

Mark 1:40-2:12

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[0 : 00] Well, if you would turn up to Mark chapter 1, verses 40 to 2, 12, these two episodes which are so familiar to us, I promise not to bring out a puppet.

Unless I see people falling asleep. So here are two little passages and in them what Mark does is he takes us right to the heart of the Christian faith.

The forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ. And forgiveness is always a miracle. Creative, compassionate, costly.

Before we dive in, I just need to say that the Bible view of forgiveness is very different than the current view of forgiveness around us. Our current view is that you should not forgive.

And if you do, you should do it only sparingly. We are a cancel culture. And if you do forgive, well, it's all about the personal therapeutic benefits to me.

[1 : 09] It's psychologically helpful. And that's true. But it misses the point. The Bible point is that forgiveness is not just about me. It's about gaining your brother and sister.

And ultimately, it's about God. And in the Bible, forgiveness is not trivialising the wrong or the sin or the evil that has been done to me.

Not trying to put it in the best possible light. Nor is it excusing the other person. Think about that.

C.S. Lewis says, Real forgiveness means steadily looking at the sin, the sin that is left over, without any excuses.

After all allowances have been made, seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness and malice. That's not forgiveness. Excusing.

Nor is forgiveness burying sin and thinking time heals all wounds. It doesn't. Nor is it saying, forgive and forget, let bygones be bygones.

[2 : 18] Forgiveness arises from the incredible grace and kindness and mercy of God. And what he does is he finds a way to lift our sins from us and to welcome us in.

And it is a mark of how we relate to one another in the Christian community. It's partly what makes us a community of contrast. And it's so relevant now in our cancel culture as COVID recedes, we seem to have become angrier and better at holding grudges and criticisms.

In today's passage, Mark deliberately puts these two stories together and takes us right into what forgiveness means and how it works. And in both the events, the disciples are absent.

The focus is squarely on Jesus and his relation to the people in aching need. And we share some of their desperation as all human hope is gone.

And death itself creeps into their bodies, both the leper and the paralytic. And in both stories, Jesus breaks all the rules and goes beyond what's on the surface to what's underneath because the wretchedness is not shallow or superficial, but is the invasion of evil and death.

[3 : 40] And in both these stories, Jesus triumphs over the invisible and visible enemies with authority and compassion. So, stories are very familiar.

I'm sure many of you have studied these in some detail. What I'm going to do is this. I'm going to go over the stories so that we have the remarkable details in mind.

And then I'm going to look at the three main things Mark wants us to take away. And if there's time, some application. Is that all right? It doesn't really matter.

That's what I'm going to do. So, I was just being polite. So, let's get some of the details, shall we?

Firstly, the leper in chapter 140 to 45. Without any introduction and, it begins and, the leper races in and kneels and begs Jesus, if you will, if you want, you can make me clean.

And we read that Jesus is moved by compassion and he stretches his hand right out across the physical, spiritual, social separation of the day and touches him and says, I want, be clean.

[4 : 45] And immediately, leprosy literally is driven out of him and leaves the man and he is completely healed, restored and cleansed. And Jesus says, don't tell anyone about this until after you've been, after you've gone to the priest and been welcomed back into the worshipping community.

But he's not able to restrain himself, understandably, I think. And he tells everyone what's happened to him so that Jesus can no longer go into the towns but has to now go and preach the gospel outside in the wilderness.

And I don't need to tell you that leprosy was a crushing reality for many in the ancient world. Long before anyone had ever heard of zombies, rabbis referred to lepers, and I quote, as the living dead. Beyond human help, only God could cleanse them. And you became increasingly corpse-like. Your skin went white and flaky. Your nerves died. Your nose collapsed. Some of your face collapsed. You began to have injuries all over your body because the nerves had died.

[5 : 58] You were not allowed to come into any town. You were excluded from all life, from all community life and worship life. You were not allowed within 50 paces of any other human being.

And you had to wear a COVID mask and ring a bell and call out, unclean, unclean. Not, I'm contagious and sick, help me, but unclean.

It was terminal. It was progressive. It was incurable. But he comes to Jesus with this staggering confidence that Jesus can heal him, just not sure whether Jesus wants to.

Is Jesus kind enough and gracious enough to do this for me? And for the first time in the gospel, we're allowed into Jesus' heart. We read in verse 41 that he is moved with pity, compassion. Instead of leaping away to protect himself from becoming unclean, he does the opposite. He reaches in and touches this man. How long it had been since this man had had any human touch whatsoever.

