

# The Provocative Grace of True Healing

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. This morning's reading is from the Gospel according to Mark, as printed in your liturgies, Mark 2.1 to 2.11.

A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come. They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them.

Some men came, bringing him a paralyzed man carried by four of them, since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd. They made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowering the mat the man was lying on.

When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, Son, your sins are forgiven. Now some of the teachers of the law were sitting there thinking to themselves, Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming.

[ 1 : 29 ] Who can forgive sins but God alone? Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this is what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, Why are you thinking these things?

Which is easier, to say to this paralyzed man, your sins are forgiven, or to say, get up and take your mat and walk? But I want to show you that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.

So he said to the man, I tell you, get up and take your mat and go home. He got up, took his mat, and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone, and they praised God, saying, We have never seen anything like this.

This is the gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ. Well, good morning, Christ Church. My name is Andrew, one of the pastors here. And I'm super thankful. Jonathan and I are super thankful to not have to preach today.

I want to just announce that we have a guest preacher coming. His name is Jesse Robinson. He comes from the prestigious Westminster Theological Seminary that me and Amy studied at.

[ 2 : 34 ] And, yeah, Jesse is a pastor now in Castro Valley. He just moved here from Virginia, what, four months ago now. What I love about Jesse is we could bond over burritos and Tim Keller.

And Jesse and his wife both have degrees in counseling, and you should know that he's actually finishing his Ph.D. at the University of Virginia on the biblical counseling movement.

And a special thing about Jesse, though, is he's really an answer to prayer for myself, for Chelsea. He's pastoring the church where we were once members, where we started dating, where a lot of our friends are still worshipping.

So we're just happy to have this ministry partnership, this connection, and looking forward to hearing this word from you, Jesse. So I'm going to invite you up. Thanks, Jesse, for being with us today. Good morning.

It is good to be here with you at Christ Church in Berkeley. So, as Andrew said, my name is Jesse Robinson. We are newly moved from Charlottesville, Virginia, where we were for eight years.

[ 3 : 42 ] I'm actually a Texan, a Texan by birth and disposition. My wife is a Californian. She went to Berkeley.

And I found that Texas probably has the most state pride of any of the states. But I've also found that California has the most provincialism of any of the states.

When I first told my wife, hey, there's this place called University of Virginia, Charlottesville, I said, what's that? What's that? It's not on the West Coast. It's not in California. So anyway, she's continued this provincialism that California is the promised land.

And so we are thrilled to finally move back to the promised land. So it's good to be here. An important thing you should know about me, I have a physical disability called cerebral palsy.

That leaves me with bad balance, a strange gait, and a good sense of humor. Although my wife would disagree about that. But one of my favorite verses in Scripture is about actually weakness, right?

[ 4 : 54 ] That weakness is one way that God expresses his love and grace for us. That he makes us weak. That in our weakness, he is strong. And so that's some of my hope this morning.

Christ Church, you're in the middle of a sermon series on the Gospel of Mark called Deny Yourself and Follow Me. So you're looking at the call of discipleship that Jesus issues us.

This morning we were looking at Mark chapter 2, verse 1 through 12. And this is one of the first healings that Mark does, that Jesus does in Mark. So let's look at what it tells us about Jesus.

If you're a note taker, here is kind of the thesis. Here's the message that God's Word gives us. Whatever the obstacles, come to Christ who truly heals us with his grace.

We're going to look at the desperate demand first for healing. The desperate demand for healing. The provocative grace for healing. And then the sacrificial authority for healing.

[ 6 : 04 ] Desperate demand, provocative grace, and sacrificial authority. Oh, before we do that, would you pray with me? Oh, Father in heaven, we do come to you because you've come to us first.

And we pray that your Spirit would come and anoint your Word. Lord, I am nothing, we are nothing, but you are everything. And so would you feed us with nothing less than Jesus.

And would you heal us, oh Lord. In Christ's name we pray. Amen. Amen. So let's jump into the story. First, the desperate demand for healing.

Mark's writing style is like a Michael Bay movie, but without the sexualization and high color saturation. It's action-packed, right? It goes from scene to scene.

Jesus appears on the scene in Mark, and immediately he says he's preaching and teaching and healing. Immediately. That's Mark's signature word. And his healing ministry immediately evokes a response.

[ 7 : 09 ] He does a couple of healings, and then the whole region is on his doorstep. Look at verse 12 on your bulletin or in your Bibles. They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door.

People are traveling from all over for healing. They're desperate. And we can understand this, right? In a world without the Americans with Disabilities Act, right?

