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Mark 2:1-12

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POWER OVER PARALYSIS

Today we'll look at a powerful story in the gospel of Mark in which a man, faced with adversity and seemingly impossible needs, meets Jesus and receives far more than he could have ever imagined. It's a story with themes that go right to the core of issues we all face. I know I do.

For the past several years, my life has been filled with a series of difficult, painful challenges in my family. Many times, I have felt totally overwhelmed, and I have often found myself wanting to be rid of them and free to have an easier life. At the same time, and for as long as I can remember, my inner life has involved an ongoing struggle with a self-critical spirit. I always felt terrible that I didn't measure up to the person I thought I should be, and as a result felt like I was dragging around this extra burden. I thought it was just part of me that couldn't be changed. But something happened to me this past January that I never would have expected, and praise God I am now free of that self-critical spirit! More on that in a moment.

Our passage today speaks about facing needs honestly, engaging with people to overcome obstacles to help, showing faith with daring actions and most of all gaining a fresh vision of Jesus. The story falls neatly into three short scenes, the first of which involves Jesus and some very determined men.

Scene I: Faith of friends

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, not even near the door; and He was speaking the word to them. (Mark 2:1-2)

Before the band of men enters the scene, Mark sets the stage for us. Notice three things:

First, Jesus was "at home" in Capernaum. Matthew 4:12-13 tells us that sometime earlier Jesus had left His home town of Nazareth and moved to the north end of the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum, an area where some of the first disciples lived. The house was probably like hundreds of poor men's houses in the region at that time, consisting of one story with a low flat roof that was accessed by an outside stairway. Jesus had been in the area before, had healed many people of various diseases, and hordes of people had started following Him everywhere. So He had left and spent some significant time preaching the gospel in many of the surrounding villages. Now He had returned.

Second, the home was crowded, actually overflowing with people. We would say "the place was packed." Somehow, word had gotten out that Jesus had returned and the crowd had too. We will see later that the crowd included many Pharisees and teachers of the Law who were apparently there to investigate Jesus.

The third thing Mark tells us is that Jesus was speaking the word to them, explaining the gospel, and the crowd of people was silent, listening intently. Watch for how that changes by the end of the story.

Now the band of determined men enters the scene:

And they came, bringing to Him a paralytic, carried by four men. 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. (Mark 2:3-4)

These four men could not get their paralyzed friend to Jesus because the house was overflowing with people who evidently made no effort to make a path for the needy man. So do they give up and try another day? No! They head up the outside stairway to the roof. They've already had to carry him perhaps all the way from his home, and were probably more than a little worn out. And it would not have been easy to carry a paralyzed adult male up to the roof, nor to make a hole in the roof large enough for him. But they were not about to let a few little obstacles prevent them from getting the paralytic to Jesus! Mark includes no words from them – their actions speak loudly enough. Look at the repeated "they" and the verbs Mark uses to describe their determination to get the man to Jesus: *they* came, *they* brought and carried the paralytic, *they* removed the roof, *they* dug an opening, *they* let down the pallet and later Mark says it is *their* faith that moves Jesus to help the man.

Mark highlights the efforts of these daring men to emphasize that without them the scene does not occur. They dare to associate with a weak man, dare to do the difficult and the unorthodox, dare to interrupt Jesus's important meeting and dare to bear whatever cost there might be. They did not simply "pray about it," but they put some feet to their prayers and took some risks to overcome the obstacles before them. Particularly striking to us is their act of removing the roof and lowering the man into the midst of the crowded room. This "unroofing" risked the ire of the homeowner and would have been no easy task since the roofs of the time were generally made of earth, grass, clay and tiles. Further, with lots of people underneath, they would have created quite a stir as first a small hole appeared, then it grew larger and larger, with more and more dust and debris falling on the heads of those below.

