

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 more room, 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 that? 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 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, 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!"

(Mark 2:1–12)

Introduction

Forgiveness: We all need it. Forgiveness: We all need to grant it. Forgiveness is our greatest need. So, why is this so difficult?

We are often amazed when we read about someone who has committed a horrible crime being forgiven by their victim. It seems, well, so unnatural. We are usually humbled by such accounts and applaud the victim. But not everyone responds this way. Some go so far to claim that it is wrongheaded, even *weak* – if not unjust – to forgive the perpetrator. So, that which should be celebrated instead becomes controversial. The idea of forgiveness often raises questions – sometimes controversial ones.

For example, how far should we go in granting forgiveness when it comes to a capital crime? In places where the death penalty is still applied, is it just to take the life of a murderer who has been forgiven by the family?

Again, we have probably all asked the question, should we forgive someone who has not repented? Or, does forgiveness mean full restoration of relationship or position? Or, like Peter, is there not a statute of limitations on how often we are to forgive (see Matthew 18:21)?

More significantly, many people question *God's* forgiveness. There are some sins that people think are too great to be forgiven. Some Christians struggle with God's forgiveness for their repeated sins, doubtful that God will *continually* be gracious.

Finally, on a completely different level, there are many people for whom the concept of needing God's forgiveness is nonsensical. Donald Trump infamously answered a question about his relationship with God with the rather unbelievable answer: "I never need to ask for forgiveness." I read the news. I think perhaps he should revise that statement!

Why do I raise all of this? I do so because the passage before us is about forgiveness – *God's* forgiveness – and is set in a context of *controversy*.

Jesus' proclamation of forgiveness stirred controversy, and the other pericopes in this section (2:1–3:6) also share the characteristic of being controversial. They record various conflicts that Jesus had with the religious elite. For such elites, the matter of forgiveness is always controversial – mainly because they don't think that they need it.

The passage invites us to observe some things about Jesus and forgiveness.

Jesus, Staying Focused

First, we see that Jesus stayed focused on the main thing: forgiveness: "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 more room, not even at the door. And he was preaching the word to them" (vv. 1–2).

Jesus had returned to his home in Capernaum, after ministry in wider Galilee. This is probably a reference to the house of Peter and Andrew. We don't know how long he had been away, but however long it had been, it can be assumed that he was looking forward to some R&R. It would not last for long.

Jesus' homecoming was anything but peaceful, anything but restful. Nevertheless, Jesus used the opportunity to do good – especially *gospel* good. While at home, he proved himself, as always, to be faithful, and therefore helpful, to many. This was particularly true for one man. He came to Jesus, perhaps, only for a physical healing. He left with so much more. He left *forgiven*.

This man would also go home (v. 11). And what a homecoming that must have been. After his encounter with Jesus, he was much different than when he left the house that morning. But we will need to wait a moment for the rest of this story. *First*, let's focus on what was always Jesus' priority: *proclamation* (1:38).

The picture before us is of a crowd gathered at the home where Jesus was staying. As before, perhaps they merely wanted the physically miraculous (see 1:35–37). Regardless, Jesus gave to them what they most needed: the *Word*. Jesus declared the gospel of God to this needy crowd—a crowd in need of forgiveness. This is precisely why he came (10:45).

Content of the Preaching

We needn't doubt the content of his teaching: 1:14–15 tells us that he came "proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.'" In other words, Jesus came preaching that his people needed forgiveness. This is inherent in the command to "repent and believe." The good news of the kingdom is only good news for those who are forgiven by God. Without forgiveness, one is outside the kingdom of God, for it is the kingdom of the forgiven.

Repent and Believe

To be forgiven means that we are guilty of something—something for which we need to repent. The word means to have a change of mind, with a corresponding change of behaviour and or attitude/belief. Without repentance, there is no forgiveness. Without forgiveness, there is no kingdom.

Forgiveness is our greatest need. We have rebelled against holy God and are alienated from him. Our state of separation means that we are under the wrath of God. It means that we carry an enormous weight of guilt. It means that we are heading for Judgement Day with eternal condemnation as our looming verdict. It means that everything that we touch in life will be tainted, in some way, with that guilt. Theologians speak of this as the "pollution of sin." Our horizontal relationships will be affected. In fact, to some degree, they will be *damaged*. Our own psyche will be disturbed. We will be blind to our faults and blind to our need. And as our story indicates, *sometimes* our physical condition corresponds to our guilt. What we call psychosomatic illness may indeed have a lot to do with sin.

