

Mark 2:1-12
Authority to Forgive (Part 1)
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Well, we return tonight to the gospel of Mark, and we begin this second chapter of Mark's gospel. I know you look there and see that there are twelve verses in the next section. No, I'm not going to cover them all tonight so you can relax.

In chapter 1 of Mark's gospel there was already substantial opposition to Jesus and His ministry. But that opposition came from Satan and his demons and those people who were demonized. But in the next section of Mark's gospel, while the opposition may be satanically inspired and motivated, it is all too human. If you've never read the gospels before, I think you would be shocked at the source from which the opposition comes. It was not the worst of sinners, humanly speaking. They received Jesus gladly; in fact, look down in Mark 2:15 it says that "[there were] ... many tax collectors and sinners dining with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many of them, and they were following Him."

No, it wasn't the worst, humanly speaking, that created the greatest opposition for Christ. The opposition that began to mount against Jesus Christ came from the religious leaders of Israel. It comes (Mark describes this opposition), in the next section of Scripture, in a lengthy section 2:1 - 3:6. Mark begins to describe their hostility against Jesus Christ. In this section there are a series of five short narratives in which Israel's leaders gradually become increasingly antagonistic, hostile, and eventually even murderous in their response to Jesus.

You say what issues could have prompted the religious leaders of Israel to turn on the Messiah? Well, those issues are clearly recorded for us. The first was Jesus' claim to forgive sins in the passage that we'll examine tonight and the next time we have a chance to study together.

The second comes in the second section of chapter 2:13 - 17. The second issue is Jesus' companionship with sinners; the people Jesus associated with.

The third issue that they had with Jesus comes in 2:18 – 22, and it's Jesus' unwillingness to keep their traditions.

And the major issue and the one that really brought things to a head was Jesus' violation of their own Sabbath regulations.

Specifically, two incidents, the first was when the disciples pick and eat grain on the Sabbath in toward the end of chapter 2, and the beginning of chapter 3 when Jesus heals on the Sabbath.

Those are the issues that the Pharisees and the scribes had with Jesus.

But with these encounters there is also an intensity that grows along with each encounter. The intensity of the hostility and the confrontation increases. With the first confrontation the scribe's reason against Jesus in their hearts in the passage we'll examine now.

In the second one they complain about Jesus but to His disciples.

In the third encounter they complain to Jesus Himself, but about what He allows His disciples to do and not what He Himself does.

And in the fourth one, they conspire against Him to destroy Him. So, there is this increasing hostility, and finally they accuse Him of being in league with Satan himself. So, you see this sort of escalating hostility toward Jesus Christ. William Hendrickson writes,

Of course, there was conflict, it could not be avoided. For Jesus stressed love, they legalism, He God's holy law, they law burying tradition, He freedom, they bondage, He the inner attitude, they the outward act. [But you know the real issue between Jesus and the Pharisees was not theological. Hendrickson goes on to write.] How they hated to surrender to Him their prestige their hold on the public or their power.

That folks, is what it was really all about. It was about losing their power and their influence. A number of Scriptures make this clear. Look at a couple of them with me. Look at Mark, or

excuse me, Matthew 27:18, Matthew 27:18. Pilate, when they turned Jesus over to him, he tries to release Jesus, verse 18 says, “For he (that is Pilate) knew that because of envy they had handed Him over.”

It wasn't about their theological convictions. It was about the fact that they envied His popularity. They envied that the people heard Him gladly. They were losing their power and influence. Turn over to John 11, and you see this same point made graphically. John 11:47,

“... the chief priests and the Pharisees convened a council, ...” [A conspiracy to kill Jesus] “and [they] were saying, “What are we doing?” For this man is performing many signs.” [They did not deny that Jesus was performing many miracles and many signs. But here was the issue, verse 48,] “If we let Him *go on* like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place [our position] and our nation.” [It was all about holding on to their power and influence.]