ADA or social services. To be disabled or diseased most often meant poverty, maybe starvation, social stigma.

Maybe there's some single mother who suffers or her child suffers from something, and they hear, hey, there's a healer in town or in the next town.

And she thinks, this might be my only chance, right? We understand the demand for healing. We still have that even today. In 2004, Howard Stab, a 53-year-old self-employed contractor, learned that he had a leaking valve in his heart that required repair.

[ 8 : 25 ] And the doctors told him, untreated, this could kill you at any moment. To repair it at the nearby hospital in North Carolina, where he lived, would cost the uninsured Stab \$200,000.

He couldn't afford it. So after researching his options, Stab flew all the way across the world to a private hospital in India to get the life-saving surgery.

He risked it, all for healing. And he's not alone. This medical tourism, right? Going somewhere to get medical help. The CDC reports that millions of Americans do medical tourism every year.

That is the desperation for healing. The text gives us little details about the foreman carrying the paralyzed man. We presume they're friends, partly by the desperation to get him to Jesus.

It says in verse 4, they can't get him to Jesus because of the crowd. So they come up with an ingenious solution. If they can't do anything about the crowd, let's fix the house.

[ 9 : 36 ] Roofs in the ancient Near East were easily accessible. They were used like decks, like we use decks to eat meals, to do laundry, to cool down. And so verse 4, it says, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it.

The Greek text actually hints at a massive demolition project. The Greek is literally, they unroofed the roof. Okay, they unroofed the roof.

They're digging. And you can just imagine what underneath, what Jesus and the crowds are experiencing, right? I've preached through a lot of distractions before. You've got your kids crying, your wandering teenager who goes to the bathroom at least four times in 30 minutes.

But here, like, the ceiling is falling. You can imagine, like, dust first coming onto Jesus. And then all of a sudden, like, there's light, right? The sound. That is the desperation.

That these four felt for healing. In the last 60 years, U.S. expenditures on health have risen from 5% of the GDP to 17, 18, even 20% of our GDP.

[ 10 : 52 ] The demand for health. Why do we do that? Why are we paying so much money? Now, I don't want to get into the politics of health care, right? But it says, have you asked that?

Like, what does it tell us, the fact that we want health so bad? There's even a presumption, right, that we should be healthy. That we want health.

Have you ever asked that? We have an innate desire to be healthy, to feel good. But why? And we could draw all sorts of sociological insights about the modern mushrooming of health care.

But what strikes me is actually how biblical this instinct is. The presumption of health. Christianity speaks to this. It says that God, the creator, originally made us healthy.

We were made for health, to be whole. But then in the rebellion against him, sickness and death began to enter in. In other words, sickness is not natural.

[ 11 : 53 ] And so there's this impression that, like we have this standard that somehow that good health is what I'm living for. Or I should have. Right?

No one is really a relativist when it comes to their health. And scripture returns to that original standard over and over in the theme of healing.

God never rebukes the desire for healing. He clarifies over and over again that he is the healer. But he never shames someone or rebukes them for their desire for healing.

In fact, he invites it. The psalmist, Psalms, over and over again, invite us to pray the prayer of healing. Psalm 6-2. Heal me, O Lord, for my bones are troubled.

Christianity sometimes gets a bad wrath for being anti-body or anti-the physical. Which is just plain wrong. Right? We serve in our faith.

[ 12 : 54 ] We believe that God took up the body. In the incarnation that Jesus is God in the body. And the resurrection of Jesus is the crux of everything.

Right? That he came back in a body. That is the value of the physical. That's what motivated the Christians in the Middle Ages to start hospitals.

Right? That's a Christian invented because we value the body. We value healing. We're desperate for it. And we see this in our story. These four men, we see how God honors this.

Right? These four men have been reckless. They've caused damage to personal property. And what did Jesus do? Look at verse 5. What does Jesus call it?

It says, When Jesus saw their faith. Jesus looks at this desperation for health. And he calls it faith. Faith. Let me ask you.

[ 13 : 55 ] Where does it hurt? Where do you need healing? And it might not be physical. Google reported in 2021 that searches for how to heal were at an all-time high.

How to heal. And it went on to report, quote, We looked inward, asking the big questions like, How to be yourself? And what is my purpose? In other words, like, we need healing.

And it's not just physical. So where do you need healing? Is it depression? Is it addiction? A relationship? Your family?

Our God is a God who invites us. Invites us to be desperate and to come to him with everything that afflicts us.

