

Amazing Forgiveness

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Preacher: Rod McArdle

[0 : 00] Friedrich Nietzsche, the 19th century German philosopher who denounced Christianity as a religion of pity saw forgiveness as immoral because it glorifies weakness.

It's interesting though that the world places a high premium on forgiveness. In India, at the Marak Umba festival which is held every 12 years Hindus go to the Ganges and bathe in it believing that their sins will be washed away.

The last festival was held in 1998 and at that more than a million people, more than a million Hindus gathered and thronged to the Indian city of Hardwar.

But of course in Australia where it's not Hindu gods but it's sport which is our national religion unforgiving fallouts between the nation's sports elite are matters of major concern, of national concern.

Bill O'Reilly, regarded by many as one of Australia's finest bowlers after Glenn McGrath's last over last night, he's going up in the list, he had an interview recorded in the early 1990s just a few years before he passed away.

[1 : 17] And in the interview he said that he'd never forgiven Bradman for not attending with his teammates a carpeting that the Australian Cricket Board handed out during the 1936-37 Melbourne Test.

And O'Reilly went on and also blamed Bradman for bringing to a premature end the career of Clary Grimmett. And the cricket writer who put this story together commented that it will remain Australia's heartache that Bradman and O'Reilly never made good their personal differences.

In the pages of scripture, forgiveness takes us to the very heart of the character of God. When we go to the book of Exodus, after that exceedingly sinful incident where the nation of Israel worshipped those golden calves, we read in Exodus 34, The Lord passed before Moses and he proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation.

God doesn't overlook weakness or excuse limitations. He forgives sin. And the alternative is guilt and punishment.

When God looked beyond the judgment that he brought on Israel after centuries of willful, sinful, rebellious disobedience, God looked to a new era and he did so in terms of forgiveness.

[3 : 15] In Jeremiah we read, No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, Know the Lord. For they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord.

For I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more. And as we come to the New Testament, in the first chapter of Matthew's Gospel, at the very outset of Jesus' life, we're introduced to Jesus as the one who will take away our sins.

And then as we come to Mark's Gospel, John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus by preaching forgiveness of sins. And as we come to our passage today in Mark chapter 2, we meet the first great controversy between Jesus and the Jewish authorities.

And the controversy is over the authority of Jesus to forgive sins. If you were here last week, you recall that at the end of chapter 1, Jesus had been in Capernaum where he'd healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law.

Now there's no more mother-in-law jokes today. I have to say though, just with those few jokes, it really just provoked the most extraordinary response from the men in the congregation because as you were leaving last Sunday morning, I was just inundated with mother-in-law jokes.

[4 : 33] In fact, I reckon I could put together the Holy Trinity Capernaum on mother-in-law jokes. Ladies, you're very forgiving that you've continued to feed your husbands and smile and greet me over the last week.

Well, in that last chapter of, at the end of chapter 1 of Mark's Gospel, Jesus also, it's recorded, healed many of a great variety of diseases.

And he cast out demons and just that wonderful account of healing the leper. And then Jesus left Capernaum and he's been travelling around the Galilean countryside preaching.

So as we come to chapter 2, Jesus is returning to Capernaum. Let me encourage you to take the Bible, page 813, and follow along as we look at Mark chapter 2.

So Jesus returns to Capernaum and he's likely residing in Peter's house, Simon Peter's house. And a crowd gathers at the house. And throughout Mark's Gospel, Mark often refers to the crowds around Jesus, not crowds who are, if you like, repenting and putting their faith in Jesus, but typically crowds who are blocking access to Jesus.

[5 : 45] Well, Jesus takes the opportunity to speak what the text says is the Word, that is, the Gospel of God. What we read about in the first chapter, verse 14 and 15. The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near repent and believe in the Good News.

So this crowd, they're hanging around, they're blocking access to Jesus, but the faith of the paralytic man and his four mates isn't going to be so easily thwarted.

All we know about this man's condition is simply that he can't walk. And the four mates, and what tremendous friends these four guys were, they carry him up the outer staircase of the house to the roof.

It's a flat-roofed house. And these roofs were used for getting some fresh air, for drying laundry, a variety of purposes. And in a Palestinian house, this, you had beams which rested on the external walls, the exterior walls of the house.