In chapter 12 of John, 12:19 “... the Pharisees said to one another, “You see that you are not doing any good; look, the world has gone after Him.”

It was that spirit of envy, that spirit of fear of losing their position, their prestige, their power that was behind their hatred of Jesus Christ. In the incident that we'll read about tonight, the Pharisees and the scribes come from all over Israel, looking for Jesus to trip up. Looking for something they could use against Him, not because He was theologically wrong, but because they hated Him for His popularity for the potential of losing their own power and influence.

Jesus has ministered in Galilee without any human opposition. But here in the passage we come to tonight it begins. Let me read it to you, Mark 2:1 - 12.

When He had come back to Capernaum several days afterward, it was heard that He was at home. And many were gathered together, so that there was no longer room, not even near the door; and He was speaking the word to them. And they

came, bringing to Him a paralytic, carried by four men. Being unable to get to Him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above Him; and when they had dug an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic was lying. And Jesus seeing their faith said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." But some of the scribes were sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, "Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?" Immediately Jesus, aware in His spirit that they were reasoning that way within themselves, said to them, "Why are you reasoning about these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven'; or to say, 'Get up, and pick up your pallet and walk?' But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"-- He said to the paralytic, "I say to you, get up, pick up your pallet and go home." And he got up and immediately picked up the pallet and went out in the sight of everyone, so that they were all amazed and were glorifying God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this."

This story is a famous one in the history of the life of Christ. It appears in all three of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. It's here of course and then in Matthew 9, and Luke 5. And in each case where this account appears the same exact point is made. It's a point that will become obvious as we work our way through this passage. The story begins with the healing of a paralyzed sinner. In verses 1 - 5. That's as far as we'll get tonight, we'll look at the second part of this story and the main point, Lord willing, the next time we meet on Sunday night.

As with all good story tellers, Mark begins by setting the scene. And he does this in the first two verses. He gives us the Capernaum context here, look at verse 1. "When He had come back to Capernaum several days afterward, when He had come back to Capernaum several days afterward." Matthew puts it like this in his gospel. "Getting into a boat, Jesus crossed over the sea and came to His own city."

Now just to acclimate you again, remember that Capernaum is on the northwest side of the Sea of Galilee about where that red arrow is pointing. That's where He's returning from. He has

been in the area of Galilee, all around in this region that is called the region of Galilee, ministering. And He's returning home. The text says that He returned there to Capernaum. You can see Capernaum on the northwest corner of the lake. You can see the shoreline. This is where Jesus comes back. So, it says He comes back to Capernaum several days afterward.

These events apparently occurred then several days after Jesus returned home from His first Galilean preaching tour and the healing of the leper that ends chapter 1. And it was heard, verse 1 says, that He was at home. Jesus had left Capernaum, His new home in Galilee you remember, to get away from the enthusiasm of the crowds about His miracles. And He went on a preaching tour around Galilee, and now He returns home to find that the fever pitch that He left has now quieted down. In fact, He's able to slip back into town without everyone noticing. But word soon spreads that He's back. "... it was heard that He was at home." Verse 2 says the result was that "... many were gathered together, so that there was no longer room, not even near the door..."

We can't be sure whose home this was. It may have been the home of Peter and Andrew that Jesus stayed at. Or it may be a home that one of Jesus' followers allowed Him to use. It didn't belong to Him. We know He didn't own His own home because of His statements, but it's possible that He lived in a home that was loaned to Him that was not Peter and Andrew's. We don't know. But regardless, so many people had come so that there was standing room only in this home. The crowd filled the home and even spread to the street. And now the street, the narrow street outside the home is packed with people as well so that there is literally no more room. There is not an inch of room.

