

Only God Forgives Sins

Mark 2:1-17

Covenant Waterfall, 10 May 2020

Read Scripture

Pray

Introduction

On the 8 July 1741, a Presbyterian minister and arguably one of America's greatest thinkers, Jonathan Edwards, delivered a sermon in his church entitled, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. The heart of the sermon was that sinners deserve God's just punishment in hell. Therefore, people needed to repent and receive Christ who would save them. The sermon had an enormous impact, not only in his own church, but across America, where its ideas spread and helped fuel the First Great Awakening – one of the most significant revivals in America, resulting many thousands of people receiving Christ.

Lots of things have changed since the 1700s. One of the biggest changes in our culture and even in churches, is that the term “sinner” has really lost its meaning. We just don't think in those terms anymore. If you had to ask most of your family or friends what a sinner was, I'm sure they'd say something like “Hitler” or “Stalin” or those murderers and rapists out there. It's seen as a label for extremely bad behaviour. Many people would say that most folks today are not sinners. On the contrary, we are decent people who are mostly good. We are upright citizens who seek the good for others and ourselves. Sure, we make some mistakes here and there, but we don't murder and rob people – we're not *sinners*.

The nature of sin is that it distorts our view of ourselves. Sin blinds us to our sinfulness. This is why the Apostle John writes in 1 John 1:8 that, **“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”** The reality is that our whole being has been deeply affected by sin – our thoughts, our hearts, our motivations, our words and our actions. Failing to realise this just reinforces how much sin is deeply imbedded in us. Romans 3

accurately diagnoses our sinful condition, in verses 11 and 12: **“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”** Our sinfulness is so bad that our natural instinct is not even to seek after God.

It’s been this way for all of us since our ancestors, Adam and Eve fell into sin in the Garden of Eden. Their sin has affected the whole human race after them – separates us from God and each other – causing misery, death and a cursed existence. And it was precisely because of this curse of sin that Jesus came to earth, as God’s promised Messiah to break the power of sin over us, forgive us and restore us to God.

Our passage in Mark 2 this morning shows us that Jesus came to earth to deal with our sin. More specifically, that because Jesus came for sinners, we need to repent of our sin and receive the gospel. Two parts:

- Jesus heals the paralytic, vv. 1-12
- Jesus dines with Levi, vv. 13-17

A. Jesus heals the paralytic, vv.1-12

“And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. ² 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. ³ And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. ⁴ 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.

Remember from last week – Jesus had left Capernaum to preach the gospel all around the surrounding towns. Thanks to the leper’s help, Jesus had to flee to the countryside as he was getting mobbed in the towns. Now after some time, he returns to his base in Capernaum, presumably staying at the home of his friends and disciples, Simon and Andrew.

This passage picks up with him preaching one day in their home. The place is packed out. Jesus is well-known in Capernaum because of the miracles that he had done there before.

Verse 2 tells us that the house is so full of people that there was no more room left for anyone to enter, even at the door. We read in the next verse, that a group of guys comes carrying their friend, a paralytic. Because there is no way to get into the house, they climb on the roof, breaking through it, digging a hole in it and lowering the guy into the house on his bed in front of Jesus.

Jesus is amazed by this. In verse 5, he says, **“And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”** There two things of significance here. Firstly – the faith of the guys who lowered the paralytic into the house. I know many people who have been prayed for at churches to receive healing, and when they are not healed, the pastor or the person praying for them invariably says something to the effect of, “you didn’t have enough faith.” This leaves people shattered, laden with guilt and unworthiness – they feel that God ignored them because they weren’t able to muster up enough faith in themselves. Is this verse justifying this kind of destructive teaching? I don’t believe so. What then is Jesus saying here?