[7 : 06] And he speaks the word of command and he's instantly made well. And in that moment, the man moves from death to life. From uncleanness to cleanness.

From separation to community again. The second story, the paralytic, which was reenacted before us with the floppy legs. And I've got to say, this is a fantastic story and it does lend itself to comedy. I mean, the expression of faith in this story is vandalism. Getting through the roof to Jesus. I know. So a man who is paralysed, he's brought by his four friends on a stretcher.

And they're all absolutely certain both that Jesus can and will give him new legs. But there's a new problem in verse 2 of chapter 2.

The massive crowd that's crashing around Jesus at Capernaum as he's in the house preaching the word. His key priority, remember. They can't get in. So they come up with a moment of creative distraction.

[8 : 10] The roofs were flat. They go up on the roof. They destroy a hole in the roof where they listen for where Jesus is speaking. They get a hole big enough. They must have tied ropes around the mat, the stretcher.

And they let the friend down in front of Jesus. Verse 5. When Jesus saw their faith, he said, Son, your sins are forgiven. It's an absolutely brilliant moment.

I mean, they are absolutely certain that their friend's big need is for legs. But for Jesus, as our children's focus said, forgiveness is all our deepest need.

And they're bewildered. There's nothing to indicate their friend was particularly sinful. But like all of us, they look on the outside and they see the physical and social need. And you know, I think it's only after we receive the forgiveness of Christ that our eyes are open to see that underneath every other need in our lives is this need for forgiveness and reconciliation with God.

Our world wants Jesus to fix up the mess. It would much rather the clergy go out and actually do something useful for a change. I mean, war and climate change and refugee, these are our biggest needs.

[9 : 25] And they are very, very big needs and very important, particularly for us as Christians. But if we clean up the mess, every mess that we can, but we don't clean up the mess makers, back to the same place again, aren't we?

So while the friends on the roof are up there calling out, it's the legs, it's the legs, or something like that, Jesus turns to the scribes, he sees in their hearts at the same time, and they are utterly horrified by what Jesus has just said, this word of forgiveness.

They're Bible experts. And they know that at its core, sin is a vertical reality against God. We owe God our lives and all our praise, and every time we sin, it's an act of betrayal, not just hurting others, but we defy and betray God himself.

And they are thinking no one can forgive sins but God alone. That's what the Bible says. Who does Jesus think he is? He's out of his league. I mean, we the clergy, we declare that God forgives sins, but Jesus doesn't declare the forgiveness of sins.

He steps into the role of God and does the forgiving. It's blasphemy. And they ought to have a little footnote, unless, of course, Jesus is God. So Jesus puts it to them in a question in verse 9.

[10:44] Brilliant. He's about, and the question explains what he's about to do. He says, which is easier, to say your sins are forgiven or you have your legs back, go? You couldn't set it up in a better way, could you?

And, of course, it may be easier to say your sins are forgiven because you can't see whether that's worked. But the point that Jesus is making is that both are humanly impossible.

Both belong to God. And he says, to show you that I have authority on earth to forgive sins, he commands this man, rise, the resurrection word, pick up your bed, go home, and he does, proving that the forgiveness that Jesus commanded him a moment before is real.

And they're all amazed and glorify God, which is exactly what we should do. So here's the question. What does this all mean? What does it mean for us today? What can we take from this?

And I think Mark is driving three lessons to us, and I just want to point out these three things for you. And the first and most obvious is the unique glory of Jesus Christ.

[11:53] Jesus uniquely combines the power and majesty of God with the compassion and mercy of God. Nothing is impossible for Jesus.

Both these men are completely beyond human help. But like all his miracles, the healing is complete, instantaneous, and permanent until they die.

When the paralytic gets up, he does not need to be helped up. He doesn't need to go for lengthy rehabilitation. The muscles that must have atrophy on his legs are strong in an instance, strong enough for him to get up and to pick up his bed in front of everyone and to walk out without assistance.

So with the leper, the leprosy is driven away. All the damage to his fingers and toes gone, instantly repaired. All the nerve damage is reversed.

He's able to feel again. All the contagious uncleanness is made pure and fresh, and he's restored to community. These are things only God can do. And as Jesus goes through here, he speaks the words of God, and he does the works of God because Jesus is God.

[13:08] This is the unique glory of Jesus Christ. And for the first time in this gospel, Mark refers to the compassion of Jesus in verse 41, chapter 1.

This is another great glory of Jesus. Moved with compassion. This is the deep stomach moving word. There's nothing cold or harsh or standoffish about Jesus.

