



# LIFE-PROVOKING CONTROVERSY

Catalog No. 1107

Mark 2:1-12

Sixth Message

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November 16th, 1997

In the opening chapter of the gospel of Mark we have noted the extraordinary magnetism of Jesus during the initial days of his ministry. His popularity spread like wildfire throughout Galilee and beyond. The rippling effect of his ministry was making waves even as far away as Jerusalem. Jesus' announcement of the arrival of the kingdom of God, and the radical reordering of the nation of Israel around himself, made a deep impression on everyone he came in contact with. But the things that were evoking popularity in Galilee provoked controversy and threat in Jerusalem. As a result, a delegation of scribes was sent from the capital to discredit Jesus' ministry in Galilee. Mark describes the escalation of this conflict in five controversial stories, beginning in 2:1 and extending through to 3:6. Each story intensifies the claims and challenges of Jesus. The opposition is so threatened by this that two opposing political parties, the Pharisees and the Herodians, traditional enemies, now plot together as to how they might kill Jesus (3:6). So the cross casts its first shadow in Mark's gospel.

Part of being a disciple of Jesus involves confrontation and controversy. Sometimes this comes as a surprise to young Christians. We take the name of the supreme Peacemaker into our hearts only to discover that when we proclaim him publicly, people react with heated emotion, and instead of bringing peace we stir up controversy. As Christians, we need to be controversial, but we must be careful that it is controversy over the right issues. Oftentimes we can be controversial over the wrong issues, or controversial merely for the sake of being controversial. When we do this we bring damage to the kingdom of God and the world writes us off as narrow minded, dogmatic and divisive.

In the next few weeks I want to look at the true nature of these controversies that surrounded Jesus. What exactly were the issues that provoked such heated opposition to him? And how did he bring these things into the light and respond to them? In the end, we will discover that Jesus did not shun controversy; he entered into it head-on. If there was any question about the lines of demarcation at the beginning of his ministry, they were razor sharp by the end. Jesus always pressed people to make a decision; neutrality was not an option.

Last week we observed how Jesus remained focused on his primary calling of preaching, refusing to be swayed off course by the pressure of popularity. We saw that he left Capernaum for a lengthy preaching

tour throughout Galilee. Today we find him home again in Capernaum.

## I. The Faith of Friends (2:1-5)

**And when He had come back to Capernaum several days afterward, it was heard that He was at home. And many were gathered together, so that there was no longer room, even near the door; and He was speaking the word to them. And they came, bringing to Him a paralytic, carried by four men. And being unable to get to Him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above Him; and when they had dug an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic was lying. And Jesus seeing their faith said to the paralytic, "My child, your sins are forgiven" (NASB).**

After Jesus' preaching tour in Galilee, word quickly spread that he was back home in Capernaum. The crowds arrive in such numbers that they fill the house and overflow out the through door. In the midst of them we observe Jesus, "speaking the word to them." What a beautiful sight that must have been! A rabbi with authority in his teaching, yet totally accessible to the crowds, welcoming all into his (or Peter's) home.

As Jesus was speaking, four unnamed men,<sup>1</sup> hearing that he had arrived back in Capernaum, place their lame friend on a *pallet* ("the word denotes a poor man's pallet or mattress"<sup>2</sup>) and carry him to the house where Jesus is teaching. But by the time they arrive, the place is already so packed that people are spilling out into the street. Sadly, no one makes room for the paralytic. But these men will not be deterred. They make their way up the outside stairs and, calculating exactly where Jesus is standing below, start burrowing through the roof. "The roof was probably formed by beams and rafters across which matting, branches and twigs, covered by earth trodden hard, were laid."<sup>3</sup> Looking up through the dust and debris falling all about him, through the newly opened "skylight" actually, Jesus sees the man dangling from the roof, being lowered down by ropes. While others are having their ears tickled by Jesus' teaching, here is a man who is seeking one touch from the Lord—and he won't be denied. Humbly, the man allows himself to be let down in the sight of all, exposing his paralysis and his helplessness for everyone to see. The scene strikingly resembles that of a body being lowered into a tomb.

