

The King who forgives sins

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[0 : 00] I don't know if you noticed where that story took an unexpected turn.

If you put on a sports movie and there's a scrappy underdog team with holes in their kit and borrowed equipment, you don't know that they're going to win the final, but you know that they'll be in it.

If there's a fashionable big city woman on her way home for Christmas to the small town and she has an unpleasant encounter with a rugged male at the beginning of her trip, you probably know what's coming next.

And this is a story where you probably should know what's coming next. Here you've got this. If you think back through the series we've been in in Mark 8 and 9, and if you know the Gospels in generally, you should know what's coming next.

People bring a paralyzed man to Jesus. What comes next? Jesus says, take up your mat and go home. The man takes up his mat and goes home. And everyone says, that's amazing. Jesus heals this man.

[1 : 28] But in this account, that absolutely is not what happens. And it's interesting because it reminds us partly of what Chris was saying last week about dashboard Jesus.

He had a picture, which I don't. But they make little plastic bobble figures you can stick onto the dashboard of your car to sort of give you a little bit of Jesus as you drive. He didn't say this, but maybe to remind you to be a little more patient when you drive.

Or maybe he said to sort of bounce the head of the thing so it sort of wobbles and gives you good Jesus vibes as you go through your day. When we come to Jesus in the Gospels, there is no dashboard Jesus.

This is the real living Jesus. This is the real living Jesus. Conceived by the Holy Spirit. Born of the Virgin Mary. Who does stuff on his own terms.

And doesn't do what we want him to do necessarily. And doesn't wait for us to offer our permission for him to do anything. So in this story we have a man with a blatantly obvious problem.

[2 : 30] The man cannot walk. His friends pick him up and carry him to Jesus. And we would expect to see Jesus say, Take heart, my son. Rise, pick up your mat and walk.

But what Jesus says instead is, Take heart, son. Your sins are forgiven. And the reason is that Jesus is broadcasting.

Jesus wants people to know that he's the one who deals with sin. And he is not being subtle. Jesus is waving a huge flag and making a grand demonstration so that all these people who are there watching will go, Oh, Jesus handles sin.

This is the one who actually deals with sin. They come to him so that this paralyzed man can be healed. So that his body can be made to work properly. So that he can look after himself.

So that he could look after those in his family and social circle. Whatever that was. This is the glaring issue. And Jesus, upon seeing them and their faith, decides to deal with a whole different problem.

[3 : 42] If you can imagine yourself going into A&E; with a ripped up t-shirt on an open wound on your head, soaked red all the way through. You've got a massive head wound.

You walk in there. The doctor comes up to you and says, Well, let's have a look at that foot. You would want to say, That's not exactly why I'm here. That's not the problem, the glaring issue that should be dealt with.

Even more so, this story is sort of like that situation, but where the doctor comes in and he says, Well, I think we need to rethink your retirement savings plan. And you'd say, That's not even the category of problem that I want dealt with here.

The man is on a mat and cannot walk. And Jesus says to him, Your sins are forgiven. This is a real problem. And it's a problem that was bigger in the ancient world than it is in ours. We have levels of medicine and levels of support system that offer people a lot more help. Than what this man would have had. And so there's no way to lighten this and say, Well, being paralyzed isn't that big a deal.

[4 : 47] It was a huge deal. And this was an absolutely huge problem. And Jesus, we know, wants to do good. Jesus isn't up to playing games.

And doing tricks. And trying to just be clever for the fun of it. And so it isn't that Jesus doesn't care. Oh, the man's paralyzed. Who cares? Jesus cares.

And it isn't that Jesus can't see. He knows the man that is paralyzed. The truth is, though, that Jesus can see more. And Jesus can see better.

And so I think what we should understand happening, when they bring the paralyzed man to Jesus, and Jesus doesn't say, I'll heal your legs, but instead says, your sins are forgiven, Jesus is saying, let's deal with the more pressing issue here.

Jesus sees that there's something else that needs dealing with. Now, we don't know what the man's response was. The man who was carried in, who was paralyzed. We don't know what his response was in this moment.

[5 : 48] We do find out what some other people thought. Because the passage says, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, this fellow is blaspheming. And from a certain angle, they make an awfully good point.

Because they're raising the question, is that really his thing to do? Is it really Jesus's territory to go around forgiving sin?

