



Speaker:
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Earnestness in Approaching God

Series: The Gospel of Mark · 6 of 6

6/11/2020 (THU) | Bible: **Mark 2:1-12**

Today we shall look at the first twelve verses of Mark's gospel. We left the story last time with Jesus travelling around the towns and villages of Galilee, healing people of diseases and casting out devils. Yet his primary activity was to preach the message of the Kingdom of God. We focused where the Bible focused which was on the healing of a leper. And we noted with amazement what was symbolised for us in that healing: salvation from sin. Jesus became unclean that we might be made clean.

After a while, Jesus returned to Capernaum. Not surprisingly, the locals soon found out that he had returned, and gathered around the house. No doubt they would still have a fresh memory of that incredible Saturday night when Jesus healed a great many people. So here, Jesus welcomes people into the house. The house is soon filled. More people arrive. They stand in the doorway and the numbers increased so much that it was soon impossible for anyone to get close enough to Jesus to listen to him. And Jesus preached the word of God to them.

We should remember that although from a human perspective the scene was slightly chaotic, all those who were meant to hear Jesus preach heard him. And it's the same for us today. When open-air preachers speak to the crowds in the city centres, you may think that those who happen to hear the gospel are a random selection of the people out that day. But even their being in that place at that time is no accident. God ordains their hearing of the gospel, even if they hear just a few words. All the variables in that situation come under the grand purpose of God:

- The quality of the gospel preached, whether good, bad, or in between, is determined by God.
- The amount of time a hearer listens is determined by God.
- And of course their ability to understand and respond to that gospel message is also determined by God, through the sovereign working of the Holy Spirit.

Once again, this episode is dominated by one incident. It concerns the arrival of five friends. One of the friends had a disability. Now the medical terms used in the 1600s were, of course, often different from today's usage. Still, I think everyone is agreed that the term as used here means a partial or complete paralysis of the body.

His four friends carry him on a bed or a stretcher to where Jesus was. They had a strong belief that Jesus could heal their friend. It was a kind of faith. Mark reports that they realised there was no way they could carry their friend through the front door. Such was their faith, and such was their love for their friend, that they were determined to do whatever it took to get their friend to Jesus. I imagine one of them will have come up with the idea, a quite bizarre idea, of breaking into the house through the roof. It was a creative solution, but it was also vandalism! So they found a way onto the

roof. If it was one of the houses that had steps at the side, they could use those. If there were no steps, they would have had to climb onto to someone else's roof and make their way along the rooftops.

I don't know what was at the forefront of the paralyzed man's mind at that moment. Whether it was excitement at the thought of being healed, or fear of being dropped! But the men did it. They dismantled the roof so that the stretcher could be carefully lowered into the house.

It tells us that Jesus saw their faith, and on that basis he pronounced the paralyzed man's sins forgiven. It is one of the mysteries, the marvels, of the nature of Jesus that we hear of him being impressed by people's faith. We can only go so far in explaining how Jesus thought. Like last week, when we tried to make some sense of the compassion of Jesus, here we have another example of Jesus being moved by the faith of people, even though that very faith was given by God in the first place.

I hope I'm not the only one to have been surprised by what Jesus did. Based on his actions up to this point, we might have predicted that Jesus would just heal the man of his paralysis. Yet curiously he forgives the man's sins. Through reading the rest of the account, and having a fuller picture of the person and work of Jesus Christ from the Bible, we can begin to see why he did this. Truly, he forgave the man's sins because he had purposed to do so in eternity. This man was one of God's elect. The remission of his sins through a face-to-face encounter with the saviour himself was undoubtedly the single most important part of this episode. Yet, Jesus engineers this whole incident in order to provoke reaction from a certain section of the audience.

Religious leaders had come from as far as Jerusalem to investigate this man Jesus of Nazareth. But the investigation was far from impartial. Despite all the evidence they would be presented with, their dark hearts would generate nothing but hostility to Jesus. On this occasion, there were nothing but murmurings in the hearts of the scribes. But we shall see, as we work our way through this gospel of Mark's, that this opposition would become greater. Murmuring in the heart would turn into murmuring out loud. This would turn into open accusation, and it would all culminate in the murder of the son of God.

We read that the reaction of the religious leaders was one of offence. Their immediate thought, on hearing Jesus forgive the man's sins, was to be offended. On this point, at least, we should not be too harsh on them. They were partly right. As experts in the scriptures, they held quite rightly that the only one who could forgive sins was God. After all, God was not only the one who had been offended against, but as the king of the world he was the only one to have the authority and power to forgive sins. They will have been familiar with the words of their own prophet Isaiah who said, "I even I am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins." (Isaiah 43:25)

Where these religious leaders got it wrong was in the identification of this man. Believing Jesus to be only a man, the only conclusion they could arrive at was that he was a blasphemer. I could tell you what they should have thought about Jesus, but I say this as one who has received light. We have no right to look down on these religious leaders, since we only know who Jesus is because he has chosen to reveal himself to us. Nevertheless I restate what God has made clear in the scriptures, which is that the unbelief of the scribes was sinful.

