. He says: “And again He entered Capernaum after some days, and it was heard that He was in the house. Immediately many gathered together, so that there was no longer room to receive them, not even near the door. And He preached the word to them.”

Well here in the first two verses we can already see that, by this time, Jesus was growing in his popularity among the people. If you think back one chapter to Mark chapter 1, you'll remember exactly why this is. Mark told us that the last time Jesus entered into Capernaum, he went to the synagogue and he taught, and “*all the people were amazed at the fact that he taught with authority.*” But on that occasion, he also delivered that man who had an unclean spirit right there in the synagogue. And as a result, we read in verse 28 of Mark

chapter 1, “*And immediately his fame spread abroad throughout all the region roundabout Galilee.*” And so already, the reputation of the Lord Jesus Christ is spreading like wildfire.

But not only that. As we continued through Mark chapter 1 we also saw that later on that night many of the people actually followed Jesus, and James and John, to the house of Simon and Andrew. Verses 33 and 34 say “*And all the city was gathered together at the door*” of Simon’s house and “*he healed many that were sick of various diseases.*”

And so here I think it's no wonder that as soon as the people now hear that Jesus (though he left for a while) has returned to Capernaum, that all of them decide to gather together and go back to the house of Simon in order that they might see Jesus.

But this time Mark tells us that there were probably a lot more people than the last time he was there. In verse 2, he says: “Immediately many gathered together, so that there was no longer room to receive them, not even near the door.”

And actually it wasn't just the people of the city on this day. It wasn't just the people from the region roundabout who had heard about Jesus. But in Luke chapter 5, where Luke gives his account, he tells us in verse 17 that there were Pharisees and doctors of the law that were sitting by. And he says that they came out of “*every town of Galilee and Judea and Jerusalem.*”

And so here, the attraction of the Lord Jesus Christ is huge. It was so great that the religious leaders came out that day to see exactly what was going on in this house in Capernaum.

The Centrality of Preaching

Well, on this occasion, you might just assume that Jesus would pick up exactly where he left off last time he was in the city. You might just assume that he would gather the people unto himself and begin again to heal all of their diseases, and cast out all of the demons by which they were possessed. But at the very end of verse 2, Mark tells us exactly what Jesus was doing on this day and Mark says that “*he preached the word unto them.*” That

is, Jesus took this opportunity to open up the scriptures and expound, unto the people, the things concerning the kingdom of God.

And, admittedly, we don't know exactly what the content of the Lord's message was. But we can imagine, based on what we've seen elsewhere in the word of God, that he taught the people about the three primary aspects of the message of salvation. And what are those? The righteousness of God, the sinfulness of man and the fact that our greatest need is for a true atoning sacrifice that can really take away sin.

In other words, we know that the very heart and center of the preaching of Jesus Christ was about the work that he came to accomplish. Just like Luke says in Luke 24, when Jesus was preaching to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. His message was about himself. And so verse 27 says, *“And beginning at Moses and all the prophets he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.”*

Well the context then, is very clear: Jesus is in this house, it's Simon's house, it's in Capernaum, and the people are all over – they're spilling out the door; out into the front courtyard, maybe into the street. The religious leaders are all gathered around, out of every city, they're sitting by and they're hanging on every word that Jesus speaks – watching to see what he might do.

What Would You Do?

That's an interesting context. And, maybe here we should ask a question. Maybe to the children if they're paying attention: Children what would you do if you heard that the Lord Jesus Christ came into your city and was teaching at a certain house? What would you do also if you knew that everyone else in your town was going to see Jesus? Would you go to hear him preach? to receive the instruction from the word of God from the mouth of the Lord Jesus Christ?

And what if you had already heard that Jesus is the Messiah; everyone's talking about him; and what if you heard that he has the power to heal any sickness and any disease ever? Would you not also, before you went, run and grab a friend, run and grab one of your loved

ones who's suffering from sickness or illness or any kind of humanly speaking incurable disease?

