

Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 2, 2021

**TRAVELS WITH JESUS:
ON FORGIVENESS**

Mark 2:1-12

“A Hole in the Roof” is the title I gave to the story we looked at two weeks ago from the Gospel of Luke (5:17-26). Today we return to this same story, reading this time from the Gospel of Mark. Regardless of how familiar the story may be, let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s Word as it comes to us in Mark 2:1-12.

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FRIENDSHIP, FAITH, AND FORGIVENESS

Last time, we turned the spotlight on three words that come into sharp focus in this story: *Friendship, Faith, and Forgiveness*. The story exemplifies the best of true *friendship*, as these four men cared so much for their needy friend that they were willing to do anything and everything they could to get him to Jesus. *Having* a friend (or friends) like that in your life is an incalculable blessing. *Being* a friend like that can make an incalculable difference in someone’s life – as it did in the life of this paraplegic. By God’s grace, be that kind of friend. As it says in Proverbs 17:17: “A friend loves at all times, and a brother (or sister) is born for adversity.”

The story also exemplifies the meaning of *faith*. These men did what they did for their friend because they had faith in Jesus. They believed Jesus could and would heal him. I believe their paralyzed friend believed it, too. When Mark says that “Jesus saw their faith” (2:5), I believe He was referring to all five of them, both the man on the stretcher and his four friends who cut a hole in the roof. Their faith in Jesus moved them to action. James, the brother of Jesus, says in James 2:18 that we show our faith by what we do. These men showed their faith in Jesus by what they did to get His attention, believing that He would heal their friend.

Jesus wants you and me to exhibit the same kind of faith in Him. You can talk all you want about faith or trust in God, but, as James says so clearly (James 2:14-26), if your faith doesn’t result in action, what good is it? Faith, as we noted two weeks ago, is a muscle that has to be used, or else it will atrophy. It will shrivel up.

God gives each of us opportunities to trust Him. He gives each of us opportunities to put our faith into action. Your opportunities may be different than mine, and mine may not be the same as yours. But God daily gives us opportunities to trust Him and to step out in faith. Our opportunities may not be quite as dramatic as in this Gospel story. But they are just as real. Take hold of the opportunities in your life:

- To trust God;
- To believe in Jesus and His power; and

- To trust that He will make a way where there seems to be no way.

Without faith, the Bible says, it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). Ask God to increase your faith. If your faith is small, be honest enough to say: “Lord, I believe; I *want to believe*; help me in my unbelief” (cf. Mark 9:24).

This story exemplifies the meaning of *friendship*. It exemplifies the meaning of *faith*. Third, it teaches us about *forgiveness*. More specifically, it shows us that Jesus has *the power to forgive*.

THE POWER TO FORGIVE

Maybe you take this for granted. Maybe, to you, as my old geometry teacher loved to say, this is intuitively obvious to the most casual observer. But it is not intuitively obvious to everyone. It was not intuitively obvious to the Jewish religious leaders of Jesus’ day, who took great and vociferous exception to it. Nor is it obvious to millions and millions of people today for whom the name “Jesus” is just a swear word.

The crux of the matter, for the Pharisees and teachers of the Jewish law, is that, strictly speaking, only God has the power to forgive sins. Only God has the authority to pronounce sins forgiven. No human being, no matter how righteous, can claim or usurp the power to forgive sins. So, when Jesus says to the paraplegic, “Your sins are forgiven” (2:5), they immediately object. Not out loud, but in their spirits. They think to themselves: “Who does this man think he is? No one can forgive sins but God and God alone!” (2:6-7). To their way of thinking, Jesus is committing blasphemy. Since only God can forgive sins, to unilaterally pronounce forgiveness is to claim to be God, which is blasphemy. Under the Jewish law, blasphemy is a capital offense punishable by stoning. That is how serious it is.

It *is* blasphemy, as they believe, *unless* Jesus is more than just a man. *Unless* Jesus really is Immanuel, God with us. *Unless* He is God incarnate, God in flesh and blood. It all comes down to who Jesus really is.