Jesus is amazed at these guys because he saw that they knew he would be able to help their paralysed friend – to such an extent that they bashed a hole in the roof and lowered him down it! They had faith in him, that he would heal him. And we see here that he did just that and much more. The truth here is that you can only receive Christ and his benefits by faith. You need to trust in Jesus. Refusal to have faith in Christ deprives you of being able to know him and experience his many blessings. Hebrews 11:6 says:

“And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”

The fact that these guys had come to Jesus with their paralytic friend was sufficient to show that they had faith in Christ. And it’s the same for us today – the fact that you come to Jesus in your need is faith itself. Not about supposed levels of faith that prevent God from working in your life. Anyone who believes in Christ, or has faith in him, will never be put to shame, as Romans 10:11 says. This is exactly what we see with the paralytic and his friends.

The second significant thing we see here is, why does Jesus initially forgive the paralytics’ sin instead of healing him? We see in the OT that healing of disease and forgiveness of sins are closely related. Both sickness and sin are a result of the Fall, they are a part of the curse.

Psalm 103:2-3 says, **“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases.”**

What Jesus is getting at here in first forgiving this guy’s sins, is that sin is really the heart of the issue. It’s been that way since the Fall and that is the reason that Jesus has come to earth, to deal with sins. Sin is the heart of the issue for the paralytic, for everyone in that room and for us today. Sins – not sickness – separate us from God. While his infirmity is important – and he deals with that later – the more important issue is that he is – like all of us - a sinner in need of forgiveness. Without this, he remains dead to God, cut off from him, and condemned to a just judgement of God’s eternal wrath. Forgiven, the paralytic is now restored to God, cleared of a guilty conscience and promised true eternal life found only in Christ.

Verses 6-7 continue:

Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ⁷ “Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

Observing all of this were the scribes. These guys were the Jewish teachers of the law which we heard about in chapter 1. Verse 7 tells us that they were highly offended by what Jesus has just done – forgiven the paralytic’s sins. They accuse him of blasphemy, as they correctly observe that it is only God who can forgive sins. Isaiah 43:25 says (God speaking), **“I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.”** It’s the prerogative of God alone to forgive sins. Only he is the Divine Judge who has the power and authority to dispense justice – to forgive sins, or to punish the guilty. No human has that power or authority – we’re all incapable of doing that. Yet this is precisely what Jesus does. The scribes correctly understand that Jesus is claiming to do what only God can do. They understand that he is claiming to be God himself. And that’s why they accuse him of blasphemy.

Verses 8-9 carry on...

⁸ 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? ⁹ Which is

easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk’?

Jesus responds to the scribes by asking them in verse 9, which is easier – to forgive sins or to tell the paralytic to get up and walk? It’s a rhetorical question. In the mind of the scribes it’s “easier” to forgive sins than to get a lame man to walk – there’s no real proof to show that sins are forgiven, but it’s clear when a lame man is miraculously able to walk.

So to show the truth of the fact that Jesus has indeed forgiven the paralytic’s sins, he says in verse 10, **“But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic— ¹¹“I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.” ¹² 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!”**

To demonstrate his power and authority as God to forgive sins, he heals the paralytic with a word. What Jesus is saying loud and clear to the scribes who were questioning him through this, is that if he’s been able to effectively heal the paralytic with his word – which everyone could see, then he most definitely has been able to forgive his sins by his word too. His word has authority. Therefore, he is indeed the promised Messiah, the Son of Man, God himself, who has come to forgive sins and restore his people to himself.

What Jesus exposes here is the degree to which you realise your need for forgiveness from your sins reveals how clearly you understand the gospel. The paralytic and his friends realised their deep need for Christ – and they came to him in faith and received the gospel, they were restored to God.

B. Jesus dines with Levi, vv. 13-17

13-14

¹³ He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. ¹⁴ And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he rose and followed him.

Jesus is walking along the shores of the Sea of Galilee and teaching the crowds who were there. Then he sees a man called Levi, a tax collector, and calls him and he follows Jesus, becoming one of his disciples. Levi's other name was Matthew – the same Matthew who would write the first Gospel. Like the other disciples Jesus called in chapter 1, Levi is called and immediately follows – showing again the authoritative power of Jesus word – his calling is indeed effectual. Levi then invites Jesus over to his house for a meal. Verses 15-16 carry on...