Further, unless we are forgiven, we will be unable to forgive others (Matthew 18:21–35). We need to take sin seriously. God does. Thankfully, God is more willing to forgive than we are to be forgiven. As Charles Wesley penned, "O Jesus, full of grace and truth, more fully of grace than I of sin." This story highlights this.

Prioritise Proclamation

Jesus prioritised preaching, though I am not certain the crowds did. They clamoured to the house probably for physical miracles—though perhaps some came because of the obvious authority with which Jesus spoke (1:22, 27). Nevertheless, forgiveness is essential, and therefore, like Jesus, it must be the priority of the church.

Preaching must be at the centre of our crowd. Preaching the gospel of forgiveness through Jesus Christ must remain the focus of the house of the local church. Though the world is oblivious, nevertheless, it needs forgiveness. It therefore needs gospel preaching. It is the best thing that we can do for our community. By staying focused on this, we become essential to our community. If this ceases, our church should cease.

Summon Bonum

This is an essential observation for us to consider. The crowd, no doubt, was clamouring for his attention and doubtless for his miraculous healing touch. But he did not cater to the crowd. He submitted to his Father and did what he had been sent to do. This, too, is the primary task of the disciple of Jesus. This is the primary task of the church of Jesus Christ. If Mark's longer ending is valid, it is no surprise that he ends his Gospel with the command of Jesus to "proclaim the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15).

His doing so may have annoyed many, if not most, in the crowd. After all, he had healed others, so he must heal me and/or mine! There is no evidence that Jesus was healing anyone at this point, but Jesus knew the priority and so he stayed focused. We must do the same.

Are you aware of opportunities to speak the word? To whom could you be speaking the word? Are you being equipped to speak the word? Do you see the priority of speaking the word?

Jesus, Granting Forgiveness

In vv. 3–5, we see Jesus forgiving his people:

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."

(Mark 2:3–5)

The crowd was growing. The word picture is one of a large crowd pressing on the house in such a way that there is barely room to move. And, like so many times in Mark, the crowd only seems to keep people from Jesus.

So, it remains today. Think of unhealthy mega-churches who do *not* preach the gospel. They draw large crowds of people which ultimately serve as a hindrance to people getting *to* Jesus. The entertainment necessary to keep the crowds and to fill the coffers compromises

the message. The crowd grows, and the famine of forgiveness continues. The famine of the gospel God remains to the eternal peril of souls.

The Faithful Five

You have probably heard of The Jackson Five. Well, here we have another group that should be equally famous: The Faithful Five.

In this situation, five friends arrived. One was laying on a stretcher – probably a roll-up matt on which lay a man who was paralysed. Four of his friends carried him to the house with great hope that Jesus would heal him. They had seen others walking around healthy and healed because of the powerful and merciful indignation of Jesus. They hoped that Jesus would be as kind to their friend.

As they arrived, they were faced with a challenge: The crowd was so tight that they realised they would never get their friend to Jesus. Unless they were creative.

Fuelled by love, hope and faith, they undertook an extreme attempt to get their friend the help that he needed – or, rather, the help that they and he *thought* he needed. What they got was far more than perhaps they ever would have, or could have, expected.

O Love That Will Not Let Me Go

These were true friends. Their actions demonstrated their love for this man. Words can be empty. “Be warm and filled” is not helpful to a starving man – unless these words are spoken accompanied by a sandwich and a blanket. Whoever these men were, they were willing to go the extra mile to get their friend to Jesus. They were deliberate and determined and would therefore not be deterred.

Please note that inability is a predominate theme in this pericope. The man who was being carried had no ability to get to Jesus on his own. And those who desired to get him to Jesus were thwarted by the crowds. But this did not stop them – *any* of them.

What are we willing to do? What risks are we willing to take? How much do we value those whom we say we love?

Bringing the Roof Down

These men would not take no for an answer. If they could not get their friend to Jesus in the most traditional way, they would do the unconventional.

I can only guess – but it seems a valid guess – that the man who was paralysed asked his friends for help. Obviously, the friends took him seriously – so seriously that they ripped a hole in the roof of Peter and Andrew’s home! You have to love this scene.