When access to Jesus is denied through the normal

channels, real friends (four in number, perhaps an allusion to what the “four” newly chosen disciples are supposed to be doing) find another way to break in. If you have faith, you don’t have to get in line or take a number to have Jesus minister to you. Jesus seeing *their* faith (perhaps the faith of all five), gives the lame man more than he sought: he grants him the eternal gift. With deep affection, Jesus says, “My child, your sins are forgiven.” The man received not physical healing, but eternal life, forgiveness<sup>4</sup> of sin that carries him into the age to come.

This miracle heightens Jesus’ claims beyond the mere offering of signs that the Messianic age was near: He is offering the very reality itself. What a response this must have evoked! Jesus is offering the gift that could only be bestowed by the priests, at the temple, through sacrifice. Now forgiveness of sin is being offered in Galilee, not Jerusalem; in a home, not the temple; by a carpenter, not a priest; and by a mere word, not a sacrifice. Jesus could hardly have been more controversial.

The scribes feel compelled to step in.

## II. The Controversy: “Who can forgive sins?” (2:6-7)

**But there were some of the scribes sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, “Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?”**

At this stage in the drama we learn that a delegation of scribes sent from Jerusalem is also present at the meeting. Tom Wright explains that when we understand the claims of Jesus, “we are in a better position to understand why the scribes came down from Jerusalem to discredit Jesus already in Galilee. His whole ministry there was already undermining the absolute claims of their city and the basis for its control, the temple. He was bringing all the temple offered, thereby replacing and making redundant, Israel’s greatest symbol.”<sup>5</sup>

If you observe carefully, you will find that it is the scribes, not the paralytic, who take center stage in the story. The account turns around these men. Unlike the paralytic, they respond not with faith, but with secret reasonings, a critical spirit that subjects everything in life to their rigid interpretations. They reason in their hearts, “Blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but the One, even God?” Their question is utterly orthodox. They make a clear reference to Isaiah: “I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake; I will not remember your sins” (Isa 43:25).<sup>6</sup>

Their theology is entirely orthodox. Rightly applied, Jesus’ pronouncement, “My child, your sins are forgiven,” is blasphemy, the penalty for which was death by stoning (Lev 24:15-16). “Blasphemy!” the scribes thought. But did not have the courage to say a word. The debate was carried on in the secrecy of their own hearts.

But it is a dangerous thing to reason in your heart in the presence of Jesus.

## III. Bringing Controversy into the Light (2:8-12)

**And immediately Jesus, aware in His spirit that they were reasoning that way within themselves, said to them, “Why are you reasoning about these things in your hearts? (2:8)**

The Holy Spirit reveals to Jesus (as a prophet, not God) what the scribes are thinking. Jesus brings their secret debate right out into the open, addressing their question with a question of his own. Verse 9:

**“Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven’; or to say, ‘Arise, and take up your pallet and walk’? (2:9)**

Of course, it would be much easier to offer the man forgiveness, because forgiveness can’t be verified. It’s a harder thing to do, but an easier thing to say. So Jesus continues, verse 10:

**“But in order 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, take up your pallet and go home.” And he rose and immediately took up the pallet and went out in the sight of all; so that they were all amazed and were glorifying God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this.” (2:10-12)**

Jesus heats up the controversy. If the claim to “forgive sins” appears blasphemous, what would they think when he called himself the “Son of Man”? “Son of Man” was a popular title applied by first century Jews to Israel’s Messiah. The term comes from the book of Daniel. In a vision, the prophet saw “one like a Son of Man” coming through the clouds to have dominion over the whole earth, one who would deal with Israel’s enemies and establish an eternal kingdom (Dan 7:13-14). Jesus leaves no room for neutrality. He claims to *be* the Son of Man, God’s unique representative who has the authority to forgive sins. Daniel’s prophecy is being fulfilled before the very eyes of his enemies. No wonder there was controversy. Everything which the scribes held dear was being set aside.