The Bible is very clear that God is the one who deals with human sin. At the very beginning of the Bible in the book of Genesis, God creates the world. He creates man and woman, and he puts them in the garden, and he tells them what should and should not be done.

Because it is God who sets the terms for what ought to happen. And so when Adam does sin, and do the thing that God had told him not to do, to pull from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God comes to him and says, you have eaten the fruit from the tree about which I commanded.

God is the one who deals with sin. The problem wasn't just, well, this tree is off limits. You shouldn't have touched it. The problem is, I commanded you not to touch it. Sin is about us and God, not just us and stuff, or us even and other people.

[7 : 04] Because in the next chapter in Genesis, or a little later on, when Cain kills his own brother Abel, God comes and says, your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground.

Obviously it was wrong. It was a sin in act against his brother. But God says, the blood cries out to me because God is the one who deals with sin.

Later on in the Old Testament, we find King David doing horrible and horrific things. He uses his power and takes a woman and then has her husband killed.

And when God sends a prophet to David to confront him, God says, why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in his eyes?

The prophet Nathan doesn't just say, what you've done is wrong against these people. It obviously is and it clearly is. But there's another thing. There's another factor going on, which is that sin is about us and God.

[8 : 01] And so the prophet says, not just why did you do this thing to these people, but why did you despise the word of the Lord? God is the one who deals with sin.

And so the prophet Isaiah, speaking for God, will say, I even I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake and remembers your sins no more.

God says the whole way through, sin is an issue that I deal with. Sin is about you and me. The Israelites had a place. God gave them a place and a means to deal with their sin in the tabernacle, which then became the temple.

But it was also known as the house of the Lord. You deal with sin in the presence of God because that's what sin is about.

And so Jesus here saying, your sins are forgiven. That's the kind of thing you could say in the temple. Someone would put their hand on the head of an animal and the animal would be taken away to be killed.

[9 : 01] And at that moment, you could say to someone something like this, your sins are forgiven. Jesus isn't in the temple. He isn't making a sacrifice in this moment. He just says to this man, your sins are forgiven.

Maybe you have a stack of parking tickets hiding in the glove box of your car. That's not what you call it here, is it? I can't remember. The thing where you store stuff in the dashboard of your car, it is.

Maybe you've got a stack of parking tickets in there. You could bring them. We could lay them out on this table. And I could stand here and I could look you in the eye and I could say, your parking tickets are forgiven.

It's okay. You shouldn't have any confidence. I can't do that. I could go and I could steal a uniform of a parking ticket guy, whatever they're called, and have the little machine.

And I could stand here in front of your parking tickets. I could even touch the machine to your parking tickets and look you in the eye and say, your parking tickets are forgiven. I could do any kind of ritual that you want.

[10 : 05] I could throw salt over my left shoulder and look you in the eye and say, your tickets are forgiven. I could wring the neck of a chicken and put its blood around the ground. I could throw dust on it.

I could put on a powdered wig and hit a thing with a wooden hammer and say, your tickets are forgiven and none of it matters because it's not my place. And I don't have authority to do that. But Jesus in this passage is waving a flag saying, I do have authority to do that. And it's not about parking tickets. It's about sin. It's about the whole thing that's gone wrong in you, in your life, in this world, on this planet.

Jesus is saying, I handle sin. I deal with sin. I have the authority and my proclamation is the key to unlocking this entirely.

He says to these people, why do you entertain evil thoughts? I'm absolutely within my rights and absolutely in my place to say your sins are forgiven. This is my business.

[11 : 09] I absolutely have authority to do this. He goes on to say, which is easier? You have a paralytic lying on the ground, someone who cannot stand up because their legs don't function properly.

You can say to that person, your sins are forgiven. What's the proof? I don't know, a happy smile on the guy's face, a glow of love in his eyes. Or you can say to that man, you're healed and what's the proof?

Well, is he still laying down? That's obvious. And so Jesus makes this demonstration. Again, he's waving a flag. He says, I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.

So he said to the paralyzed man, get up. Take your mat and go home. Then the man got up and went home. And so for all of us, for all of you who recognize yourselves in that description as sinners, who see this in your lives, who see its work in your life, look at Jesus.

Because he is saying, I'm the one who deals with this. Sin is something that needs to be forgiven. Our sin is against God. But it also is so much more.