Houses in those days, and in that part of the world, were usually only one or two rooms with a flat roof made of poles and thatch, covered with earth. Steps ran along the side wall so that one could get access to the rooftop, where laundry was dried, a nap taken, or people even sat to enjoy a meal to escape the dankness of the room(s) below. Presumably, these men found the steps, carried their friend to the rooftop, and deconstruction took place.

As debris fell from the ceiling, the crowd inside may have been complaining. But not Jesus. No, he was commending. These men succeeded in getting their friend to Jesus. (I wonder how he felt as he was lowered: completely out of control, and at the mercy of his friends who held his life, literally, in their hands).

As he was lowered, these five would get a lot more than they probably anticipated: forgiveness of sins, not merely healing of body.

“When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’” This is most remarkable, for several reasons.

First, their faith was corporate. At first blush, we might conclude that Jesus was addressing the four friends. Doubtless, they believed in Jesus’ ability to help their friend. And we can all learn a lesson from this. Jesus can help our friend; he can help our family. In fact, he can help our enemies. Get them on the end of a rope and get them to Jesus!

Our faith in the gospel should make us industrious, creative, undaunted, risk-taking, unconventional, bold and sacrificial. They even put themselves in potential danger. At the least we can probably do more than what we are. We can probably invest more time in home Bible studies, or Bible studies at work, school or university. We can do more to get our children under the ministry of the word.

Having said this, I maintain it was the faith of *five*: the paralytic *and* his four friends. Since no one is saved by proxy, clearly the paralytic believed as well. Maybe *his* faith is what drove these men to this extreme action. Faith can be contagious.

Regardless, the Lord responded to faith, as we know he is pleased to do (Hebrews 11:6).

Second, their faith was visible. As we have noted, their faith was desperate, determined, and demonstrated. This pericope serves well as an illustration of James 2:20–26.

The faith that saves is a faith that is not hid under a bushel. It is evident for others to see. When a person feels the weight of their sin, coupled with the awareness that Jesus can do something about it, convention won't hinder their response. In fact, they won't care what others think. They will submit to baptism. They will leave ungodly relationships. They will join in meaningful membership with a church. They will identify with God's people on the Lord's Day. They will testify to others about a gospel-transformed life.

Third, their faith was rewarded. It was rewarded with forgiveness. The fruit of their faith was forgiveness from the Lord. The one who was preaching forgiveness pronounced it. He would *provide* it.

But wait a minute: Is this what the man asked for? Was forgiveness what his friends desired? It is quite possible that what the Lord proclaimed was less than what these five all wanted — kind of like the kid who asks for a bike for Christmas and gets new clothes instead. Needed? Yes. Wanted? Not primarily. But as that astute theologian Mick Jagger said, "You can't always get what you want; you get what'cha need."

It is helpful to recognise the old covenant connection between sickness and sin; between healing and forgiveness. Perhaps this man *did* make a connection between his sick bed and his sin-sick soul. Regardless, Jesus puts his word on the greatest need.

When Jesus said this, perhaps there was disappointment among these five. But it also may have *astounded* them. It may have so *stunned* them that they stopped to consider the reality that this man *did* need forgiveness. In fact, it may have begun to dawn upon them that they *all* needed forgiveness.

I will come back and expand on this later, but for now consider the reality that we need forgiveness more than we need anything else — more than bigger barns, a better career, temporary success, relationships, etc. People often come to church with varying motives — companionship, better ethics, raising children, etc. Many people come to Jesus with the wrong desires, or at least, with a desire that is less than what they should be desiring. And Jesus in his mercy gives them so much more: He gives to them what they really need.

Jesus, Facing Foes

In vv. 6–9, Jesus faced his opponents.

Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this man speak like that? 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'?"

Not everyone was impressed with God's forgiveness. Not everyone believed. God's forgiveness of sinners is a threat to the self-righteous. This is self-evident in these verses.

The scribes appear for the first of several times in Mark. Here, and in every other occurrence except one (12:28–34), they were portrayed in a negative light – because, well, they were negative! They seem to have been the professional naysayers. They were the sceptics, the cynics in every crowd where we find them. They lay in wait to pounce on Jesus for the things that he both said and did. They were smug and self-righteous. The last thing most of them were concerned with was seeking forgiveness. They were too proud for that. Strangely, they were too “spiritual” for that. They were too concerned with God for that! This is evident as they deliberated in their hearts what Jesus had just proclaimed.

