

Jesus Heals a Paralyzed Man (Columbia Heights)

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[0 : 00] And I have to say, there's a lot of faces here, people I haven't met yet, so I don't know if you're new or if I just don't know you or I don't recognize you because I have your faces covered, but good to meet you.

My name is Lexi, and I'm a member of our preaching team here at the table and also serve on some of our justice and compassion teams. I live in Northeast DC with my family. We have a golden retriever.

He's the star of the show. He will jump on you, though, and we're working on that. And I want to shout out my Tuesday night dinner party and watch any of them are here. That's been such a sweet community for us during a time when we can not believe in the community as much as we would want.

So with that introduction, I am going to begin doing what I'm here to do, which is to continue us in our series on the Gospel of Mark.

We have been in the series for some number of weeks, learning quite a lot about Jesus through what Mark has written, but believe it or not, we are only one chapter in.

[1 : 03] So today we're beginning the second chapter, and I do want to recap the first chapter. A lot happened. Mark packs a lot in there. So to recap, where we began was with Jesus receiving baptism from John the Baptist, the spirit descending in the form of a dove on him, a voice from heaven saying, you are my son, and you are mine, please, and I picture the Trinity.

And then next, Jesus was sent into the desert to be tempted. He passed the test, came back from the desert, started collecting his disciples, and he began in his ministry.

And interestingly, in Mark, most of Jesus' ministry so far has been healing and exorcisms, these miracles.

We're used to thinking of Jesus as a teacher and a storyteller, but in Mark, he hasn't done a whole lot of that yet. He's mostly gained fame from being a healer and an exorcist of all things.

Okay. So now we begin chapter two. This is starting with Jesus. Jesus, he's returning from a preaching door in Galilee and returning to Capernaum where he lives.

[2 : 19] And at this point, he has made a name for himself. He is quite the celebrity. And he's going to continue doing a lot of healing in our story today. He will be doing a healing.

But what's different in chapter two from what came before it is that instead of just collecting followers, Jesus starts collecting questioners, doubters, and accusers.

This story that we're going through today, it's about, you might be familiar with four friends bringing a paralytic to Jesus to be healed. So it's another healing story, but it's also a controversy story.

This chapter in Mark is all about Jesus starting to stir up some controversy with the religious leaders in town. There are five of these.

This is the first. And Mark is using these controversy stories to show us what Jesus is saying about himself, what he's doing. It's not ordinary. It's disruptive.

[3 : 23] It's radical. It's strange. Maybe defiant. What Jesus is doing ultimately through his ministry is letting people know that he himself is God.

But he can't say that all at once. Hey, everyone. I'm God. He has to reveal it piece by piece through revealing parts of his identity, parts of his authority.

And Mark is doing this through these controversy stories, beginning to do this through these controversy stories. So he's asking us to pay extra attention to the things that stir up trouble.

And that's what we're going to do today. But first, I'd like to say a prayer if you could join me. Thank you.

That's why I'm saying that. I'm going to pray that no one will hear it. And I mean that. And if there is anything that is unkind or unhelpful, I pray that you would give someone courage to tell me.

[4 : 51] But we trust this time to you. We believe you're here with us and we're so grateful for that. In Christ's name. Amen. All right, let's dive in.

So we're reading from Mark chapter 2, starting in verse 1. When Jesus returned to Pipherdium after some days, it was reported that he was at home.

So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door. And he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them.

And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him. And after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay.

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 fellow speak in this way?

[5 : 57] It is blasphemy. Who can forgive sins but God alone? I'm going to pause here. I noticed that when I mentioned this story, do you have you nodded your heads?

Yeah, I know this one. And it's a familiar story. It's pretty easy to remember and hard to forget. We have this image of people clawing through a roof of a house and lowering a man down on a mat. Lots of preachers like to use this opportunity to talk about the architecture of roofs at the time and how it was possible to dig through. For me, it's an image that's always stuck with me.

This story is familiar. However, for the people in the crowd that day, the people hearing the story for the first time, it's really anything but familiar.

This story is full of surprise. The first surprise is what I just said. People are digging a hole through a roof. I would guess that that is not something that happens every day and probably drew a lot of attention.

[7 : 05] And then the next surprise. We can presume that the reason why the paralytic was brought to, came to Jesus, was to seek healing in his body. But Jesus doesn't do that.

He says your sins are forgiven. That's a little surprising. Don't you know this guy is here for something else? He wants healing, Jesus. Aren't you going to do that? But he doesn't.

So we're surprised again. Now I do want to say here that there was a belief in the ancient world that physical disability and illness were related to sin, that sin caused these things.

