

Unbearable and Impossible

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[0 : 0 0] Let's bow our heads and pray for a moment. Heavenly Father, now as we turn to look at the Lord Jesus Christ, we pray that he himself would teach us, that you would do for us what's impossible, that we might see him through the eyes of faith, receive from him what he's come to give us, and join him in that great feast that we're going to talk about.

And we ask this in his name. Amen. Please sit down. You might find it helpful to open the Bibles to the reading Diane just read for us in Mark chapter 1, 40 to 2, 17.

There's three little stories. And the last thing, it leads up to this thing Jesus says, those who are well have no need of a physician, a doctor, but those who are sick.

I came not to call the righteous, but sinners. The thing about doctors is they don't always give you what you want. If they're any good, they give you what you need.

I have a brother-in-law. He was 38, great big athletic guy, fit as a fiddle. And he started to get a pain in his back, just a little pain.

[1 : 3 0] It wasn't there all the time. It was only there when he walked uphill, not steep uphill. He could go and do, he could run miles and miles, just a little incline.

And no physio could figure out what was wrong. But his GP is one of those very, very good doctors who tested, tested, tested, and discovered that four of his arteries around his heart were 98% blocked from a congenital heart disease.

And rushed him into surgery, quadruple bypass. He's now approaching 60 and fit as a fiddle.

Except when Bronwyn hits him in the chest, which is an affectionate thing she does.

But good doctor, you see. I have another friend whose problems are the opposite. He has a very active imagination. He's very slow to go to doctors.

And when he's lying in bed at night, any little lump he's sure is the end. And he begins to think he's got weeks to live and days to live.

[2 : 2 8] And he plans out how he's going to do that. When he finally is forced to the doctor by his wife, the doctor tells him it's a flea bite. We open the Gospel of Mark here.

Jesus himself is our teacher. We're able to see him. And last week was the first public day of his ministry. Jesus did things of stunning power and compassion.

He healed all who came to him. Congenital diseases, deformities, sicknesses, terminal illnesses. And he drives out unclean spirits, which is...

And I don't know if you noticed this last week, but the first unclean spirit that's driven out is during a church service. Which would have been a little unsettling. Although...

No, I'm not going to go there. But as the demon comes out, the demon screams, have you come to destroy us? It's a very good question.

[3 : 3 1] Why have you come, Jesus? And it's left hanging. We don't get an answer for it. And as we came to the end of last week in verses 37, 38, 39, the mission of Jesus is in danger, but this time from his disciples.

Jesus has become a kind of a victim of his own success. Word spreads that he can heal any sickness or injury. And people flood in. And Jesus goes out overnight and prays.

And the disciples come out. The disciples think they've won the lottery. I mean, here is a religious leader who can do some practical good for a change. And they say, get back to town. And he says, no, no, no, I'm going to go and preach.

Because that's more important. And I think we're meant to go, really? It's more important than long life and good health? And with that question in mind, we now come to the three stories today.

And we find actually what Jesus is doing is infinitely more compassionate and powerful. Because Jesus is the doctor who gives us not what we want, but what we need.

[4 : 39] And Jesus has come to deal with something that most people don't even recognize as an issue, the problem of sin. And he hasn't come just to deal with the symptoms. He's come to deal with the root of the disease.

And he hasn't come to just deal with it temporarily. He's come to do it forever, to bring a full cure. So we get three snapshots which show us why Jesus come.

And it finishes with this statement. I'm the doctor. I've come to call sinners, not the righteous. And each one of the stories tells us of unbearable human suffering and impossible grace of Jesus. So let's look at the first one, which is the end of chapter 1, 40 to 45. And in verse 40, we meet a leper, a man with leprosy.

Doesn't take much imagination, does it? Lepers in those days were the living dead. They dressed as corpses. They were banished from synagogues and from their families.

[5 : 43] They were cut off from all human contact. They couldn't enter towns. It was a deadly fear of contagion. If you had leprosy, you were robbed of your family, of your name, of your community, of your religious place, your reputation.

You were defined by your disease. If anyone were to pass you in the countryside, you had to hold up your hand and call out, unclean, unclean, unclean.

It's a horrible thing. Infectious. Incurable. Disfiguring. Unbearable. No hope of cure. No restoration to community.

It's like a living death. And he's deeply aware of his own need. And he comes to Jesus. And he does something that's very risky and quite illegal. He falls on his knees and begs, ongoingly begs, if you will, you can make me clean.

He has no doubt about the power of Jesus to do this. But he doubts whether Jesus wants to or even cares.

[6 : 51] He's been a leper long enough to know. Nobody really cares. Verse 41. Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him.

Said to him, I will be clean. And immediately the leprosy left him. And he was made clean. It's absolutely breathtaking.

