

Back to church Sunday 2011

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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 00] Good evening, everyone. If you've got your Bible there at Mark chapter 2, if you'd like to leave it open. And I'm going to pray, and then we're going to take a look at that text. Father God, we pray that you'll help us now, by your Spirit, to understand this text, but particularly that we might get such a glimpse of who Jesus is and what he has done for us so that we might be able to leave here as changed people, forgiven by you of all our trespasses against you.

And we ask it for your sake. Amen. Well, it's been referred to a couple of times tonight already, and naturally throughout the media. Ten years ago today, on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, there was a series of four coordinated suicide attacks by Al-Qaeda upon the United States.

Approximately 3,000 people, including 19 hijackers, died in the attacks in what is remembered today as the worst terrorist atrocity in human history.

The overwhelming majority of the casualties were civilians, including nationals from 70 different countries. For most of us, we can remember where we were when that awful news reached us. I remember the moment vividly. It was really early in the morning. My alarm clock had gone off, and my alarm clock just goes straight to a radio station, and the news was on, and in my sort of half-awake stupor in the morning, I thought that I heard the lady say that the World Trade Towers had collapsed.

[1 : 51] And I just thought, well, that's just not possible. There are 110 stories. And then when she said that it was the worst act we have seen in history, I just went, this is true.

And I remember just jumping out of bed and running to the TV and turning it on, and as soon as the TV came on, I saw the pictures of the planes hitting it. I remember that moment vividly.

Our world has forever been changed by that evil event. In fact, it's known as the day that changed the world. And as we remember those events 10 years on, I want to take us to this Bible passage, which was just read out to us.

It's about another life-changing event, and naturally on the surface it's a life-changing event for one man, but it is a life-changing event for one man, which points us to a world-changing event.

It's an event which changes the world for everyone. And so I want you to know straight up as I speak tonight that Jesus is in the business of changing lives. That's what he does. He changes lives for good, and that's what we are excited about here at St. Paul's as a church.

[3 : 08] And so we are very pleased that you've joined us tonight on Back to Church Sunday to at least get some of the good news of what Jesus, who he is and what he's done for us. So let's jump straight into it at verse 1.

A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them.

Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus, and after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on.

Okay, so there's this guy. He's paralyzed, totally paralyzed, and his friends get a stretcher. They get a bed, if you like, and they carry him to the house where Jesus is. And when they arrived, they discovered that lots of people have already got the front row seats.

It's a sellout. There's no room left. But they've got it all figured out. These guys are fairly resourceful, and they're pretty determined to get their buddy to Jesus.

[4 : 17] And so they go up onto the roof, and they dig a hole in the roof, and they lower the guy right in front of Jesus. You can imagine that's a pretty awkward moment. Jesus is there delivering the sermon, teaching all these people, probably asking a heap of questions.

Next thing you know, stuff starts falling down, and right in front of him. All of a sudden, no one cares what Jesus is talking about anymore, or we want to know what is he going to do in this moment. It's a pretty awkward thing. And I think for most people, in a moment like that, you're kind of grateful that you're not Jesus, having to make some kind of a decision. I don't know if you've ever been in a moment like that, where something really bad's happening, just glad, geez, I'm glad I don't have to make the decision here.

I remember one day in church, Chris was actually preaching in a previous church. Chris was preaching, and someone went, let out this awful groan noise, and went, and I thought, oh my goodness, they're dead.

That's what I initially thought. Apparently, they just had low blood pressure, and sort of fainted. I think that's what happened. But I was pretty convinced they were dead, and I was just glad it wasn't me, I'm preaching at that moment. All eyes are on Chris, what's he going to do?

[5 : 26] It's one of those kind of moments. No one is, sorry, Jesus is in a moment here, with this person in front of him, and it's very clear what they're wanting.

You cannot ignore this person, Jesus. He's the elephant in the room. All eyes on Jesus, what's the next move? And the next move is there in verse five. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, son, your sins are forgiven.

Well, that's not what they were expecting at all. It's pretty obvious what these people want, isn't it? Don't they want this guy to walk again? That's why they're there. They've heard of Jesus healing people, and so they're expecting that that's what he's going to do here.

And instead of healing the guy, what Jesus does is he sets up a showdown with the religious heavies. See it there? In verse seven. Sorry, verse six. Now some teachers of the law were sitting there thinking to themselves, why does this fellow talk like that?

He's blaspheming. Who can forgive sins but God alone? You see, the religious leaders knew exactly what Jesus was claiming when he declared to this paralytic, your sins are forgiven.

[6 : 42] They reasoned that Jesus' claim to be able to forgive this man's sin is tantamount to claiming God's authority for himself.

And technically, if you're not God, that's blasphemy. And in first century Palestine, it was punishable by death.

So you can kind of imagine it though, can't you? these people here being a little bit ticked off with Jesus at this moment.

You see, I wasn't there 10 years ago in New York or in Washington. I wasn't there. And I don't even know any of the 3,000 people that died.

I don't know anyone personally who was affected. I don't know any friends of friends of people who died even. I don't even know anyone or any families.

[7 : 41] So imagine me going to the perpetrators of this terrorism act and saying to them, I forgive you. On behalf of all the grieving families and friends and work colleagues out there, I forgive you for what you've done.

How do you think those who have suffered the loss of loved ones would feel about that? I reckon they'd be a little upset.

I think they'd probably potentially feel cheated. They'd probably even be angry with me. What right do I have to hand out their forgiveness to those people? Surely it's the same with God.

How on earth could a mere mortal presume to forgive another human being for their sins that they have committed against God?

It is offensive. That's God's job to forgive sin. And so the religious heavies were right. You do need to be God in order to forgive sins.