That's the desperate demand for healing. Let's go to our second point, the provocative grace for healing. Verse 5 again. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, Son, your sins are forgiven.

[ 15 : 02 ] Now, this is not how we expect this story to go, right? We expect, I mean, these men have literally moved to earth to get their friend to Jesus. And then Jesus looks at him and says, Your sins are forgiven.

What? But it's provocative on so many levels, right? Jesus seems to be socially oblivious to the expectations that come into.

It's like, don't you see what this man needs? Why else is it provocative? Well, it's kind of offensive. The Jews had a kind of karmic theology about disability, right?

That either disability was God's punishment for the parent's sin, or it was punishment for some future sin that you would commit. So Jesus, are you blaming this paralyzed man for his disability?

This kind of behavior would not be permitted as PC behavior in Berkeley. Finally, it's terribly presumptive and even weird.

[ 16 : 07 ] Forgive my sins? Who do you think you are? Jesus' presumption to forgive actually fuels the conflict of the rest of the story.

And there is this strangeness of the Gospels that just rings with authenticity, right? Like, this had to have happened. No one could have thought this up. So what's going on? What is Jesus doing?

He's doing triage on this man. He's saying paralysis is not the primary problem. It is sin. And I know that's a provocative word, sin.

But biblically speaking, sin is living against the grain of how you are meant to live. It means living against God, living without God. That is what sin is.

And in a broad sense, the Scriptures say that all suffering came from this root sin. That once we disobeyed, once we rebelled against God, that everything went wrong.

[ 17 : 08 ] Sickness came in. So at the root of suffering, broadly, is this sin problem. And so if Jesus is going to heal this man, he has to go to the root, to the sin.

It would be like you going to the doctor for a stomachache, right? He could treat that symptom with a painkiller, but to do nothing else would not be doing due diligence.

What if you have stomach cancer? What if there is something behind the symptom? Jesus is offering this man not only symptom relief, but true healing.

And you can imagine the paralyzed man's narratives. Like, if I just had a whole body, then I would make it. Then I'd be happy or whole.

You know these fill-in-the-blank ambitions, right? Like, if I just did this, or if I just had this, then my life would be set. I'd just score that job or write this book.

[ 18 : 12 ] But Jesus knows that that is wrong thinking. That that will not free him. Mere physical healing is not going to fix this man's problems.

Jesus knows, and we know, that this will not work. That these things that we put our hope in, these identities, to heal us, right? What do we look to to heal us?

Is it accomplishment? Is it relationship? Relationship. Jesus knows that these will not work. They will not save you. In fact, they enslave you. Anything other than Jesus is going to enslave you.

When I was a teenager, I hated my disability. I grew up in a small town of Texas where the show Friday Night Lights might as well be a reality show. Like, that's how I can't watch that show because it's real.

It's real. And I wanted to play football so badly. It was like the measure of manhood in my town. I dreamed of being able-bodied and playing for the Dallas Cowboys, who were beating the 49ers at the time.

[ 19 : 24 ] Then I'd make it. Then I'd make it, right? But do you hear the enslavement? I wanted healing so I could prove myself in able-bodied ways, serving the cultural idols in my community, right?

Physical prowess, popularity. This paralyzed man could have had his body restored and remained enslaved. But by forgiving his sins, Jesus frees him from this narrative of self-salvation.

Stop. You need me as a healer. I am your healer. And what you need most is forgiveness. Reconciliation. What you need is God, who is healing.

This is the provocative grace of Jesus. He comes into our lives and we say, hey, I need your help with this. And Jesus says, oh, no, no, no, no, no. There is something way deeper that we need to work on.

Even though God invites our desperate demand for healing our presumption, he also retains the right to tell us what's truly wrong with us.

[ 20 : 35 ] And not only that, but to heal it. Do you see the grace of Jesus? This young man didn't even ask for it. And Jesus says, son, your sins are forgiven.

Jesus heals him. And that's the difference between Orthodox Christianity and all the wacky health, wealth, and prosperity cults out there. That God welcomes our desires for health, and yet he does not always heal us in the way we want.

Right? You all know Garth Brooks? It's Berkeley, right? You all know Garth Brooks, the most famous country singer ever?

He has this very theologically sophisticated song called Unanswered Prayers. And the whole gist of it, I mean, you get it from the title. The whole gist of it, right, is that sometimes God doesn't answer our prayers, and that's actually his grace.

Because we do not know what we truly need. So true healing is this forgiveness of sins.

