

“THE AUTHORITY OF THE SON OF MAN”

After chapter 1, in which we saw Jesus bursting onto the scene and becoming something of an instant celebrity, we now begin to see that not everyone in Israel responded favorably to the things he was saying and doing. The stories told in Mark 2-3 are sometimes described as “conflict stories,” because they depict the beginnings of opposition to Jesus. Four times in these chapters, Jesus’ opponents asked why he or his disciples either did something or failed to do something. ‘Why did he say that?’ ‘Why does he associate with those kinds of people?’ ‘Why don’t his disciples do this?’ ‘Why do they do that?’ Jesus was saying and doing all the wrong sorts of things, at least as far as his opponents were concerned. And this remains true to this day. The gospel that Jesus came to preach always comes into conflict with the ideas of man. This is something that every Christian has to accept about the way people respond to Christ. As Jesus said a bit later on in his ministry, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34). Apart from God’s gracious work in our hearts, sinful man will always stand opposed to the gospel, because it is a gospel that humbles us and exalts Christ.

In our text, opposition arises in response to Jesus’ handling of a situation in which people were seeking to avail themselves of his healing power. Jesus’ popularity had resulted in a swarm of people descending upon the house in which he was staying. Houses in first

century Israel were not very large to begin with, and even a modest-sized crowd could prove to be overwhelming. In this case, there were so many people that it was completely impossible for these four men to push through the crowd while carrying their paralyzed friend on his bed. But, as Mark tells us, these men were not so easily deterred.

The action that they took was certainly bold, but it was not quite as strange as it might seem to us. In those days, people actually used their roofs for extra living space, in much the same way that we use decks and porches. The house that Jesus was in would have had a flat roof that could be accessed by a stairway built along the side of the house. So it would not have been unusual for these men to climb up to the roof. However, it certainly was out of the ordinary for them to dig a hole in it. This roof would have been constructed of wooden beams covered with sticks, reeds and clay. Obviously, it had to be a fairly sturdy roof if people were able to walk on it on a regular basis. It would have been quite a demolition job to remove enough of the roof to be able to fit this man and his litter through it. Mark literally says that they unroofed the roof. Just imagine being inside the house while this was taking place. You are standing there listening to Jesus preach, and all of a sudden a piece of the roof falls down and hits you on the head!

Needless to say, the people in that house would have been quite surprised to see a man on a bed being lowered down from a hole in the roof. But Jesus' response is just as surprising. First of all, Mark tells us that Jesus saw this act, despite its apparent disregard

for personal property, as an expression of faith. The desperate measures taken by these four men showed that they really believed that Jesus was the only one who could help their friend. They never would have gone so far as to unroof the roof unless they truly believed that Jesus was the only hope for this man. His paralysis helped them to see the desperate nature of his condition.

Whether we realize it or not, you and I are just as desperate. You need Christ every bit as much as that paralyzed man needed him. Whoever you are, Jesus Christ is the only one who can provide the help, the strength, the hope that you need. And the good news is that he is not distant; he is not hidden. You do not need to come up with new and creative ways of drawing near to him. You don't even need to cut a hole in a roof. He is not far off. As the apostle Paul writes in Romans 10:8, "The word is near you." By his Spirit, Christ makes himself present to believers through the God-given means of grace. This is why Jesus concluded the Great Commission with the promise, "I am with you always, to the end of the age." Those words mean much, much more than the kind of sentiment you sometimes find on a greeting card. When Jesus said that he would be with his church he really meant it, even though he was about to ascend back to heaven. Jesus is presently seated at God's right hand, but the Holy Spirit uses baptism, and the Lord's Supper, and prayer, and the Word of God, to make Christ truly present to us by uniting us to him through faith.

If this is true, then it means that you and I should come to worship each week with the same kind of expectation that these men must have had as they lowered their paralyzed friend down into that house. They were not just fulfilling a duty. They were expecting something to happen. Worship, and prayer, and Bible reading should not be a burden to us. The efforts that these men took to get their friend to Jesus were not a burden to them. Yes, they had to do some work, but they were happy to do it. They wanted something that only Jesus could give, and they were not about to let a crowd of people, or a bit of roofing material, stand in their way. If you and I are honest, we will admit that we often lack that kind of determination in our pursuit of Christ. God invites us to come to a feast, but we are content to scavenge under the table for scraps. In the words of Samuel Rutherford, “Alas, how soon are we pleased with our own shadow in a glass” (*Letters*, 159). What would it look like for you to pursue Christ with the kind of tenacious faith that you see in these four men?

The second thing that is surprising about Jesus’ response is that, instead of simply healing this man, he tells him that his sins are forgiven. This was not what the man was seeking from Jesus. He wanted to be healed. His friends, who had gone to all of this trouble for him, wanted him to be healed. But Jesus forgave his sins. Stop and think about that. How would you feel if you were in the paralytic’s place? You have been brought to this great healer, in hopes that he might enable you to walk again, but all that he does is say that your sins are forgiven! Now of course, theologically speaking, forgiveness is far

better than healing. But I expect that most of us would be disappointed at such a response from Jesus. ‘Yes, Jesus,’ we might say, ‘it is wonderful that you have forgiven my sins, and I really am very grateful for that. But don’t you see what I really need? Won’t you do this for me? If you would only grant me this, then I would be content.’ This is not to make light of people’s suffering. In the case of this paralyzed man, his condition made life extremely burdensome, both for him and for those who cared for him. And yet, here we see, once again, that Jesus did not view sickness as the sum total of man’s problems. He came to strike a fatal blow at the root cause of all human suffering: sin.

