

Unbearable and Impossible

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[0 : 0 0] used to preaching in gymnasiums or comedy clubs, a theater once. You know, those places where all the hipster Christians with forearm tattoos kind of congregate. So this is nice. I don't know, I'm supposed to bow to you? In all seriousness, my wife and I, we've been attending St. John's since April. You guys have been so welcoming to us. It's helped us really root in the city.

But whenever I'm sitting there, I look at Aaron over here, I feel like he should have like a cup of tea. You know, just, yes, yes. Anyways. So as you know, we're in the Gospel of Mark. This is the third week. The first week was just fantastic. It was about how the Gospel of Mark gives us a picture of the real Jesus. And then last week, Aaron just spelled out so clearly the compassionate authority of Jesus. And then this week, we have these three scenes, and they continue in this fast pace. They're back-to-back. And each scene has this center stage character. You have a leper, you have a paralytic, and then a tax collector. And at first glance, I would say it seems a little out of step with one another. Like, what are these three things doing together? They have the makings of a bad joke. You know, a leper, a tax collector, and a sinner. You know, walk into a bar. I've got no punchline for that.

But as we'll see, Mark, you know, put these stories together for a reason. And each scene, when the original audience would have heard this Gospel read, would have just been shocking. They would have been flabbergasted. You know, this is Bruce Willis being a ghost at the end of Sixth Sense stuff. For the one person who hasn't seen the Sixth Sense, sorry for that spoiler alert. But in these scenes, Mark so beautifully crafts three major themes of his Gospel. And so these are the three things I want to kind of look at tonight. The first is Jesus's authority, his identity, who he is, what he can do because of who he is. That's the big one. But the next one is about the kingdom of God being at hand, and who's invited into this kingdom of God. Then the third big theme is the controversy, the resistance to who's invited, to what the kingdom of God being in our midst actually looks like. So scene number one, chapter one, verses 40 through 45. Jesus is somewhere, we're not told, and he's tracked down by a leper. This is the beginning of the scene. And we can assume that Jesus is on the outskirts of the town because you're not going to find a leper where people live. Leprosy was a big deal in terms of diseases in this day and age. It meant exclusion from society, and you might be wondering why. Well, leprosy was incurable back then. It was highly contagious. It evoked fear, and even disdain from people. And so the leper was shunned. They were excluded. And this disease, in a way, was a sentence. It would have robbed this man of his name, of his occupation, of his family, of his fellowship. Nobody could or even would touch this person because if they did, if they came into contact with him, they would become unclean and even risk getting leprosy themselves. And a quick thing about this whole clean, unclean thing because it shows up over and over in this passage.

Back then, there were all these rituals you'd go through to be ceremonially clean to worship God. And there are these things that could make you unclean, which mean you couldn't worship God until you went through all the ceremonies again. It could range from a couple of days to a couple of weeks. And in this leper's case, permanent. He was permanently unclean. He was cast out in every sense of the word. And this might seem kind of inhumane to us, right? In this day and age, with all our medical advances. Like, why would you treat the leper this way? But that's what you think about. When HIV began to ravage the world, what did we do with the first people? We quarantined them. We cut them off from society because we didn't know what was going on. We didn't know what to do. It was tragic. And so sometimes, even with compassion, the best humanity can do is quarantine. So this leper approaches Jesus. He comes to him. And this is a gutsy move.

[4 : 03] You know, generally, people in quarantine are supposed to stay in quarantine. And this man knew his place. He knew he was supposed to stay away from society. And presumably, he's heard about Jesus.

He's heard about this man who is setting bodies back to rights, making people whole. And then he sees them. And I love this. He runs to Jesus. He's probably desperate. And he gets on his knees. And he begs. He takes such a humble posture. He approaches Jesus as if Jesus is a king. And he says, if you will, you can make me clean. Now, this is already scandalous. But the shocking part of the scene is this. Jesus touches the leper. Jesus could have healed this man simply by speaking a word. We've seen in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus says, follow me. People follow him. He says, be silent and come out of him. And the demon listens. But Jesus doesn't just speak a word.

