

“Your Sins Are Forgiven”

The Seventh in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 2:1-12; Isaiah 35:1-10

Israel’s long awaited Messiah has appeared in the most unexpected of places and in the most unexpected of ways. The Messiah’s forerunner, John the Baptist, had completed his work of preparation and was now in jail at the hands of Herod. Jesus had followed John out into the desert, was baptized by him, and received the Father’s benediction– “this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” Jesus then spent forty days in the wilderness, resisting the temptation of the devil, as he began to fulfill all righteousness. Having triumphed over Satan, Jesus then appeared in Capernaum, a small backwater fishing village on the Sea of Galilee. It was here, of all places, that Jesus began preaching the good news of the kingdom of God, casting out demons, calling disciples and healing the sick, including a man with leprosy, the most feared and horrible disease of that age. While Jesus instructed this man to be quiet about his healing and to report to the priest so that he could be declared ceremonially clean and regain his life, instead this very excited man went out and began to spread the news everywhere about what Jesus had done. The buzz about Jesus was spreading throughout the whole area and as we learn at the end of Mark 1, “*Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.*”

As we return to our series on the Gospel of Mark. I asked you when we began this series to read Mark’s gospel through several times and I hope that you have been able to do that. This is a gospel of action and vivid images. As we move into Mark chapter 2, it has become clear that Jesus’ messianic ministry is not only attracting the poor and suffering throughout the whole region, but Jesus is becoming the subject of intense controversy and conflict with the Pharisees and scribes in the area, who had come to see Jesus not as Israel’s Messiah, sent by God, but as a threat to their own power and prestige. In fact, the next five incidents recorded by Mark (which takes us from Mark 2:1-3:6) indicate that Jesus and his disciples were being constantly challenged directly or indirectly by the Jewish religious authorities. These exchanges were becoming quite intense. In fact, Jesus (the Son of God) is actually accused of blasphemy! He is also roundly criticized by the self-righteous scribes and pharisees for eating with tax collectors and sinners (Mark 2:16).

Throughout this entire section of Mark’s gospel (which deals with Jesus’ initial ministry in Galilee), Mark continues with his “nothing but the facts” approach to the events at hand. Jesus is building his church and effectively silencing those who oppose him.¹ Mark’s proclamation dramatically–yet with great economy of speech–informs us that Jesus has the power to forgive sins (something only God can do). Mark will also recount in this section of his gospel how Jesus addresses difficult questions about fasting and Sabbath observance, along with a discussion of the meaning of the redemptive purposes of God. As we have seen in previous weeks, with the coming of Jesus, redemptive history has reached its pivotal moment. The messianic ministry of Jesus has turned everything on its head. That which has been hidden in type and shadow is now out in the open. Everything Israel’s prophets had foretold was coming to pass. Promise is becoming reality.

¹ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 91.

After leaving the wilderness, Jesus has come preaching about the kingdom of God. His authority over demons, his call of disciples so as to create a new Israel and begin a new Exodus, his ability to heal the sick and suffering with but a word or a touch, clearly demonstrates that Jesus is the Son of God and Israel's Messiah. When Jesus forgives sin, we see the clearest sign yet of the presence of the kingdom of God and our Lord's true identity. Jesus also demonstrates the very real and profound connection between the forgiveness of sins and the healing of sickness and disease. In this section of Mark, Jesus explains why we suffer and he begins to reveal why he has come. Jesus will overturn the curse, brought upon the human race through Adam's fall into sin, and which lies at the root of all our sickness and suffering. We are a fallen race and it will take a second Adam to undo the awful consequences of sin²

In his brief but vivid style, Mark simply says in verse 1 of Mark 2, "*A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home.*" Mark's point is that the buzz surrounding Jesus was so intense that people were now keeping track of his every move. Jesus couldn't go anywhere without people running ahead of him and spreading rumors about his travels and where he might be heading. When Jesus returned to Capernaum—which was a very small town—everyone quickly learned that Jesus was back. Another sure sign that Mark's gospel reflects the preaching of Peter can be seen in the fact that Mark mentions that Capernaum is "home." It may not have been Jesus' home—it was his base of operations. But Capernaum was home to Peter! These comments are the kinds of things which give the gospels their eye-witness character.