Jesus confronted the scribes with a rebuking question: “Why do you question these things in your hearts?” I imagine Jesus pausing to let the impact of his omniscience sink in. Perhaps they began to squirm. After all, there was a crowd here, most of whom were doubtless members of the synagogue where the scribes carried out their ministry. They were now being confronted to be corrected by the Scribe of all scribes.

This question is followed by another: “Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk’?” The Christian reader will be tempted, like me, to answer, “Your sins are forgiven!” After all, physical healing seems so much more believable than spiritual healing. Guilt is such a powerful, and, at times, such a pervasive force that forgiveness seems, well, impossible. As Calvin wrote, “So strong is our inclination to distrust, that we never venture to believe that God is merciful to us, till he draws near, and speaks familiarly to us.”

But Jesus was not asking this question to Christians. He was not speaking to believers but to *unbelievers*. His point was that, on an evidential level, to say that someone is forgiven is not measurable. Such a declaration is not tangibly quantifiable. It can't be empirically proven. Some might even say, “Talk is cheap; show me.” On the other hand, to say to a paralysed man, “You are healed, prove it by rising up and walking,” is very easily verifiable.

So Close, Yet So Far

Scribes were responsible to steward the scriptures – the very words of God. They were to copy them, yes, but, more importantly, they were to study God's word with a view to faithfully teaching and instructing God's people to *obey* his word. They should have been those most apt to recognise God's authority. Sadly, they continually failed to do so. Frighteningly, as they immersed themselves in God's word, they missed the very God of

that word. Jesus pointed to this when, on another occasion, he rebukes them: “You search the scriptures for you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life” (John 5:39–40). So here.

I wonder how many people sit in faithful churches week after week, month after month, year after year, and yet are as far from God as the idol-worshipping Hindu, Allah-devoted Muslim, or God-rejecting atheist? Proximity is not enough. Humble repentance is required.

Christian, along the same line, some of us need to recapture our awe concerning forgiveness by the gospel. We would do well to be more like the sinful woman who washed Jesus feet with her hair.

Messianic Ignorance

Many have observed that, among Jewish teaching (outside the Bible), there was no idea of Messianic forgiveness. Therefore, so goes the thought, the scribes should be excused for questioning Jesus about his pronouncement of forgiveness. I’m not willing to let them off the hook. The reason is simple: God’s anointed one, as revealed in the Old Testament, was *inseparable* from the concept of forgiveness. Just one example proves this point: Isaiah 53. That chapter is predominately about Messiah dying for sinners and, through that death, securing forgiveness for his people. Therefore, these scribes were not only without excuse, but, because of their proximity to Scripture (literally!), were the more culpable for rejecting God’s forgiveness through Jesus.

This would be a horrible place for an unbeliever to depart this world.

We have already seen that, in comparison to the scribes, Jesus spoke with bewildering authority (vv. 22, 27). He spoke, we might say, prophetically. Nathan was a prophet who confronted David with his sin. David confessed, “I have sinned against the LORD.” Nathan then pronounced, “The LORD has put away your sin, you shall not die” (2 Samuel 12:13). No one accused Nathan of speaking blasphemy. But there is something else going on here.

In Nathan’s case, he was merely the messenger of forgiveness. Here, Jesus is the *message* of forgiveness. He is the one who forgives sins. Those who reject him are the real blasphemers.

Jesus, Confirming Forgiveness

In vv. 10–12, we read of the confirmation of forgiveness:

But 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, 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!”

(Mark 2:10–12)

As these sceptical scribes accused Jesus of blasphemy – that “this man” claimed to do what only God could do – Jesus provided evidence that he *is* God: He read their minds and then exposed their hearts. I would like to think that they were shocked into belief, but the subsequent record indicates otherwise.

Healing the Forgiven

Without going into detail, let me point out that v. 10 is parenthetical. That is, though Mark wrote this, it is an explanatory note to the *reader*. These words were not spoken by Jesus to either the crowds nor to the scribes – regardless of the colour of your red letter edition Bible.