Why then *should* the scribes and pharisees have believed Jesus? The group of religious leaders as a whole, by the time of the crucifixion, would have been met with powerful and plenteous evidence that Jesus was the promised Messiah, Saviour and King.

- He dispensed forgiveness of sins
- He miraculously healed people of diseases
- He raised people from the dead
- He testified that he would soon be sitting at the right hand of God
- He called himself the “I AM”
- He told them that he and his Father in heaven were one

And not insignificantly, we see in this account that he was able to read minds. Their private thoughts may as well have been shouted out loud. Jesus immediately heard *their very thoughts*. And as we testify to the world about Jesus Christ, we should not neglect to warn people that even their innermost thoughts are not hidden from God. We read in 1 Chronicles 28 and verse 9, “And thou, Solomon my son, know thou the God of thy father, and serve him with a perfect heart and with a willing mind: for the LORD searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imaginations of the thoughts...”

If you were to imagine yourself as one of these men for a second, you will find it hard to believe that they didn't immediately believe on Jesus. I mean, if he immediately read your mind, surely at least one of the possibilities is that he is divine. But for the one who God has withheld his grace from, **EVERY FRAGMENT OF THE GOSPEL THAT THEY HEAR AND EVERY BIT OF EVIDENCE THAT IS LAID BEFORE THEM ONLY HARDENS THE HEART**. I don't think I'll ever stop being surprised at what the hardening of a man's heart does to him. You can passionately testify to what God has done for you, and it will have no impression on him. You can show him the sophisticated and marvellous word of God, and he will not believe it. You can use the highest levels of theology, reason, logic, philosophy of religion and scientific argument to persuade him, but he will not be moved. It doesn't matter how much you ramp up your enthusiasm. **Unless God performs heart surgery on him and gives him a new heart, all your words will be nonsense to him.**

Approaches I've just outlined are rightly employed by the Christian in his efforts to persuade men to believe. But all our efforts should of course be accompanied by fervent prayer to God. And if God chooses to save a soul in response to your prayer, that man or woman will begin to understand your words for the first time. **God will teach them the language of the children of Zion.**

The reaction of the scribes here allows Jesus to make his point. He puts a question to them. He asks them which they think is easier: forgiving someone's sins, or healing an incurable disease. Trying to get into the minds of the scribes, I think they would have realised that *both* of these things were naturally impossible. Let me down try to suggest three purposes in Jesus' actions.

1. Firstly, by performing one of the actions that the onlookers thought impossible, he showed his authority and power. A right response would be for them to realise that if he did indeed have the authority and power to instantly heal this man of this terrible disease, he must be divine. He *does* have the authority and power to forgive sins also. He *must* be the one promised by the prophets, like Zechariah. In Zech. 13:1 it says, “In that day there shall be a

fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness.”

2. Secondly, Jesus was making the point that if he could do the outwardly more difficult act, he must therefore be able to do the outwardly simpler one.
3. And thirdly, and surely most importantly, **Jesus meant to teach us that the forgiveness of sins was of greater importance than bodily healing.** We find that this principal discriminates between people who have an interest in God and those who don't. If I was paralyzed, but had been made aware of my sin and the presence of a saviour, I would judge that forgiveness of sins was infinitely more important than curing of my paralysis—simply because the physical state is temporary, whereas forgiveness of sins has eternal consequences.

The worldling in the same situation would think in the completely opposite way. They would have no interest in forgiveness of sins, and likely would not even acknowledge their sin as a problem. They live for the here and now. If given the choice, they would choose to be relieved of their physical affliction rather than have forgiveness. And it is this short-sightedness, this blindness, this *obstinacy*, that will take such people to an eternal hell.

I can't tell from this passage the spiritual state of this paralytic beforehand. Obviously, it makes sense that God would have dealt with him gradually, bringing him to a knowledge of his sinful condition, revealing Jesus as the one who could deliver him, and having a desire to meet Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. But we can't infer this confidently from this passage. It seems at least possible that the only motive for being there that day was for a physical healing, and that Jesus used this to bring him there in order to forgive his sins, as a surprise act. Perhaps it was at the moment that the man lay at the feet of Jesus that he became aware of his sinful state. But there is one thing that we can say with confidence: when the man left the house, rejoicing at being able-bodied, he would have been rejoicing far more that his sins had been forgiven.

We read in Psalms 119:71, “It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes.” This man's affliction was *good*. His life of difficulty, embarrassment, frustration and perhaps anger, was used by God, in his wise purpose, to bring about this appointment with Jesus, where he would receive eternal life and get bodily healing thrown in as a wonderful bonus.