If you can recall the most crowded environment, you've ever been in, that's the picture Mark wants us to get of what's happening here. They are literally pushing and shoving to gain an inch so that they can hear the Master teach. There's no room anywhere, and the street outside the house is packed as well. Mark wants us to get the picture that the home is literally under siege by people eager to listen. It's interesting, by the way, that when the word gets out this time that Jesus is back, it's a different crowd that gathers to Jesus. They aren't looking for miracles this time; instead, they want to hear His teaching. This group would of course include Jesus'

disciples and friends. It would have included the curious, and as we will see in verse 6, it included even the scribes and Pharisees who resented Jesus' growing popularity and who were there to spy on Him to see if there was something they could catch Him in.

What was He doing? Verse 2 says, "... and He was speaking the word to them." This shouldn't surprise us, should it? We've already in this short gospel, the short time we've been in this gospel, we have seen the priority of Jesus was teaching and preaching the word. And that's what He's doing here. When Jesus returns to Capernaum, He picks up where He left off, and He begins to teach. That's the context in which these events occur; Jesus teaching, the house packed, with not a square inch left, and even crowding out onto the narrow street outside the house so that you couldn't have gotten into the house if you had wanted to. Body packed against body crowding forward to listen to Jesus.

But while Jesus was teaching, and while the crowd was listening, something else was happening. And it's in that context that Mark introduces us to five desperate men, five desperate men. Look at verse 3, "And they came, bringing to Him a paralytic, carried by four men." Here we meet five men. Five extraordinary, unique men as we will see before we're done. Mark's the only gospel writer who tells us that there were five of them. And four of them are carrying one man on a pallet. Now, we know several things about this man who's on the pallet.

First of all, we know that he's paralyzed. The Greek word for paralytic tells us the major symptom of his condition. He was immobile. But it doesn't tell us why. It may have been the result of any number of diseases that can call cause paralysis, or his paralysis may have been the result of an injury or an accident. We really don't know, but whatever caused it, his paralysis was apparently extensive because he could only lie on his bed. Even when they're letting him down through the roof, it says he was lying. He couldn't help in any way. He couldn't sit up. He was apparently a quadriplegic, and his circumstances were so desperate that his friends were willing to take extraordinary measures to try to get him healed.

We also know that this man was poor. The Greek word for pallet was the normal word for a poor man's bed. It would have been a thin straw filled mattress. We also know about this man

that he had some extraordinary friends. We don't know who these men were. They're never introduced to us. Perhaps they were members of his family, or perhaps they were neighbors with whom he had grown up and who had known him since childhood. But regardless of who they were, look at what they were. Look at the qualities that they expressed.

There was this incredible selflessness about them. They are expending their time and their energy to carry their friend to Jesus. There's compassion. They were obviously moved by genuine concern for this man, nothing else could account for the efforts that they expend on his behalf.

And there's also sacrifice, because they were facing not only the loss of wages for that day's work, but they were also facing the anger of those in the house along with the expense of repairing the roof when all was done. So, they come bringing their friend to Jesus. Verse 4 says, and "they came, bringing to Him a paralytic, carried by four men, but they were unable to get to Him because of the crowd."

You know that fascinates me. They were unable to get to Him for the crowd; you find that so often in Mark's gospel. In fact, James Edwards, the commentator, makes this observation, he says,

Crowds form audiences for Jesus' teaching, they're the object of His compassion, but Mark never describes crowds turning to Jesus in repentance and belief. [Have you ever thought about that?] Crowds never repent and turn and embrace Jesus as Lord and Savior. The single most common attribute of crowds in Mark is that they obstruct access to Jesus. Thus, despite Jesus' popularity, crowds are not a measure of success in Mark, they are outsiders who stand either in ambivalence or in outright opposition to Jesus. [The same is true today, isn't it? The crowds may gather around but that's not where Jesus' true followers are found.]

So, the four tried for some time because of the crowd. They tried for some time to work their way through the crowd that's gathered there in the street outside the door of the house where

Jesus was. If you've ever been in that environment, if you're alone, and it's just you trying to work your way through a crowd like that, it's hard enough. But here are four men with a man on a poor man's mattress trying to work their way in through this crowd, but with no luck. And yet these men won't be turned away. I've thought often about why they did this. Why such extreme measures? Why not just wait 'til the crowd leaves? Why not just take a few hours, and wait outside, wait your time to see Jesus?