[ 21 : 44 ] This provocative grace of Jesus goes to the very heart of this man and gives him what he truly needs. Let's look at our third point. A sacrificial authority to heal.

Now look at verse 6. Now some teachers of the law were sitting there thinking to themselves, why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming. Who can forgive sins but God alone?

Now they're not wrong. The Hebrew Scriptures have two primary categories of forgiveness. Right? The first is a matter of person to person. If I sin against you, then I need to make restitution, ask your forgiveness, and you have the right to forgive me.

But that's not what Jesus is doing here, right? He's giving a general forgiveness. A general forgiveness. And that's only God can do. That's what the whole sacrificial system of Mosaic law was set to do.

The sin offering was a prayer for forgiveness. God alone was the one who could give you absolution, give you forgiveness in your life. God speaks in Isaiah 43, 25.

[ 22 : 51 ] I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake and remembers your sins no more. So when the teachers of the law see Jesus forgive sins, they rightfully understand what he just did.

Who can forgive sins but God alone? That's right. And Mark is a brilliant employer of irony. It's the teachers of the law, those who are going to oppose Jesus the most, who actually see what he's doing.

They get it. They get it. Who can forgive sins but God alone? That's Jesus' point. He is making a claim that he is God.

Now, up to this point in Mark's gospel, Jesus has not named himself. And that's why this story is so important. This story is, he's naming himself.

And we see this in verse 10, which is the climax of this whole story. He says, I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. He says, this is who I am.

[ 23 : 58 ] I've been healing. I've been preaching. But this is who I am. I am the Son of Man. And that's a messianic title that comes from Daniel. He's claiming, I am the Messiah.

And I want you to know that I am the one who has authority. The point of this passage is actually not the healing. It's the revealing. It's the revealing of Jesus' true identity, his authority.

And that's why he heals. The Greek text reflects this. In verse 10, it's more like this. But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.

And then he says to the paralytic, Rides. He says, in order that you should know this, I'm going to heal this man. The healing validates the revealing. Authority.

Jesus is showing us who he is at his core. One commentator explains, the characteristic of Jesus that left the most lasting impression on his followers and caused the greatest offense to his opponents was his authority.

[ 25 : 06 ] his sovereign freedom and magisterial authority. Do you feel that authority? I think we see it also in the scriptures. I'll just remark, right?

Jesus shows up. He is casting out demons, correcting teachers of the law, forgiving the sins of strangers, cavalierly bossing a paralyzed man to rise up off the mat.

No wonder the crowds in verse 12 marvel. This amazes everyone. And they said, we have never seen anything like this. That's the authority of Jesus. He does this all by his word.

He speaks. And things are happening. The authority of Jesus. It carries. He is supreme. He is the one that presumes to be in charge.

G.K. Chesterton, the clever early 20th century British journalist. He was raised, not as a Christian, but with these sentimentalized portraits of the liberal Jesus. Kind of gentle, like a good guy, a philosopher, but not really God.

[ 26 : 09 ] Like he's a good philanthropist. But he was actually Jesus' authority that led Chesterton to faith. He writes, Instead of looking at books and pictures about the New Testament, I looked at the New Testament itself.

And there I found an account, not in the least of a person with his hair parted in the middle, or his hands clasped in a peel, but of an extraordinary being with lips of thunder and acts of lurid decision, flinging down tables, casting out devils, a being who often acted like an angry God and always like a God.

That is Jesus. That is his authority. Friends, honestly, you have to do business with Christ's authority.

Who is he? Who is he? Have you done business with his authority? Either he was insanely narcissistic, strange, weird, or he was God.

But what did Jesus do with that authority? What did he do with it? Jesus answers the concerns of the teachers with a question.

[ 27 : 22 ] Look at verse 9. Which is easier, to say to this paralyzed man, your sins are forgiven, or to say, get up, take your mat, and walk? Now on the face of it, the story seems to prove that the healing is the harder task, right?

It's not that difficult to say your sins are forgiven. But who can heal? Like, who has the power to heal? Right? Jesus uses the physical healing to confirm his authority.

But like many questions that Jesus gives us, it's a bit of a trick question, isn't it? Because what will it cost Jesus to declare your sins are forgiven?

It will cost him his life. He will go to the cross, suffer and die for the authority to say your sins are forgiven. The beauty of Christ's authority is that even if, even as it is supreme and sovereign, it is also sacrificial.

Later on in Mark, Jesus elaborates on his authority. In Mark 10, 42, he teaches his disciples and he says to them, you know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them, but not so with you.