Asinine Fatuity

Here is what C.S. Lewis writes about Jesus’ claim to have the authority to forgive sins in *Mere Christianity*: “Now unless the speaker is God, [forgiving sins] is really so preposterous as to be comic. We can all understand how a person forgives offenses against himself (or herself). You tread on my toes and I forgive you, you steal my money and I forgive you. But what should we make of a person, himself (or herself) unrobbed and untrodden upon, who announced that he (or she) forgave you for treading on other people’s toes and stealing other people’s money? Asinine fatuity is the kindest description we should give of [their] conduct.”

Let me stop right there for a moment. I won’t speak for you, but “asinine fatuity” is not a phrase that is part of my usual lexicon. In case you’re wondering, “fatuity,” spelled F-A-T-U-I-T-Y, has nothing to do with your weight, physical shape, or BMI (body mass index). According to the dictionary, it means “complacent foolishness.” It means you’re foolish or

silly, and you don't care that you're being foolish or silly. Or that you're being foolish and you're proud of it. Add to it the adjective "asinine," which means "stupid" or "foolish," and you get the picture that asinine fatuity means really foolish foolishness or really stupid stupidity. That's what Lewis is saying about an ordinary person claiming the authority to forgive sins. It is asinine fatuity.

"Yet," says Lewis, "this is what Jesus did. He told people their sins were forgiven, and never waited to consult all the other people whom their sins had undoubtedly injured. He unhesitatingly behaved as if He was the party chiefly concerned, the person chiefly offended in all offenses. This makes sense only if He really [is] the God whose laws are broken and whose love is wounded in every sin. In the mouth of any speaker who is not God, these words would only imply what I can only regard as a silliness and conceit unrivaled by any other character in history" (Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 40).

If Jesus is not God, His claim to forgive sins is either blasphemy (as His critics among the Pharisees and teachers of the law thought), or a sign of egomaniacal lunacy. *If*, however, Jesus really is the incarnation of God, the One who perfectly mirrors God (Hebrews 1:3, *MSG*) so that when we look at Him we see the God who cannot be seen (Colossians 1:15, *MSG*), then His claim to forgive sins is anything but asinine fatuity.

It all hinges on who Jesus is. If He is *not* God with us, He does not have the power to forgive. If He is *not* God in flesh and blood, He does not have the authority to declare the forgiveness of sins – not the sins of this paraplegic on a stretcher, nor those of a woman with a bad reputation who anointed His feet with expensive perfume at the home of a Pharisee named Simon (which you can read about in Luke 7:36-50), nor anyone's sins, including yours and mine. *If* Jesus is *not* God.

But if He really *is* God, as the Bible teaches and as the church has professed and proclaimed for the last 2,000 years, then He really does have the power to forgive sins. And not only the power to forgive, He has the will to forgive as well. He has the heart to forgive. That should be intuitively obvious in the way He responds to the man on the stretcher.

Because Jesus *is* God, He *does* have the authority to forgive sins. He has the authority of God Himself to forgive sins, because He Himself *is* God. You can bet your life on it.

It is true that forgiveness of sins was not on the minds of the four men who brought their friend to Jesus. They wanted Jesus to heal him of his paralysis. Which Jesus did, but not until He had addressed the greater need in the man's life, his need for forgiveness.

What Jesus demonstrates here, and what He wants us to understand, is that our greatest need in life is not physical healing or any other purely earthly blessing – job, income, family, education, or whatever. Our greatest need is spiritual healing. Our greatest need is to have our sins forgiven and our guilt removed. Our greatest need is to be made right with God. Healing from our physical ailments is desirable, but as one preacher put it, it is "better to limp into heaven than to run into hell! Paralysis is nothing compared to God's punishment" (T. Anyabwile, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Luke*, 94). As Jesus Himself said in

another context: “What good is it if you gain the whole world” – even experience some miraculous healing along the way – “yet forfeit your soul?” (Mark 8:36). What do you gain if you have perfect health but go into eternity without Christ? It is a question everyone should think about.