We can't be sure of the reason, but I think there's one good possibility. Remember what happened after the last crowd gathered around Jesus in Capernaum? And they came looking for Him the next morning? He disappeared. He was gone. I think these four men and the fifth man there on the mattress concluded that they would not let Jesus slip away. They could not risk Jesus slipping away again perhaps for weeks or even months as had happened last time. And so, at least one of these men was extremely creative. He suggests that they go to the roof, and lower the man on his pallet right down in front of Jesus as He teaches.

You have to understand a little bit about the first century to understand why this was even feasible. Most first century homes in Palestine had flat roofs. They were used like decks. They became a favorite sitting area in the evening. A number of texts talk about that. When it was cooler in the evening, you could sit up and catch the breezes. They would put flax and other produce out on the roof to dry. It became a place, a favorite place, for the family to collect much as decks do in our day. The normal way to access the roof was not through the house, but most homes would have a staircase attached to the outside wall outside the house that would go up onto the roof. And so, either the house where Jesus was had one of those staircases, or a nearby home had one, either way they get up to the roof.

Now it says that they removed the roof. To us that seems odd, even unlikely to the extent that some critics have said that the Bible couldn't be true because it couldn't have happened like that. But there are other examples in contemporary literature. One of the Midrash's describes opening the ceiling and letting someone down through the ceiling. Cicero mentions the same thing, so it did happen. First century roofs you see were flat and not much over six feet high from the ground. There would be large beams running across to support the roof structure and then across

those support beams at about three-foot centers would be smaller timbers or rafters. And then on top of that they would have put brush wood, palm branches various things over the top of which then they would have put a final coating of mud mixed with chopped straw. On top of that straw then there would have been a roller. Some they've found that rollers were actually kept on top of the roofs so that you would wet down the top of that mud, and then you would take your roller and roll it out flat so that you would make that a hard surface that would be as impervious as possible to the rain. Some would even crush rock and add to the very top of that. From the bottom of the lowest beam to the top of the mud surface or rock surface on the top the entire roof could be up to two feet thick. This is what they faced.

The text says, "Being unable to get to Him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above Him...." Literally they unroofed the roof is what the Greek text says. They unroofed the roof. Or roof, my family gets after me for how I say that. "And when they had dug an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic was lying." So, they, they dug through the surface, the packed earth. They pulled apart the reeds and branches that formed the next layer, and they found a spot between those beams and the cross rafters, and they cleared it away. As they did so, of course the debris would have begun to fall. They first made a small hole and then that hole grew large enough for a man. It only had to be large enough, not for the full length of the guy. It only had to be large enough to maneuver by ropes his bed at a bit of an angle and lower it down through the hole.

Undoubtedly as they did this, there would have been a number of glances at first, what's going on on the roof? Then suddenly the hole opens up and then a larger hole, I'm sure they were shouts from the owner of the house. What are you doing to my house? Then perhaps using some of Peter's fishing ropes, if it was Peter's home that had been drying out on the roof, they tie it to this mattress, and they let their friend down into the house; right down in front of Jesus as He teaches. Talking about, talk about a disruption to your teaching. I can't imagine standing here teaching and suddenly seeing a hole develop in the roof and a larger hole, and debris starts falling, and then finally down comes a man on a mattress. But that's exactly what happened. What would have prompted these men to go to such extraordinary means to get their friend to Jesus? They refused to be discouraged by the crowds. They even vandalized someone else's

property. They ignored the cries and the jeers and the epithets. Why? Certainly, out of love for their friend, that's clear. I love what Ken Hughes says, he says,

Whatever was to happen that day, this paralyzed man was a rich man. He had something that people spend their whole lives and never have. He had friends that truly loved him.