And in the original, these are words of deep emotion. Moved with pity has a strong flavor of anger about it. Fury about it even. Jesus is infuriated, not with the leper's doubt, but with the ravages of this disease and with human suffering.

Because leprosy encapsulates all that is evil, the death that we face, the result of sin. And Jesus is indignant. And he reaches out his hand and touches him.

How long since another human being had touched the leper? And he says, I am more than willing. Be clean. The way the text reads here, before our very eyes, all physical disfigurement leaves him.

[8 : 04] It's like in the movies. Nerve endings that were dead and made alive. The muscles and digits that were damaged and made whole.

Every symptom, we're told, left him immediately, not over time. Something all the medicine in the world couldn't do. He is made clean completely.

He moves from death to life. It's a new creation. It's a restoration. What is unbearable leaves. What is impossible enters in.

It's a liberation. It's Jesus' touch. It works in reverse. When Jesus touches the unclean, he doesn't become unclean. The person becomes completely clean.

And so he says to him, you need to go and see the priest, obey the law. The priest will sign a letter saying, you're completely clean so you can re-enter society. But don't say anything about this.

[9 : 03] He can't help himself, which is fairly, I think, understandable. I would have too. And the little episode finishes in verse 45. Because he spoke about it so freely, Jesus could no longer openly enter a town.

It was out in desolate places. And people were coming to him from every quarter. So as this first little episode finishes, we see that Jesus is a very different kind of doctor.

The leper and Jesus have changed places. The leper was outside. But through the healing, now Jesus is outside.

And the leper is received back into community. It's quite brilliant. It's the first snapshot of Dr. Jesus. And he hasn't come just to see a list of patients.

He's come to take what is unbearable and to give what is impossible. And he does that by changing places with us. And I think this story begins to cast the shadow of the cross on Jesus.

[10:09] That's the first one. The second is in chapter 2, verses 1 to 12. And this is the man who's paralyzed. This is a great story. And if you're new here, this is one of the foundational stories of the Christian faith.

And we go deeper into the heart of why Jesus came, what he's doing. So again, someone comes to Jesus. Actually, he's brought. He can't do a thing.

He's paralyzed. He cannot move. And the four perhaps have heard of Jesus' healing. They love their friend who's completely paralyzed.

His life is basically over. And so they grab his stretcher. They come to the house. And Jesus is preaching. And whenever Jesus preaches, there's a great crowd. Unlike here, they can't get in the door. As such is the strength of their faith, that they won't stop.

They won't let that be stopped. By the way, it's a great picture of what Christians ought to be doing, isn't it? Like bringing our friends to Jesus. Grabbing their stretcher. Doesn't matter. Doesn't really matter. And if you've been brought here by Christians, that's probably why.

[11:17] However, it's a flat roof house as they were. They go up the steps on the side. They go into the flat roof, which is strong wood, mud, timber, where people would go out in the cool of the day.

And they take extraordinary measures. They listen in to where Jesus is. And when they find where Jesus is, they dismantle the roof. The first act of Christian vandalism. Their friend is not just a stretcher case.

His life is over. And the only hope he has, if this healer can see him. So it's a wonderful moment where, you know, the crowd was packed in.

Jesus is preaching. These guys are pulling the roof apart. It's a very distracting thing in the middle of a sermon. And then down four ropes comes a guy who's paralyzed. What does Jesus do?

Verse five. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, son, your sins are forgiven.

[12:23] Imagine yourself as one of the four guys on the roof. That is not why they brought their friend. That's not why we brought him. It's his legs.

Can't you? I mean, it's just blazingly obvious. This guy's paralyzed. Heal him, Jesus. This guy hasn't come to have his sins forgiven. There's no evidence he's even aware of any sins.

Isn't Dr. Jesus being a bit paternalistic? Isn't he being impractical? Before we get any answer, things become more disturbing. Because Jesus can't only see into the heart of the man who is paralyzed.

He sees, he reads the heart of the clergy who are there watching him. They haven't said anything, verses six to nine. But Jesus knows what they're thinking. They're thinking, nobody can forgive sins but God alone.

This is blasphemy, which is true in a way. And what Jesus often does with controversial and uncomfortable questions is he doesn't leave them and conciliate. He brings it out into the open.

[13:23] He says, I know this is what you're thinking. And so he puts a question to them, which is easier to say to this man, your sins are forgiven, or rise, get up and walk? Well, it's probably easier to say your sins are forgiven because you can't actually see whether it's true.

But both are impossible. Next moment, verse 10, 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 he rose, and immediately picked up his bed, and went out before them all, so that they're all amazed and glorified God, saying we never saw anything like this. Again, absolutely instantaneous, this man, this man's body is healed.

We don't know how long he was paralysed for, but muscles that had atrophied, tendons and sinews that had forgotten how to work, they're made whole. He doesn't need help getting up.