Which Is Easier?

Jesus has the power to forgive sins. Knowing what these religious experts were thinking in their hearts, Jesus answered their unspoken objection with an object lesson. “Which is easier?” He asks. “To declare a person’s sins forgiven? Or to tell a man who can’t walk to get up and get going?”

It would seem intuitively obvious that actions speak louder than words. Forgiveness is an inside job. You can’t immediately tell if real forgiveness has occurred. But if you tell someone who can’t walk to get up and walk because he or she has been healed, you can tell if the healing has really taken place. So, to make the point that He really does have the power to forgive, Jesus told the paraplegic to get up and go home. Which he did. And everybody who saw it was amazed. They said: “We’ve never seen anything like this!” They had never seen anything like it before, because they had never seen anyone like Jesus before.

You and I will never see anyone like Jesus. There will never be anyone like Him, in whom, as it says in Colossians 2:9, “all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.” *The Message* paraphrase says: “Everything of God gets expressed in (Jesus), so that you can see and hear Him clearly. You don’t need a telescope, a microscope, or a horoscope to realize the fullness of Christ, and the emptiness of the universe without Him.”

Ironically, while it was easier for Jesus to say the words, “Your sins are forgiven,” than to heal this man of his paralysis, the work of forgiving our sins was actually much harder. The work of forgiveness would cost Jesus His life. The cross was the price Jesus paid to forgive sins. To forgive *your* sins and *mine*. The cross reveals the forgiving heart of God.

Psalm 130 says:

“If You, O LORD, kept a record of sins,
O Lord, who could stand [before You]?
But with You there is forgiveness.”
(130:3-4a)

With God there is forgiveness. With Jesus there is forgiveness, because He is God. In His great mercy, God does not treat us as our sins deserve or pay us back in full for all our wrongs (Psalm 103:10, *MSG*). Forgiveness is available to anyone and everyone who will receive it through faith in Jesus.

THE POWER TO FORGIVE YOUR SINS

Jesus has the power to forgive sins. This is a theological truth that no one who understands and believes the gospel can dispute. But, as I just hinted a moment ago, there is more. Not

only does Jesus have the power to forgive sins, *He has the power to forgive your sins*. There is no sin in your life or mine that Jesus cannot and will not forgive, if you put your trust in Him.

We all have skeletons of sin in our closets. We have all done things we are ashamed of or embarrassed about. We all regret things we have done or said, as well as opportunities we've missed to do or say something we should have. You may believe that Jesus forgives sinners. You may believe that there is forgiveness with God. But you may think it somehow doesn't apply to you. You may think you have disqualified yourself from being forgiven by God. You may think that even Jesus can't get the stain of your sin out. You may think there is no way God can ever forgive you for something you've done. Which may really mean that you don't know how to forgive yourself.

The good news of the gospel is for you: Jesus has the power to forgive *your* sins. Jesus came to forgive sinners, including *you*. Jesus did not go to the cross to suffer and die for some of your sins and not others. No. The Bible says that "The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:9). *All* sin.

Listen to what Paul writes in Ephesians 1:7-8: "In Him (Jesus) we" –you and I and everyone everywhere who trusts in Him, regardless of how many ways or how many times we have messed up – "have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that He lavished on us."

I don't have the power to forgive sins. That power belongs to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit alone. But I do have – *we* do have together – the authority and the mission to announce the message of forgiveness, the gospel of forgiveness and freedom from sin and guilt, *in the name of Jesus*.

Are you carrying a load of guilt over some sin, past or present, in your life? Bring it to the cross. Give it to Jesus. Tell Him you're sorry for your sin and ask Him to forgive you. He's waiting for you to come to Him. Let Him set you free. In the name of Jesus, who has the power and the heart to forgive, receive forgiveness for all your sins.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.