No one is more approachable. No one is more gentle. And the worse our problems, the deeper his affection and pity.

And he touches and he heals and he embraces and forgives, not because these men deserve it, not because we deserve it, but because it is his deepest joy.

This is who he is in showing grace. The most unclean, the most spiritually filthy among us.

[14:09] God yearns for you. God sympathises with you. Our ignorance and our arrogance, they don't put him off. They don't put us outside his love.

And even when we come to Jesus with our own agendas, he continues to love us and to give us more than we desire or deserve. There is no obstacle too big for Jesus Christ.

So when the roof is ripped open above Jesus, he's not irritated at the interruption to his preaching. Instead, he sees their faith. Their action showed.

Very little understanding of his priorities, but they had acted in faith to bring their friend to Jesus, which is what we should do. So he stops preaching. He's not offended and gives the man a gift which is greater depth than any physical healing, a gift that's going to last forever.

I mean, if he gave him back his legs, it might last for another 30 years. This will last forever. And Mark wants us to see the unique glory of Jesus Christ, this unique combination of power and majesty, passion and mercy.

[15:15] That's the first lesson. The second lesson goes a bit deeper, I think, in a way. And it's this, that Jesus works by changing places with us.

So, ever since the Exodus, leprosy has been associated with sin and judgment. That is why leprosy is not regarded as a sickness, but an uncleanness.

Lepers don't need to be healed. They need to be cleansed. And the leper is a classic outcast, banished from society and community. And his segregation, you don't have to think about this too hard.

I mean, it's a daily dehumanising experience for all lepers in those days. But though he is untouchable, he's not untouchable to Jesus. And Jesus' touch of him would usually make Jesus unclean, but it works in reverse.

Such is his power, such is his holiness. He makes the man clean and drives away the leprosy. And what Jesus does for this leper is a picture of what he does for all of us.

[16:20] He does not get rid of the problem by banishing the victim with the disease intact. He separates the man from his uncleanness and deals with the man himself.

Jesus deals with the uncleanness and brings the man into fellowship. And that's the shape of our salvation. Let me show you just one more thing in the leprosy episode.

Notice how it ends in verse 45. What are the consequences of this miracle and of the man being brought back into community? Verse 45, Jesus is driven out.

The leper comes in. Jesus is forced out now into wilderness places. It's as though the leper and Jesus have changed places. And it's even more true in the second episode.

When Jesus says the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, nobody in that room, not the guy who's paralyzed or his friends, the enemies or even the disciples, had any idea what it was going to cost him to bring that forgiveness.

[17:26] And if it's the first time we're reading through the gospel, Mark expects us to be utterly stunned by this and to keep reading to chapter 10 where we read this, that Jesus again calls himself the Son of Man.

And he says, The Son of Man has come not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Give his life as a ransom for many.

So that he doesn't die as a martyr making a big example for us. He's not surprised or overwhelmed by those who want to put him to death. He chooses to die in our place as a ransom, to give his life for our sins that we might be forgiven.

Because all our sins in the end put us beyond human help. Since we have wronged God, we are beyond human help. But blessed be his holy name.

Jesus has paid what we could not. He suffered for sin, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God. And all who hear this promise of forgiveness, all who turn to him and trust him, receive freedom from guilt, pardon for wrong, new life and new strength, and the beginnings of the power to forgive others.

[18:43] Jesus stands in our place because this is how forgiveness works. All forgiveness works by a willingness to bear the pain. And imagine a woman whose husband has had an affair.

And he lies to her for a time about it and then he confesses that he has betrayed her and asks to take him back. How can she take him back even if she wants to?

I mean, it's going to take ages to trust again. But how can she bring herself to forgive him? Not by making excuses. Not by pretending it doesn't hurt.

The only way is for her to bear the pain in herself. To absorb the loss and the debt and the grief. Because forgiveness is always choosing a path of suffering. And the word forgive in the New Testament means to lift off, to carry away, to take away, to release.

[19:44] And you've got to release the person. You're not going to take revenge. You're not going to nurse grudges. You're not going to get gossiping about them.

And that's what Christ has done for us. Christ, on the cross, absorbed the pain of our sin, the shame and the brokenness of our world, of every one of us. He stood in our place as he was nailed to the cross.

And it is only out of the riches of his forgiveness that we can possibly forgive each other. If you are insecure or if you are a needy person, it's very hard to be gracious.