He doesn't need crutches going out. He's not going to enter into years and years of physiotherapy. He rose, picked up his bed, and walked out a new man. He moves from death to life.

[14:39] It's a recreation. It's a restoration. What's unbearable leads. What's impossible enters. We have two miracles for the price of one here.

I just want to say, this is not like what James was doing with the children. I don't know if all of you saw this, but James did a magic trick with a piece of paper. Sleight of hand.

I've never seen that done in church before. We went to church and the minister did a magic trick. That's not what's going on here. It's very clever, by the way.

I was amazed. There are two miracles happening. Forgiveness of sins that we can't see, the healing of a paralysed body, which we can.

Because from Jesus' point of view, this man has two problems, not just one. So he first forgives his sins, then demonstrates the power and reality of his forgiving word and restores his body.

[15 : 40] Two separate miracles. It's not that he was paralysed because he'd committed some great evil and needed an encouraging word. If that were true, when he had the forgiveness of sins, he would have got up and walked.

He doesn't. That's not it. Healing is a second thing. It's an outward and physical demonstration of what Jesus has just done inwardly. And when Jesus says, my son, your sins are forgiven, Jesus is not just announcing it like we clergy do.

God has forgiven your sins. He's actually doing it. He's forgiving his sins. And Jesus tells us in verse 10 explicitly why he heals his body. So that you may know.

The son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins. This is why he's come. True? The healing of the body, absolutely wonderful. Forgiveness of sins, infinitely more wonderful.

Paralysis is a picture of death. Do you know Hippocrates, Dr. Hippocrates? He said that when a limb is paralysed, it's not that that is one limb in the grave. It's that death itself has come out of the grave and inhabited your limb and you should treat it like a corpse.

[16 : 51] And I think this is the way the story is told. The paralysed man is lowered into the house as you would be lowered into a grave. The only difference is, is when he comes to the bottom, he doesn't meet death.

He meets life in the person of Jesus and the word of forgiveness. And three times Jesus uses the resurrection word, rise, and he rose.

It's a picture of this absolutely wonderful new life that he's received through the forgiveness of sins. Now that he's been physically healed, he could live a full life.

He could go out and get married and have children and contribute to the community and watch his grandchildren. Brilliant. But as wonderful as that is, what we're meant to see here is there's something fabulously, infinitely more valuable and wonderful and that is the forgiveness of his sins. See, on that day when he rose from the dead, he had a new wonderful physical life. But the forgiveness of sins means that on the day at the end of history, he will rise from the grave to eternal life.

[17 : 54] This is one of the great truths of the Bible, that God is willing, God does not treat us according to our sins. He doesn't deal with us as we deserve.

He deals with us as we don't deserve. Forgiveness is a massive power, you see. It's not just wiping the slate clean. Forget about yesterday. It's being raised from the dead.

It's being given a new life. And here, it's almost too hard to believe. Here, it's a time-shifting miracle. Jesus says, the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.

In Bible terms, the forgiveness of sins is the verdict of the last day at the end of the world. And Jesus says, I bring that verdict of the last day now into history.

You can know that you are forgiven of your sins completely. You don't have to go through life wondering, doubting, not sure where you'll be on the last day. He gives it now. He has the power to remove everything that stands between us and God.

[19 : 01] He offers new life, restoration. This is the authority of Jesus. And it comes into our lives now. And it's not just to fix up our lives so we can live 90 happy years here.

It's to bring us back to God. It's to bring us into the world to come. And then we have a third snapshot and I'll just do this quickly.

And it's a wonderful meal. And it shows the result of forgiveness. And this is chapter 2, 13 to 17. Verse 14.

Jesus passes by the tax booth and there is Levi, son of Alphaeus, the tax collector, and he says, follow me.

And we read, Levi rose and followed him. Verse 14. And I don't need to tell you that tax collectors were morally completely compromised. Israel was an occupied country.

[20 : 01] They outsourced their tax collecting to the local Jews. The local Jews who collected taxes from their own friends, family, community, were worse than collaborators and traitors.

They lined their own pockets through extortion and corruption. They were below contempt but they were very wealthy. And I, well I'm told this, but I imagine the four fishermen who are Jesus' disciples

by now thought this was a very bad idea.

You don't, it's just, you don't do that. Notice please, Jesus does not say to Levi, I want you to clean up your act first and then come follow me.

I don't want you to reform. He doesn't say, I want you to reform and then you can be one of my disciples. The word follow me is just a command. It's a military command. It's the same voice that said to the leper, be clean.

To the paralytic, you're forgiven, get up. And now it says to Levi, follow me. And Levi rose, it's the resurrection word again, he becomes a new man.

[21 : 10] He leaves his tax collecting. He begins a new life of following Jesus. He moves from death to life. It's a recreation. It's a restoration. What's unbearable leaves and what's impossible enters.

