

Authority to Forgive Sins: Mark 2:1-12
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A week and a half ago I had the privilege of being at the Desiring God Conference for Pastors in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The theme of the conference was *The Pastor, the People, and the Pursuit of Joy*. Sam Storms unpacked the idea of Christian Hedonism, the biblical truth that we are to pursue our joy and delight in God. Each one of us is a hedonist. We are pleasure-seekers. There's no way around that. There's no way to suppress that, and no need to suppress that desire for happiness. What we must do, though, is pursue our happiness in God rather than in other things. Eric Mason, a pastor in Philadelphia, spoke on the role of suffering in sanctification and how that relates to joy. God actually ordains for us to go through suffering so that we can have a greater delight in Him. And in this way, suffering is so good for us, even though it is also so hard. That message resonated with us as Eric shared about a miscarriage that he and his wife experienced, which caused Stacy and I to think about our miscarriage last summer. And then as we returned to Pittsburgh after the conference and got a call from Stacy's sister last Friday saying that baby Julia had just passed away in her arms. Many of you have prayed for Julia and her many medical complications, and for Kim and Steve as they have struggled through these very difficult months of Julia's short life. And the wonder of it all has been to see how much God has been at work through these intensely painful times. Stacy is in Portland right now with the Bello family as they mourn the loss of Julia but also celebrate her life and what God has been doing in their family through all of this. Suffering is a means of sanctification, and thus a pathway to deeper joy in God.

There were two other lectures at the pastor's conference. John Piper spoke on the theme of joy in a biographical talk on the life and thought of C. S. Lewis. And Bob Blincoe, who is part of a mission organization called Frontiers, spoke on the pursuit of joy in missions. And he, like Eric Mason, spoke quite a bit about hardship and suffering but the amazing rewards that come through hardship and suffering. It was a conference about joy, about the pursuit of joy, and how the church ought to be a place where we spur one another on in this holy pursuit of delight in God.

I want to read you one quote from C. S. Lewis and then tell you how I see this connecting with our study of the Gospel of Mark. Lewis, in his *Reflections on the Psalms*, observes that "all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise . . . The world rings with praise - lovers praising their mistresses, readers their

favourite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favourite game - praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians or scholars . . .” Then he goes on to say, “I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because *the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation*. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed. It is frustrating to have discovered a new author and not to be able to tell anyone how good he is; to come suddenly, at the turn of the road, upon some mountain valley of unexpected grandeur and then to have to keep silent because the people with you care for it no more than for a tin can in the ditch; to hear a good joke and find no one to share it with . . .”

In the context of what Lewis is writing about as he reflects on the Psalms, his point is to show why God’s command for us to praise Him is an extremely loving thing for God to do. Because praising God is the consummation of, the completion of, our enjoyment of God. And to enjoy God is the highest delight possible to mankind. There is nothing better. There is nothing sweeter. There is no pleasure known to the human race that even begins to compare with the pleasure of seeing God for who He is and being drawn into His presence. This is true delight.

As I think about our study through Mark, as we consider the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ, I want this to be a feast at the table of Christian hedonism. I want us to see the glories of Christ and be caught up into the enjoyment of beholding Him and praising Him for who He is and what He has done. I want each passage of this Gospel to serve as fuel for the fire of our holy passion for Him. And I want this to be an encouragement to us in our times of suffering. I want us to have a deep and abiding delight in God that will weather the storms of this life.

We are not here merely to learn facts about Jesus. We are not here to do intellectual exercises in abstract theological thought. We’re not here simply to change our behavior. The reason why we look into the Bible so closely and carefully and slowly is because these are the words of life. Psalm 16:11 says, “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” C. S. Lewis once said that the sweetest thing in all his life was “the longing to find the place where all the beauty came from.”¹ By God’s grace Lewis came to see that God is the source of all true beauty. He is the object of true delight. It’s in Him, and Him alone, that our souls

¹ These quotations are taken from the talks by Sam Storms and John Piper at the 2010 Desiring God conference for Pastors: www.desiringgod.org

can be satisfied for eternity. And God has made Himself known in this Book. He has made Himself known in sending His own Son into the world—His Son Jesus Christ, who is very God of very God. Therefore by mining the depths of this revelation, and right now as we focus on the Gospel of Mark, our purpose is to hold up and admire and cherish these precious truths about Jesus' life and ministry. This is our Savior! He is the way and the truth and the life. He is where all the beauty comes from. He is where we can find true pleasure.

