

Mark 2:1-17 - Our most urgent need

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[0:00] Good morning, church. We are reading Mark 2, verses 1 to 12. A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home.

They gathered in such large numbers 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 paralyzed man, 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 by digging through it, and then lowered the mat the man was lying on.

When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, Son, your sins are forgiven. 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 sin but God alone? Immediately, Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts.

[1:17] And he said to them, Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier to say to the paralyzed man, Your sins are forgiven? Or to say, Get up, take your mat and walk.

But I want you to know that the Son of Man has the authority on earth to forgive sins. So he said to the man, I'll tell you, Get up, take your mat and go home.

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.

Amen. Let's pray together as we come to look at God's word. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, how we ask now that you might speak to us through your word.

Thank you that we're gathered here not to listen to my good ideas or anyone else's good ideas, but to listen to you. So be gracious to speak to us, we pray.

[2:27] In Jesus' name. Amen. I wonder if you could ask God one question and ask him to do something for you, what is it that you would ask him to do?

What would you ask that God did for you? Perhaps you'd ask him to provide for you financially. Maybe to heal your body from a particular disease that you are struggling with.

Maybe you would ask him to protect your family from danger. Maybe you would ask if he could sit your GCSE exams for you. Well, all of those are worthy things, maybe except for perhaps taking your GCSEs for you.

But what I want you to see in Mark chapter 2 with me this morning is that the answer that Mark gives to that question is very different to any of those. See, Mark has placed these two stories together, verses 1 to 12 and then verses 13 to 17, to show us that given the chance to ask God for anything, then the thing that we should be asking for is not health or safety or success.

No, Mark thinks that our most urgent need is forgiveness. That's what he thinks. What we really need, says Mark, is exactly what Jesus can give you, which is forgiveness.

[3:57] Now, I want to return to that idea in a moment, but to kind of build up to it and to show that that comes from here, I want to just spend a few moments retelling the story. So, open the passage again if you've closed it, look down with me, and let's work our way through it.

In verse 1, you find Jesus returning home to Capernaum. And the same thing happens in Capernaum as happened when he left in chapter 1, verse 33, which is that in his house, the whole town turns up.

But this time, they don't seem to wait by the door. Perhaps someone left the door open or something. And now they are rammed inside the home. And in verse 2, Jesus is preaching to them. Again, I don't want you to miss this. We spent time on this last week, so I'm not going to go into it in great detail. But notice that while in chapter 1, verse 33, it was Jesus' healing which brought people to the door of the house.

Now it's Jesus' preaching which is cramming the house full. Jesus is not a magic show, right? He's not just a do-gooder. Jesus is here with something to say, a message to preach, good news to hear.

[5 : 06] And that's what's happening here. Then, as he's crammed into this house with all these other people and he's preaching to them and teaching them, four friends turn up with their paralyzed companion on a mat.

They are hoping to get him to Jesus, which is what you were doing with sick people in Capernaum, back in chapter 1, verse 33. But this time, there's a challenge. Because as they get there, it's obvious they are not getting through the front door.

So they come up with a plan B. Interestingly, the men, according to verse 5, if you look at it, are called men of faith. Not, I don't think, as a statement of their salvation, but rather a statement of their determination to get this guy to Jesus.

Here are a group of guys that might not know very much about Jesus, but what they do know is that Jesus can help their friend. And so they're going to get him there.

Come what may. Verse 4, these men dig a hole in the roof. It's obviously an odd scene to us, but I guess it's not that hard to imagine. If you've ever seen a picture of a first century home, this is not a pitched roof with Welsh slate on it, nor is it the zinc roof that Ray made on the hall behind us.

[6 : 16] No, this is a flat roof made out of mud. But I guess for those in the house, they would hear it before they saw it, wouldn't they? Maybe you live in a flat and you've got a noisy person living upstairs.

That's the kind of thing that they would have been hearing. A thudding on the roof and then the dust and the dirt eventually falling down on them. A small hole appears, sunlight starts coming through, and then a stretcher-sized hole, and a man on a mat lowered right in front of Jesus.

Now, I know this is impossible to do because Mona's just read the story, right? And you know what happens next. But if we could pause the video there, I think then we'd get a sense of the shock of the story.

You see, I wonder what you would expect to happen next. I mean, if you were the homeowner, right, you'd be shrieking. Yeah, you'd, you know, oh my goodness, that's my roof, right?

But what about everybody else? I think this is, we're meant to see this is not what we would be expecting Jesus to do with this paralyzed man on a mat in front of him. Last time Jesus was here in this house, everybody who came to him who was sick and in need, they were healed instantly.

