

October 9, 2016

## **Suffering Servant, Sovereign Lord** ***Forgiveness and the Scandal of*** ***Grace***

**Mark 2:1 – 17**

We are looking at two stories this morning here in Mark which beautifully illustrate the outstanding characteristic of the Christian faith – forgiveness and grace. No other religion or system of philosophy offers this. There are those who think the message of Christianity is a message of becoming a better person, a more moral person. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. There are others who think the message is simply one of love and sacrifice, we should love people and live sacrificially, a kind of social approach to life. Love your neighbor and love your enemy. Others think that Christianity is meant to give you inner peace. Others say it offers personal fulfillment and satisfaction in life. And yes, the Christian faith is full of all of those things. We have a faith that is concerned with ethics and morals. It does hold out the promise of peace and fulfillment and sacrifice. It does mean that we love our neighbors and our enemies.

But none of those address our greatest need. Quite frankly, there are other religions and philosophies that offer ethics and morality, and social responsibility, and family values, that preach a message of love and peace, that offer some degree of fulfillment, satisfaction, and a certain measure of happiness. But none of them deal with our most desperate issue and our most dire need. Our most desperate issue is not a lack of love or peace or morals or satisfaction and fulfillment. Our most desperate issue is our sin. And our most dire need is to be reconciled to the God against whom we have sinned. Every other issue and need pales in comparison to these. What I need more than anything, the one thing I really need is to know that God loves me, cares for me, and wants me to know Him. And the one thing that really needs to happen is the removal of that barrier which prevents me from knowing God.

Here in Mark 2, we see a beautiful illustration of the removing of that barrier in two stories. And what we see operating in these two stories lies at the very heart of the gospel. The good news of the gospel is that God sent His only Son to live the life we should have lived and die the death we should have died on the cross so that rebel sinners might be forgiven and reconciled back to God. What we need is a divine forgiveness and grace that is so outrageous it is scandalous. What we see in these two stories is a shocking, even outrageous, demonstration of forgiveness and grace. These stories are not mainly about Jesus healing a paralytic and His calling of Levi, although we might be tempted at first to focus on those two things. The point Mark is making in these two stories is about forgiveness and the nature of grace. So let's look at the first twelve verses.

You'll remember that at the end of chapter one, the leper that had been healed had spread the word about his healing so much so that Mark records that Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city, but stayed out in unpopulated areas. But people still came out looking for Him.

And it wasn't any different when He came back to Capernaum: *1 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.* This was not just a full house, it was overflowing. He was a very popular guy. He had been teaching and preaching and healing people and casting out demons all over the region of Galilee and I'm sure He was the buzz. No doubt many of the people jamming His home were there because they either needed a healing or wanted to see people healed. But Mark makes it clear that healing people was not necessarily a priority with Jesus: *And He was preaching the word to them.* They may have loved the way He taught the Scriptures or skewered the scribes with truth, but it is clear that what a majority of the crowd was after was the spectacular.

You see, Mark never records (and for that matter neither do any of the other gospels) that these crowds which followed Jesus everywhere, followed Him in repentance and faith. There is a lot of crowd activity in the gospels, but there's never a suggestion that a majority of them were ever really followers of Jesus. Time after time in the gospels we see the crowds thronging when Jesus is doing some spectacular healing or miracle, and then we see them melting away when His teaching becomes offensive. Big crowds are not necessarily a sign of spiritual success. Most of these people were probably there to see Him do some incredible miracle.

There are, of course, some who follow Him in truth, but on the whole they are a small minority. The crowd actually works to obstruct Jesus more than anything. They continually make it difficult for Him to teach because they are primarily looking to get their physical needs met. He feeds the five thousand, they miss the message of the loaves and fishes and then they run around the lake to get to Him on the other side to get more bread. He preaches to them on the shore and He has to get in a boat and go out a ways, just to get some breathing room from the crowds. They make it hard for Him to minister, hard for Him to teach. And even when He's teaching, the interruptions must have been constant much like this amazing interruption where people start digging through the roof in the middle of your sermon.

Regardless, Jesus was teaching them about the kingdom and Mark records: *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.* I often wonder what happened when the ceiling began to fall in pieces around those who were fortunate enough to get inside. And I've always been amazed by the boldness of his friends. Imagine carrying your paralyzed buddy over to where Jesus the healer was, finding your way blocked by this enormous crush of people, and deciding the best way to get him help was to destroy this guy's house. Apparently, being completely immobile on a stretcher was not enough to get you to the front of the line.