[ 28 : 38 ] For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. He says, I want you to know the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins because he will sacrifice his life for that authority, for you.

Now, what about physical healing? We need to come back to this, right? We've talked about this true healing that we need of forgiveness, and I really think this is where Christianity really covers everything because we all know that someday this paralyzed man is going to die, right?

Someday he's going to die. He didn't live forever. And so this healing was only temporary. And yet, what Jesus does in his resurrection is he promises us a world, his authority, where he is seated on the throne and he will restore all things.

That your bodies, your souls, that if you put your faith in Jesus, that he will ultimately restore them. The picture we get in Revelation 21 and 22 is the whole cosmos being healed by Jesus.

That is his authority. It first sacrifices and serves and then it sanctifies and redeems and restores. Now, to close, I want to speak about the nature of faith and some obstacles.

[ 30 : 04 ] Some of us have an intellectualist conception of faith. Faith is believing in propositions, right? Do you believe in God is really, do you believe in a God? Do you believe he exists?

And that's not bad. Faith does have content, but faith is also personal and active. What do I mean by that? Verse 5, look at verse 5.

When Jesus saw their faith, this is actually the first mention of the term faith in Mark's gospel. And how does he demonstrate faith? What is their faith that he sees? It was his desperation to get to Jesus.

One commentator says, faith will, quote, remove any obstacle, even a roof, if necessary, to get to Jesus. Faith is going to Jesus.

So here's my question. What are the obstacles that are keeping you from Jesus? Now, we see several obstacles in the story. The first is the crowds.

[ 31 : 07 ] In Mark's gospel, the single one attribute of the crowds is that they obstruct access to Jesus. I actually share that view of crowds. They also annoy me, and they tend to obstruct my access.

And they bring out, I don't get to Jesus when I see a crowd. I usually go the other way. But maybe other people are barriers to your faith.

Right? Maybe it's what the crowds might say of you if you did believe. Maybe you've coasted on being in the crowd. You've never been bold enough to step out and deal personally with Jesus.

You cannot be healed until you come face to face with Jesus. The next obstacle is the paralyzed man's immobility.

He can't get himself to Jesus. And actually, paralysis is an excellent metaphor for our spiritual state without God. We cannot move ourselves towards God.

[ 32 : 08 ] But look at God's grace. He provides friends to carry the immobilized man to Jesus. faith requires asking each other for help. It is deeply personal but at the same time it is always communal.

It's always dependent on others. And friends, faith requires asking for help. And prayer is the primary way that we carry others to Jesus now.

So ask for prayer. That's how you get around this obstacle. And did you catch how the man didn't say anything when Jesus forgave him? He doesn't repent or confess his sins.

He just shows up and Jesus forgives him. And I think God shows us that faith is actually a gift from God. That even when we don't know what to say, that all we have to do is ache in his direction and Jesus will answer us and meet us.

some of you are looking inward to conjure up faith. You think, I've been struggling with this. I don't know how to believe. Stop.

[ 33 : 16 ] Look up and out. Look at Jesus and ask him for the faith to believe. He is where faith is. Finally, the last obstacle is the scribes' righteousness.

They know all the right answers. They were the theologians. that they're more invested in knowing about God than knowing God himself. And they miss God standing in their midst.

They miss a miracle. Friends, whatever it is, whatever the obstacles get to Jesus, he is the one with true healing.



One last thought. How do you know if you've gotten to Jesus? It's the marvel and worship look at verse 12. Right before verse 12. The paralyzed man picks up his mat and says, they walked out, he walked out in full view of them all.

And this amazed everyone. And they praised God saying, we have never seen anything like this. Friends, wherever you are in your spiritual journey, if you get to Jesus, if you encounter the living God who has authority over everything, this is how you come away.

[ 34 : 28 ] You come away marveling at God's goodness for you and his healing. That's what healing is. You coming away and saying, isn't God wonderful? Isn't he beautiful?

When you walk away worshiping light on your feet, your legs, your crippled legs straightened with joy in your heart, that is the healing. That's when you know you've gotten to Jesus.

Would you pray with me? Oh, Father in heaven, we do come to you and we ask that you would heal us. Heal us, oh Lord.

Heal us in our physical ailments. Heal us in our emotional, our mental struggles. But most of all, we pray you would heal us spiritually.

You would restore us to you and that you would give us life, oh Lord. And give us nothing less than Jesus that we may walk out of here marveling and praising God and saying, we have never seen anything like this.

[ 35 : 35 ] In Christ's name, Amen. Amen.