[7 : 29] He healed them all. And so you would be surprised that Jesus doesn't do that here in this story. Play the video, and you hear him say in verse five, son, your sins are forgiven.

Most of the people like us, I think, are shocked. They are waiting for Jesus to heal this guy's paralysis. But the teachers of the law are not shocked like us. They are scandalized. Not so much because of Jesus' priority of forgiveness, but rather because of the audacity to assume that he can forgive sins.

Look down at verse seven. Why does this fellow talk like that? He is blaspheming. Who can forgive sins but God alone? I want to suggest to you this is really important.

And so I'm going to try and give you an illustration of what's going on. Illustrating an illustration of a story is really a bad idea, but I'm going to try and do it anyway to try and help you unpack what's going on.

Imagine for a moment that you arrive on the scene of a terrible car accident. And you're there with two friends, okay? One friend is a paramedic, and the other friend is a psychiatrist.

[8 : 36] And the three of you go and approach this terrible car accident that you have noticed happen. Your paramedic friend has obviously seen all this before, you know, blood and guts and injuries.

He knows what that's like. He knows how to treat them. And your psychiatrist friend also knows a lot about car accidents. They spend a deal of their time working with people who've had terrible car accidents and are now suffering with some form of PTSD.

They can't get the kind of replays out of their mind, the deep trauma and the flashbacks, wounds that never seem to heal. A psychiatrist spends like hours and days and years treating some of these people with no promise of any cure at the end of it.

Now the three of you get to the scene of the car accident, and the driver of the car is obviously injured. They're trapped under the steering wheel, and there's a bad bleed on their head, which

urgently needs attention.

And as you arrive at the scene, your paramedic friend comes into their own, and that's just what you were expecting. But what they do next shocks you, because they come to the person in the car accident, and instead of doing anything about the blood pouring from their head or the legs trapped underneath the steering wheel, they say in a loud voice, trauma be gone, depression be gone, anxiety go away, the replays in your head don't have them anymore.

[9 : 59] And what are you thinking? Well, you're thinking, goodness me, the guy's bleeding. Come on, do something about it. And what's your psychiatrist friend thinking? Don't be ridiculous. You can't say that. It doesn't work like that.

It's way more complicated than that. If you could do it like that, I would be out of a job. Trauma is, well, it takes years to heal, and great skill. Now, in Mark 2, Jesus is the paramedic, yeah? He is the one who everybody knows can heal lame people. He's been doing it all along. Everybody knows that's what he does. But he seems to miss the need of the man to be able to walk again, and instead pronounces his forgiveness.

And the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, they are the specialists. They're the psychiatrists, if you like. They're the specialists in forgiveness of sin. If you have a sin problem, you go to the teachers of the law, to the Pharisees, and you go to the temple.

They will sort it out. It takes years. It takes hours. It takes sacrifices after sacrifices after sacrifices. And they look at this, and they don't say, Jesus, you've missed his most urgent need. They say, Jesus, how ridiculous.

[11 : 05] You can't call his forgiveness out like that. It takes a great deal of effort to forgive anybody's sin. It takes God to forgive sin. This is way above your pay grade, Jesus.

You're a healer, not a forgiver. What I love about this story, really, is that they accuse Jesus of blasphemy in verse 7. And what happens next in verse 8 in Mark's gospel?

Well, look down at it. Look what happens in verse 8. Immediately, Jesus knew in his spirit that this is what they were thinking in their hearts, right?

You know, they accuse Jesus of blasphemy and claiming to be God. In the next verse, Mark proves to you that's exactly who he is, right? He hears what they're thinking. You know that's what God is like. That's why you pray in your head, because you know that God alone hears what's going on in your head.

So Mark proves Jesus' divinity and then sets about proving that forgiveness is not above Jesus' pay grade, but that he absolutely has the credentials to forgive the paralyzed man.

[12 : 11] And so he proves that he has done the difficult thing in providing forgiveness, which is easy to say, but is hard to prove, by doing the harder-to-say thing, the easier-to-see thing, which is healing this man's legs.

And so in verse 11, Mark says that Jesus said to the man, 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, amazed everyone.

And they praised God, saying, we have never seen anything like this. Now, if that's right, if I've understood the story rightly and have retold it to you correctly, that means this story's about two things, yeah?

One is the priority of forgiveness, and the other is Jesus' power to forgive, yeah? Jesus comes on the scene, and he sees this man's most urgent need is his forgiveness, and I have the power to do it.

The priority and the power of forgiveness. And that, then, is underlined in the next five verses, as Jesus, we're told, hangs out with tax collectors and sinners.