Remember that Mark wrote to Christians. He wrote his story to encourage the church that Jesus truly is King of kings – a message they needed to remember during Caesar worship. Later, Jesus would deliberately utilise the title “Son of Man,” but to do so here would be premature. The closer to he came to Jerusalem, the more predominate this title would occur. He was a long way from there at this point.

Mark’s readers needed the reminder that Jesus saves sinners. In other words, Mark seems to be encouraging Christians, the church, that even though surrounded by sceptics and cynics, they (and we!) must not lose our grip on the truth that Jesus forgives sinners.

They needed to be encouraged that, even though Jesus is now in heaven, nevertheless, he is doing what he did on earth: forgiving the repentant. Therefore, they were to continue to preach this gospel to themselves and to the world (16:15).

The proof that will follow is not for unbelievers, but for *believers*. Jesus does not prove himself to scoffers. No, he scoffs at scoffers (Psalm 2). But Jesus does desire to bolster the faith of the faithful. He desires to encourage believers – by the ministry of the Holy Spirit; by providential kindnesses; by answered prayers; by the ministry of others; etc.

By way of application, we need to remember and rejoice in this forgiveness. This is why corporate worship on Sunday is so important. And it is why our gathering is to be *glad*. At the least, it should produce the scattering of the glad!

Humble Condescension

Jesus condescend to their reasoning and addressed the man: “I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.” And he did just that “before them all.” As someone has commented,

“He did the miracle which they could see that they might know that he had done the other one that they could not see.”

I wonder how long the dialogue lasted between the declaration of forgiveness and the healing of the paralysis. And I wonder how important healing was at this point for the paralytic. After all, the greatest of miracles had already occurred. If he had been paralysed as consequence of his sin, then the weight of guilt removed would have provided him with much joy. But to be physically healed was surely a welcomed bonus! He had already experienced reconciliation after separation and, now, restoration after suffering. Such is the pattern of the Christian life. First things first; second things second.

Christian, never underappreciate the greatest and most gracious of all miracles: gospel reconciliation to God. This is first prize – God’s mercies in saving us. But neither should we lose sight of subsequent collateral blessings of restoration. In fact, these serve as proof and confirmation of saving faith. These may take the form of restoration of relationships (marriage, parent/child, within congregation); of restoration of order and priorities; of restoration of health and productivity; even of restoration of community and society.

Reconciliation and restoration are inseparable. But we must keep the right order. Biblically, there is a connection between forgiveness and healing. Suffering is here because sin has entered here. And as God’s forgiveness is realised, God’s restoring this world will also eventually be realised. And one day, what a day that will be!

Honouring the Forgiver

Those witnessing this miracle went away “amazed.” The word speaks of being astounded. It speaks of wonderment. The descriptive phrase, “We never saw anything like this,” coupled with “glorified God” indicates that the crowd was convinced that Jesus was not a blasphemer, but rather was of God.

When we experience God’s forgiveness, it provides an opportunity for those around us to be amazed by God. Forgiveness experienced, and forgiveness expressed, provides a platform to glorify God.

The evidence that this man had been forgiven was the way he went back home. Perhaps like the paralysed man in Acts 3, who was also healed, this man went home walking and leaping and praising God (see Acts 3:8).

The evidence of our being forgiven is not to be hid under a bushel. In fact, it can’t be. The impact of joy flowing from forgiveness is to be amazing in its pointing others to what God has done – bringing his weight to bear. The evidence of our being forgiven, of our being

reconciled, will be seen, in some shape or form, in restoration. Such evidence may not convince everyone. Nevertheless, it should be irrefutable.

A Final Word

In this story, we have seen Jesus preaching and pronouncing forgiveness. But this was only possible because Jesus would one day provide for it by paying the price for it. This story, in other words, leads us to Calvary.

There is conflict here and, later, when Jesus entered Judea on his way to Jerusalem, there was even more conflict (another five controversial pericopes in 11:1–12:27). These would result in his arrest and crucifixion – and our forgiveness.

Sinful controversy resulted in suffering on a cross. But that was not the end of the story. Rather, Jesus rose from the dead, proving that the forgiveness he promised this man, and all others, is secured. There is no controversy about that. There need be no controversy in your mind. Repent and believe the gospel.

Christian, embrace forgiveness today and go home walking and leaping and praising God.

AMEN