So let's study this together, not as an academic exercise, but as a feast for our souls. God has been so good to us to give us this revelation and to give us eyes to see the beauty contained here. Let's not take it for granted or treat it lightly, but dig into each passage with diligence and desire, that we might find diamonds of spiritual truth that will satisfy us and stir us to praise and overflow in love and witness toward others.

With this intent let's read our passage again and then pray that God will come and cause these things to happen.

"And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. And many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And he was preaching the word to them. And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the paralytic lay. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic—"I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home." And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!" (Mark 2:1-12, ESV)

The amazing and praiseworthy truth that we're going to see about Jesus this morning is that He has authority to forgive sins. Remember how we saw the authority of Jesus in chapter 1, in effectually calling disciples, in His teaching and healing and casting out demons. Jesus has tremendous authority, and He

demonstrates it both in word and in deed. He speaks with authority, and He can back it up with powerful demonstrations of His authority over sickness and over demons. Jesus has authority, which points to His deity and should impress upon us the necessity of submitting to His commands. When He says “repent and believe in the gospel” (1:15) we should sit up and pay attention, because it’s not a mere man who is saying it. It’s the Messiah, the second Person of the Trinity, the authoritative Jesus Christ who is ushering in the kingdom of God and warning us of the imminent judgment that will come upon those who do not repent and believe. This morning we see a new aspect of Jesus’ authority in that He has the authority to forgive sins.

Persistent Faith (verses 1-5)

Let’s start by looking at verses 1-5 and the persistent faith that is exercised by these men. Verse 1 tells us that Jesus returned to Capernaum after some days. Following the cleansing of the leper, and because the leper talked freely about this, the previous verse (1:45) says that “Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places.” Now Jesus does return to the town of Capernaum, but not openly. He comes in quietly. He doesn’t announce publicly that he has arrived. But eventually the word got out that he was at home. This is most likely the home of Simon and Andrew (mentioned in 1:29) where Jesus is staying. This home has become a very popular place in Capernaum. You can imagine the lives of Simon and Andrew and Simon’s mother-in-law and the rest of the family—they never received much attention before this, but now their home is the most famous spot in town. That is, if Jesus happens to be there. Chapter 1:35 says “the whole city was gathered together at the door.” And now 2:2 says “many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door.”

And what is Jesus doing? He’s preaching. “And he was preaching the word to them.” He was preaching about the kingdom of God. He was calling people to repent and believe in the gospel. Jesus was preaching to the crowd. But the emphasis on the crowd here is not that they were repenting and believing, but rather the crowd functions as a barrier between Jesus and these men who are trying to get their friend to Jesus. Just because all these people were packed in the house and even out in the street does not mean that they were really taking to heart the message that Jesus preached. They were curious. They were amazed. But this does not mean they were repentant.

And apparently this crowd had no compassion for the paralytic who was being carried by four men. Verse 4 says “they could not get near [Jesus] because of the crowd.” These four men

were trying desperately to get their friend to Jesus, and the crowd would not make a path for them to get through. But these men were persistent. They would not give up. They did not turn around and go home. They were determined, somehow, to get to Jesus.

The house would have been a small single story dwelling with an outside staircase that led up to a flat roof. The roofs of these homes were used for various things—for working or sleeping—and so they were very durable. They were constructed with wooden beams that were filled in with smaller sticks and thatch and then covered in clay and sometimes tiles covering the clay. This is what the men had to deal with to get their friend to Jesus. It was not an easy task. This was a demolition project that would have taken a lot of energy. They would have worked up a good sweat pounding away at this roof. And it would have made a lot of noise, too. Imagine if you were one of the folks in the house listening to Jesus, and all of a sudden it sounds like the roof is going to cave in and crush you. Imagine how Simon Peter felt, seeing the roof of his own house being destroyed. Mark doesn't satisfy our curiosity at all in giving us the details of how the people reacted to this. The focus is on the persistence of these men, the determination of these men to get their paralyzed friend in front of Jesus. Verse 4 says "they removed the roof above [Jesus]." Literally, they unroofed the roof. "And when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the paralytic lay."

What made these men so persistent? What was it that was driving them with such determination to get to Jesus? It was faith. They believed that Jesus could heal. Maybe they had witnessed some of His healings, and certainly they had heard of the miraculous things Jesus was doing. And they believed that Jesus could heal their friend as well. They were similar to the leper who did not care about laws or customs. He was desperate to be cleansed by Jesus, and he didn't let anything stand in his way. In the same way these four men didn't let a crowd deter them, or a roof. They persistently pursued Jesus until they had the paralytic in front of Him.