[13 : 09] Let me just read these verses to you. Look down at verse 13. Once again, Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi, the son of Alphaeus, sitting at the tax collector's booth.

Follow me, Jesus told him. And Levi got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for they were many who followed him.

When the teachers of the law, who were Pharisees, saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples, why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners? On hearing this, Jesus said to them, it's not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill, I've not come to call the righteous, but sinners.

My priority, says Jesus, is to hang out with those who need me. Those are sinners. And I have the power of a doctor over the power of sin.

Jesus says, the sickness of sin is my priority. I'm the doctor with the power to heal. Now, let's just spend the rest of our time then thinking about this priority of forgiveness and Jesus' power over forgiveness.

[14 : 24] Let's think firstly about priority. Priority. It would be a real mistake, wouldn't it, to think that Jesus is not compassionate towards the physical needs of this man or of anyone, right?

The Gospels are super clear to you that Jesus is full of compassion for people in physical need. He is moved to feed the crowd, to heal the sick, to liberate the oppressed.

But what Jesus is able to see more clearly is the horror of our sin and its consequences. And so that is his priority. So that the lame man on the mat in front of him needs forgiveness more than he needs healing.

You know, in a world where paralysis like his would have basically rendered him poor, in constant need of help and in financial need as well, he is told that forgiveness is his greatest need.

Now, what is it about sin that means Jesus would say it's his priority? Let me just try and show you two assumptions in the story, which I think get unpacked later in Mark's Gospel.

[15 : 27] So notice firstly that his assumption here, and this is why it's his priority, his assumption is that sin is internal, not external. Notice that the man on the mat was incapable of most of what we would call sin.

Yeah? He was probably capable of some kind of grumpiness, for sure. Perhaps he could complain bitterly. But if sin is essentially an external action, then this man has probably been saved from mostly sin, right?

The man couldn't commit adultery. He couldn't steal and run off with anything. He couldn't murder a man. He couldn't run a business and defraud his workers. He could hardly do anything. And so Jesus' assumption here is that sin is not so much the external actions, but the internal heart of each of us.

There is a more serious internal problem than even the external visible problem that this man has. If you turn over a few pages to Mark chapter 7, you will see this underlined by Jesus.

Mark chapter 7, verse 20. Here Jesus is surrounded by the Pharisees who are so keen on keeping themselves away from sort of sin that's on the outside, things that would get them dirty with sin.

[16 : 42] They kind of ceremonially wash to try and keep it at a distance. And in Mark 7, verse 20, Jesus says this to them. He says, it's what comes out of a person is what defiles them.

Defilement, spiritual uncleanness, is inside and it comes out. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, the evil thoughts come. Sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly.

These are sins of the heart, says Jesus. They come from inside and defile a person. Adultery is a thought before it's an action. In other words, don't worry so much about the gremlins on the outside getting you.

No, the danger of the contamination of sin is the internal problem of the heart. Sin is in you and comes out of you. No one, you know, no one makes you angry, do they?

You might say that to your husband or your wife or your friend or your sibling. You've made me angry. They haven't made you angry. The anger is inside of you and they've only exposed it.

[17 : 53] You might be physically incapable of running riot like this paralytic, but the truth is sin is in our heart and we can't get rid of it. Can I just ask you if I can, just really simply and honestly, have you seen that truth about yourself yet?

It's really difficult to persuade anybody that Jesus is good news unless you're willing to accept this news first, that sin is an internal problem in each of us coming out in a variety of different ways and none of us are immune to it and none of us are better than anyone because we all have the same struggle internally.

You know, without knowing that, Jesus will make no sense to you. I read a book a few years ago that the author thought he could prove this, right? He could prove to you that the sort of, the horrors of indwelling sin with a silly story.

He told a story about him and his wife. They'd been married for 40 years. Both of them loved ice cream. So one of the things that they would love to do is sit down in front of the TV with a bowl of ice cream.

And because he was a loving, generous husband, he would get up and go to the kitchen and open the freezer and get the ice cream out to take the two bowls of ice cream to them so they could sit and, you know, enjoy ice cream in front of the TV.

[19 : 16] He said, do you want me to tell you and prove to you, he said, that sin dwells in our hearts? What am I doing as I walk back to the TV with two bowls of ice cream in my hand?

I'm weighing them. Because although she's the love of my life and we've been married for 40 years, how dare she get a gram more of ice cream than me, right?

And we're all like that, aren't we? We are so wired for ourselves that even with the person that we would say we would love and give our lives for them, we don't even want them to get a smidge more ice cream than us.