[12 : 28] Sin is something that lands on us and needs to be removed. It makes us sick so that we need to be healed. It makes us filthy so that we need to be cleansed.

It creates a debt that must be paid. It sets us as unrighteous and worthy of punishment. It sits on us as shame, smothering us like a plastic bag over our heads.

Like a sopping wet blanket out in the cold, it oppresses us. It constrains us. It turns our choices. It darkens our minds.

It rules over our lives. It covers us in a gloom of darkness and death. And it dooms us for destruction. But what we see happening here in Matthew 9, what we see in Jesus is the light coming out after a long, gray month of rain.

Jesus says, look at me. Look at this paralyzed man. What would be easier to say your sins are forgiven or take up your mat and walk so that you know that I have authority to do this, that I've come as the one who deals with sin?

[13 : 43] I say, take up your mat and go home. And you watch the man stand up and walk home. Jesus is the one who can say to all of us, take heart, my son.

Take heart, my daughter. Your sins are forgiven. Before Jesus was born, an angel comes to Joseph who would be his stepfather and says to him, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.

She will have a son. You will name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. This is what Jesus does. Jesus, talking amongst his disciples, would say, I didn't come to serve, or I didn't come to be served.

I came to serve and to give my life as a ransom for many. This is what I came to do. On the night before he was crucified, he sat with his disciples and passed around a cup of wine.

And he said, drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for the forgiveness of sins.

[14:53] And that cup passed around the room and they drank deep. And that cup has passed around this room. And everyone who drinks of that cup is forgiven in looking to Jesus Christ.

He is the one with the authority to do this. Jesus is the one who deals with sin. Because of who he is and because of what he has done, he has every right to say to the paralytic, to everyone, to anyone, take heart, your sins are forgiven.

And I think it's important for us this morning, for each one of us to ask frankly, am I asking Jesus for far too little? How much are you looking to Jesus for in your life?

We sort of laugh about dashboard Jesus, like, well, we know it's not like that, but in your own life, are you asking him to be anything more than dashboard Jesus? What do you look to him for?

To offer some inspiration in your life? To sort of give an enduring example of hope? to give you some good ideas about how you ought to live? A bit of comfort when you're struggling?

[16:07] A bit of direction when you don't know what to do? Come to Jesus for all of that.

Absolutely do. But come for the whole thing. Come for Jesus looking to you and saying, take heart, my daughter, your sins are forgiven.

Take courage, my son, your sins are forgiven. Rise, take up your mat, and follow me, which is also like saying, rise, take up your mat, and go home.

Jesus wants people to know that he's the one who deals with sin. And in the second part of the passage, we see then that Jesus goes looking for sinners. As Jesus went on from there, from healing a man who'd never walked, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth.

Follow me, he told him. Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples.

When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners? Tax collectors were shady characters for a couple of reasons.

[17:18] On the one hand, they were collaborators. They were pulling money from locals so that it could be funneled off to Rome because Rome needed money as an empire and Rome would use that money so that they could oppress people like the people who were paying taxes.

And so, tax collectors are shady because they're collaborators. Tax collectors are also shady because most of them, it looks like, were greedy cheats, willing to make your life more miserable so that their life could be padded with some more coin.

And it looks like they attracted a crowd of people who were very much like themselves because when Matthew throws a dinner, birds of a feather flock together, it's tax collectors and whatever it means by sinners, people who were publicly known as shady characters in some sense.

And so again, some people come and ask a sort of obvious question which has a good point.

What's Jesus doing? If birds of a feather flock together, why is Jesus with the shady crowd?

Is Jesus a collaborator? Is Jesus greedy? Is Jesus looking to line the purse? What is Jesus doing there? We don't know what the tax collectors and sinners thought about Jesus sitting with them, but we do find out what some other people thought.

[18:40] Some Pharisees asked, why does your teacher eat with these people, with tax collectors and sinners? What is Jesus doing here? And his answer is, where else would I be?

This is actually what I came here for in the first place. I came to look for people exactly like this. On hearing this, Jesus said, it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.

But go and learn what this means. I desire mercy and not sacrifice. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. Jesus looks to them and says, you really don't know who I am, do you?

Why am I with tax collectors and sinners? Because this is exactly why I showed up in the first place. I came looking for people exactly like this.