The paralytic risks something, too. Humbly he allows himself to be let down in the sight of all, exposing his helplessness for all to see. Ever felt that vulnerable? Ever exposed *your* helplessness and anxiously waited to see if, in return, you would be loved, scorned or – even worse – ignored? For the paralytic, the lowering may have even felt like being lowered into a tomb, especially since the crowd below might completely reject him. Mostly, though, we wonder what Jesus thought of the interruption to his teaching. Verse 5:

And Jesus seeing their faith said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Jesus does not rebuke them for either the timing of their interruption or the fact that they came directly to Him, without a priest. He sees only the faith of these men. Some people would say, "You can't 'see' faith. Faith isn't in the physical, visible realm." But it is. Scripture calls it the "evidence of things not seen." The faith of the friends in this scene brought the paralyzed man to Jesus. Likewise, when life gets to be too hard for us, it is often the prayers and work of friends that enable us to find the help we need from Christ.

In response to the faith of the men, Jesus utters one simple, compassionate phrase, but not the phrase they were hoping for! They were

hoping for physical healing – they got spiritual forgiveness. Jesus knew in His spirit that the heart of this lame man’s problem was sin, not physical paralysis, so Jesus moved to address the deeper need. It is of little use to cure symptoms unless you cure the disease, right? That is His greatest desire in dealing with us also.

I mentioned earlier my change back in January. Like the paralytic, friends got it started. With all the chronic struggles my family has had, my wife and I decided to act on the advice of four friends and devote an entire evening to concerted prayer for our home, especially our kids. With two of our four friends present, we moved from room to room, praying for family members and for the Lord to release us from anything that was hindering our lives. At one point, my wife and friends prayed specifically that if there was a spirit of condemnation that was deceiving me, it would be removed. Over the next few days, we found that God did not remove our physical problems, though we did notice reduced friction in our home, and I began to notice a purer heart in me, as well as increased sensitivity to the spiritual forces that aim to harm us. But the most significant change was something deeper – the spirit of failure and self-criticism that I thought was just a part of me and could never be gone was in fact gone. Even when I would start to go down a self-condemning path of thought, I found something like a strong barrier there to prevent it. Since then, I have felt free to be more engaged as a dad, more encouraging of my team at work and more actively involved at church. That new freedom was not the physical or other relief that was the original impetus behind our prayer evening – like the five friends, the change in me was deeper and unexpected. While God sometimes heals our physical hurts, He cares even more about our deeper needs.

So let’s get back to our paralytic friend, who has just been told his sins are forgiven. This is incredibly significant to both the man and the crowd. To “sin” simply means to miss the mark. It refers to things done wrong, in violation of God’s ways – something we have all done. To “forgive” means to send away, to let go, to disregard. In other words, Jesus is telling the paralytic *all the things you have ever done wrong are put away permanently and you are fully restored to a positive, right relationship with me*. What an incredible statement! As Warren Wiersbe summarizes, “Forgiveness is the greatest miracle that Jesus ever performs. It meets the greatest need; it costs the greatest price; and it brings the greatest blessing and the most lasting results.”¹

In a moment, we’ll see one specific reaction from the crowd. But generally speaking, Jesus’s statement must have been astounding to everyone present, because they knew from the Old Testament that only God could forgive sins, and that was done through rituals at the temple in Jerusalem involving priests as intermediaries, not in a house in a fishing village with a carpenter. In fact, Old Testament Law clearly specified death by stoning as punishment for anyone who claimed to forgive sins, other than God. So in a fraction of a second these people were presented with either something incredible (if God was in their midst) or something blasphemous (if Jesus was not God). What would these people do with this claim, especially the leaders who had traveled so far to investigate who this Jesus was? The next few verses give us the answer as the scene zooms in on the scribes.

Scene II: Scribes and Jesus

But some of the scribes were sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, “Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mark 2:6-7)

Mark now tells us that included in the crowd were “scribes,” and Luke’s parallel account tells us that these men had come from all over Israel. These were men learned in the Mosaic law and in the sacred

writings, but they tended to be nitpickers and scooges, often missing the spirit of things in trying to make sure the laws were observed.

Mark says the scribes were “sitting” and “reasoning.” There is no mention of them moving to help the needy man, or being impressed by the dedication of the four friends. And their reasoning was going on “in their hearts,” not aloud among themselves. Matthew’s account says they were “thinking evil.” These scribes were there to pick flaws in Jesus’s teaching, and were probably jealous of His popularity and power. Their critical, secret reasonings are in stark contrast to the supportive, public faith of the four friends. But they didn’t speak their thoughts aloud, so Jesus didn’t know, right? Verse 8:

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? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven’; or to say, ‘Get up, and pick up your pallet and walk?’ (Mark 2:8-9)

Jesus grasps their reaction “immediately” without them saying a word, just like He grasped the paralytic’s deepest need. I don’t think this is Jesus being omniscient (all-knowing God) but able to perceive with a full gift of discernment. It is worth noting here that our thoughts cannot be hidden from God either. He knows us so well! This can be amazingly encouraging when we realize He knows us not so He can catch us in wrongs (like scribes) but so He can show compassion and forgive.

