

Who Can Forgive Sins but God?

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- [0 : 00] Well, what a pleasure to be with you on this beautiful, beautiful day. A pleasure in many ways. I've known your pastor for a number of years, both in our associations of Simeon Trust and preaching workshops, also in Australia and England in connections.
- Down there, my son went to Moore College where your pastor went down there. So we have a lot of connections and it's great to be here in a church that shares those values together.
- Now, I didn't sleep with my shoes when I was a little boy, but I did sleep with my tennis racket for a year. So, we all have our romances. We're going to be looking at Mark, the second chapter today, the verses that were read this morning.
- And you'll want to follow along in your Bibles. Alpine hikers have told me that when caught in a brewing storm, that they have seen the hair on their fellow hikers stand out like a radiant crown.
- And when things get really intense, the metal frames of their backpacks begin to glow with a neon blue eerie light.
- [1 : 17] It's called St. Elmo's Fire. And the same phenomenon has been recorded by sailors of ancient times and modern times when their ship's mast would be crowned with a ghostly aura of light.
- Now, in all cases, when St. Elmo's Fire is seen, it means if you're a hiker, it is time to get rid of your pack and go to cover. However, I think this image conveys something of the fire that is over the text, the expectancy, the voltage that is over the text that we have today because something very dramatic takes place.
- And I think there was a kind of spiritual fire hovering over those jammed in that little house in Capernaum. And you get a feel of the situation in the opening verses. And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home.
- And many were gathered together so that there were no more room, not even at the door. And he was preaching the word to them. The home was likely the home of the Apostle Peter's mother-in-law.
- And when they got word that Jesus was back and staying there, people began to show up at the door. And almost immediately, the home in which Jesus was staying was packed with people.
- [2 : 41] Some were just curious. Others were bright-eyed disciples hanging on every word. Important people began to show. And some of those important people looked a little edgy, a little nervous, a little intent.
- And as is always, crowds attract greater crowds. And soon it was impossible to get in the door. So outside there then was dust and jostling and disease and crowding.
- And still more people are trying to get in the house where Jesus is. With all of that bustle and all of that crush, there were two dominating presidents.

First, as a parallel account in Luke tells us, Luke 5, there were the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Now, to those who were unsuspecting in the crowd, to have these theological heavyweights there looked like a spiritual life conference maybe.

But in actuality, they were an investigative committee sent to check Jesus out and see if they could find something wrong with that young rabbi. Though there were standing room only, it tells us that this investigative committee was sitting.

[4 : 02] So you can picture them in the forefront, wearing suspicious looks, a sense of self-importance, seated, listening to Jesus to make a slip.

So there is fire in the air. The other presence, of course, is the Lord Jesus, who is calm and unperturbed, and He's in self-control.

And as our text says, He is preaching the Word to them. So as a rabbi seated, He is opening the Word about the nearness of the kingdom, the necessity of faith and repentance. And I personally think that that expectant crowd sensed the tension.

They didn't know perhaps exactly what it was, but that kind of relational stress was in the air, and they sensed perhaps something was going to happen. And Luke says, in the parallel account, in Luke 5, very interestingly, he says, the power of the Lord was with Him to heal.

So the room was charged, and the atmosphere fairly crackled, and then a disturbance began. And Mark continues in his account here, in verses 3 and 4, And they came, bringing to Him a paralytic carried by four men.

[5 : 26] And when they could not get near Him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above Him. And when they had made an opening, they let down the bed in which the paralytic lay.

Now, you can fill in the lines here, but you have four men struggling with the litter in which a helpless paralytic lay, approached the friends of the pressing crowd.

Their few attempts to get through proved futile, so they rested the mat, mopped their brows, glanced down at their needy friend, looked at the house, the people, and decided what they were going to do.

And they picked up that stretcher, moved around that crowd to the side of the flat-roofed house, and possibly there was an outside stairway leading up the roof, as many homes had in those days, or perhaps they just ascended the neighboring roof and stepped across, the houses being close together.

But however it was, after hauling and sweat and handling and pushing, they had their friend on the roof, where they would have caught their breath, rested for a moment, and then they did the most amazing thing.

[6 : 38] They began to tear through the roof. Now, the typical Syrian roof in those days was constructed of timbers laid parallel to each other, like we do with roof joists, and then across that, smaller sticks, so that you would then form the basic roof, and then on top of that would be stacked twigs and branches and leaves, and then on top of that, a foot of dirt, all packed down.

They say that in the springtimes, those would be grass roofs, those primitive roofs. A roof about two feet thick. These four men were tearing through the roof.

And those inside the house would have first heard the stirring on the top of the roof and the shoveling and then the pounding and then louder conversations as the roof began to open up and as they tore branches and pried the slats between the beams.