As they had done on the Sabbath, when Jesus cast out a demon and healed Peter's mother-in-law, the people of Capernaum once again flocked to Peter and Andrew's house upon learning that Jesus had returned to their city. On the earlier occasion, Jesus stood in the doorway and healed the people as they made their way to him. It is a tragic scene, typical of virtually every place in the world where there are poor, sick, suffering and oppressed people. Sadly the people who showed up outside Peter's house are so preoccupied with their present circumstances that they miss the whole point of Jesus' healing them—his power to do so being the proof that the kingdom of God had broken in upon their little hamlet, and that they should be thanking God for what he was doing in and through the person of his Jesus. Instead, these poor suffering people see Jesus as a kind of walking emergency room. He alone is able to heal them when all hope is gone. And they flock to him for healing, not because they think (or even care) that in Jesus, the kingdom of God has drawn near. He who can heal their bodies, came to save their souls.

Therefore, we should not be surprised when Mark tells us in verse 2, "*So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them.*" Give the fact that Mark has already recorded the content of Jesus' preaching in Mark 1:15 and doesn't say any more about it here, it is safe to assume that when Jesus preached the word to these people he declared the same basic message he had proclaimed before. "*'The time has come,' . . . 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!'*" Jesus was compassionate on these poor people beyond measure. But Jesus had not come to merely heal them and relieve their suffering. He came to deal with the fundamental cause of all human misery and suffering—our sin. But these poor people missed this very important fact. And it is easy to understand why. It is hard to see the big picture when we are in the midst of sickness, sin and tragedy. This is why we need to get the big picture in view before horrible things happen, because they will. It is very difficult to learn what God would have us to learn or to see the big picture when we are in the midst of these kinds of intense and difficult personal struggles.

² Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 96.

While Jesus was preaching, something rather remarkable took place. Mark describes it for us in verses 3-5. *“Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on.”* Preachers tend to be a bit funny about distractions when they are preaching. Everybody has their own list of things which bug them. I don’t mind kid sounds because these are sounds of the covenant. I do mind cell phones ringing and I am not happy when crows decide to crack open stuff up on the skylights. But no earthly preacher has encountered what Jesus encountered in Capernaum. While he was in the midst of his sermon, four very determined men proceed cut a hole in Peter and Andrew’s roof (the roof was probably made of dried mud and sticks). Then they lowered a man still on his sickbed down into the middle of the room, apparently suspended off the ground by whatever it was they used to lower him. Mark never tells us what, exactly, was wrong with the man, only that he was paralyzed and was unable to walk. We learn of Jesus’ reaction, but not surprisingly, nothing is said of Peter and Andrew’s reaction! It was their roof these men were ruining.

Jesus saw their sheer determination and gall as a sign that these four men truly believed that Jesus could heal their paralyzed companion—if only they could figure out some way to get through all those people who had packed the house both inside and out. In some ways, what comes next is more audacious than the efforts of these four men to make sure Jesus saw the plight of their friend. *“When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’”* You can just imagine the stunned reaction of the people in this house witnessing this. *“What did Jesus say?” “Did he actually say, ‘your sins are forgiven?’” “Who is this man and why does he speak like this?” “How dare he pronounce that the man’s sins are forgiven.” “Who does Jesus think he is?”* Only God can forgive sins. *“And why does Jesus speak about the man’s sin, when the man is paralyzed and cannot walk?”*

Whenever we hear these stories, we need to remember that while the gospel story is old news to us, to those first century Jews who lived in Capernaum near the Sea of Galilee, Jesus’ words were no doubt shocking, frightening, and yet at the same time, were issued with such calmness and authority that it was clear that this man could actually do what he said he would do. Surely, Jesus must be a prophet, perhaps even the Messiah. This man must have been sent by God. There was no other explanation. For Jesus spoke with authority, unlike the scribes and pharisees with whom they were used to dealing. But this was all new to them. No one had ever seen anything like it and they are troubled by it all.

Because we are not intimately familiar with the Old Testament and don’t immediately make the connection that Jews steeped in the Torah and the prophets would have made, we might miss something very important about our Lord words and actions. Throughout the Old Testament, sin and sickness are frequently connected, as is forgiveness and healing.³ There is the famous passage from 2 Chronicles 7:14—*“if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”* Sadly, this passage is often misused by American evangelicals who lament the godlessness of our nation. This prophecy is ripped out of its historical and redemptive context and is interpreted to mean that if only Americans put prayer back in the schools, if only Hollywood would stop producing so many anti-Christian movies, and only if our courts would stop advocating things like homosexual marriage, then God would stop bringing so many calamities upon us. Aside from the biblical truth that in his good providence, God can bring about any form of judgment upon us that he wishes, since our nation is as wicked as any other on earth, the fact of the matter is that 2 Chronicles 7:14 does not apply to America.

³ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 94.

It applies to Israel during that time the people dwelt in the land of promise. This is a promise of covenant blessing and a threat of covenant curse. If Israel repents, God will forgive his people and extend to them covenant blessing. It has nothing to do with modern America, since America is not part of the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai.

The same linkage between healing and forgiveness can be found in Psalm 103:3 where the psalmist praises God, “*who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases.*” Likewise in Psalm 147:3 we read that God “*heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.*” The same kind of language is found throughout the prophecy of Isaiah. In Isaiah 19:22 we read, “*The LORD will strike Egypt with a plague; he will strike them and heal them. They will turn to the LORD, and he will respond to their pleas and heal them.*” Similarly in Isaiah 58:16-19, we find these words, “*I will not accuse forever, nor will I always be angry, for then the spirit of man would grow faint before me—the breath of man that I have created. I was enraged by his sinful greed; I punished him, and hid my face in anger, yet he kept on in his willful ways. I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will guide him and restore comfort to him, creating praise on the lips of the mourners in Israel. Peace, peace, to those far and near,*” says the LORD. “*And I will heal them.*”⁴ Then, there are a number of passages in which healing and forgiveness are virtually interchangeable terms.⁴ This can be seen in a text such as Psalm 41:4—“*I said, ‘O LORD, have mercy on me; heal me, for I have sinned against you.’*”

Therefore, when Jesus tells this poor paralyzed man that his sins are forgiven he is getting to the root cause of this man’s problem. Paralysis (for whatever reason) is an outward sign that our race is fallen. The overturning of the curse—brought upon us all because of Adam’s act of rebellion in Eden—is the mission that Jesus came to perform. By forgiving the man’s sin, Jesus is making the direct connection between sin and sickness as cause and effect. Although as soon as we utter these words we also must point out that the Bible never says that we suffer in relation to how many sins we have committed. We need to be clear about this. Many times God calls the righteous to suffer and allows the wicked to prosper. This is part of his purpose and remains a mystery to us, other than to say that God alone has the power and purpose to turn everything to our good, even our sickness and suffering.

In fact, Jesus makes this exact point in Luke 13:1-4, “*Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, ‘Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.’*” The point is that we do not necessarily suffer or get sick in direct proportion to our sins.⁵ We do live in a fallen world. We are all born guilty for Adam’s sin. We all inherit a corrupt and sinful nature. And then we all commit acts of sin, which may, or may not, bring down God’s punishment upon us. Therefore, our sin in Adam lies at the root of all our suffering. This is Jesus’ point. Our restoration begins with forgiveness.

As Mark continues to describe this event, we learn in verses 6-7, that not all those present were pleased with Jesus’ words and actions. “*Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, ‘Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?’*” These

⁴ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 94.

⁵ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 98.

so-called “teachers of the law” are commonly known as scribes and were an order of specialists in the interpretation of the law and its application to particular situations or disputes. These men will continually challenge Jesus’ teaching and his authority, most likely because he was not one of them and they had not approved him. In other words, they didn’t give Jesus permission to interpret the law and the prophets like he was doing. He was not a card-carrying member of their union.

Clearly these men do not like what they heard from Jesus. They knew full well that throughout the Old Testament it is repeatedly said that God alone can forgive sin, since all sin, even our sins against each other, is ultimately a sin against God as well. Furthermore, the Jews fully expected that when God’s Messiah finally appeared he would restore the nation of Israel to greatness and purge sin from the land by removing all idolatry and restoring the true and proper role of both the law and the temple. But the Jews never thought the Messiah himself would forgive sin. And yet here stands Jesus, saying things which sounded to them like blasphemy. What Jesus said did not square with what the people of Israel expected.

According to Mark, Jesus knew full-well what the scribes were thinking. *“Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, ‘Why are you thinking these things?’ Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk?’”* As is his custom on those occasions when he is challenged by the scribes and pharisees, Jesus answers their questions, spoken or otherwise, with a question of his own. “OK guys, which is easier to say to this poor paralyzed man? Your sins are forgiven. Or is it easier to say, pick up your mat and walk?” Jesus’ question is surely designed to provoke additional reflection and thought on the part of all those present. The scribes might be thinking mere words—“you are forgiven”—are easier to utter than to take action—“take up your mat and walk.” It is one thing for Jesus to promise forgiveness, but his words have no meaning other than the ranting of a madman or some kind of theological anarchist, if the man remains on his mat. But if the man gets up and walks, then it is clear that Jesus does have the power to do as he says. If the man is healed, there can be only one conclusion—Jesus has the authority to forgive sin, even if that authority belongs to God alone. And so in asking this question, Jesus is preparing everyone there for what follows next. Both healing and the forgiveness of sins are the sure sign that the kingdom of God has come in power.