Even though the crowds may have been frightened by the destruction of the roof, and Peter may have been irate, Jesus was pleased. Jesus saw their faith, it says in verse 5. I think this is referring to the faith of all five of them—the paralytic and the four men who were carrying him. They all had faith in the healing power of Jesus. So we see the persistent faith of these men.

Jesus Forgives (verse 5)

Next, we see that Jesus forgives. When Jesus saw their faith, He responded by doing what? What would we expect at this

point in the story? We would expect for Jesus to heal the man's body. That's the ostensible point of the men coming to Jesus. By all outward appearances, they are there because the man is paralyzed and wants to be healed. But what does Jesus do? He says to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Jesus saw into the heart of this man and perceived that he truly believed. It's difficult to know the full content of this man's faith, but he must have been looking to Jesus not only as a healer of physical ailments, but he must have also been looking to Jesus as a healer of souls, as One who could rescue not only from paralysis but from divine punishment. And Jesus, seeing this faith in the man, made the authoritative declaration, "your sins are forgiven."

In a moment Jesus will heal this man's body, but He begins with a far deeper problem that plagues every human soul. And that is the problem of sin. Do you know, friend, that your deepest problem in life is the sin that resides in your own heart? You may look at financial problems or relational problems or physical problems and think that those things are weightier than anything else. But that's not, in fact, the case. The thing that will determine whether you live forever in the heaven in the presence of the all-satisfying God, or if you live forever in hell *apart from* the presence of the all-satisfying God—the thing that matters is whether your sin is forgiven or not. The state of your soul regarding your sin is of eternal significance.

The Good News that we see in our passage this morning is that Jesus has the authority to forgive sins. For those who repent and believe, there is forgiveness through Jesus Christ. So run to Jesus. Look to Him. Be persistent in your pursuit of Him. Believe that He can forgive you and change your life forever. This is our glorious Savior, the One who has compassion on hurting souls, who has the authority to forgive sins, and who will satisfy our deepest longings forever and ever. Let's praise Him for who He is. Let's delight in Him for what He has done. Let's recognize that He is our only enduring hope and joy.

Jesus forgives. Think for a moment about the sins for which we need forgiveness. If we think that our sin is a light thing, we will not be utterly blown away by this statement as we ought to be. The fact that Jesus forgives is no small thing. It's not like saying an unkind word to someone and then apologizing and they say, Oh don't worry about it, no big deal. Our sin against God is a big deal, a very big deal. It's such a big deal that the just penalty for our sin is nothing less than an eternity of conscious torment and emotional anguish in the pit of hell. Oh, our sin is a big deal. When we treat food like an idol, we are saying to God, You're not enough for me. When we entertain lustful thoughts we are saying to God, You're not as attractive as worldly things. When we are

plagued with pride or self-pity, we are saying to God, Your plans are not as important as my plans. Your reputation is not as important as my reputation. The world revolves around me, not You. When we sin, we drag God's Name through the dirt as we make it appear that so many other things are more precious than God. And God, in order to uphold the worth of His Name and uphold justice in the universe, must punish sin. He must punish sin in a way that is commensurate with the infinite offense it causes. The punishment must fit the crime. And that's why hell is eternal, because our sin is infinitely offensive to Almighty God.

In light of these truths we should be absolutely blown away by the words of Jesus when He says, "your sins are forgiven." The guilt that you bear is lifted. The wrath of God is no longer against you. The reason Jesus can grant forgiveness is because He is, Himself, God, and because He went to the cross to be our substitute and bear the penalty of our sin. So these are precious, precious words as we meditate on the fact that our infinitely offensive sins are forgiven, if we are repenting of sin and trusting in Him.

The Skeptics (verses 6-7)

Well, so far we've seen the persistent faith of these men and then the forgiveness which Jesus grants to the paralytic. The third piece of this story is the skeptical response of the scribes. The scribes were sitting there and they were questioning in their hearts. They weren't saying these things out loud, but they were asking these skeptical questions in their hearts. Verse 7, "Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" They are exactly right that God is the only one who can forgive sins, and that reveals the intended impact of Jesus' words. Jesus' authoritative declaration of forgiveness reveals His divine identity. Only God can forgive sins. Jesus forgives sins. Conclusion: Jesus is God.

Why is it that only God can forgive sins? Don't we forgive the sins of those who sin against us? We do, but only on a horizontal level. We can forgive someone for their sin against us, and that's important, but it doesn't come close to dealing with the full significance of that sin. What we also need to realize is that every sin is a sin against God. And therefore only God can forgive sin in that vertical way, in an ultimate way. Whatever sins this man had committed in his life, whoever it was he sinned against, ultimately he had sinned against God. And Jesus, the God-Man, declares him to be forgiven.