Jesus is moved with pity. He stretches out his hand. And he touches this leper and says, I will be clean. Jesus touches the unclean, the incurable, the diseased, ridden outcast.

Now, to the average first century person, Jesus would just be downright mad. You don't go around touching people, let alone just, you know, touching lepers. You know, you're now unclean. But this isn't what happens with Jesus. He actually reverses the structures. The uncleanliness of the leper doesn't make Jesus unclean. Rather, the cleanliness of Jesus extends to the leper, making him clean. Jesus reaches across all these social boundaries, all these cultural boundaries, all these ritualistic boundaries, and touches this man. And think about it. This would have been the first time in a long time that this man was touched. It's just such a compassionate picture. And so in this action, Jesus, you know, affirms this man's dignity as a person. You know, he restores him. He restores his body.

[6 : 02] He restores him in such a profound way that he can now re-enter community. But the part I love about this scene the most is that we actually get to have a glimpse of Jesus's heart. The text says he was moved with pity. Some translate it compassion. But this word, you know, it can actually have a strong implication of anger. It's this driving, intensely emotional, expressive passion. But what is it directed at?

Jesus isn't angry at the leper. When you look at the context of the actual Greek, that it's not possible. What it seems that Jesus is angry at is the condition of the leper. What his leprosy has done to him, the hopelessness of it all. It's isolating and dehumanizing effect. In other words, he's angry at the brokenness of this creation and how that ripples through every thread of our existence, causing pain, separation, suffering, disorder. But then there's this kind of surprising twist at the end, right? Jesus forcefully warns this man not to tell anyone. Go straight to the priest. And, you know, well, the man would have to go through the proper channels to get restored to community. This makes sense. But the secrecy thing. And then, you know, the man doesn't do what Jesus asks. And, you know, well, you can guess why. I mean, don't have leprosy anymore. Kind of a big deal. This is like the hallelujah, you know, praise Jesus kind of moment. And, but his announcing of the news is painful in the text. Mark points this out. You know, at the beginning of the story, the leper's on the outside.

Jesus is in the inside. Jesus, though, at the end of the story is in desolate places. He can no longer go into the city because his population, or his popularity, sorry, kept growing because of this. So the leper gets to go inside. Jesus goes outside. In a way, it's this trading of places. Jesus. And so in this first scene, we see the heart of Jesus. We see his profound compassion, his anger at the brokenness of this world, his willingness to reach out against all boundaries, to benefit other people at his own cost. So scene two, chapter two, verses one through 12. And this is where the controversy starts to pick up. Jesus is back at home. He's in Capernaum. And a huge crowd has gathered so much that it's flowing out of the house. And he's preaching the word to the crowd. And this is what's going on. And then we're told in verse three that four guys come to Jesus with a paralytic. But when they get there, they couldn't get into the house. So they did the only logical thing, which is to get up on the roof and tear apart the roof. I mean, this is pretty dramatic stuff, wouldn't you say? I mean, the queen skydiving into the Olympics with James Bond, pretty impressive. These guys destroying a roof to make their entrance, that is something. The Greek even says that they unroofed the roof. You know, we're not talking about shacks. Palestinian homes are quite sturdy. This is effort. These are the type of guys, you know, in their spare time are probably ripping up phone books, bending denarii. You know, just, but when you look at it, this is just such an act of desperation. You know, and Jesus sees this. The whole crowd sees this. And imagine it. You're listening to Jesus teach. You kind of start to hear these footsteps above you.

[9 : 25] You know, sprinkles of dust, chunks of ceiling are starting to fall. You know, it's louder and louder. And then a burst of sunlight and someone peers in his head. And you're like, oh, George, what are you doing breaking the roof? You know, like, this is just a crazy scene. It's a chaotic situation. But the real shocker is how Jesus responds. He says to the paralytic, my son, your sins are forgiven. Is this, you know, is this really the appropriate response? My son, your sins are forgiven. As Aaron mentioned, my wife, Julia, and I lived in Florida for a few years.