And we see this in John's Gospel, when Jesus' disciples point to a man who was born blind, and say to Jesus, Was he born blind because of his sins or the sins of his parents?

Jesus says neither. He's just blind. It's nothing to do with sin. But this is the mindset that some people in the calendar have. Maybe Jesus is forgiving this guy's sins, his paralytic sins, because that's why his body is this way.

[8 : 12] And that will heal him. But again, we see that's not the case. Jesus says your sins are forgiven. And he's not healed immediately. Jesus is breaking the link between disability and sin.

And that's a good thing. This piece about forgiving sins is surprising, because it's not what we thought Jesus was going to do. He's known to be a healer.

That's how he got his fame. That's why there's a crowd. But now he's forgiving sins. That's one reason it's surprising. Another reason it's surprising is because people don't do that.

People don't forgive sins. God forgives sins. We have a whole process for that. You go to the temple. You bring your whatever animal you need to bring. The priest makes atonement for your sins on your behalf.

And then God forgives. That's how that happens. People don't just forgive. But that's what Jesus did. And for that reason, for Jesus to say to the paralytic, your sins aren't forgiven, is not just weird, or strange, or unexpected.

[9 : 23] It's blasphemy. It's a big deal. Let's get back to this story. ...among themselves.

And he said to them, why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier to say to the paralytic, your sins are forgiven, or to say, stand up, take your mat, 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, stand up, take your mat, and go to your home.

And he did it. He stood up, immediately took the mat, and went out before all of them, so that they were all amazed and glorified by God, saying, we have never seen anything like this.

So like I said, this is one of five controversy stories, and each of these controversies are revealing piece by piece parts of Jesus' identity and authority.

[10:31] And the controversy in this particular story is about Jesus' authority to forgive. I cannot overstate how much of a big deal this claim is.

Sometimes today, we, who have had the Bible our own lives, can read these gospel accounts and look back on the Pharisees and scribes and say, gosh, they were just so strict.

They were just overly litigious and rule-keeping, or maybe even, they were threatened by Jesus and worried about the position of power in the community.

But if we go back to that mindset of we have this thing for forgiveness, forgiveness, and it's what God does, and if you're saying you forgive, that's, that's not that.

That's something different. It's reasonable for them to question the same Jesus is saying. There's nothing more reasonable for them to say than, what are you talking about, Jesus?

[11:34] And for them, it goes really deep. It's not just about, we have a system for that, follow the procedure, go to the priest.

It's deeper. It's that forgiveness is a central characteristic of the nature of God, and forgiveness is the only way that we can have fellowship with God.

The stakes are super high, so don't mess with it. That's how we go on with God. Don't take it lightly. Don't play games. Christians often make the mistake that before Jesus, God was strict and unquenchably unforgiving, that we needed Jesus to see forgiveness, but before Jesus, there was none.

But that's not true. It's just not the case. Forgiveness has always been part of God's nature. That's right. There is a song that's going to come up on the screen that Jewish people have been singing since the time of David, which I'm not a historian, but was a pretty long time before Jesus was on the scene.

It says, This is a song about a gracious, merciful, forgiving God that the Jewish people and especially the scribes and Pharisees who studied God's word, they knew this God well.

[13:21] That's right. Forgiveness has always been who God is and what God does. That's right. So fast forward to Mark. For Jesus to say, miles and miles away from the temple, that he had authority to forgive sins was very upsetting.

I want to say a lot more word about the scribes and Pharisees. I've recently been learning about how anti-Semitism shows up in Christianity, specifically in progressive Christian spaces.

It looks different from how it shows up for our conservative siblings, but it shows up. And I want to highlight that now because these controversies and conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees are just the place where these kinds of anti-Semitic interpretations might show up.

We, I will say we, progressive Christians, people who think about justice and think in terms of justice, often see Pharisees as oppressors and Jesus as a liberator.

And that's applying useful categories to the wrong kind of thing. That's not what's happening here. My friend, Elizabeth Moraff, was a guest on one of my favorite podcasts called Reclaiming My Theology.

[14:42] I would recommend when we write that down. I won't judge you for taking your phone out. Also, no pressure. I think I would show you a really helpful frame to think about what's going on in these conflicts between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees.

And she says something like, we have to remember that all of these conversations between Jesus and the Pharisees are written for Jews, by Jews, by marginalized people, for marginalized people. Jesus is Jewish and he's interacting with folks who are Jewish. This is Jewish people's business. So we, most of us, I think, are Gentiles eavesdropping on the conversation among Jews, including Jesus.