And those beams were then cross-hatched with smaller poles and sticks. And then there was thatch, which was put on that, and then all of that was covered with mud. And periodically, the roof was resurfaced with what we might refer to as a roof roller.

[7 : 02] And these friends and the man obviously believed that Jesus could heal. And they were going to get to him. Just imagine for a moment that scene, if you were in the house, there would have been falling dirt and debris.

Probably first of all, you would have heard some scratching noise. And then you'd see some debris coming down and dust would start to fill the room. And then there'd be a shaft of light that would sort of come through that dust.

And then the shaft would grow bigger. And then, unbelievable, coming down through the roof is a man on a stretcher being lowered. Being lowered right before Jesus.

What commitment, what desire to get to this man, this Jesus of Nazareth. Well, Jesus doesn't seem to be too disturbed by the house renovations.

In fact, he's obviously encouraged. Look at verse 5. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, Son, your sins are forgiven.

[8 : 05] And as we read through Mark's gospel, faith isn't just some simple intellectual ascent. It's faith in action. It'll remove any obstacle, even a roof if necessary, to get to Jesus.

So, here's the paralytic. He's barely able to move. He's helplessly lying there. And he's hoping for a cure. And Jesus' response to their faith is, well, it's kind of unexpected, isn't it, when you think about it?

I mean, it's startling. Maybe you might even think his response is a bit outrageous. I mean, is that the sort of response that you get when you go to the local doctor? I mean, who is this man?

Who is this Jesus of Nazareth? We, of course, associate physical wholeness with things like right diet and being in the right environment and having lots of exercise.

We don't often associate it with our relationship with God, do we? The point is, we want medical explanations. But Jesus' pronouncement recognises that the man can be genuinely whole only when the breach which brought about by sin has been healed through God's forgiveness of his sins.

[9 : 18] So, does this verse then tell us about some sort of relationship between sin and illness? It's a big topic and I want to make just three simple points in relation to that.

Firstly, at the most fundamental level, all illness is related to sin. The world is in a fallen state because of the rebellion in the Garden of Eden.

And this fallen state is seen throughout all of creation and it's particularly seen, isn't it, in our bodies. Our bodies that get sick and decay and bodies which eventually physically die.

So, at a fundamental level, all illness is related to sin. But secondly, some illnesses and misfortunes are directly related to sin.

There are a number of examples in Scripture but ones that come to mind are Ananias and Sapphira who lied and were struck down dead in Acts 5. And then, the believers as we read about in 1 Corinthians 11 who had fallen sick because they'd been abusing the Lord's Supper.

[10 : 29] So, some illnesses and misfortunes are directly linked to sin. But thirdly, this direct link is not the universal situation.

Jesus teaches this truth at least twice very clearly in the Gospels. In Luke 13 when he's speaking of the collapse of the Tower of Siloam, that point comes through strongly.

And particularly in John chapter 9 in relation to the man who was born blind, who was blind from birth. Jesus, in fact, denies categorically that there's a direct link in this case between sin and the man's condition.

It's interesting that this healing miracle, this healing of the paralytic, is the only healing miracle where Jesus explicitly correlates sin and infirmity.

note also that Jesus refers to the man's sins, that is, in the plural. It's suggesting perhaps specific sins. So it's possible that Jesus' address to the paralytic reflects knowledge of his particular sins and their relationship to his paralysis.

[11 : 38] promises. But what we do know is this, Jesus addresses the paralytic at the deepest level of his sins. Son, your sins are forgiven.

And Mark doesn't actually record the reaction of the stretcher bearers or the man to Jesus' pronouncement. But notice that Mark does highlight the silent misgivings of the scribes.

These scribes, these teachers of the law, their sitting is in Mark contrast to the active demonstration of faith by the men on the roof, isn't it?

And this is the first appearance of the scribes in Mark's gospel. I mean, back in chapter 1 verse 22, there's reference to them where the people in the synagogue were astounded at Jesus' teaching for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes.

Well, the scribes, they were experts. They were the custodians of the sacred tradition. These scribes were the ones in the society who decided what was acceptable and what was unacceptable before God in all spheres of life.