And as a sign of Jesus’ authority to forgive sins, he heals the man. It is possible, though we can’t be sure, that the man’s paralysis may have been caused by sin. Not all sickness is due to sin, of course (John 9:2-3), but it is true that sin can cripple. The shame and guilt of our sinful habits can wrap around us with tenacious tentacles that weaken the will and cripple the spirit. That innocent freedom and playful openness which we once exuded is strangled in the grip of shame. Our lives close in. The simple good we wish to do is no longer in our ability to do. Gradually, we become a heavy weight for others to carry. But all it takes is one word from Jesus and the paralytic is set free. The man immediately rises up, takes up the mattress that moments earlier bore his crippled body, and leaves in the presence of all. The crowd, which would not make way for him to enter, has no trouble making room for him to leave. As he ex-

its through the door he hears their cry of amazement ringing in his ears, "We have never seen anything like this."

The miracle has brought the controversy into the light. It forces the scribes to radically reconsider their whole theological system. What tension Jesus created! His claims appear blasphemous, but his life-giving power is undeniable. What can the scribes do? This life-provoking controversy threatens the very fabric of their theology. The lines are drawn, clear as day, and the scribes must choose. They cannot remain neutral. And we cannot remain neutral, either.

#### **IV. Bringing Controversy Into the Light of Today**

The controversy continues today. Our story, which brings us right into the center of theology to the very essence of the kingdom of God, raises three questions: Who is Jesus? How do we gain access to him? And, What impact will he have on our lives?

##### **A. Who is Jesus?**

Is he a rabbi? Yes. But no rabbi ever taught like this. A prophet like Elijah, with divine intuition and healing powers? Yes. But what prophet claimed the authority to forgive sins? A king? David's heir? Yes. But Jesus pushed his claims beyond all that. He claimed to be the Son of Man, the very One whom Daniel saw in his vision:

**"I kept looking in the night visions,  
And behold, with the clouds of heaven  
One like a Son of Man was coming,  
And He came up to the Ancient of Days  
And was presented before Him.  
And to Him was given dominion,  
Glory and a kingdom,  
That all the peoples, nations, and men of every lan-  
guage  
Might serve Him.  
His dominion is an everlasting dominion  
Which will not pass away;  
And His kingdom is one  
Which will not be destroyed."** (Dan 7:13-14)

Here is a man in heaven, vested with all the authority that belongs to God, the One who will give the kingdom to the saints (Dan 7:18). We aren't allowed to water down this One's claims. And if they are true, then a new age is born. What was once orthodox religion is no longer legitimate. When God moves ahead in history, he expects us to move with him. But a move of this magnitude is very threatening. Israel's exile is over, finished, but so is her temple, her sacrifices and her priests.

When John Calvin, the great sixteenth century reformer, tried to recover these basic Christian doctrines, he became a tremendous threat to the Catholic church. Calvin had a school in Geneva for training pastors and theologians. He knew that the ordination papers for many of the pastors he trained would be their death cer-

tificates. Most of these courageous men were sent to France to work under the name Huguenots, and many of them faced persecution, loss of property, and death. But Calvin would not water down the claims of Christ. Neither should we.

That then was the first controversy: Jesus is the Son of Man and nothing less.

The second controversy surrounds the question, How do we gain access to Jesus?

##### **B. How do we gain access to him?**

We do not have to stand in line to gain access to Jesus. There is no need to make a pilgrimage to a holy city. There are no temple steps to ascend, no intermediaries to kneel before, no priests to beg permission of. In fact, there is no protocol to observe whatsoever when we want to gain access to Jesus. Woe to the church when it erects barriers between the sinner and Christ. Over this we dare be controversial! We should tear down such barriers with the same vigor and force which those four men used to tear the roof off Peter's house.

These men transformed Peter's home into a hospital. What a good image this is for the church! I liken the church to a M.A.S.H. unit located behind enemy lines. The job of disciples is to find the wounded, men and women, boys and girls with open sores and perpetual pain, and place them on stretchers and carry them to Jesus. Two things are required for this. First, it takes the hard work and tenacious resolve of friends to peel back the layers of debris that prevent us from seeing Jesus. That may take time. A good counselor or a close friend can do this for us. Sometimes it is a crisis that parts the layers of darkness, permitting us at last to see clearly. The second thing that is required is this: once they have broken through, it takes a willingness on the part of the one who is sick to allow his paralysis to be publicly exposed. Notice that the paralytic allowed himself to be carried, and lowered into the tomb, in the presence of all. Healing occurs in community.