It is not that every sickness can be directly traced to a particular sin in an individual’s life. Sometimes it can, but certainly not always. Nevertheless, there is always a connection between sickness and sin. Sickness is something that works against life. Sickness is anti-life. It is pro-death. It is a sign, and precursor, and cause of death. And death has come into this world as a consequence of sin. Every experience of sickness, every bodily injury, every handicap, every decline in our overall health, all of these things should remind us of our fallen condition. Far from making us feel like innocent victims, our sicknesses should humble us. God can use sickness for our benefit. As Calvin observed,

“[T]he Lord instructs his followers in the vanity of the present life by continual proof of its miseries...[T]hat they may not be puffed up with

vainglory or exult in self-assurance, he sets before their eyes, through diseases and perils, how unstable and fleeting are all the goods that are subject to mortality” (*Institutes*, 3.9.1)

Sickness and suffering strike a blow at our pride. All of our health problems are ultimately the result of human sinfulness. And not merely sinfulness in the abstract, but sinfulness as something that is at the very core of our being. When we acknowledge this to be true, there can be nothing better than knowing that our sins have been forgiven. Far from being irrelevant to our most pressing needs, the forgiveness of sins is the deepest cure that we could ever ask for.

But that was not the way the scribes responded to Jesus’ pronouncement of forgiveness. Instead, they took his words as an instance of blasphemy, since Jesus was taking upon himself a prerogative that belongs to God alone. And it would have been blasphemous, were it not for the fact that Jesus is God, a fact that is established in this passage by his supernatural ability to discern what the scribes were thinking. What the writer of Psalm 139 said of God is also true of Jesus: “Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether” (v. 4).

Jesus responded to the objections that he saw in their thoughts with these words: “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, take up your bed and walk?’” Which is easier? In a theological sense, it would be far easier to heal than it is to forgive sins. Only God can forgive sins, and the only way he is able to do that is by satisfying his justice through the death of his one and only Son. Forgiveness is far more difficult than healing. But that is not the answer that Jesus is assuming here. Notice what he says. He asks the scribes if it is easier to say that this man’s sins are forgiven or to say that he has been healed. The answer is obvious: it is far easier to say that his sins are forgiven, because there is no way to verify that assertion. Almost everyone believes that God will forgive their sins and let them into heaven. Very few people think that God would send them to hell because of their sins. Most would say that God forgives them of their sins. But how do they know that? What authority do they have to say that their sins are forgiven? How can their claim be verified? It is easy to say that God forgives your sins, but unless your hope of forgiveness is founded upon the gospel, you will not be forgiven.

In this passage, Jesus demonstrated his authority to forgive sins by employing an argument from the greater to the lesser. If he is able to do that which is more difficult, if his words result in the actual healing of this paralyzed man, then his claim to be able to grant forgiveness is validated. His ability to do that which is harder establishes his authority to do that which is easier.

Just before performing the actual healing, Jesus refers to himself by the title “Son of Man.” You may know that this is the title that Jesus used most often in reference to himself. He prefers it over titles like “Son of God” and “Christ” (which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew title “Messiah”). He probably preferred “Son of Man” because those other titles had strong military and political associations in the minds of many first century Jews, and Jesus wanted to distance himself from those kinds of ideas about who the Messiah would be and what he would do. The title “Son of Man” was not in use as a messianic title in the first century, even though it clearly refers to a messianic figure in the passage that we read earlier in Daniel 7. By using this title, Jesus was saying that he is that figure. He is the one who has come from heaven. He is the one who has received dominion over all the peoples of the earth. And that is why he has the authority to forgive sins, as well as the power to demonstrate that authority by commanding this paralyzed man to walk.

Spiritually speaking, you and I are no different than that paralytic. His physical condition gave him, and his friends, a more urgent sense of his need for Christ, but our condition is certainly no less urgent. We need Jesus every bit as much as he did. And this is something that will never change. You will never reach a point in your Christian life when you get beyond this most fundamental need. In his recent book on covenant theology, Michael Horton compares the Christian life to a sailboat:

“We glide out of our harbor under full sail, thrilled with delight in knowing our sins are forgiven and that we are right with God. A new love for our Redeemer fills us with gratitude, and we are eager to follow the course he has set for us in his Word. Yet as we pass into the open seas, we encounter spiritual stress...Our whole life as Christians is a process of sailing confidently into the open seas, dying down in exhaustion, and having your sails filled again with God’s precious promises...At the beginning, in the middle, and at the end, the *gospel* ‘is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.’” (*God of Promise*, 194)

No matter what need seems most pressing in your life at this time, the one thing that you always need, more than anything else, is to hear the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, saying to you: ‘My child, your sins are forgiven.’