[12:49] I find it interesting that their observation, though, is absolutely right. Look at the end of verse 8. They ask, who can forgive sins but God alone? In the Old Testament, in the book of Leviticus, a priest could pronounce the forgiveness of sins but it was on the basis of repentance, restitution, and sacrifice.

But it's only God who can forgive sins. You might recall those magnificent words of Yahweh to exiled Judah in Isaiah 43.

I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake and I'll not remember your sins. So, here before this crowd in this house at Capernaum, Jesus of Nazareth is claiming to remit sins as if he were God.

Who is this man? I mean, who is this Jesus of Nazareth? And regardless of the man's physical condition, the man's greatest need by a long shot, by far, was the need for forgiveness of his sins.

Forgiveness was a far greater work. It was a far greater work because it cost Christ his very life. And Jesus met the man's greatest need and he met his need first and he met it for all of eternity.

[14:18] I wonder as I speak this morning whether you know that God has forgiven all of your sins, the past, the present and the future. Or are you burdened down by guilt in your life?

If that is the case, let me encourage you to turn around, repent and put your faith, that is, put your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as your saviour and having done so, know the joy of sins forgiven.

When you think about God's grace, I want to suggest to you that God's grace is scandalous. He forgives the worst of sinners but he forgives on one basis and one basis alone and that's trusting in the death and the resurrection of his beloved son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

A Christian mother of the murderer of a senior police constable told her story in May of this year and as I pick out some highlights of this, I'm sure you'll remember this very, very sad, traumatic story.

Her son, Mark, had called her in the early hours of the morning to tell her that he'd shot a policeman on the side of the road and as her son was talking to his Christian mother on his mobile phone, in fact, she could hear the police manhunt closing in and Mark asked his mother to pray for him and she explains, so I did.

[15:48] I think I asked God to have mercy on him and forgive him and I told him that Jesus died for sinners, not just little sinners but big sinners also and I told him to ask God for forgiveness and that's what her son did, this cold-blooded murderer.

God's grace is outrageous, isn't it? I wonder in the quietness of our hearts whether we're tempted to think, is it right that God should forgive such people as this, as murderers?

I mean, I understand that he should forgive me but should he forgive people such as this? God's love for sinners is so great, it's so great that he sent his only son to die in the place of sinners, in our place, in your place and I know in my life certainly in my place.

That's outrageous, isn't it? That is undeserved favour. It's costly grace. Well, back to the story. Here are these hard-hearted legalistic scribes and they're sitting before Jesus.

I want you to notice that by pronouncing forgiveness first, that it's a stunning witness to who Jesus is, given the healing that Jesus is about to perform.

[17:14] Follow the logic of it in the text from verse 8. At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions 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 and take your mat and walk? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, Jesus said to the paralytic, I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.

Jesus was going to demonstrate that the sins of the paralytic had really been pardoned. And look at that marvellous verse 12, the man stood up and immediately took his mat, went out before all of them, so that they were all amazed they glorified God saying, we've never seen anything like this.

And that's pretty easy to understand, that reaction, isn't it? I mean, imagine this man and his four friends. You can just see them, can't you, in your mind, just jumping around, jumping around with joy.

And they perhaps could have been mistaken to be forerunners of the street dances that you see in New Orleans. Just massive joy and exuberance over what's happened.

[18:32] But the physical miracle verified the spiritual miracle. It's amazing. For those who know our family, it might help just to imagine if Brendan, suddenly jumped out of his wheelchair.

I mean, we would all be stunned, wouldn't we? Absolutely stunned. And yet, the question is, do I appreciate, do you appreciate, that the extraordinary miracle, the greater miracle, is every time a sinner repents and their sins are forgiven.

man? Well, Mark tells us that Jesus left Capernaum. He goes out along the seashore and people come after him. Lots of people come after him.

And Jesus teaches them. And then he returns to the town and on returning to the town, Jesus sees Levi, a tax collector, and he's sitting in the customs office. You need to really catch the significance of Levi and his job.

You see, the Romans, they collected taxes through a system that you might refer to as tax farming. That is, they would take a district and they would assess the tax in that district for a set amount.

[19:44] And then they would sell the right to collect the taxes to the highest bidder, a bit like a tax franchise operation. And these tax collectors then were effectively trained extortionists, especially when it came to collecting duties.