In 2008, we got caught up in this tropical storm called Javier or Ernesto. I'm not sure. They're always named after Latino men for some reason. And during this tropical storm, this massive tree fell on our little duplex. And we were actually in the apartment when it happened. It sounded like a train had collided with our kitchen. And fortunately, it only fell over the kitchen part of our kind of L-shaped home. So, you know, the damage was sort of contained. The kitchen was sort of functional.

So it could still live in our home and I'm cheap. So we stayed. And, you know, the next day, Julia and I were talking in the kitchen and she was complaining about, you know, the sanitary conditions of the kitchen, you know. And she might have had a point. I mean, she was cooking on the stove and, you know, water's dripping in through the ceiling. We've got pots and pans everywhere. There's pieces of drywall we're still cleaning up. That kind of cotton candy pink insulation stuff is coming out the ceiling.

So, yeah, she had a point. And, you know, so she took two steps. She turned around to get something from the sink. And just as she moved, a massive piece of the ceiling just dropped all over the stove where she was standing. And I don't mean to throw her under the bus, but she might have dropped a few expletives through her sweet lips. Now, if my response had been, my wife, your sins are forgiven.

That would have been better than my response, which was, so what are we going to do about dinner? Jesus' response is odd, right? It's out of place. It's out of sorts. It seems even a little insensitive, a little offensive. This paralytic man is utterly helpless. You know, his body is broken.

[11 : 51] He's dangling through the roof at the mercy of his friends. And his friends weren't bringing him for sins to be forgiven. They wanted his body healed. And some of the scribes even agree with it, that this isn't the best response. But not for its lack of sensitivity, but for what Jesus actually said.

You know, Mark tells us, they start asking in their hearts, why does this man speak like this? He's blaspheming. Who can forgive sins but God alone? This isn't a small accusation. Blasphemy is a big deal. I mean, this is a capital offense. And these are the thoughts that are going through some of the audience's mind. So what's going on here? Jesus draws out what's going on in the scribes' hearts for everybody to hear. And he says, why do you question these things in your hearts? Which is easier to say to the paralytic, your sins are forgiven? Or to say, rise up, take your bed, and walk. So like the scribes, I think, we're very material people. It's hard for us to grasp something abstract, the intangible, something we can't see or touch, like sins being forgiven. You know, how do you even show that? So Jesus does something very tangible, something material, like healing a paralytic to prove that he can do the intangible. He does what is hard, this impossible healing, to show that he can do what is easy, something immaterial, but still very much a real spiritual reality. So in other words, Jesus uses this logic. If Jesus has the power to raise a paralytic, then he also has authority and power to forgive sins. And he is just straight up about his motive. He says, but that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. He said to the paralytic, I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home. And the paralytic gets up, and he goes home. And this is just like one massive truth bomb dropped on the audience. I mean, first, the astonishment. I mean, you just saw a paralytic get up and walk home. Flabbergasted. You know, that's the Bruce Willis part. And then even more, Jesus calls out the scribes, and he, in a way, kind of one-ups their authority. You know, he says, I have the authority to forgive sins, which is totally unprecedented. As they mentioned, only God can do that. And then he says, on top of it all, just in case you're wondering, I'm the Son of Man. What is the Son of Man business? I mean, why is that coming out all of a sudden? This is the first time, you know, it shows up in Mark. And the title actually comes from the book of Daniel in the Old Testament. In chapter 7, Daniel has this prophetic vision.

He gets to peer into heaven, and he has this vision of a Son of Man approaching the throne of God. And the Son of Man is given all authority to judge and rule the world. And this is what Daniel sees, and hundreds of years later. Jesus is the fulfillment of this vision, this promise, that there would be a

Son of Man with all authority. And he comes and he announces that he has the same authority of God, yes, to judge, but what he's doing is declaring the forgiveness of sins. He is pardoning. And he's not just doing that because he's nice. He's doing it because he has the authority to, and because all sin is really against him. So he has the right to forgive it.

[15:23] But let's get back to Jesus's response for a second. You know, why forgive sins before healing this man? You know, there was a need at hand. There's a paralyzed man. You know, this is a very important issue. But it shows that Jesus is far more concerned with an eternal need, which has more urgency. You know, we're concerned with the physical, the now. And Jesus sees deeper.