And it will help us to remember that when the scribes are questioning Jesus, they're coming from a place of care for their community. They want their people to believe the truth about God, to walk closely with God, to follow God.

They want their people to survive to do these things, even as a marginalized group in the midst of a notoriously brutal empire. They are worried that what Jesus is doing is threatening that community, either by teaching him things that are not true or by drawing the wrong kind of attention from the empire.

[16:09] they're coming from a protective space. Okay, tangent over. One thing that's peculiar about this passage is that Jesus knows the scribes are asking questions in their hearts.

It says that he perceived it in his spirit. And I always thought that this was like something about Jesus' mind-reading powers.

force. And maybe that's true. Or maybe he just knows that he's saying something super provocative. And then of course people are asking questions. Of course people will challenge it. I don't know. Mind-reading powers sound cool. Could be. I won't say no. But either way, however he knows that people are asking questions, he does make a point to respond and to show that what he's saying is true.

He asks, which is easier, to say that this guy's sins are forgiven or to tell him to stand up, take his mat, and go home? I'm not actually sure the answer to that question both sound not too easy.

[17:18] And then he says, so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. He tells the man to stand up and walk and he does.

All right, I'm going to wait one more thing out here. I really nerded out preparing for this. Is it Heidi in the slides? Yes. Yeah, Heidi, could you go back to the last scripture slide?

Perfect. Okay. So you see here it says, but so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. He sent the paralytic. Some translations have him saying that first sentence to the scribes as if to say, hey you with all the questions, watch this.

I'm going to show you that I can really do it. And some, like this one, have him saying it to the paralytic as if to say, son, I really did just forgive your sins and I'll show you.

I'll show you that it's true. Again, I don't know which is true, but it's something to reflect on as we think about the nature of Jesus and how he's interacting with the people in the story.

[18:32] All right, I think that's going to be my last tangent, but I hope you're having fun. Okay, so, so far we've learned that the main controversy in the story is about Jesus' authority to forgive and it's so controversial because forgiveness is such a big deal.

It's a big deal to the scribes, to the crowd, to the paralytic himself. The question I have for you all this morning, the question I have for myself mostly, is this.

Is forgiveness a big deal to you? And I'll be honest, forgiveness is a tricky concept for me. I think it's because when the concept of forgiveness was introduced to me, it was in this very transactional framework that went something like, God has rules.

People break rules. People sin. God judges sin. Through Jesus, God forgives us and forgets our sins.

And because we are forgiven, we are saved or spared from God's judgment. Does that sound familiar to anyone? Yeah. Mm-hmm. And it's not completely untrue.

[19:52] I will say that. It's in Scripture. This framework is in Scripture. It's in Christian tradition throughout history. But I will say, it's not particularly inspiring.

For me, it might be for you and praise God, but for me, it's not. That's funny. For me, it's transactional and formulaic.

And most of all, it doesn't tell me much about either why sin is so bad or why forgiveness is so good. And for the concept of forgiveness, there might be many reasons why it's a tricky one for you. Maybe it's been weaponized against you. Maybe you've been told you've got to confess parts of who you are that aren't actually sin. and that's created a challenge in thinking about forgiveness and all those things are valid.

And I want to share a little bit about how I've been grappling with this idea of forgiveness, especially in this last few years. Is that me? No answer.

[20:57] That's fine. So I, maybe it was. No. Okay. I get tripped up in the part of the communion liturgy or daily prayer where we are supposed to confess specific sins.

And I was talking to my husband, Connor, about this as I was preparing for this sermon. I'm like, you know, what do you do? When we're given time to confess, how do you, how do you approach that?

And, and I was thinking like, you know, confessing specific sins, the things that come to mind are like, I don't know, I went through a yellow light where I probably should have stopped. Which we should take seriously because there's been a lot of pedestrian deaths in DC.

So let me not minimize that. It's a really serious thing. Or like, maybe I kept my Zoom camera off because my internet connection was unstable. Yes.

Like, are those the things that I'm supposed to be confessing? Maybe. But again, it doesn't feel that deep, it doesn't feel that inspiring. and I'm sharing with my husband, like, you know, the things I really want to confess, but I don't know that I can, are this.

[22 : 15] I believe that the faithful Christian life is about generosity, being present with the poor, and putting others' needs before my own, being deeply invested in the community around me.

But day after day, I find myself earning a paycheck, putting my hours, sweeping the floors, walking my dog, maybe getting to the gym.

My life is kind of about my to-do list. And frankly, my to-do list is kind of about my life. It's about me. And I don't really have time to even check everything off from the day.