There were all sorts of duties, duties for using roads, harbours, there were import and export duties, there were sales tax on items. And you can imagine, I think, that these extortionists attracted the scum of the society, all sorts of rip-off merchants.

And the Jewish tax collectors were particularly hated. They were hated because they were extortionists. And they were hated because they were working for the Romans.

Vermin, scum of the society. We try and relate that to our world. It's hard to think of an exact equivalent, isn't it? Certainly hard too when we think of the Australian tax office or something to do with our tax system.

But maybe it would help to think of something like this. Think of a drug dealer outside a primary school. And then think about what Jesus says to this despicable man.

[20:58] two words, follow me. And immediately we're told Levi left everything and followed Jesus. Who is this Jesus of Nazareth that commands such authority?

And what was Levi's response? Well, Levi throws a party. He throws a party to honour Jesus. He throws a party to share Jesus with his friends.

verse 15. As Jesus sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples. For there were many who followed him.

That term there, sinners, was a term that was used by the Pharisees. It was used in a derogatory way to speak of those who had no interest in the scribal tradition, very much despised and looked down on.

Well, this eating with tax collectors and sinners was much too much for the Pharisees. They asked, why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?

[22:01] I mean, why indeed? Who is this Jesus? Look at Jesus' answer in verse 17 with me. Because Jesus, firstly, he takes a well-known proverb, those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

And then he goes on and gives them his mission purpose. I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners. See, Jesus was saying, in effect, you need to recognise that you're sick, that you're spiritually sick.

But the Pharisees, they were blinded by their self-righteousness. A self-righteous man, a self-righteous woman, finds it impossible to recognise his or her need for forgiveness.

To be forgiven is the greatest blessing, clearly the greatest blessing that can happen in our lives. Totally free from guilt, an eternal home with the one true living God.

I want you also to note that it's important in this story not to think that Jesus is condoning sinful lifestyles. See, Jesus is demonstrating that sinners can be transformed.

[23:14] He preaches repentance and then Jesus befriends repentant sinners. forgiveness. Let me ask you this morning, where do you stand before this man, this Jesus of Nazareth?

Is he your saviour and lord? Is he your friend? I mean, he can be. He can be if you obey his call. The cross of Jesus places forgiveness at the very centre of our faith and our preaching.

And forgiveness must be at the centre of our lives as the people of God. Because God isn't going to allow us to glory in the forgiveness of our sins and yet to refuse to forgive others.

Jesus teaches that clearly at the end of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew chapter 6. You see, having received the gift of forgiveness by placing our faith, our trust in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ, then God tells us in his word that our response needs to be one of right social conduct.

If you think of the church, the actual church, it's a fellowship, isn't it? But it's a fellowship not just of the forgiven, but it's a fellowship of forgiving friends.

[24:38] In 1956, a team of missionaries landed in a remote part of Ecuador in South America. And they went amongst the Alka Indians.

Five of these missionaries were killed very soon after arriving in this remote area. And in the year 2000, there was a worldwide evangelism conference that was held in the city of Amsterdam.

And at that conference there were two Alka Indians and a missionary interpreter who came along. And one of these two Alkas was in fact one of the ones who killed the five missionaries.

And the missionary interpreting for them was a Steve saint who was the son of Nate saint. And Steve had been just a little boy when his father was murdered by the man who's now one of the elders of the church in the tribe.

Stunning. And two weeks before this conference Steve's daughter died in Ecuador. And she apparently always called the Alka man grandfather because he'd replaced the grandfather she never knew.

[25:59] Well apparently at this conference as the report goes Steve asked everyone in the hall to stand who had somehow been affected by the story of the five missionary martyrs.

And 5,000 people rose. And the report of the conference concluded by saying that this old Indian warrior's face lit up with this most enormous smile.

Friends, the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is powerful. it brings forgiveness and it brings transformation.

Why don't we just take a few silent moments now to reflect on God's word to us. And as we do that you might want to praise the Lord in your heart for his forgiveness in your life. there may be areas where you need to confess and repent of unforgiving attitudes. Or indeed it may be a situation where you realise that you're out of relationship, you're not in relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

[27:18] And what a wonderful opportunity this morning to repent, turn around and put your faith and trust in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's just come before the Lord silently. Amen.

Amen.