[8 : 53] But as normal, they missed the point. The claim of Jesus here is huge. He is either a deluded blasphemer with a very unhealthy view of his significance, or Jesus is saying something very significant about himself and something very life-changing for us.

His claim to have the authority to hand out God's forgiveness is, I think, the most significant aspect of his authority. It's a huge statement that he makes here.

And no other religious leader has ever made a statement like, I can hand out God's forgiveness.

That I am, in fact, God.

Not Muhammad, not Krishna, not Buddha. No one. It's a bold statement. But it's a bold statement that he doesn't back down from.

He could have easily have qualified it when some of the boo-hisses started to come in. He could have easily qualified it and said, well, what I really meant was that God forgives you for your sins. But instead of backtracking, he actually takes the opportunity to emphasize publicly that God has authorized him to offer forgiveness to anyone he chooses.

[10:20] Have a look at it there in verse 8. Immediately, Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts. And he said to them, why are you thinking these things?

Which is easier? To say to the paralytic, your sins are forgiven, or to say, take up, get up, take up your mat, and walk. What's easier?

Well, see, imagine now if someone punched a hole in the roof and lowered a paralytic person right in front of me. Not that they need to do that. They could just come through the doors. Enough room. Imagine they did that, and I had a choice of what I was going to say to them.

And obviously, I could say many things to them at that moment. But imagine I had a choice between your sins are forgiven, or get up and walk, which is easier. It's easier for me to say, your sins are forgiven.

Who cares? I mean, how do you know whether my words have any power at all? But if I said to them, get up and walk, and they didn't, you'd immediately know that my words have no power.

[11:38] And so, verse 10, but that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. Turn to the paralytic. I tell you, get up.

Take your mat and go home. And he got up, took his mat, and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone. And they praised God, saying, we have never seen anything like this. You see, the promise of forgiveness of sins is not some cheap, idle words from a deluded man trying to say, they're there there and move on so I can get on to do with the real job that I've come here to do.

How do we know that they weren't just empty words with no way of proving it? Well, Jesus follows through with his words.

He follows through with the display of God's power that has been given to him. But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. He said to the paralytic, I tell you, get up and take your mat and go home.

[12:41] And he did. It would have been an incredible moment for that guy. I mean, I could just imagine him being stunned, speechless with a huge smile on his face as all the implications of his life now started to sink in.

There was no painstaking process of rehabilitation over months. He got up and he picked up the bed that he came in on and carried it out. But the amazing thing about this encounter with Jesus is not the lengths that the men went through to get him into the place in the first place and punch a hole in the roof.

Even as spectacular as it was, it isn't even that Jesus healed a man who had been paralysed from birth. What was happening here was much more than an act of kindness by Jesus.

The most important thing in this encounter is the huge and the public claim of Jesus that he can hand out forgiveness to people who have offended God, people who have ignored God, people who have gone about their daily business as if God doesn't even exist, as if they are the sinners of their world.

That is the extraordinary bit. The healing of the paralytic was a visible sign that God could do the invisible miracle, sorry, that Jesus could do the invisible miracle of handing out God's forgiveness.

[14:14] Jesus proved here that with everything that we have ever done to offend God, to ignore God, he has the power to declare it forgiven.

Gone. Slate white clean. I was talking to someone during the week who's got a criminal record that's currently with the governor and the governor has the power to issue clemency and I said to them, so what happens if the governor gives you clemency at that point?

What happens? And they said, it's like the file doesn't exist. It's like it's gone. And I went, that's exactly what happens when you go to Jesus.

All that offense and sin, everything that cuts us off from God and cuts us off from life, it's just gone. And the crowd was right, they haven't seen anything like this before.

They have witnessed a life-changing event for a man. Not just that he walked away, but that he walked away with a clean slate with God.

[15 : 34] All his sins forgiven. But this life-changing event for the paralytic is not just a life-changing event for one individual. Jesus says this about himself a little later in Mark's gospel.

He says, the son of man, that's talking about himself, did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Jesus ultimately makes good on his promise to hand out God's forgiveness by giving his life for us, for all of us.

The event of Jesus' death and resurrection is the world-changing event for good. Jesus doesn't just hold out the offer of God's forgiveness to a paralytic 2,000 years ago, he offers it to us all.

He died for our sin against God so that we, as he says there, the many can be forgiven for our sin against God. I've written a little bit of a blurb about it in the front of your bulletin, something like, good news in four minutes.

You'll also notice I've given you six minutes on the first line in case you are a slow reader. That was an editing mistake. But take it and read it. I started thinking it was going to be six minutes and realised I could do it in four.

[16 : 56] So there you go. Take it and read this good news. It is so simple and yet so profound. And it is so crucial because we live in an unforgiving world.

Grudges from hurt can be carried to our death beds, a slip up at work can mean the difference between a promotion or a redundancy. Words said in anger can cause divisions between friends and families and governments and churches.

Sometimes there is a refusal to forgive because the hurt is just too deep. Sometimes guilt is carried because we think that my sin is just too big to be forgiven.

And so day after day, week after week, and year after year after year, we carry the guilt and it just festers away in bitterness. And into our world of sin and carnage and evil and guilt comes Jesus.

He announced that despite the unforgiving nature of much of our world, God is in the business of offering us a clean slate. And so Jesus has been authorized to announce it and to make good on it.

[18 : 21] no matter how great the sin, even the sin of planning and executing the greatest terrorist atrocity in human history, even that sin, it is possible to find complete forgiveness in Jesus even for that.

And so if you've come here tonight paralyzed by sin and guilt, you need to know that Jesus is in the business of forgiving it, of giving you a clean slate. And so turn to Jesus for forgiveness and walk out here a new person.

Amen.