The scribes have two questions in their thoughts (from verse 7), which Jesus answers with two questions of his own. The scribes ask, “Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming” (claiming to be God when He is not). And, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” They’re basically asking, “Who is this Jesus really?” Jesus responds first with a general question (why are you reasoning?), then with a specific question: “Which is easier to *say*?” – not, which is easier to *do*? – “to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven’; or to say, ‘Get up, and pick up your pallet and walk?’”

Obviously, it was easier to *say* your sins are forgiven, since that couldn’t be visibly proven. As a colleague puts it, Jesus is basically saying to these scribes, “You know that I’ve already healed men and women in this city and all over Galilee and that I’ve drawn a crowd wherever I’ve gone. But this is the first time you’ve heard me declare someone’s sins forgiven. And you know what that means: it means that I’m claiming that the kingdom of God is being established in and through me. We both know that it’s an easy thing to claim but a hard thing to prove, but what really troubles you is that it looks like I’m proving it, which poses a threat to your authority and your way of life.”²

In fairness, as Wiersbe points out, “These religious leaders had every right to investigate the ministry of this new teacher, since the religious life of the nation was under their supervision. But they should have come with open minds and hearts, seeking truth, instead of with critical minds, seeking heresy. They also could have learned that Jesus Christ of Nazareth is indeed the Saviour with authority to forgive sins—and their own sins could have been forgiven. What an opportunity they missed when they came to the meeting with a critical spirit instead of a repentant heart!”³

But the story does not end here. The paralytic is still lying at Jesus’s feet, and Jesus has something more to do.

Scene III: Jesus heals the paralytic

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, get up, pick up your pallet and go home.” And he got up and immediately picked up the pallet and went out in the sight of everyone,

so that they were all amazed and were glorifying God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this.” (Mark 2:10-12)

Having done the so-called easy thing, Jesus now does the so-called hard thing: He commands the paralyzed man to walk. But first Jesus heats up the conflict with the scribes even further by using the term “Son of Man” for Himself. It was a popular title applied by first century Jews to Israel’s Messiah, and comes from the book of Daniel where the prophet saw One like a Son of Man coming to have dominion over the whole earth, deal with Israel’s enemies and establish an eternal kingdom (Dan. 7:13-14). Jesus is again claiming to be God! To finish the matter, Jesus goes on to heal the man of his physical paralysis – an action that He says shows He has authority to forgive sins, not just heal illnesses. Again, it would have been shocking for the people to hear Him say that He had the right and power to forgive sins and to see this confirmation.

Jesus now moves our third scene to its climax by giving the second of His two commands to the paralytic, in three parts: “get up, pick up your pallet and go home.” That seems straightforward, except why “go home?” While elsewhere Scripture indicates Jesus wanted some healings to be kept fairly quiet, I think there may be another reason He sends this man home – namely as a gift to the family who knew him best, probably had endured the most in caring for him over the years and would have been the most grateful to see him healed and forgiven.⁴

The man takes three parallel actions in response: he got up, picked up his pallet and went out in the sight of everyone. Matthew and Luke say he “went home,” but Mark chooses to emphasize that everyone watched him go out. When he went out, the crowd at last made room for him!

Our passage ends with the reactions of some of the characters. Mark emphasizes the reaction of the crowd, which he says was “amazed” and “glorifying God.” “Amazed” literally means “out of their minds” – it’s the word from which we get our word “ecstasy.” The crowd was so taken with what had happened that they noticed nothing else around them. It may have been a superficial amazement for many, though, since not long afterward many people stopped following Jesus (John 6:66). Nevertheless, they glorified God and marveled, saying, “We have never seen anything like this.” Before, they had seen Jesus perform amazing healings and teach with unusual authority. What was amazing and new now was that Jesus showed unparalleled understanding of human nature *and* forgave the sins that were at the core of people’s lives. Incredible!