But nothing is made of this great big hole that suddenly appeared in the roof, no doubt showering dirt and debris on everyone below, including Jesus. But much is made of faith and forgiveness. Jesus sees the way these friends of the paralytic believe in His power to heal, and says, "*Son, your sins are forgiven.*" Mark says that Jesus saw **their** faith, that is and then told the paralytic that **his** sins were forgiven. Mark is not excluding the faith of the paralytic here, because the essence of faith is understanding our need, and believing in Jesus to supply it. And that was certainly at work here.

But it still seems like a very insensitive thing to say at that point. Here's a guy who can't move off his stretcher and in great physical need and Jesus seems to be so insensitive He doesn't even notice it and goes straight to preaching the gospel at him. But this is so consistent with the ministry of Jesus. Right from the get go, Mark tells us that Jesus was all about the gospel and that is what He was preaching and He doesn't change the message. Now Mark doesn't tell us much about the content, but as you read the gospels and the rest of the New Testament, you begin to understand that He went about preaching repentance and forgiveness of sins. His message was not, 'Come to Me and I will heal you'. It was 'Repent and believe in the gospel and be forgiven'.

Luke tells us that this was the message He gave His disciples before He went to the cross: "*Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.*"<sup>1</sup> And this is the message Paul begins proclaiming at the beginning of his ministry recorded in Acts 13: "*Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man [Jesus] forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you*"<sup>2</sup> And so Jesus is in the middle of preaching the gospel and this paralytic is lowered down through the roof of the house and lands in front of Him. And apparently oblivious to the poor man's condition, Jesus tells him that his sins are forgiven.

You see, this man was paralyzed, but that was not his worst problem. His worst problem was that he was on the outs with God. His temporal condition was bad, but his eternal condition was worse. Did he need to be healed? Absolutely. Sin had certainly ravaged his body, but without forgiveness, the sin that robbed him of mobility would eventually rob him of an eternity with God. Now I'm not saying that he was paralyzed as a result of some sin. He may have been. Perhaps that is why Jesus' first words to him were about forgiveness. But sickness in general is only here because of sin in the first place. If there had been no sin, there would be no sickness. In any case, whether he had sinned and was sick, or he had not sinned and was sick, forgiveness was still his greatest need.

The medical field recognizes the fact that many illnesses can be caused by mental conflict and emotional battles. People with mental and emotional health issues often have physical health problems. Many times these things can be traced back to holding on to things like anger, bitterness, revenge and unforgiveness; and if these are held long term, they will turn your life sour and affect your body and mind to the point where it loses its capacity to function. People with ulcers know this.

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1 Luke 24:46-47 ESV

2 Acts 13:38 ESV

In fact most ulcers are caused not by what you eat, but by what is eating you. Guilt and unforgiveness and anxiety can affect us physically. Things like anger and bitterness and unforgiveness can literally kill you. It is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die. And it can really make you sick. Forgiveness is incredibly important. In the deepest part of every person is the knowledge that in some way they cannot even articulate, they need to be forgiven. That we have somehow got on the wrong side of a God we might not even acknowledge and we need His forgiveness. We are pretty sure, no matter how much we might protest that we have somehow been guilty of sin and need absolution.

Karl Menninger, the famous psychiatrist, once said that if he could convince the patients in psychiatric hospitals that their sins were forgiven, 75 percent of them could walk out the next day!<sup>3</sup> There's a story of a father and son in Spain who had had a major falling out and had become estranged. The son ran away, and the father set off to find him and he searched for months to no avail. Finally, in a last desperate attempt to find him, the father put an ad in a Madrid newspaper. The ad read: ***Dear Paco, meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Your Father.*** On Saturday 800 Pacos showed up, looking for forgiveness and love from their fathers.

Dick Lucas once told this story from the perspective of the paralytic who was healed. He said, "Suppose this paralytic was allowed to come down from heaven and speak to us today. 'I will never forget that day when Jesus told me to take up my bed and walk. I never thought I would walk again. I want to tell you how grateful I am to God for giving me back my life. I literally ran out of that room as you can imagine, pushing my way through the crowd. And like most of you I raised a family and enjoyed my life and lived another thirty or so years. But of course since then I have been with Christ for 2,000 years. And I want to tell you that that has given me an entirely new perspective. I now realize what I could not possibly realize on that morning, that the first blessing He gave to me, the forgiveness of my sins, was the most infinitely important. In fact I would say to you, if I could go back to that day and Jesus was there, and He asked me and said, 'I give you a choice between the healing of your body and the healing of your soul', I think I would dare to tell you I would have asked for the healing of my soul. To go through life paralyzed is of course a desperately painful and horrible thing. But far more horrible, not to know that you were banished from God, not to know that forgiveness is available, not to know that Jesus is the Savior, and not to take that offer when it was made. I realize that God gave me two gifts that day, one infinitely more precious than the other.'"