He sees that we need forgiveness. He knows he's the only one who can offer it. And that's sort of the point of this second scene. As necessary as the healing was, there's a deeper, more pressing need at hand. You with me? One more scene. Verses 13 through 17. So after a day of teaching, Jesus comes across Levi, a tax collector, and invites him to follow him. Jesus goes to Levi's house for this big old tax collector and sinner party. Katy Perry was probably playing, just because it's good, not because she's a sinner. And because of this, the scribes take issue.

The controversy stirs up some more, and this is an uncomfortable issue for them. You know, it's bad enough that Jesus has made this claim to forgive sins, but now he's actually hanging out with sinners.

This is kind of stirring the pot a little bit. So they ask his disciples, you know, why is your rabbi eating with these tax collectors and sinners? Well, what's the big deal? Well, first the word sinners, you know, it's similar to the word wicked that shows up in the Psalms. These aren't people who are just occasionally making some mistakes. You know, these are people who stand fundamentally opposed to the way of God. You know, in other Jewish writings at that time, they were described as gamblers, moneylenders who extorted people, people who raced doves for sport, which I think sounds awesome, people who traded and engaged in activities on the Sabbath, thieves, the violent, and of course, tax collectors. And tax collectors, that's the real issue at hand in this scene. You know, they were the worst. I mean, tax collectors. No one wants to be friends with a tax collector. Why? In one word, they were traitors. Now, these people were in cahoots with the Roman government. They enforced these taxes, and they exacted these taxes from their own people. So here you have a Jew working with the Gentile government, you know, levying money from his own people, yet then on top of it, adding an extra charge, because that was the only way they actually made money. It was through extortion.

[17:59] And so the whole community just abhorred tax collectors. They were expelled from synagogue. They were a disgrace to the family, and a touch of a tax collector can make you unclean.

And so in a way, contact with Levi was actually more offensive than contact with this leper that we saw in scene one. The leper's condition was at least not chosen. Levi had a choice. He decided to be a tax collector. And then to top it off, Jesus is reclining at table with Levi. And now this doesn't mean that Jesus is just some super chill dude who knew how to relax.

When you recline in this context, you're identifying with someone. You're associating with them. You're offering yourself to them. It's a very intimate thing.

And this is why it's so offensive. Jesus is reclining in Levi's house with the worst of the worst, with sinners and tax collectors. And the scribes don't like this because Jesus is associating with the people they think God has no interest in.

[19:06] Right? They think God is only interested in the ones who can keep the law, who can build up their righteousness. And Jesus is standing with the group, identifying with the group who have nothing to boast about, who are the ones that are seen as the worst.

And so Jesus responds to the question they asked his disciples. He says, Those who are sick, or sorry, those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

And came not to call the righteous, but the sinners. Now this is the second big mission statement we get from Jesus in the gospel of Mark so far. The first one was this, The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel.

And this kind of flushes out this whole repent and believe, doesn't it? To hear that Jesus came not for the righteous, but for the sinner. And I think this scene is actually really about the scandal of grace.

Levi is offered grace before we ever get any notion of him recognizing his need. It's just pure mercy that Jesus reclines with him.

[20 : 12] Nowhere are we told that Levi repents or believes. And we see that Jesus seeks him as he is, enters into his conditions before ever asking anything of him.

And so if we step back and we look at all three of these scenes, how do they tie together? Three times we see people come to Jesus. The leper came to Jesus. The paralytic and his friends came to Jesus.

And then the crowd came to Jesus. But only once do we see Jesus go to someone. And when he goes to someone, he goes to Levi, the tax collector. The worst of the worst.

Worse than the leper. And when Jesus did this, he was clear about why he did it. He said, So I think there's a few implications for us.

Especially if we're asking, well, who is this kingdom of God for? Who's invited into this kingdom? First, I think it's unsurprising that it irks us that Jesus forgives the paralytic before he heals him.

[21 : 16] Now, in my opinion, one of the biggest struggles in the city is a misdiagnosis of need. Now, the average Vancouverite generally thinks they're not all that bad.

And I'm quite a decent person. I do my social justice on the side. And, you know, any discontentment can be fixed by something new like an iPhone or a blonder girlfriend or stronger medicine.