Summary and application

Let’s now consider some applications by taking a closer look at the three main points of our passage:

The first and primary point is *not* that the paralyzed man got what he came for (healing) – it’s that **Jesus showed the power and authority to not just heal illness but to forgive sins, providing healing at the deepest level of need.** The actions in the story confirm this structurally, forming a chiasm with Jesus’s action to forgive at the center:

- A People hear the word
- B Jesus at home with crowd; paralytic not seen/present
- C Paralytic is carried on pallet by friends
- D Paralytic is lowered down
- E Jesus sees paralytic’s paralysis
- F Friends love actively and publicly
- X Jesus forgives sins**
- F’ Scribes sit still and reason inwardly
- E’ Jesus heals paralytic’s paralysis
- D’ Paralytic rises up
- C’ Paralytic carries pallet
- B’ Paralytic told to go home; paralytic seen by all
- A’ People speak their amazement and praise

The man and his friends wanted healing (his visible need) for him, just like we all want our visible issues like health, finances and relationships to be healthy. But Jesus perceived the man had a deeper need, and He moved to address it by putting away his sins completely.⁵ This kind of forgiveness is found in Christ alone and releases us from the burden of sin. It liberates us in the deepest parts of our being and enables the Spirit to rule in us and produce fruit for living: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). Nothing and no one else deals effectively with sin like Christ. Our healing begins with our relationship with God.

Not surprisingly, though, we often want to be physically healed, too. But though we are free in Christ to *walk spiritually*, God may or may not choose to heal us physically, and His choice is not dependent on whether we have enough faith. Paul had plenty of faith, yet God chose not to heal him of a recurring physical ailment Paul referred to as his “thorn in the flesh” so he would not grow conceited and would learn that God’s grace was sufficient for him and God’s power was perfected in his weakness (2 Cor. 12:7-10). God doesn’t make life easy, He just makes newness of life possible. He does not always heal, but He always forgives.

The second main point is that **transparency and receiving the support of others are key to the process of finding help from Jesus.** Mark emphasizes this by highlighting the determined support of the four friends and the paralytic’s willingness to accept help and show his need publicly. Scripture consistently exhorts the people of God to live actively in community and to bear one another’s burdens (Gal. 6:2; James 5:16), all of which begins with being open about our needs. When we are silent about our sin (Psalm 32) and the other things that can paralyze us, we cannot get to Jesus – we just waste away. We need honesty from ourselves and support from others to help us find Jesus’s restoration and forgiveness.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *Life Together*, puts it this way in referring to lack of transparency about sin:

“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 breakthrough 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!”⁶

Since we often look deeply at forgiveness and since Mark also emphasizes this second main point about community, let’s look more closely at the latter, particularly this core concept of transparency. Why is it so hard? Consider these barriers – some of the wrong ways of thinking that hinder us from being open about our needs:

- I have no needs, problems or weaknesses.
- I’m afraid I’ll be judged or rejected if I open up.
- I’m ashamed that I have the problem (and have not been able to fix it).
- Telling others about my problem won’t help.
- My sins are so bad that God could never forgive me.
- I’m not sure what my problem really is.
- I’m the only one that has this problem. (This may be one of Satan’s greatest lies to isolate us from community.)

- I probably deserve whatever has happened to me.
- I got myself into this; I should be the one to get myself out of it.
- No one really cares anyway.

What can help us overcome these barriers? The solution begins with one word: honesty. Dare to be seen for who you are – a sinner with needs bigger than you can handle alone. Admitting the truth can be very hard, but Scripture tells us the alternative is dangerous. Proverbs says that “Pride goes before destruction” (Prov. 16:18), and 1 John 1 reminds us, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves ... and we make God out to be a liar.” If you need to admit some sin or other deep need, I suggest you begin by telling one person, preferably a mature believer who will be supportive and not judgmental. I have a good friend in this church body who, after many years of marriage and raising kids, came face to face with the fact that he had a serious addiction. He eventually began what has since become a tremendous recovery by admitting his addiction to his wife and a few men, who have stood with him and encouraged his involvement in recovery programs. That first step of admitting his need was *huge*.