Ultimately we do not know what the cause of the paralysis was, but we do know that this man found real healing. Healing for his body and healing for his soul. *'Son, your sins are forgiven.'* And then Mark gives us the counterpoint to this story, some people who needed healing from spiritual paralysis: *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?"* This was the religious group in the crowd. The scribes. These were the guys that thought they had it all figured out. They studied God's laws day and night and considered themselves a cut above the average person. And they were right.

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3 *Today in the Word*, March 1989, p.8

Who can forgive sins but God alone? And the answer is no one. Because sin at its root is first and foremost against God Himself, and only the one who is wronged has the prerogative to forgive. That is not to say we do not sin against one another. We do. And we need to repent and ask forgiveness and make restitution for that sin when it happens. But there is a larger narrative to sin and that is we have all chosen to be our own gods, to do things our own way, and have sinned against the God who made us by not loving Him above everything, with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and by counting Him as inconsequential in our lives. And for that we need the forgiveness of God Himself.

And these scribes were scandalized by Jesus' apparent conviction that He could actually speak for God on this. Their messianic theology would allow for His authority over demonic powers and perhaps even healings, but forgiveness of sins would never be attributed to Him. And so they charge Him with blasphemy. Of course they don't do it out loud, Mark tells us they were questioning in their hearts. This is what they were thinking.

And then if you needed any proof that this man had the authority to grant forgiveness, Jesus reads their minds. *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?"* I think they were probably very surprised that He had just read their mail. Here they are, condemning Him as a blasphemer, and He reads their minds. And that is the great divide. You either have to dismiss Jesus as a blasphemer, or worship Him as God. There is no other alternative. There is no middle ground with Him. He can either forgive sins or He cannot. If He can, He is God; if He can't, He's not.

So as He often does, He brings the lesson home with a question. *9 Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'?* I think the clear inference here is that it is easy to say 'Your sins are forgiven', because how do you check that out? The only one who knows is God and you can't actually call Him up and ask if so and so's sins are really forgiven. These scribes know that. In the circumstances, it's much harder to say 'Rise, take up your bed and walk' because this guy is spectacularly unable to do that. And if you say that and he just lays there, it becomes pretty evident right away that you are a fraud. So Jesus completes the lesson and says: *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!"*

And then Mark gives us the story of Levi. *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. 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?" 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."*

The picture Mark is painting here is the scandalous nature of grace. And Mark does this by showing us two groups of people – the scribes of the Pharisees, and the crowd of tax collectors and sinners. The scribes of the Pharisees are the same kind of people we saw in the first story; they may even have been the same people. Scribes, or the scribes of the Pharisees or simply Pharisees, are the ones in the gospels always opposing Jesus. Who were these guys? Well, they were the religious people who ultimately were instrumental in putting Jesus to death. They were the good people. But they hated Him; they despised Him, they rejected Him and then they murdered Him. Why? The simple reason was that He was not religious enough. By their standards He was not righteous enough, demanding enough, intolerant enough, legalistic enough, judgemental enough or holy enough.

On the scale of religious piety, He was way down there. We'll see this all throughout this gospel. Jesus did not come up to their religious standards. It is ironic however, that if Jesus showed up today in our society, He would be killed for the exact opposite reason. He'd be seen as far too religious, and legalistic and demanding and intolerant and judgmental. They hated Him for forgiving bad people – we would hate Him for condemning good people. They were scandalized by grace. They were scandalized that He would associate with the outcasts of society. These guys would never think of being friends with them, much less eating with them. In fact the rabbis used to say *"You don't even go near a sinner even so much as to teach that sinner the Law."*<sup>4</sup> Their attitude was summed up in the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18 where we hear the Pharisee pray, *"God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector."*<sup>5</sup>

Now the other group, the tax collectors and sinners were those on the ragged edge of Jewish society. Just so you know, when the Bible talks about tax collectors and sinners, it is not saying that tax collectors were intrinsically different than sinners. Both were sinners in the eyes of the religious Jews. But if hell has a basement, that's where these guys would be. Tax collectors were universally despised and hated, and not just by the Jews. But for the Jews, they were a constant reminder that they were ruled by the iron fist of Rome. And they were everywhere. They collected not only the general taxes, like property, income, estate taxes and so on. They also levied taxes on goods and services, roads and bridges, businesses. They taxed your wagon on the number of wheels, how many legs your cows had, letters, everything you could think of. That is probably what Levi was doing down by the Sea of Galilee, making sure the fishermen paid their taxes.