You know, at worst, you might need a little bit of help. But forgiveness? It's a little much, don't you think? Or maybe you've been doing this Christian thing for a while and you think you've kind of got it under wraps.

You've got this following Jesus thing down. He's sort of your sidekick, you know, and a little bit of prayer here and there, you know, will help you out. But for the most part, you've got this under control.

But the text unashamedly shows us that we can be oblivious to our deepest need. You know, you might come to God looking for help, but what Jesus offers, at least in the case of the paralytic, is forgiveness.

[22 : 17] He came for sinners, people who are broken and separated from God, people who need their sins forgiven. And the Bible is clear. You're worse than you realize. You know, everyone has sinned, and the ones who think they're righteous, who think they're well, who think they need no forgiving, are in far worse condition than we can even imagine.

And so I'd encourage you, let Jesus diagnose your condition. This text tells us he's the true physician. He's the only one who can offer the remedy for our brokenness.

He offers it freely. But secondly, maybe you have some objections about Jesus. You know, the scribes did. But they didn't ever address Jesus directly.

In the second scene, it's their thoughts. They have these thoughts about Jesus. And then the third scene, they actually address his disciples. And so if you have an issue with Jesus, what this text tells us is the best way to work out that issue is to talk to Jesus.

Now, every time they have an objection, Jesus responds. He wants people to understand. He wants people to get what he's doing.

[23 : 27] He doesn't want people to be confused. You know, maybe you have unanswered prayers, or maybe you have these lingering doubts, or maybe you're hesitant about what you're even hearing tonight. Maybe you're still trying to figure out, is Jesus really who he said he was?

But I think the best way to figure out those answers is to do it in this sort of context, in this sort of community, hearing the scriptures proclaimed. You know, maybe give prayer a shot. And I get for some of you how ridiculous that might sound.

You know, how can I talk to Jesus? He's not here. I'd say, you know, keep coming, keep engaging. Let him answer the questions you're asking. Third, maybe we can wrap our heads, you know, around healing to a leper, or, you know, raising up a paralytic.

You know, this idea that Jesus, yeah, come and make people better. But can we embrace grace to sinners, grace to tax collectors, you know, the people that aren't even asking for help, you know, grace to the people that have betrayed us or hurt us, the people that we don't want to forgive, or the people that aren't even asking for forgiveness.

I think the text shows us that the common denominator in all of this is that every single person stands in need of forgiveness. None of us stand so tall that we're beyond this.

[24 : 46] All of our maladies may appear different, but they come from the same root cause, our sin. And it's only an uncomfortably free grace, this pure, unadulterated mercy, that can actually

change our hearts.

It's only when we see that what God has done for us is entirely free and costs us nothing and is bigger than we're comfortable with, once that takes root in you, that is actually how someone changes.

And so we're all invited to gather at the table of undeserving friends. That's the essence of community. That's the essence of Christian community, a group of undeserving friends.

We're all sinners, and to come to the table, we have to kneel. Maybe the idea of kneeling just irks you. So I want to just step back and look at the big theme one more time.

Who is Jesus in this text? We see Jesus has compassion on us. He restores our dignity. He's grieved over the brokenness of this world, and he has the power to set it to right, and he is doing it.

[25 : 50] He makes the unclean clean. He mends broken bodies, and this is all because the kingdom of God was making a personal appearance through him. As the son of man, he has the authority to forgive our sins and pardon us from judgment to set us right with God.

Jesus goes to the worst of the worst. His message is for those who are on the outskirts, for sinners, and this is his mission. This is why he came, not for those who are well, but those who have desperate need.

He meets us in our mess. He offers us love. He offers us forgiveness before we ever ask, before he ever asks anything of us. He will cross every barrier to reach you and will ultimately sacrifice himself for your benefit.

This is the picture that emerges in these scenes. And we see three very distinct actions performed by all the people in the scenes. The leper kneels, the paralytic rises, Levi reclines.

We all must kneel before Jesus. And he will raise us up and invite us to recline with him. That's how we find our place at the table of undeserving friends.

[26 : 56] Amen. Amen. Amen.