Sin is internal. It's the cancer of the soul. And Jesus' priority is based on this assumption that sin is an internal invisible disease.

But the second reason that dealing with sin is Jesus' priority is because of where sin takes us, yeah? So sin is Jesus' priority because it's internal and invisible, but also because of where sin takes us and where it leads to.

[20 : 17] You know, like I said, Jesus is not ignorant of the man's suffering. He's not ignorant that being a paralytic in the first century was even more miserable than it is at any other time in history. You know, this guy was toast.

His life was awful. Dependent on others, excluded from social settings, never able to go to temple worship. It's why his friends are so desperate to get this guy healed. And so Jesus' silent assumption here is that there is a suffering greater than the suffering of paralysis, poverty, dependence on friends, exclusion from the temple.

Do you see this? It's like the paramedic and the psychiatrist in our illustration. Both of them know that the suffering of ongoing trauma is worse than a bang on the head. The head will heal.

The trauma will not. And so here the suffering of paralysis will last only as long as this man lives.

But Jesus knows that the suffering of sin will last longer than that.

Sin is an internal problem, an internal problem, with an eternal destiny, consequence, suffering. Right?

[21 : 28] Jump forward in your Bible to Mark chapter 9, and let me show you this. Mark chapter 9 and verse 43. Mark chapter 9, verse 43. Jesus, again, just showing the seriousness of sin and why it's his priority.

It's an internal problem, but it has eternal consequences. He says this, If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It's better for you to enter life maimed than to go with two hands into hell, where the fire never goes out.

And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It's better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It's better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where the worms that eat them do not die and the fire is not quenched.

Those verses put it very starkly, don't they? Unforgiven sin, sin that's not dealt with, will take us to hell.

That's why it's Jesus' priority. Jesus doesn't give you many details, does he, about hell. He tells you enough to know that it's real and it's terrible. He says that being in hell is worth cutting off your limbs now in order not to be sent to hell.

[22 : 47] But of course you know and he knows, doesn't he, that you can't avoid hell by chopping your hands off or your legs off or plucking your eyes out. Because where does sin come from? From our hearts.

It's inside of us. But his point is that the suffering of hell is worse than the suffering of this life with no hands. As bad as that would be. But he's also clear about his eternity, isn't he?

It's an unquenched fire. Again, not because hell is literally a fire, but because it's the burning justice of God, a pure holiness meeting impure sinfulness.

So that the suffering of this world, if you like, is the restrained brokenness that comes from God excluding Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. And then our world unravels, doesn't it?

As we are excluded from the presence of paradise. And then hell is the full force of God's justice, eternally removed from God's blessing.

[23 : 47] You know, of course sin is Jesus' priority because sin is an unseen eternal problem with eternal consequences. Jesus really cares about the suffering of this life, temporary suffering.

But he cares even more about eternal suffering. Let me say to us as a church, we've got to keep a hold of this, right?

It's so easy for Christians to lose sight of this. We begin to sort of assume the gospel and, you know, and assume that really it's the needs that we can see which are the worst.

We see that for ourselves and for others outside. We live in a city, don't we, where we are surrounded by physical need. Need that we should be full of compassion for.

We should be showing practical love for our neighbors in need. And I'm sure as a church that we could do better at that. And I want us to do better at that. But we also need to care about the eternal suffering of every single soul in our neighborhoods.

[24 : 51] Destined to hell without Christ because of their internal problem of sin. You know, hell is not invented by the church to control the masses. No, Jesus is the clearest on hell of any of the scripture writers.

Jesus warns because he knows it's real. And so forgiveness is his priority. Jesus' forgiveness is his priority, okay?

It's his priority because sin is eternal and internal. It's also really good news that in our passage, Jesus has the power to forgive sin. That's our second point, power.

Now, given what you've seen about sin, it should be outrageous to you, right, that Jesus can claim to forgive sin. The teachers of the law are right to be scandalized and right to see it as a claim to divinity.

What is Jesus claiming here? If what we've seen about sin is right, if Jesus is a doctor that can heal a sinner's need, then Jesus is essentially making two claims, isn't he?

[25 : 57] One claim is that Jesus is making is that he has the power to reach internally in you and transform you. Yeah? Jesus is saying, I can reach into your very soul and transform you from being a sinner into being a saint.

That's what he's claiming. Nothing less than that. And at the same time, he is also claiming that the eternal consequences of sin in hell, he can bear that punishment for you to free you from it.

He is claiming both inner transformation of the believer and the removal of the fair and just consequences before a holy God. That is an incredible claim.