Do you remember the passage I quoted? The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, to give his life as a ransom for many. Jesus is saying, this is why I showed up.

[19 : 44] And he tells them, he reminds them, that this is actually the kind of thing that God loves. He says, go and learn what this means. And he points toward the Old Testament where God says, I desire mercy, not sacrifice.

God had set up a whole system because people have not only sin, they have a thing called impurity, which can involve sin, but doesn't necessarily. And people needed to be cleansed from that impurity.

And so God had a whole system in the temple for people to come and make offerings and be clean or other ways to be clean so that they could enter and be in a state again of cleanness.

But God says, I desire mercy, not sacrifice. And there's a priority thing where God is saying, you know what's most important is mercy.

I desire mercy. And so Jesus tells these people who prided themselves on knowing what God had said in the law, and he points them to what God had said and says, this is what God's about.

[20 : 48] God is looking to show mercy. You shouldn't be surprised that I'm here. This is what I came for, and this is what God is interested in as well.

Going back to that image of walking into A&E; with a head wound, and you go in bleeding, and you imagine the doctor saying, oh, sorry, we don't do that sort of thing here. You know, go somewhere else.

It's ridiculous. Of course it's what you do. You're a hospital. You're a doctor. Jesus is saying, of course this is what I do. I came for the sick, not for the healthy.

And so, again, I think it's important for all of us to ask if we are looking to Jesus for too little.

Because in this account, in the first part, we see that Jesus can deal with sin, and in this second part, we see that it's not just a hypothetical, that Jesus actually goes looking for people who have sin that needs dealing with.

As we recognize our sin, we tend to shy away. Of course, this is true before somebody comes to Christ. We feel, I've done wrong. God doesn't want me around, and how could he ever accept me, and all of that.

[22 : 03] But even as Christians, we do the same thing. We have secret sins that we don't deal with, and we sort of hold on to them and leave them, and we go about our lives, and we sing, and we pray, and then there's a guilt that sort of sits there and festers.

And we need to ask, are we asking Jesus for far too little? Because not only can he deal with sin, he actually goes looking to deal with sin.

There won't ever be a moment where someone comes to Jesus as a sinner where he shudders and turns away in disgust. Jesus broadcasts, I'm the one who deals with sin.

And then he goes looking for the people who need it dealt with. Remember at the very start of this passage, when the people bring the paralytic man on the mat to Jesus, and it says, and Jesus, when Jesus saw their faith.

But there was something else there that Jesus saw as well. You don't say to someone, your sins are forgiven, unless you see the sin as well. And so as Jesus looks at this man and recognizes sin, recognizes this thing that is a gross offense against the fabric of the universe, and an offense against the holy God who stands behind it at all times, he doesn't say, why would I heal the likes of you?

[23 : 27] Why would you bring me this? Take it back where you found it. He says, looking at the sin, looking at the man himself who had done it, not in the abstract as an idea, as a thing that might have happened, as a living, breathing example of someone who had gone wrong and done wrong and was wrong and had wrong on them.

And he says, take heart, take courage, my son. Your sins are forgiven. Jesus saw this man's sin and this man's sin and all of us continue to live under the gaze of the same God and the same Jesus.

And we are all called to return that gaze and see in Jesus the one who deals with our sin. And so I say to you what Jesus said to us, blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those of you who recognize inside that something is wrong, that you don't have everything you need, that you are not exactly as you should be because the poor in spirit will inherit the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who know that they don't have reason for pride fully across their lives, that things have gone wrong, that you have shame, not just as a thing you feel, but as a thing that's on you.

Blessed are the meek and those who are pressed down because they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness because they know they don't have it.

[25 : 05] You don't hunger and thirst for something of which you have enough. Blessed are you who say, I need more. I thirst for righteousness because I look at myself and I don't see enough there.

I see unrighteousness. Blessed are you for you will be filled. To everyone now, as sinners willing to look to Jesus, I can't even forgive your parking tickets, but I can stand speaking for Christ and say to all of you looking to him, take courage, my daughter, and take courage, my son, for your sins are forgiven.

Let's take a few minutes just for prayer. Feel free to pray on your own. If you'd like to pray with people around you, please feel free to do that and then we'll move to our final song.

But a few minutes just for prayer. Thank you.