Another thing that can help us overcome barriers to transparency is to remember Scriptural truths like these:

- Jesus said, “I did not come to judge the world but to save the world.” (John 12:47)
- “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Rom. 3:23)
- “No temptation has overtaken you except that which is common to man...” (1 Cor. 10:13)
- “Where this is no guidance the people fall, but in abundance of counselors there is victory.” (Prov. 11:14)

And we can of course remember that positive things can happen when we are open about our needs. Others in the body can use their gifts to support us and help us. We may even get a surprise solution that gives great glory to God. And opening up is liberating – and may even be contagious – because we find we don’t have to be perfect after all.

The third and final main point of this passage is that **we can learn a lot from the characters in this story**. Ask yourself which of them resonate with you:

A. Take the paralytic – You may not be physically paralyzed and unable to move, but you may have chronic problems that you have not been able to solve on your own. The paralytic in the story had to be willing to expose his true self – at perhaps his most vulnerable point – to Jesus, the scribes, his friends and others from the town. Are you at that place? Do you need to be honest with yourself, with Jesus and with some people you trust about some deep aspect of your life where you really need help, even if you don’t understand it fully? Maybe a painful and paralyzed relationship, a crippling financial situation or a place inside where you’ve allowed sin to take root and even rule you at some level? Do you want to go to Jesus with that need?

B. How about the four friends? – They took time to see the lame man’s need, and were willing to associate with him, stand with him in front of others and even break through barriers to get him the help he needed. Are you like that? Do you want to help needy people get to Jesus with their needs? Maybe God is inviting you right now to care for a needy person you know with a kind of love that’s new to you – a love that is daring and determined to help others. I know a young man who is partially paralyzed inside. He can move his arms and legs like most people, but inside there is something keeping him from being

fully functional in life. Oh that the Lord would send him “carrying friends” who would help Him find the deep help of Jesus! How do we do that? It looks different for each of us – we simply use the gifts we have. I know a woman who has the gift of faith to pray. I know people with the gift of service, who regularly offer themselves to help with others’ physical needs. There’s the gift of wisdom – speaking a word of truth into a situation – and many other gifts we could talk about. Just use what gifts you have!

C. Maybe you’re like the crowd – In the opening scene, they were preoccupied with themselves and did not let the needy man enter the gathering, and at the end they glorified God but perhaps did so just superficially. Do you need to hear God’s voice today, inviting you to take greater notice of the needy around you? Do you need to move beyond superficial worship, and become more like the psalmist who wrote of seeking just one thing – to dwell in the Lord’s presence all the days of his life (Psalm 27:4)?

D. Or maybe you honestly see yourself as a scribe – You know all the right religious jargon and are zealous for religion that looks “right” externally but not for the power, presence and love of God. Maybe this is your day to stop looking so hard for errors in others and instead look for God’s presence. Or perhaps you’re stuck in an intellect-only kind of faith, trying to figure out every problem according to some formula, instead of coming to God directly. Maybe you need to confess Jesus for who He is – God Himself – even if doing that might turn your life upside down.

E. Or maybe you’re just drawn to be like Jesus – to mirror His compassion, His willingness to be interrupted by the needs of others and His focus on meeting the deepest needs a person has.

F. And as a bonus, consider the homeowner – He did not let the confines of his small house deter him from opening it for the Lord’s use, and he got to witness a miracle that day. Do we do the same with our homes and limited resources?

There is a lot of practical truth in this simple but profound story. In the end, it is not just about Jesus’s power over physical paralysis but His power to put away permanently the deeper problems we have, especially our sin. And it is not just about what Jesus can do, but also about how we need to be open and involved with each other to find His help for life and eternity. God knows us and wants to go right to the heart of our problems. He just waits for us to come to Him. But often we cannot get there on our own.

“Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.” (1 Tim. 1:17, KJV)

1 Wiersbe, Warren W. *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. (Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989.)

2 Scott Grant, “A Story of Forgiveness,” a sermon delivered at Peninsula Bible Church, Palo Alto, CA, February 10, 2008.

3 Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*.

4 See also Mark 5:19.

5 This is not to suggest that there is always or even often a causal relationship between sin and physical illness or disability. See John 9:1-4.

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