Have you ever been admitted to a hospital? Lying on a gurney, dressed in a paper thin gown that's open all the way down the back, a couple of knots removed from nakedness, can be a humiliating experience. All around you people are busily working, dressed in their uniforms, clipboards in hand, stethoscopes at the ready, but you are lying helpless on your pallet, near naked, exposed before all. But you know that this is the way to health and wholeness again, otherwise you wouldn't be there in the first place. Healing occurs in community.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *Life Together*, has a word for us here. He writes:

He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone. It may be that Christians, notwithstanding corporate worship, common prayer, and all their fellowship in service, may still be left to their loneliness. The final break-through to fellowship does not occur, because,

though they have fellowship with one another as believers and as devout people, they do not have fellowship as the undevout, as sinners. The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy. The fact is that we are sinners!

James says, "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed" (5:16). Why is it that it is often easier for us to confess our sins to God than to a brother? God is holy and sinless, He is a just judge of evil and the enemy of all disobedience. But a brother is sinful as we are. He knows from his own experience the dark night of secret sin. Why should we not find it easier to go to a brother than to the holy God? But if we do, we must ask ourselves whether we have not often been deceiving ourselves with our confession of sin to God, whether we have not rather been confessing our sins to ourselves and also granting ourselves absolution. And is not the reason perhaps for our countless relapses and the feebleness of our Christian obedience to be found precisely in the fact that we are living on self-forgiveness and not a real forgiveness? Self-forgiveness can never lead to a breach with sin; this can be accompanied only by the judging and pardoning Word of God itself... Who can give us the certainty that, in the confession and the forgiveness of our sins, we are not dealing with ourselves but with the living God? God gives us this certainty through our brother. Our brother breaks the circle of self-deception. A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person. As long as I am by myself in the confession of my sins everything remains in the dark, but in the presence of a brother the sin has to be brought into the light... As the open confession of my sins to a brother insures me against self-deception, so, too, the assurance of forgiveness becomes fully certain to me only when it is spoken by a brother in the name of God.<sup>7</sup>

We want this church be a safe place for sinners to expose their sins.

### C. What does He offer?

And in the dark tomb we find Jesus present in all his power and tenderness. He looks at you, and with a sea of love in his eyes, says, "My child, your sins are forgiv-

en." But be clear about this: forgiveness did not merely restore the relationship between the man and God, it restored his ability to walk. This word "walk" will become a significant metaphor in New Testament theology. Paul picks it up in Romans 6, and says:

**Do you know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead though the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (Rom 6:3-4).**

Once our sins are forgiven we are united with the life of Christ both in his death and resurrection; and the life that raised Christ now inhabits us with the ability to walk in newness of life. The gift of forgiveness frees us from the paralysis of sin once and for all. No habit, no sin, no addiction need maintain its grip on us. No generational sin, no matter how powerful, need be passed down from one generation to the next. Now we are called to rise up, carry our pallet, and walk in newness of life.

This is how believers force a hostile world to face the controversial Christ. Like the early Christians, we do not merely repeat Christ's radical claims, we also in our transparency, like the paralytic in this story, become walking miracles of his healing life.

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1. These unnamed men form part of a group of what some scholars call the "little people" in Mark. They serve as foils to the disciples and examples of faith. See Stephen H. Smith, *A Lion with Wings: A Narrative-Critical Approach to Mark's Gospel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) 76-80.

2. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge UP, 1959) 97.

3. V. Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan, 1952), quoted by Cranfield, 97.

4. The word "forgiveness" has already been used four times by Mark (1:18, 20, 31, 34), conveying the idea of "giving permission, setting free," etc. This instance marks the climactic usage, the "setting free" from sin.

5. See N. T. Wright's excellent work, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 434-435.

6. See Richard Schnegg, S.J., *Isaiah in the Gospel of Mark, I-VIII* (Biblical Press, 1994) 69-73. Schnegg carries the argument further, into Isaiah 43, to show that the next verses describe a legal debate with God and the princes of Israel, much as Jesus does with the scribes in this text.

7. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Harper San Francisco, 1954) 110 ff.