Well, in our passage, that's the beautiful thing: *That's exactly what the men in our text decide to do.* Mark says that there were four men and they picked up their paralytic friend who couldn't walk (he was probably paralyzed from the waist down) and they carried him to the house where Jesus was. But when they got there, Mark says that there was a real problem. The crowd was so big that they were unable to get their friend to the Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 4 says *"they could not come near Him because of the crowd."*

A Persevering Faith

And so now, here's the last question: What would you do in that particular situation? Would you look down at your friend and say, Well we tried! Would you look at the crowd and give up? Would you turn around, and go back home and say maybe we can catch the Lord on some other day? OR, would you say, No, we need to seek the Lord yet while he is near? Would you be persistent? And would you persevere in your faith?

You know, the Bible gives us a precious promise. The Bible tells us that if we seek the Lord Jesus Christ that we will always find him. But then the Bible adds this one qualification; and that is that we have to seek him with everything that's in us.

In Jeremiah 29:13 it's the Lord who's speaking when he gives this promise. He says, *"And you will seek me, and you will find me, when you search for me with all of your heart."* And in Hebrews 11:6, the Bible says that *"without faith it is impossible to please Him for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him"*

Well, on this occasion, these men were certainly seeking the Lord Jesus Christ with all of their hearts; they were seeking him diligently. And you can see that very clearly in the passage before us by the very radical thing they did in order to get their friend to Jesus. In verse 4, it says, *"And when they could not come near Him because of the crowd, they*

uncovered the roof where He was. So when they had broken through, they let down the bed on which the paralytic was lying.”

Here, these men show that they are seeking the Lord with their whole heart because they go to great extremes; they give an expression of their faith that proves their commitment to their friend.

The Priority of the Gospel

But here's the interesting thing. You know, we can assume that on this day these men brought their friend to Jesus *primarily* so that their friend might be healed of his disease. In fact, if you look over at Luke's Gospel, in Luke chapter 5, where he gives the record of this account – Luke almost paints the context in a way that makes us assume that point. Because in verse 17, after he described the situation, he says, that on this day *the power of the Lord was present to heal*. As an indication to the reader that, this is what the people were waiting for.

And so you can assume that when these men brought their friend, they too were looking and waiting for Jesus to heal him. And yet, on this occasion Jesus did something that no one expected him to do. In verse 5, Mark says that *“when Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, Son, your sins are forgiven you.”*

I think here, when we see that, we learn a very important point. Jesus is teaching us that the most important thing that we can ever receive from him is not the healing of our bodies. In fact, it's not any temporal blessing that we enjoy in this life. But instead, the most important thing that we can ever receive from the Lord Jesus Christ is the forgiveness of our sins; it is a reconciled relationship with our heavenly Father. And so notice here that Jesus switches the priority for these men, and he puts things in their proper order.

You know sometimes God heals us in this life, doesn't He? I mean, we pray to God and God heals us; he heals our bodies; He sustains us, He gives us strength even on a daily basis to endure in this life. But he doesn't always heal. He doesn't always deliver us from our physical infirmities, and that's just a fact. And yet, it does not diminish one thing from the gospel message! The gospel message is that if we put our trust in Jesus Christ then he will

give us the forgiveness of our sins, and eternal life, and he guarantees that you and I will enjoy everlasting communion in heaven with him forever.

For Jesus that is the important message here, and so he takes this opportunity not first to heal the man, (not even to reprimand his friends for the vandalism that they caused). But instead he takes this opportunity to pronounce a word of pardon to this man lying in a stretcher.

A Silent Resistance to the Lord's Word

But the Pharisees were there. The scribes were sitting by and Mark says that they didn't like what they heard on this occasion. In verses 6-7, he says, *"And some of the scribes were sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, Why does this Man speak blasphemies like this? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"*

Now, I find it interesting that none of them, in any of the synoptic gospels, none of them spoke a single word in this moment. The text is very clear that they were reasoning in their own hearts. But you know, their reasoning was wrong; their reasoning was sinful because it began from a place of unbelief and rebellion against the word of God.