But if you are secure in the forgiveness that Christ has brought, then you have capacity to forgive. The humility and grace to forgive each other come out of his forgiveness for us.

And those who've been forgiven much, forgive much. And the only way to not call in the debts that other people owe you is to know that Christ has paid it all for you.

[20 : 47] So that's the second lesson Mark wants us to get, that Jesus stands in our place. And the third is very quick. It's just simply the unique authority of Jesus. The glory of Jesus, he stands in our place.

And now, thirdly, the unique authority of Jesus. You know, the story in chapter 2 is the first time Jesus himself speaks about his own authority. The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.

And the Son of Man has a rich Old Testament background, but most clearly it's the judge of all human beings on the last day at the end of the world, where God gives eternal rule to the Son of Man, dominion and a kingdom.

Jesus says, I am the Son of Man, and I have the authority, that authority that is given on the last day, and I'm exercising it on earth now.

In other words, forgiveness is a time-shifting miracle. Jesus is saying, I'm bringing the verdict of the last day into the present time.

[21 : 57] And he offers the verdict of forgiveness, innocent, cleared, pardoned, righteous, to all who trust him now. It's a complete miracle.

It just means we don't need to wait to the judgment day wondering whether we're really forgiven or not. Here is the judge. He came to save us and to serve us by giving his life for our sins, and he offers us complete forgiveness and cleansing and restoration with God.

And that begins now, and it will outlast your life, my life, and this world into the next. So there are the three points I think Mark wants us to grab.

Let me make just three quick points of application, and then I'm going to pray, and Rita will finish our prayers. So there are three points of application out of this, and the first is very simple. I think we ought to be very happy.

Rejoice. That's the Christian language. We do nothing to earn or deserve the forgiveness of God. What we have to do is to receive it, and every time we receive it and understand it afresh, there's an awe and wonder in us.

[23 : 16] You know, if you've turned from your sins and you're trusting in Jesus Christ, he has forgiven you all your sins, all your guilt, all your shame, the most shameful things that have happened.

And he is giving you a clean heart and a fresh and right spirit. Pray that he would restore the joy of salvation to you. It doesn't depend on your personal integrity and morality.

It depends on the Lord of glory, on the Lord of power and mercy, who came to release us from our sins and bring us back to God. It's the utter miracle of grace, and I reckon we ought to be very glad about it.

Rejoice. Second obvious application. You ought to forgive those who sinned against you. I know this is complicated. And I know there are situations where more is needed for reconciliation than just forgiveness.

But since Christ has forgiven us, we must be willing, at least willing, to let go of the bitterness and anger and desire for revenge and self-justification.

[24 : 22] We must be willing to bear the pain that we have received since Christ has borne our sins for us. This is the mark of everyone who has received the forgiveness from Christ, willingness to forgive others.

And as I said earlier, forgiveness is a form of suffering. It's emotionally expensive. Letting go of the sense that that other person owes you and you're jolly well going to make them feel it.

And since he has absorbed all that stands against us, we must be willing to forgive each other. It is the mark of Christians that we turn the other cheek. Some years ago, we sponsored an Iranian refugee and the government wanted to deport him.

And in his interview, when he first entered Canada illegally, in his broken English, he explained to the border guard how he had been converted from Islam to Jesus.

And it was this. He said, the fact that Jesus turns the other cheek and doesn't get revenge, that's the reason I became a Christian. And I think in our cancel culture, it's very strange to be willing to forgive and very attractive.

[25 : 43] They have a community so gripped by the gospel of God's grace, they're willing to truly forgive him. It's outstanding. And the third application is this. Obviously, if you know you're not forgiven or if you're unsure whether you've been forgiven, just repeat what Jesus said in chapter one.

Repent and believe the good news. And here is the promise. Christ Jesus has authority on earth to forgive sins. And if you turn to him and trust in him, as we've said in the service already, he will forgive you your sins.

And now is the time to do it if you've never done it before. He's brought you to this place. He has shown you his love and power. He's made this promise of pardon.

He's gone to the cross. He's risen from the dead. And he is coming again. So if you know you're someone who has not received forgiveness, pray with me now. And for all of us, let us pray together that God would give us this great gift in increasing abundance so that we might be like Christ in our lives as well.

Let's kneel for prayer. Heavenly Father, I have sinned against you and I need your forgiveness.

[27 : 12] Thank you for your Son, Jesus Christ, for his death and resurrection, for my sins and your promise to forgive. Please forgive me all my sin.

Create a new heart in me and bring me to everlasting life. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. And now Rita is going to continue in prayer.