So how am I supposed to live the life that I believe God calls us to? And one reason why I find it hard to confess this is because I know if I confess this, but then the next day, I'm going to spend my time doing the same whole thing, commuting, working, if I know that I'm just going to have to repeat this cycle over and over, how can I confess it?

And what I didn't expect is this conversation made me emotional. Made me so, so sad that I believed in this beautiful vision of the Christian life that I didn't know how to live.

[23 : 36] And it kind of became a confessional for me as we were sitting there talking and because Connor said, yeah, that's what confession is for. That's what forgiveness is for. Admitting your weakness and your inability to live the life that you believed you has invited you to live.

But trying anyway, wanting to anyway, and you know, it actually gave you a little bit of hope. A little bit of hope that even though, yeah, tomorrow I'm going to commute to office and runs my time to dinner, gotta make dinner, maybe call my mom, I might find a little pocket to do something more faithful.

that's what forgiveness can do. It enables us to confront the things that really breathe us, that feel hopeless, that make us feel ashamed.

And in confessing them, we are free to enter new hope. Forgiveness is about so much more than just avoiding God's judgment. forgiveness is how we are reconciled back to God and invited to join God once again in the renewal of all things.

That conversation with my husband was like a confessional for me. And the book of James says, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed. 2 Corinthians says that God has given us, God's people, the ministry and message of reconciliation that we might be Christ's ambassadors.

[25 : 12] Many denominations have formal confession or reconciliation rights usually carried out by a priest. Some even consider it a healing process and think of it as the same category as ministry to the sick and the dying.

that's because your Christ's resurrection, both sin and death are defeated and will not have the last word over any of us.

There are other ways to experience confession. Maybe you have a friend on speed dial you trust and is a safe place for you when you need to get something off your chest. Maybe your therapist appointments have become a safe space for you to let go of the things that make you feel shame. There's a podcast called The Confessional from Nadia Boltz-Weber which this is going to be my plug for the Women's Community Group next weekend because we're reading one of her books. But this podcast is one where Nadia Boltz-Weber interviews people who have done really incredible things and gives them a space, a compassionate space to confront the effects of their sin on their own lives and the minds of others.

[26 : 26] And in her first episode she shares a story. The story is kind of framing why she wanted to do this podcast and I wanted to share it with you this morning. It's a pretty long and vivid story so it closing your eyes helps you imagine the scene.

You're invited to do that but I'm not going to tell you to close your eyes. In 1992 when I was newly sober I sat in a tiny New York apartment with a woman with advanced AIDS while I fidgeted with the papers on which I had handwritten all my sins.

It was the fit of twelve steps required of me to stop being such a drunk mess. And I was so filled with shame about my past that the only reason I trusted her to hear my moral inventory was that I was certain she'd not be alive eight or nine weeks later.

She offered me some tea and after placing a red cup of salsa next to me she took her seat on the worn easy chair from which she listened to me tell her about all the shit I've done.

Excuse my language. Anna sat there kind-faced and patient. Her breath rattled in and out of her lungs as my list of affairs crimes and betrayals rattled out of mine.

[27 : 50] I'd been terrified of her judgment but she held my confession with nothing but an easy compassion and that compassion softened everything in me enough that I could see the truth of my wrongdoing with even more clarity.

I'd actually added some things in the moment that I'd been too afraid to write down before and when I finished she adjusted her oxygen tube and just said let it go girl that shit is in the past now so you can stop bringing it with you into the present.

Her compassion moved the needle from me in a way her disgust never could have and for that I will always be grateful.

when Jesus tells the paralytic to stand up and take his mat the Greek word there for stand up is the same one used later in Mark when the women are going to the tomb looking for Jesus and a man says you're looking for Jesus the one who is crucified he has been raised that word he has been raised is the same Mark's doing this on purpose this is resurrection language the compassion of God that we find when we confess our sins and receive forgiveness enables us to walk in resurrection life in goodness of life and to join God in the renewal of all things which is what we like to do here so as we do week after week I'm going to leave you with a challenge and an invitation my challenge is this it might be obvious but might be heard so far I'm trying to spend some time confessing your sins to God that might feel strange if it's not part of your practice give it a shot knowing that God is full of compassion and if it feels more comfortable maybe confess with a friend or someone else that you trust to listen with compassion and an invitation we're about to enter into a time of communion and during the liturgy there's an opportunity for us to confess our sins and receive reassurance of forgiveness

I invite you to simply pay attention to this part pay attention to the words pay attention to what God's up to do will and ■ to out