In his commentary, James Edwards notes: *'A Jew like Levi who collected taxes was disqualified as a judge or a witness in court, expelled from the synagogue, and a cause of disgrace to his family. The touch of a tax collector rendered a house unclean. Jews were forbidden to receive money and even alms from tax collectors since revenue from taxes was deemed robbery. Jewish contempt for tax collectors is epitomized in the ruling that a Jew could lie to a tax collector with impunity'*.<sup>6</sup>

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4 John MacArthur, *The Scandal of Grace*, May 24, 2009

5 Luke 18:11 ESV

6 James R. Edwards, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary, The Gospel According to Mark*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002), 83.

And then there is the crowd of sinners. These were the guys you hear about in the Psalms who are called 'the wicked'. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament 'wicked' is translated, 'sinner'. And the reference is not to the occasional lawbreaker, but to one who stands fundamentally outside the law. They were categorically reprobate.<sup>7</sup> Jewish commentaries describe sinners as gamblers, moneylenders, dove racers, Sabbath violators, shepherds, thieves, thugs, drunkards, prostitutes, all the dregs of society, or as the Mishnah calls them, people of dirt. These were the people who would never get to heaven. And these were the people Jesus was rubbing shoulders with and these were the people Jesus was eating with.

And it is interesting to notice, the good guys are the ones on the outside looking in while it is the tax collectors and sinners who are inside eating with Jesus. I am reminded of the scene in the book of Revelation where the Lord Jesus is pictured knocking on the door of those who claim to be religious, and say, '*Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him and he with Me*'.<sup>8</sup> Jesus is always apart from those who think they are good, but He is always welcoming to those who know they need Him.

Jesus' rebuke to the good guys serves to underline this thought: "*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 was not saying that the scribes of the Pharisees were actually healthy here. They thought they were healthy; they just failed to see how sick they actually were. They thought that forgiveness and salvation comes to those who deserve it. They thought that God would reward them for their piety. The good news of the gospel is not that God grants forgiveness and salvation to the people who earn it, or to the people who deserve it, or to the people who are good enough, or righteous enough, or holy enough, but He grants forgiveness and salvation to those who recognize their need, to the ungodly, the unholy and the unrighteous who believe in Christ and repent. This is the scandal of forgiveness and grace and it scandalizes every one who thinks they are good enough.

You might have some serious issues in your life this morning that you would like God to come in and fix. But have you dealt with the most serious issue you have? Just like the paralytic, it's no good fixing the body if the soul is lost. I pray that God would grant you to know your deep need of His gracious forgiveness, and like the paralytic hear Him say, 'Son, your sins are forgiven'. Or maybe you think you're a pretty good person on the whole. Maybe you're not perfect but you're certainly not that bad. You've just put yourself on the outside looking in. Because the fellowship of those around Jesus is not made up of good people, it is made up of bad people. It is not made up of those who think they are righteous. It is made up of those who know they are not.

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7 James R. Edwards, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, The Gospel According to Mark, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002), 83.

8 Revelation 3:20 ESV

Those who follow Jesus are keenly aware that apart from His grace in forgiving us and giving us a righteousness we could never have, we are lost. And it is only those who have acknowledged they are in the camp of the tax collectors and sinners that receive His grace. This is the gospel: *And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience-- 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ--by grace you have been saved-- 6 and raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,*<sup>9</sup>

*Our gracious God and Father,*

*Thank You for the grace and forgiveness we find in Jesus. We thank You for opening our ears and hearts to the call of the glorious gospel. We thank You that You have not left us on the outside looking in. We pray for those who have not yet responded to Your gracious invitation that You would this morning, call them away from the guilt of sin to the freedom of forgiveness, not because they earned it but because they asked. Grant them the repentance that leads to life we pray in the precious name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*