And debris began to fall in the house. There was a crack of light which then widened to the opening of a man.

You could see the light above. Now, you can be sure that there were words exchanged between those below and those above.

[8 : 03] And you have to remember this is Peter's mother-in-law's house. So maybe Peter had some words. And then the paralytic's bed descended on some ropes.

So what a scene you have above the light streaming past them and dusty beams four sweatish, determined faces.

Below the Pharisees and the scribes shaking the dirt off of themselves. And in the midst, the Prince of Peace and the paralytic. The two main figures radiating in the light.

And history would remember this event. We all know what happened. We've heard it from Sunday school on. But for a moment, before we go on, let's just concentrate on those four friends.

These four sweaty men. For starters, they loved him. There can be no doubt about that. They wouldn't be put off by the crowd.

[9 : 13] They even went so far as to abuse another's property, so to speak, to get their end. They ignored the protest, the judgment of those, say, inside or others around for the sake of their friend.

You have to say why. Perhaps he was family. Loved brother or uncle. Maybe simply a neighbor that they'd grown up with and were fond of.

But whatever the relationship, these four loved him. And whatever happened that day, from their perspective, whether it was healing or rejection or whatever, that paralytic was a very rich man.

He had something that people pay millions of dollars for and they can't buy. And God was going to work in his life, and we do remember this, because his friends loved him.

Their remarkable love is paired with something else equally remarkable, and that is their faith.

[10 : 21] They would not have gone to such extremes that they did if they did not implicitly believe that Christ could and would heal their friend.

That's got to be a fact. I mean, a wavering faith would have demurred. Maybe when they got up on the roof or began to tear it and say, guys, I'm out of here. You'll have to finish yourselves. But the four of them stuck together and they did the whole thing.

And that faith was not a vague, passive thing like so many imagine faith today. Their faith was persistent. When they got their friend on the stretcher, on the roof, there's no stopping them.

When they came to an obstacle, none of them said, well, the door's closed. I guess this isn't God's will. And they didn't form a committee. They got going.

Beautiful thing. Now, in another place in Scripture, Jesus lauded their action, which for us is an enigmatic saying.

[11 : 31] But here, I think you'll see what it means. When Jesus says in Matthew 11, 12, from the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence.

the violent take it by force. And so when those four tore through the roof, they took the kingdom by violent, determined, graced force.

Such force unleashes God's power. And that force comes out of a deep, abiding faith faith in God, in His power.

Their faith was also creative. Undoubtedly, there were people standing around saying, why didn't I think of that? And the answer is, they didn't believe as passionately and love as dearly as those four believing men.

There was some sacrifice. Someone had to pay for the roof. Someone had to fix the roof, time and labor. But they were willing to pay the price. Now, perhaps you've heard people talking about putting their faith in Jesus.

[12 : 42] You hear that phrase out there today. And you wondered, what does it mean? Well, here's a snapshot. Here.

Faith is about action. And throughout the Gospel of Mark, when you read those brief chapters, Mark, faith is not just knowing the facts.

It involves action. One of the nicknames for Mark is the Go Gospel because it's so action-packed, so demanding action. And the faith of those four friends meant that no one could keep them from bringing their pitiful friend to Jesus.

They found a way around those callous crowds. Roof? Two feet thick? They just tore through it. Amazing faith.

Paralytic had not only faithful friends, but faith-filled friends who so passionately believed that they got them to Jesus. Now, as Christians, and when we gather together in an edifice like this on the Lord's Day, and as we have prayed and extolled Jesus Christ as our Savior, we believe, by virtue of saying this in Mass, corporately, that Jesus is the only person who can change our lives forever.

[14 : 12] However, we believe that with all of our hearts. We believe that He is the only one who can meet our deepest need.

We believe that with all of our hearts. He's the only one. This we passionately believe. We believe. But I want to say, if you're here today because some friends invited you to come, perhaps even pestered you to be here on this day, you're a blessed person because you have faithful friends who passionately believe.

When you look at this story, the real paralytics here are the Pharisees and scribes.

In marked contrast to the four stretcher bears, they're just sitting there. And as the religious leaders of Israel, they should have been directing the traffic to Jesus.

When the roof opened, they should have welcomed Him down. But instead of love, there is indifference. Instead of faith, there is just criticism.

[15 : 35] And we know that the Lord saw everything more clearly than we do. It was transparent to Him. Totally transparent. And so, the Lord decided to use that charged moment with a paralytic before Him to make His point.

And what Jesus said was shocking. In that charged atmosphere, it was a bolt of lightning. As He said to the paralytic, My son, your sins are forgiven.

That was a thunderbolt. It was a shock. It was a jolt for two reasons. First of all, and listen very closely, because your sins are forgiven was so utterly irrelevant.