Yes it's true that only God can forgive sins, even the psalmist acknowledges that in Psalm 85. In verses 4 and 5 he says, *"To you O LORD do I lift up my soul, for you are good and ready to forgive."* And so we know that it is not the prerogative of any man to forgive the sins of another man in the ultimate sense. Only God can forgive sins. And so their reasoning wasn't all together wrong, but their problem was that they failed to see the true identity of the Lord Jesus Christ, as being the Son of God and therefore God in the flesh!

That is absolutely clear in this passage. Because if only God can forgive sins and they think it's blasphemous for Jesus to forgive sins, then their assumption is that Jesus is nothing more than a mere man.

But what did Jesus do in response to their reasoning? Look at verse 8 because there, Jesus demonstrates who he is; he demonstrates his omniscience, by reading their minds, and by confronting and exposing their thoughts, right there in front of everyone

who was sitting in that room. In verse 8, it says *“But immediately, when Jesus perceived in His spirit that they reasoned thus within themselves, He said to them, Why do you reason about these things in your hearts?”*

And congregation, Can you imagine what must have gone through their minds as they were sitting there, and the Lord looks over at them, and peers into their thought life, and exposes the reasoning of their hearts ? At that moment, although he doesn't develop it, Jesus shows himself to be the Son of God. Only God can forgive sins, true, but only God can read the hearts of men.

In Psalm 139, that's what the psalmist also declares. He says, *“O LORD, You have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thoughts from afar off.”* And then, in verse 4, he says, *“For there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O LORD, You know it altogether.”*

Jesus Certifies the Truth of His Word

Now, Jesus isn't done yet. After he shows the Scribes that they were reasoning from a faulty premise, he goes on to show that their conclusion was necessarily wrong. Jesus was not blaspheming, but instead, he was perfectly within his own right to forgive that man of his sins. And so look at verses 9 -12. Jesus says, *“Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, Your sins are forgiven you, or to say, Arise, take up your bed and walk? But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins—He said to the paralytic, I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.”* Mark says, *“Immediately he arose, took up the bed, and went out in the presence of them all.”*

Here, we return to the main point that I began with. That on this occasion, the miracle that Jesus performs is there to certify the truth of his word. He says what's easier to say, that your sins are forgiven (which, BTW, no man can verify) or to say to this man Take up your bed and walk (which everyone in this room will know in a matter of seconds whether I have the power to heal him or not)? And, Jesus knows that those of his own day demanded a sign for everything that he said and everything that he did.

When he was in the temple and he cleansed the temple the Sadducees came up to him and they said, *What sign can you show us to prove that you have the authority to do this?* And of course, there, Jesus says, *“Tear down this temple and in three days I will raise it up again”* telling them that the ultimate miracle of his resurrection from the dead substantiates every claim that he ever made in his ministry.

And so here, Jesus does the same thing. He says, *“In order that you might know and have no excuse that the Son of Man does have authority on Earth to forgive sins,”* he turns to this man and performs a mighty miracle of instantaneous healing.

And, it's interesting, because we keep running into this title, Son of Man. I would say, no less than three times, we've made the connection between this title and Daniel chapter 7, right? But here, I think there's a different connection to be made. Because you see the reason that Jesus has the authority to forgive sins, is not just because he'll ascend to heaven, and receive the kingdom. No, it's first and foremost because he will ascend to the cross, and by his own death, make an atonement for our sins. And you can see that connection, later on in Mark chapter 10. In verse 45, he says, *“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”* You see Jesus can forgive us of all our sins, because he himself paid the penalty for those sins, when he went to the cross and died in our place.

A Call to Prioritize Our Own Thoughts

Now, as we go our way today, and we think about this passage, we should realize that even though this story is so familiar, it's also challenging at the same time. Because it reminds us that, even though we all have things in this life that we value, including our own health and the health and physical well-being of those we love. God is teaching us that there's something far more important. He's showing us that our relationship with Him is the most important thing, and should therefore always be at the top of our list.

And God is also teaching us that if we do want the forgiveness of our sins, or we do want our loved ones to receive God's grace, then there's only one thing that we need to do, and that is to come to Jesus Christ by faith. **Amen.**