And what's impossible becomes the focus of the passage. Because what happens now is we then go into this beautiful meal, which is the picture of the restoration that Jesus brings, verse 15.

Jesus reclined at table in Levi's house with many tax collectors and sinners, for there were many who followed him. This is a big meal, not fast.

It's a big meal. It's a banquet. It's a festival. It's formal. Because you see, Levi, Levi does what everyone who begins to follow Jesus does. He takes what he has and he serves Jesus.

And all he's got is money and lots of friends with questionable morality. And so he brings those two together with Jesus. Jesus. It's wonderful. It's these people Jesus wants to spend time with.

[22 : 18] Many have begun to follow him. Clergy are horrified and eating with someone was a very big deal. It demonstrated acceptance and identification.

For a man like Jesus to eat with these would make him unclean in their eyes. But this is what forgiveness does.

It opens the door for a very different kind of community and acceptance. Not a community based on our success or failure.

Not our moral standing, our rightness or wrongness. Not on our outward attractiveness or unattractiveness. But true forgiveness leads to feasting as we saw in Luke's gospel.

This is the kingdom of God. To follow Jesus and to be made clean by him. Those who are forgiven long to be together. And that's one of the reasons why we gather Sunday by Sunday.

[23 : 18] This is a little foretaste of the great feast of the kingdom. That is why Jesus has come. Those who are well have no need of a physician. Those who think they're well.

But those who are sick I have not come to call the righteous but sinners. And of course there is no such person as the righteous. Jesus says I haven't come for those who are confident in their own spirituality or imagination or moral uprightness or whatever.

I've come for sinners. And like the leper you may be here this morning thinking I am just too unclean too deeply.

You may feel like an outsider like the leper and you think Jesus couldn't possibly be interested in someone like me. I don't even know if he's willing to cleanse me. He doesn't really want someone like me.

I want to urge you go to him. Ask him if he is willing. As Jesus says I came for you. Or like the paralyzed guy you may not even know that sin is an issue for you.

[24 : 25] Your life seems full of these outward crippling problems. Your friends bring you to Christ and you need to hear this word of forgiveness. Listen to his word of forgiveness. It will give you life.

Or you may be someone who's morally compromised successfully successful financially but you know the way you've done it is a bit grubby. You hear Jesus calling you to follow him.

Rise up and follow him. You may be you may have been a Christian for a long time and you don't get this sense of community. You don't have this sense of freedom and life that's here in the forgiveness in these stories.

Go back to Jesus. Go to his forgiveness because forgiveness is not just something that we get at the beginning of our Christian life. Forgiveness is the power that gives us life every day with one another.

It's the restoration James was speaking about. If you're not sure about direction go back to forgiveness. If you're not sure what you should do go back to forgiveness. And I once heard a preacher try and interview the paralyzed man as though he could get a hotline to heaven.

[25 : 34] Do you understand what I mean? I want to say imagine that we could interview all three of these guys now, today 2,000 years later. What would they say? Well I think the leper would say you know I could have pretended to be clean.

I could have stolen clothes. In fact I was tempted to. and been very sanitary but it just would have dealt with the symptoms. What Jesus did was to give me his own purity that day and over the last 2,000 years since I've been with him that purity is a growing delight to me.

Or the paralyzed guy would say you know the day Jesus came and healed me was brilliant. I'm married I had a family I had a productive life but now that I've been with him for 2,000 years I realized that the forgiveness he gave me was far more important than those 60 years.

Or Levi he might say something like you know I wasn't looking for any kind of religious experience he just came out of nowhere he just entered my life and called me and I want to say following him was not easy and in the end I died for it but those early meals with him and with my friends were a foretaste of what it's like to be with him now.

The amazing thing about forgiveness is it's a massive power it's stronger than all our uncleanness and all our weakness and all our sin. Without forgiveness we cannot make ourselves really clean all the meditation or spiritual exercises in the world just can't do it.

[27 : 13] Without forgiveness we can't get to the root of who we are. it's a new life that comes out of forgiveness. And here at St. John's without forgiveness we can't create a true community.

Through forgiveness he welcomes us to his table. There are no barriers to the table apart from the forgiveness of sins. That's it. That's the qualification. There is no one at the Lord's table who deserves to be everyone.

We're all equally undeserving. It's a massive power. forgiveness restores us to God and to each other and to ourselves. And in just a moment we are going to celebrate the Lord's Supper Holy Communion which was the meal Jesus gave us as a little picture of the banquet in heaven.

When we say the confession we confess we ask God forgive us all that is past. and through his words of forgiveness that you'll hear again Jesus holds out this new life this forgiveness of sins this new power this cleansing power to us and as we come forward to take the bread and the wine we participate in anticipation of that great meal.

I invite you all to do so. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.