What was the reaction? They were all amazed. They said they'd never seen anything like this. And they glorified the God of Heaven. It's impossible to gauge the condition of the hearts of all the people present. People can glorify God through a genuine Spirit-driven desire. But even unbelievers can be shaken by visions of God's power and feel constrained to give glory to God. And the scribes? If they were the same individuals that we encounter later on, they did not worship God. They would have despised the people for doing so. And they will have been growing in their hatred for this man who, in their twisted view, was an enemy of God.

What stands out for me in this passage is the determination of these four men to get their friend to Jesus. I suppose I had a faint expectation that Jesus would frown on their behaviour. It was impolite. It was *destructive*. It showed an utter disregard for the property of the owner. Yet for all this bloody mindedness, Jesus sees only faith.

It would be funny if this house didn't belong to Jesus. We can imagine the homeowner looking on in horror as his roof was destroyed, and thinking *Any moment now Jesus will rebuke them*. Our

saviour here teaches us that there are more important things than manners. There are times when we must set aside politeness and good manners for the sake of the gospel.

Imagine if every time evangelists were told by members of the public that their preaching was offensive that they stopped preaching. Imagine if visitors to a church told the pastor they didn't like him talking about sin, and the pastor from then on omitted references to sin, righteousness and judgement. Well we know this goes on. Shamefully, some do so covet the respect of the world that they compromise in these ways.

Is there not a danger though in Jesus approach that people will think that this forwardness is an acceptable way to approach God? Friends, this is not the danger—this is the intention! Conflicting with all our high views of God and attitudes of reverence towards him, he encourages us to approach him with our requests in ways that are far from polite. Listen to what it says in Matthew chapter 11 and Verse 12. “And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.” If this verse means what I think it means then I imagine it would benefit from a slightly different rendering. If there were no other verses to cast light on this one, I'd be inclined to interpret it as referring to unbelievers in the visible church.

But this language is seen elsewhere. In Luke chapter 16 and verse 16 it says, “The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it.” The context of this verse is similar to the previous one so we can use them both along with other scriptures to form an idea of how God encourages us to approach him. Luke says men press, or barge, into the Kingdom. Compare that with the crowds pressing their way into the house in our account. And in Matthew our translation uses the word “violence”, and this is approaching a bit more the actions of the vandals on the roof we're looking at today.

How is this possible? Surely God would want us to approach him politely. The thing is, God does not think in ways we think are proper. Most certainly, he wants us to honour him, glorify him, and treat him with due reverence. But along with this, he openly invites people to *pester* him. In other words, we go to God in prayer in a spirit of humility, acknowledging that he is the Eternal King. But he wants to see a *dogged persistence* in our prayers. He delights to see our *enthusiasm*. It is in our *passion* that he reads just how much we want the things we asked for.

What we are not to do is go to God, apologise for taking up his time, tell him we will be as brief as possible, make a request, and determine not to bother him again for another year. No. We're to go to him day and night. Day *by* day. Week by week. Month by Month. Year by year. And if you have prayed for years for something and not had your prayer answered, **you must be prepared to live and die in prayer**. Such should be the endurance of the saints.

Let me read to you a familiar account from Luke's gospel and chapter 11, beginning at verse 5: “And he said unto them, ‘Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, “Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him?” And he from within shall answer and say, “Trouble me not: the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give thee.” I say unto you, though he will not rise and give him because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him as many as he needeth. And I say unto you, “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.” For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. If a son shall ask bread of any of you

that is a father, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent? Or if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?"

The reserved attitude that Englishman are noted for is undoubtedly a strength in some situations. But in prayer we should be *fervent*. We should ask God the same petition thousands of times without worrying that he will become tired of it. We should even present him with reasons to answer our prayers. Regarding the example we've just read, it is right to quote this to God. We say *Lord, you've said that you are willing to give the Spirit to those who ask for it, so I'm asking you now to fulfil that promise and grant me an extra measure of the Spirit.* We are not offending God by quoting his word as if he needed reminding of it. No—we are *glorifying God* by quoting his word, because in this we show our absolute reliance on his many wonderful promises.

And even when it comes to presenting the gospel to the world, we similarly encourage people to barge their way into the kingdom of God. We don't preach free will. We know that no one can get into the kingdom in any way without first being drawn to Jesus by the father. But we also confidently use the language of Jesus himself who said in Luke 13 and Verse 24, "Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able." What an awful thought. When Jesus returns, we will no doubt see repentance on a scale that the world has never seen. But the window for salvation will have gone. It will be too late for them.

Brethren, take three things from today's message.

1. Firstly, think on the wonder of forgiveness of sins. That none other than God himself created the means by which he could become like us and give his life if so that we might be set free.
2. Secondly, unless you already pray frequently and fervently enough, let the word encourage you to be more committed in your prayer life.
3. And finally, I encourage you to do what the vast majority of God's people neglect; that is, bear witness to Jesus Christ in this world. Pray for opportunity, and pray for great courage. And tell people to exercise all urgency in hammering on God's door and not giving up until he opens it, and gives to them the twin gift of remission of sins and eternal life.

Amen.