With the stage now set, Jesus goes on to say in verses 10-11, *“But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . .”* He said to the paralytic, *‘I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.’”* Jesus speaks first to the scribes whose thoughts he knew (“that you may know”) and then to the paralyzed man (“I tell you”). In doing this Jesus will answer the scribes’ unasked question, and also make it plain to the paralyzed man that the forgiveness of his sins manifests itself in the healing of his body. It is not accidental in this context that Jesus now speaks of himself as the “Son of Man.” In doing so, he is using a title which hints at deity and which clearly implies divine authority. In light of Daniel 7:13 (where the phrase is used), it is also a messianic title. It may even imply some connection to YHWH’s servant who does his will. In any case, “Son of Man” is a term which is loaded with theological significance and becomes the characteristic way for Jesus to identify himself.⁶ In speaking of himself in this way, Jesus is claiming the right and the authority to forgive sins. Sadly, this authority, which gives us the clearest picture of the true nature of his mission this side of his resurrection—remains veiled until after Jesus has died and is then raised from the dead.

That Jesus has the authority to forgive sins, now will become evident to all. As we read in verse 12, the

⁶ See the helpful discussion in; Cranfield, [The Gospel According to Romans](#), 272-277.

paralyzed man *“got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, ‘We have never seen anything like this!’”* Here was the great sign that the kingdom had drawn near in the person of Jesus. This poor paralyzed man got up and walked away because Jesus did indeed forgive his sins. It was also the sure sign that the messianic age had dawned. As we read in our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 35:6, when Israel’s Messiah appears, *“then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.”* The people of Capernaum were beginning to sense just who Jesus was. They were witnessing the first glimmer of the messianic age. And so we read that the people present *“praised God for what [Jesus] had done.”* This joy is likewise a sign of the dawn of messianic age, for as Isaiah also tells us in his prophecy regarding the messianic age; *“Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.”* The lame man is leaping and God’s people are rejoicing. The Messiah is standing in their midst and God’s kingdom has come in power.

What then do we take with us from this amazing passage by way of application?

First, when we read that Jesus has authority to forgive sin, this should bring us unspeakable comfort. Every person here has a past and a present. Some of us are notorious sinners. Some of us are good at keeping our sins hidden from everyone else. But we are all sinners. Therefore, we will get sick, we will suffer, and bad things will happen to us and to those we love. We are a fallen race and we live in a fallen world. And so when Jesus says to this man *“your sins are forgiven,”* we see these words in the context of the cross and the empty tomb. In the words of the absolution in our liturgy, you have already confessed your sins and Jesus has already declared to us that we are forgiven. To those of us who know the depths and gravity of our sin, there are no more comforting words than these, *“your sins are forgiven.”* Jesus declared these words to the paralyzed man. He has also declared them to you this very day.

Second, because Jesus forgives sin, healing is guaranteed to all Christians. Shocking words! That being said, let us not make the mistake of those who have an over-realized eschatology and who believe that healing and elimination of all suffering is guaranteed to us in this life. God has forgiven you through the shed blood and perfect righteousness of Jesus. God has even healed some of you—miraculously or through natural means. God has seen you through every trial which he has brought into your life. And God will heal everyone of us, if not in this life, then certainly on the great day of resurrection. Because you are forgiven you will be healed. Those glorious words of Revelation 21:3-7 are true and you will witness this glorious promise fulfilled: *“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’ He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’ Then he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ He said to me: ‘It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son.’”*

When Jesus healed the paralyzed man lowered down on his sickbed in the midst of Peter’s packed out house in Capernaum, we are given the first glimpse of how it is that Jesus will remove the curse and make all things new. The people who witnessed this, praised God because they had never seen anything like it. The lame man leaped like a deer and the people’s hearts were filled with joy. The messianic age had dawned! Therefore, let us praise our merciful and gracious God because one day, we will all be healed and all will be made right because Jesus has already said to each of us who trusts in him, *“your sins are forgiven!”*