Jesus says, I can change you and I can deal with hell. This is the big problem that all religions and worldviews face. You know, I know that you think or I think perhaps that the biggest problem in the world is to answer why does a good God allow suffering?

Yeah? We've heard that question a hundred times. People ask it all the time and it is a really good question and we want to wrestle with it and everything. It's not the most difficult question. The most difficult question if you believe in the existence of a good and holy God is how can that God ever, ever live with people like you and me?

[27 : 13] That's the problem. And religions answer it in all sorts of stupid ways. Oh yeah, that holy God, he'll live with me if only I pray. If only I attend church.

He won't notice that I have this deep internal problem with sin and selfishness that's so deep that I weigh ice cream. Don't be ridiculous. Oh yeah, no, I'm not going to eat pork anymore.

And then God will allow me into his holy presence. It's ridiculous, isn't it? We're like drowning men and women clinging onto matchsticks hoping that they're going to float enough to save us.

And Jesus says, no, I've got a lifeboat for drowning people. Look back at verse 9 for a moment. I think Jesus' question here is actually rather hard to answer. Which is easier to say to this paralyzed man, your sins are forgiven, or to say get up, take your mat and walk?

Which one's easier? You see, the words, your sins are forgiven, are not actually very easy for Jesus to say, are they? As Jesus says to that man, son, your sins are forgiven, what is he saying?

[28 : 24] I'm going to die for you. It's not an easy thing for Jesus to say at all, is it? He knew that to forgive that man's sin, he would have to go to the cross.

He would have to take on the role that all those Old Testament sacrifices pointed to. He would have to be at the Passover feast hung up as a sacrifice for sin on the cross. Literally taking on himself the hearts of sinful men and women and bearing hell for their sin.

Exclusion from the presence of the Father who loved him. You know, Mark is super clear that Jesus dies on the cross under the judgment of God for the sins of his people. It's dark when he dies.

He cries out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? He is punished with hell of God's absence so that we can be forgiven and enjoy the joy of his presence. And because Jesus did that, because he went to the cross and bore our guilt and our shame, he can now take you by the hand and say, son, daughter, your sins are forgiven.

I'm going to give you a new heart that loves the Lord, that loves me, that longs to live for me, that's not riddled with selfishness, but is riddled with worship.

[29 : 43] A heart that wants to love me, live for me, lay itself down for others. And yes, this side of glory will still drag around our old sinful hearts.

They're mortally wounded, aren't they? But we still have them with us. One day they'll be destroyed forever because Jesus took the hell of my judgment so I might have the joy of his life. Listen, brothers and sisters, I know many of you this morning have been Christians for a very long time. If that's you this morning, please don't ever forget that Jesus has met your greatest need on the cross. I know what this is like because I've sat where you're sat, right?

And I know that the thing that's on your mind is always the trouble in your life. It's always the thing that's going on that's causing you anxiety. Maybe it's the thing you'll face tomorrow. Maybe it's the job you're applying for.

It's the poor health that you're struggling with. Well, listen, this is the logic that the Bible makes about those kind of things. If God has given you Christ for your greatest need, how much more along with him will he not give you everything that you need and take you to glory to be with him?

[30 : 56] Brothers and sisters, that's the truth of the gospel, isn't it? Jesus has solved your internal, eternal problem by dying in your place on the cross.

Son, daughter, your sins are forgiven. I love you. I know there are others in this room this morning who are still under the illusion that your sin is not that serious and so Jesus is not that important. And if that's you, can I plead with you to listen carefully to this story? Jesus is the doctor who says that sin has serious consequences.

And whatever it is that you have now, right? Maybe you don't have a sickness problem. You're not suffering with that. Maybe you're not poor. Maybe you've got the life that you really dreamed of. Listen, without Christ, you have nothing. Because you have an internal problem with an eternal consequence, which outshadows anything that you might have in this world or this life.

[31 : 57] We started with this question, if you could ask God to do one thing for you, what would it be? We're ending with a question that God's asking us. God in Christ asks you this.

He says, I'm a doctor for people who are sick with sin. I can see that you're sick. Will you let me heal you? Let's have a moment of silence to pray in our hearts.

And I'll pray and then we'll sing together. What then shall we say in response to these things?

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all. How will he not also along with him graciously give us all things?

He will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen. It's God who justifies. Who then is the one to condemn? No one.

[33 : 24] Heavenly Father, how we thank you that the Lord Jesus has met our greatest need. Paid for our sin. Transformed us from the inside. Given us himself that we might know you.

Love you. And live our lives for you. Thank you for Jesus. Amen. Amen. Amen.