But there was something else that motivated these men beyond their love for their friend. It was their faith in Jesus Christ. Notice verse 5. "And Jesus seeing their faith...." And Jesus seeing their faith. This clearly includes the four friends. They had an outrageous kind of faith. But it almost certainly includes the man who was paralyzed as well. It's hard to imagine that they would have brought him against his will. They're all in on this together. It's a pact that they've made together. And Jesus seeing their faith responds.

D Edmond Hiebert writes, "The extraordinary ardent persistent action of the four in getting their friend to Jesus was visible evidence of their faith in His ability to heal." Think about that. Why would you go through all of that? It's because they truly believed in their heart that Jesus had the ability to heal their friend, and that if they could get him to Jesus He would heal. It's extraordinary faith. And their faith showed itself by a stubborn refusal to quit pursuing Jesus.

So, they've done everything they can to get into Jesus, so that he can be healed of his paralysis. Imagine the scene as there he is extended on ropes from the ceiling broken out of the house, the crowd pressed in around Jesus, hardly any room at all and there in front of Jesus is this paralyzed man. That brings us to an unexpected outcome.

Look at verse 5, "And Jesus seeing their faith said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." This is completely unexpected. Why did they bring their friend? They brought their friend to have him healed of his paralysis. And yet Jesus in response to their faith says, "Son, your sins are forgiven." This was more than a declaration of fact. Jesus was actually forgiving the man's sins. It's how Jesus' enemies understood it as we'll see the next time. The Greek word order

really puts the emphasis where it belongs. This is what it says in the Greek text. Jesus said, “Forgiven are your sins.” Forgiven are your sins.

Now, that isn’t ostensibly why they had brought their friend. They’d wanted him to be healed, so the question is: why does Jesus, why does Jesus heal this man, or I should say, instead of healing this man, why does He forgive his sins? Well, it certainly was in line with the current thought. The rabbi’s thought that a sick man does not recover from his sickness until all his sins have been forgiven him. But I don’t think that’s the point, Jesus wasn’t going along with the rabbi’s, He never did.

There are several possible reasons that Jesus forgave his sins rather than healed him. First is that Jesus knew this man’s illness was directly caused by his sin. We know that not all illness is the result of the direct cause of sin in a person’s life. The New Testament is clear that sickness can be the direct result of sin, but it often is not, and we shouldn’t immediately jump to that conclusion. But perhaps Jesus knew this man’s illness was directly caused by his sin.

Another possibility is that the man himself believed that his illness was directly caused by his sin. And Jesus knew he believed that, and so He first proclaims him forgiven.

A third option is that Jesus knew this man’s illness was not caused by his sin, but He did this strictly to pick a fight, strictly to raise the issue of His authority with the Pharisees.

These all three are offered as possibilities. Frankly, I think number three is unlikely. That’s not how Jesus acted. In fact, He was always telling people to keep it quiet, not to tell. You remember the leper in the account we looked at last week. Don’t tell anyone. So, either one or two are possible. All we know for sure about the connection between this man’s illness and his sin is that, apparently, he was deeply troubled by his sin. And so, Jesus speaks first to the man’s conscience. He speaks peace. D Edmond Hiebert writes,

Seemingly his affliction had caused the man deep searching of heart, leaving a troubled conscience because of his keen sense of personal sinfulness. Christ's word assured the removal of guilt in real forgiveness.

Don't miss the big news here. Jesus is declaring forgiveness, and that meant that He was claiming to have the authority to forgive sins on God's behalf. Jesus spoke, and out of His decision of a moment the collective guilt of a lifetime in this man's life was swept away. Think about that. Jesus saw their faith and in response to their faith, Jesus makes a decision. A decision that is all grace, a decision that is sovereign grace, and He speaks in a moment, "you are forgiven." He makes a decision, He makes the statement, and in a moment's time this man's guilt of a lifetime is swept away as if it never existed. It's incredible.