Here's a wretched paralytic moldering on a stretcher who's been lowered through the roof desperately hoping for a cure, aching for a cure, and Jesus says to him, your sins are forgiven.

Thanks a lot, Jesus. I didn't come here for a religious sleight of hand. Thanks for nothing. Men, take me home.

[17 : 03] I mean, everyone in that room could see that that wretched man's greatest need was His healing. But, if Jesus is a son of God, we had better listen carefully, because He never indulges in irrelevancies.

And when Jesus looked down on that man, Jesus saw as clearly as anyone, He saw His shriveled appendages. He saw a man who perhaps felt himself to be a burden to others, and a man who was a prisoner of his aching, inert body.

And Jesus looked at all of that, and then He penetrated through all of that to the man's greatest need, which was the forgiveness of sins. And when Jesus went beyond the man's surface need to His greatest need, He addressed the need of every person in that room, every onlooker in that room, from the poor to the rich, to the establishment, to the disestablished.

Now, it is possible that the paralytic could have been a notorious sinner. I think it's unlikely, because in fact, His paralysis would have mitigated against doing a lot of things that we call the big sins.

He couldn't get out and do adultery. He couldn't get out and rob stores. He couldn't physically abuse others. He couldn't murder. He just couldn't do the big bad things. But Jesus' point is clear.

[18 : 44] Sin is not just about our actions, but about our hearts. Now, it is true that He could be the biggest sinner in Capernaum because the sins are here.

But whatever, His spiritual need was far more desperate than His desperate, desperate, desperate, appalling, physical need.

And if Jesus cured the man of paralysis, then the man could expect, if he was perhaps younger, 20 to 30 years of health. He could expect a couple of decades of being liberated from all of that misery.

But, when Jesus forgave the man's sins, He delivered him not only from his sins, but an eternity apart from God. From the presence and goodness of God, hell itself.

That's the logic. And all that the force of what Jesus said would penetrate our thinking. Because, speaking to a disparate crowd like this, you may think that your greatest need today is a job.

[20 : 03] That's what obsessed you as you came to church this morning. A job. Or, that your greatest need is education. I've got to get that education if anything's going to happen to me in this world.

Good. Or, it may be that the thing you think that you've got to have more than anything is a spouse. Or, if you've got poor health, your health.

But, it is not. your greatest need is the forgiveness of sins. And may the shock of what Jesus did here shock all of us to our senses.

Now, that is shocking for that reason. My son, your sins are forgiven. But, it's shocking for a second reason. And that is what Jesus says about himself. And, notice in verses 6 and 7, now some of the scribes were sitting there questioning their hearts.

Why does this man speak like that? He's blaspheming. Who can forgive sins but God alone? These scribes knew their Bibles and they were horrified.

[21 : 17] Jesus was making the appalling, blasphemous claim that he was God. And, according to the Scriptures, according to the Old Testament Scriptures, not just the New Testament Scriptures, the Old Testament Scriptures, that sins are essentially and ultimately against God.

That's what King David understood implicitly as he prays in Psalm 51, where he has sinned in adultery against Bathsheba and then he's committed homicide against her husband, Uriah, and he cries out to God in penitence.

Now, he knew he'd sinned against these people, but ultimately he knew what he was against. For I know my transgressions. That's my lying and adultery and homicide.

And my sin is ever before me. And he says to God, against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight. Because all sins, whether against others or sins of the heart, are ultimately against a holy God who sees all, and he alone, he alone is the one who can forgive sins.

So by making this claim, Jesus is claiming to be God incarnate. And as they sat there, they thought, there's no doubt about it. This is blasphemy.

[22 : 49] It deserves death. death. And of course, I'm sure Jesus could read their faces, but he didn't need to read their faces, he could read their hearts, and he knew what was going on in their minds.

And so you read in verses 8 and 9, and immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, why do you question these things in your hearts?

He read their minds. Then he said, which is easier? To say to the paralytic, your sins are forgiven, or to say, rise, take up your bed and walk.

Now, if I was there, I know how I would have answered the question. Or if this happened today, I know how I would answer the question because there are entire research communities endowed with billions of dollars devoted to the miseries of paralysis, especially para and quadriplegia, with hardly anything to show.

So, for us, it's far easier to say, your sins are forgiven. No one can check that. Only God knows.

[24 : 05] But I want to say, does anyone here have the temerity to tell Johnny Eric Santata, who's been on her stretcher for over 50 years, take up your bed and walk?

Of course not. But here, Jesus shocks again. And the electricity in the air flashes with lightning as he says in verses 10 through 12, 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 were all amazed and glorified God saying, we never saw anything like this.

In Jesus' word, now this is a healing, an instantaneous healing. The paralytic crooked bones straightened and resumed their density.