The scribes were right to recognize the profundity of what was happening before their eyes. They were correct in their assessment of what Jesus was claiming. But the scribes were

wrong in their conclusion. They saw that Jesus was claiming to do what only God can do, and they were convinced that there was no possible way that Jesus could have divine authority. And therefore they concluded that Jesus was a blasphemer.

The correct conclusion, though, is to recognize that Jesus is God. He is who He says He is. Like C. S. Lewis said, He is either a liar, a lunatic, or He is Lord. Concluding that Jesus was just an inspiring moral teacher is not an option, because He said things like this. He claimed to forgive sins. The scribes said He was a liar. We know that He is Lord. He is God. He has authority to forgive sins.

Jesus Demonstrates His Authority (verses 8-12)

In response to the skeptics, we see finally that Jesus demonstrates His authority. He has already stated His authority. He has declared it in words. But now He demonstrates it in action. We see in verse 8 the supernatural insight that Jesus has into human hearts. The scribes had not spoken out loud but only in their hearts. And Jesus knew their hearts. Verses 8-9, "And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'?"

This is an interesting question. On the one hand, to forgive sins is certainly the weightier and more difficult thing to accomplish. But in terms of demonstrating the validity of His words, Jesus proceeds to perform the physical healing. One commentator, James Edwards, writes, "From a human perspective it is safe to pronounce the forgiveness of sins, since that statement cannot be falsified. Jesus, however, will provide evidence of the [forgiveness] by healing the paralytic, which can be verified by all."² Jesus is going beyond simply declaring the man to be forgiven, and He is giving tangible evidence of it by healing him. The conclusion should be, then, that if He can read the minds of these scribes and He can also make a paralyzed man get up and walk, then His words should be trusted. He must really have the power that He claims to have.

This is what Jesus says 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 say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home."² Notice that word authority. Jesus is demonstrating His divine authority in this.

² James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), page 79.

Also notice that Jesus refers to Himself as the Son of Man. This is the term He often uses to refer to Himself. And this seems a little odd since Mark began in 1:1 by speaking of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of *God*. So why doesn't Jesus speak of Himself as the Son of God, but rather as the Son of Man? In many places in the Old Testament the term son of man simply means a human. And in this way Jesus using this term for Himself is an evidence of His humility. He became a man. And He humbled Himself as a lowly servant. He did not come as a political ruler, but as a Suffering Servant. And of the 14 times that Jesus uses this term in Mark, 9 of those times it is with reference to His suffering. For instance, in Mark 10:45 Jesus says, "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." So this term is closely connected with His humble role of service and suffering.

But this term also contains an allusion to the fact that Jesus is the Messiah. It is not an explicit messianic title, but in a veiled way it points to this. The place in the Old Testament where "son of man" is used in a messianic way is in Daniel 7:13-14, where Daniel says, "I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed." Jesus' use of the term Son of Man shows us that He is the fulfillment of this prophecy. He is the One who has an everlasting dominion and an indestructible kingdom. So Jesus was able to use this term that pointed to His identity as the Messiah but in a somewhat veiled way. Remember, He wanted to minimize the problem of the crowds. They were trouble enough without Him going around announcing that He is the Son of God. That term would have had all kinds of political overtones for those who would have heard it. So instead Jesus speaks of Himself as the Son of Man—a humble term, but one that also communicated a veiled allusion to His power and dominion as the Messiah.

In verse 12 we see the proof that Jesus does have authority on earth to forgive sins. The proof was right there for everyone to see as the paralyzed man "rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all." The reaction of the crowd is similar to what happened in the last chapter when they were astonished at his teaching (1:22) and they said, "What is this? A new teaching with authority!" (1:27). Now, again, "they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, 'We never saw anything like this!'" The people are amazed. They are not, however, repentant. Jesus had

been preaching the word to them—the message of repentance and faith. But even as they give God the credit and stand amazed at this healing, they do not respond appropriately to Jesus’ teaching.

What will our response be to this? Will our amazement stop short of repentance? Or will we be convinced by the miracles of Jesus that we ought to heed the words of Jesus—that we must repent and believe in the gospel? If we, by God’s grace, recognize our spiritual paralysis and look to Jesus in faith and persistently pursue Him in faith, He will, indeed, say to us, “Son, daughter, your sins are forgiven.” And that is a reality that is beautiful and precious beyond anything we can imagine. This is the gateway to eternal delight. To have our sins forgiven so that we are no longer separated from God and deserving of God’s wrath but instead can enter into a relationship with Him through Jesus—this is true joy.