¹⁵ And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶ And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

Levi is a tax collector. Tax collectors were despised by many Jews as they were seen as collaborators with the Roman colonisers. They took Jewish tax money and gave it to the Roman oppressors – seen as traitors and undesirables. At Levi's dinner party there are more of these undesirable tax collectors and what verse 15 calls “sinners”.

In verse 16, we're introduced for the first time to the “scribes of the Pharisees”. These guys will begin to feature increasingly in Mark's Gospel going forward. So who were the Pharisees? Sect of Jews which arose after the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon. Because they realised that the reason for the exile was Israel's disobedience to the Law of Moses, they made it their mission to try and obey every aspect of the law in order to try and please God. Not only that, they felt they had to obey the various rabbinic interpretations of the law – the oral law. Very concerned with maintaining an outward righteousness – eating kosher foods, making sure they tithed everything they had, keeping ceremonial purity – washings. They also would not mix with what they saw as “sinners” – other Jews who did not keep the laws as strictly as they did. They looked down upon such people and considered them unclean, and unrighteous, along with Gentiles. They had to completely separate themselves from them as they did not want to be polluted by them. Not enter their houses, have meals, hang out with them – forbidden. To get an idea of what they were like – watch “Unorthodox” on Netflix. It's excellent. About a Hasidic community – Jewish sect with many similarities to the Pharisees.

So when Jesus, a teacher of the law, a rabbi, goes and hangs out with a bunch of tax collectors and, what the Pharisees call “sinners” they cannot comprehend why he would do this. They question Jesus’ disciples in verse 16 and cannot grasp why Jesus would want to associate with people who in their eyes were unrighteous law breakers. Jesus on hearing this, responds to them devastatingly in verse 17:

¹⁷ And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Jesus cuts to the heart here and hits home a truth that he’s been communicating through this whole passage. If you trust in your own righteousness, like the Pharisees – if you trust in your own good works, your own obedience to the law, to get you right with God; you won’t see the need for Someone else to save you. You think you are well and so you don’t need a doctor to help you. You think you are righteous in your own sight.

Jesus deliberately hangs out with “sinners” and tax collectors at this meal, as they know that they are unrighteous. They know they are not keeping the law. They are sick and they need a doctor. They need Someone else to save them. They need the righteousness of another.

This is why Jesus has come – to call people like Levi, and you and me, who realise their need for him – people who realise that they are sinners, to repent of their sin and receive him and his gospel by faith.

Conclusion

It’s only when you realise, like the paralytic and Levi and his friends, that you are sick with sin, that you will know your need for a doctor. No matter how much you have tried to live a righteous life, trying to do the right thing – the reality is that all of us will always fall short of God’s standards of righteousness. You may think you are righteous, but in God’s eyes your works of righteousness are like filthy rags compared to his holiness. You can only be accepted and saved by perfect righteousness.

And there is only one Man who has lived the perfectly righteous life. Jesus obeyed every law and pleased God perfectly. He came to deal with the problem of sin that affects all of us. Instead of us having to pay for our own sin by being judged guilty by God, he the only

Righteous One was judged guilty by God on our behalf. He faced God's judgement on the cross, died for our sins there, and rose on the third day, forgiving us our sins. That's why 1 Peter 3:18 proclaims:

"For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God."

Brothers and sisters, friends, receive this good news of our promised Messiah Jesus. Repent of your sins, receive Christ and his many benefits by faith – his gift of undeserved grace: forgiveness of your sins, the healing of your soul. Receive his perfect righteousness that covers your unrighteousness, the sweet comfort of his Spirit, communion with your Heavenly Father, the assurance of life eternal and his steadfast love from which nothing can separate us.

Amen