In two weeks, we'll get to the second half of this passage and the main point of the passage. I want to save the main point for two weeks from tonight. But as we finish our time tonight, I want you to consider a couple of implications of this encounter so far, a couple of implications.

First of all; Jesus still responds to faith in Him with a pronouncement of forgiveness. Wherever there is faith in Jesus Christ and folks, Jesus is always the object of saving faith. It's never the truth in general, it's always the person of Jesus Christ, and to that kind of faith there is new life and there is forgiveness. Whether it's John 1:12, "as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become the children of God even to those who believe in His name." John 3:16, "... whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." Listen it's not about the quality of your faith, it's about the object of your faith. Where is your confidence? B B Warfield wrote,

It is not faith that saves, but faith in Christ. It is not strictly speaking even faith in Christ that saves, but Christ that saves through faith. The saving power resides exclusively not in the act of faith or the attitude of faith or the nature of faith, but in the object of faith. We could not more radically misconceive the biblical representation of faith than by transferring to faith even the smallest fraction of that saving energy which is attributed in the Scriptures solely to Christ Himself.

Listen folks, your faith is not what saves you. It's where your faith is placed. Jesus Christ is who saves. And to those who believe in Him as these five men did, He still pronounces today, "your sins are forgiven." In a moments time, the sovereign decision of Jesus Christ for those who have faith in Him can wipe away a lifetime of horrific guilt. It's incredible.

There's a second implication; true faith manifests itself with determination and action. In Mark's gospel 2:5 is the very first time he mentions faith. Isn't it interesting that he immediately connects faith, not just with what you know or what you feel, but with action? The most important thing about these men is their faith, and the only way Jesus could see their faith was how? By their actions. As one commentator says, "Faith is first and foremost not knowledge about Jesus but active trust."

Listen, saving faith is not an intellectual assent to the existence of Jesus Christ and to who He claimed to be and what He did. The devils, the demons believe that. You are not a Christian if your faith is solely the kind of faith that says I believe those things happened. These men staked their lives on it. They did everything they could to get to Jesus because they believed it so much that they were willing to expend any effort. That's how it is with true faith. Read James 2, faith without works is dead. It's not real faith. It's not real faith if it doesn't work.

Thirdly, not only does Jesus still respond in faith with the word of forgiveness to those who come to faith in Him, but true faith manifests itself with action. Thirdly those who truly have faith in Christ will like these men do everything they can to get their friends to Jesus Christ. This isn't the main point of the story, these men aren't the main point of the story, we'll see that in two weeks. But I think this is a very obvious implication. These men loved their friend. They believed Jesus could and would heal their friend, and so they expend every effort to get their friend there. I think there is an implication here that we will do our part to get our friends to Christ, not for physical healing but for spiritual healing if we truly love them and if we really believe that only He can help them.

I think sometimes the reason we don't share the gospel with others, the reason we don't communicate Christ to others is we don't have the measure of faith that these men had. That

Jesus really is what our friend's need, what our family members need, what our coworkers need. Do you really believe that? Do you really believe that that family member you've been praying for can only be helped by Jesus Christ? Do you really believe that that friend needs Jesus Christ more than he or she needs anything else? If you did, then like these friends, you would expend every effort to get them to Jesus.

Let's pray together.

Father, we look forward to getting in our next time together to the main point of this story, and it's all about Jesus. Father, we thank You for the lessons and implications we've seen even tonight. We thank You that Jesus still responds to faith with a decision, a sovereign decision of grace in which, in a moments time, He pronounces us forgiven. How can we ever thank You Father for that work in our lives?

And Lord, I pray for the person here tonight who's never experienced it. May, before they lay their head down on their pillow tonight, may they fall down before You and before Your Son repenting of their sins and placing their trust in Christ and Him alone for life and eternity. And may He, just as He did for this man pronounce them forgiven.

We pray it in Jesus' name and for His sake, Amen.