The tendons flexed and stretched. His appetite muscles inflated. His sagging skin became taut. And, at once, he rolled up his bed, stood illuminated the dusty shaft of light radiating from the hole above.

[25 : 32] And, standing exultant, he bent down, took up his bed, hoisted it on his shoulder, and strode joyfully through the parting throng that had once blocked his way into the sunlight where his four faithful friends had scurried down the roof and had joined him, no doubt leaping and whooping all the way home.

Shocking. But think of this. For Jesus, it was an easy thing to say, take up your bed and walk.

work. The thing that we would have such temerity in saying is easy for Jesus. It only involves an exercise of his creational power which he displayed when all things were created through him and for him.

That Jesus healed with the ease of omnipotence. That when power to heal went out from Jesus, it had no effect on the infinity of his power.

it was easy to say, take up your bed and walk. Easy. But the hardest thing of all was to say, my son, your sins are forgiven because that meant his death on the cross.

[26 : 55] Now, remember, in the garden, the prospect of it was so horrific, so loathsome, so terrifying, that it says in Mark 14.

33, he began to be distressed and troubled. And he said to them, my soul is very sorrowful even to death. Remain here and watch.

And going a little farther, he fell down on the ground and prayed if it were possible that the hour might pass from him. And he said, Abba Father, all things are possible for you.

remove this cup from me. That's his petition. And then his submission. Yet not what I will, but you will.

And when the hour came, he did it by dying the lowest death, even death on a cross. Now, in retrospect, the apostle Paul described what took place in 15 words in the Greek in 2 Corinthians 5 21.

[27 : 57] For our sake, he made him to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in him, we might become the righteousness of God.

Jesus was sinless through all his 33 years as he knew no sin, and he remained sinless when he became sin for us.

So, Christ became sin while remaining inwardly and outwardly impeccable, that is sinless. on those three dark hours on good Friday, 400 minutes on good Friday, his heart, so to speak, became a sea into which poured the mountains of our festering sin, and there the loathsome mass of our corruption is poured out upon him, and there our sins were focused on Christ as he bore the wrath of God, having become a curse for us.

So, Jesus, in full, lucid consciousness, writhing like an impaled serpent in the gloom, took on your sins and mine with a unity of understanding and pain that none can fathom.

For 400 minutes, he was bereft of the goodness of God alone, crying out in his desolation, and he did it all willingly.

[29 : 23] the hardest thing ever done in all the universe so that he could say, my son, my daughter, your sins are forgiven.

Jesus did the hardest thing in time and eternity, the hardest thing in all the universe for you and me, which means that he is committed to those who come to them.

To forgive their sins. The Victorian preacher, Charles Spurgeon, never at a loss for words, says, I think I see him.

He sets one foot down to God's glory. He plants the other to the same note. He walks to God's glory. He carries his bed to God's glory.

He moves his whole body to the glory of God. He speaks, he shouts, he sings, he leaps to the glory of God. What a display to that wondering crowd, awestruck by what they've seen.

[30 : 35] And I think who's to say the paralytic and his four friends didn't dance down the street while the multitude clapped in rhythm. As I like to think, they were Palestinians, they weren't Bostonians. And as he went home, he bore something far more impressive than his bed.

It was a clean heart. The greatest miracle of all. No guilt. It's gone.

Perhaps he felt like the gravity was gone. The guilt was gone. No bitterness. No tension. Peace.

Peace with God. Reconciled with God. Sins forgiven. The peace of God. Now think of this.

Someday, that fully restored body, fully healthy, would wither. And someday, it would refuse to breathe.

[31 : 49] But in that man, there would remain a well of water springing up to everlasting life. For his sins were forgiven. Now the Lord can do anything He wants.

He can heal any disease He pleases with a word. But the greatest miracle, eternal, the only one that is eternal is that He forgives sins.

And so I want to say to a congregation that I am blithely ignorant of, has He ever said to you, my daughter, your sins are forgiven?

forgiven. Or my son, your sins are forgiven. Now as we noted earlier, Dr. Luke said that the power of the Lord was with him to heal so that the room was charged with energy.

And I think it's the same way whenever this text is preached. And I like to imagine, this is my imagination, that if all of a sudden I had glasses and could see the spiritual realities, I might see over here and over there and here and maybe somewhere else, sort of a spiritual St. Elmo's fire hovering over someone's head.

[33 : 16] As lightning is about to strike, as you believe that Jesus died on the cross for your sins and was resurrected on the third day.

That may be happening right now. That's all it takes. And our greatest need today is the same. We need our sins forgiven.

And the greatest work, the most painful work, the hardest thing in all the universe was done by Jesus on the cross. That he might say, my son, my daughter, your sins are forgiven.

And my question is, it's a good question, it's the question the Holy Spirit would ask, is how will you go home today? That is the question.

Let us pray.