

"Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

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[0:00] Take a seat. We are continuing in Mark's Gospel, so please turn to page 837 of the Blue Church of the! We're reading from chapter 1, verse 40.

And Jesus came to him, imploring him and kneeling, said to him, If you will, you can make me clean.

Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, I will, be clean. And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.

And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once and said to him, See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them.

But he went out and began to talk freely about it, to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter.

[1:21] And when he returned to Capernaum, after some days, it was reported that he was at home. And many were gathered together, so there was no more room, not even at the door. And he was preaching the word to them.

And they came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four men. 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 on which the paralytic lay.

And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, Son, your sins are forgiven. Now, some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, why does this man speak like that?

He is blaspheming. Who can forgive sins but God alone? 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?

Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, Your sins are forgiven, or to say, Rise, take up your bed and walk? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.

[2:34] 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 they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, We have never seen anything like this. He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them.

And as he passed by, he saw Levi, the son of Alphaeus, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, Follow me. And he rose and followed him. And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.

And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?

And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.

[3:45] Let's pray for the Lord to reveal his words to us. Father, we come before you in need this evening.

We come before you spiritually thirsty, knowing that only you and your word have what we need.

We pray that you would speak through your words by your spirit, that we might know the truth about your son, the salvation that he has bought for us, and that we may become ever more like him.

These things we ask with assurance. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. We all know a person, or maybe have a person in our family, who loves to say, I'm not ill.

The kind of person who, no matter the level of illness, will just keep saying, I'm not ill. They will never take a day off. They might be at death's door, but they're going to be sending emails. They're going to try off, trying to walk off a clearly broken ankle. I think we all know somebody like that. My family is stock full of those people. The problem, of course, refusing to admit that you're ill isn't medicine.

[5:01] Refusing to admit that you need help cannot fix you. There's a huge difference between denial and healing, obviously. Sometimes we're too proud to admit that we struggle.

That makes the problems persist, the pain worse. That when that's a cough or a cold, that's just unwise. But if it was a deadly wound or a wasting disease, that would be a disaster. In our pride, we don't want to admit when we are weak or sick or struggling or just plain wrong. If that's true of our physical health, let me say, how much more is that true of our spiritual health? A way deeper problem. We might sit there saying, there's nothing wrong with me. I'm spiritually healthy. Everything is fine. I don't need any help. Whilst there are open spiritual wounds in our lives. Refusing to admit that we're spiritually sick doesn't make a problem go away. Now when I say spiritual problem here, I want you to hear the right thing. I don't mean some sort of spiritual blockage or some new age karma thing.

[6:12] But sin. The spiritual sin sickness that we all have. And all attendant problems that come with it. All the ways that we reject God and his words.

His instructions in good design for our lives. Every way in which we say no to God and yes to ourselves. Thankless to the one who has made us.

Living for our own ways. Refusing to worship him in any way. Saying, I do not need you. I can deal with my problems myself. We don't need to be taught to sin like that.

Anyone who's ever seen a newborn knows it's not long before you see it creeping out of them. Disobedience, selfishness, lies come easily to children. And so naturally they come easily to us as adults too.

I'm just going to be better at covering those things over. We try to deny these things. We start telling ourselves, I'm basically a good person. Or at least I'm better than the other person.

[7:13] If the circumstances had been different, well I wouldn't have done that. It was just one time. I was provoked. How many stories we tell ourselves to deny the fact of our spiritual sickness being very real.

And yet how painfully unavoidable it is that we are sinners. Sick and in need of mercy and grace for our healing. We reap the rewards of that all the time.

Shame and guilt, those feelings. They come from our sin. The broken relationships we try to ignore are coming from our sin. The fact that we have to excuse other people's faults so that we don't have to face up to our own.

It's all coming from the sickness that is our sin. Why do we do that? Because it's so painful to say, I'm a sinner.

So painful to admit that I've sinned against a holy God. That I've hurt people around me. There's a Christian author called David Powlison who says this of sin.

[8:20] It is your worst cancer. Your most crippling disability. Your most treacherous enemy. Your deepest distress. It is the single most destructive force impacting your life.

And like nothing else in all creation, it threatens your life and well-being. God's word is so clear that sin is our deepest problem.

And if that's true, then forgiveness is our deepest need. And on our own, there is nothing we can do about that but wonderfully as we are seeing in Mark's gospel.

And as we will see even more front and center this evening, with Jesus, we have everything we need to deal with the problem of our sin.

Now, we've been in Mark for a couple of weeks now. We've seen that this is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. We've seen Jesus demonstrating his authority in his teaching over demons, over health.

[9:23] And the priority of his preaching to get the gospel out there as he starts to build his kingdom on earth. And those twin ideas of his authority and his priorities are going to keep building through Mark.

But this evening, where we start is in verses 40 to 45, with Jesus willingly restoring the outcast. Now, the last verses of chapter 1 there, we meet a leper, a man with leprosy coming to Jesus.

It's a dangerous, contagious skin disease. Samuel really helpfully read for us that slightly distressing chapter. Of all the things a person with leprosy would have to do to be cleaned in the Old Testament law.

If you went back all of Leviticus 13 and all of Leviticus 14, the whole two chapters about the life of a leper and what it means and how they had to act and what it would mean to be cleansed.

Here are just these three verses from Leviticus. And imagine the life of the man that we hear about in Mark. Leviticus says, Imagine spending your whole life not just being separate from people but having to shout, Stay away. I am dangerous. I cannot come anywhere near you.

[11:02] Having to live alone and far away. If you found isolation in lockdown hard, imagine that, but it's your whole life and you're the only one. It's a truly painful, bleak picture of this man's life.

A piteous existence. There's no social or medical care. This is an outcast with no hope of restoration. The leprosy doesn't go away. Then he never gets to come back.

So when we read in verse 40 that this leprous man comes and kneels before the Lord Jesus, it's hard to imagine the level of social risk this man is taking.

The entire crowd have parted to get as far away from this man as possible. He's broken every single stipulation and command about where he's allowed to be, just to kneel before the Lord Jesus and say, If you will, you can make me clean.

He believes that Jesus has power to do this, but the question is, does he have the compassion to heal this man? We saw last time Jesus was moving from town to town so that he could preach in more places.

[12:17] Jesus hasn't come just to be a miracle healer, but to preach the gospel of the kingdom and keep going. And yet, verse 41, Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, I will be clean.

And immediately the leprosy left him and he was made clean. Imagine that moment in the crowd. Everyone stood back, getting away from this dangerous, leprous, contagious person.

And you see Jesus' hand going out towards the ill man and you're thinking, Don't do it, you'll get contagious as well. You can't go back from that. But instead of the leprosy coming to Jesus and infecting him, the exact opposite happens.

Jesus' holiness and purity blasts the leprosy out of this man. It is just gone. And think about the touch of Jesus on this man, likely the first person who's touched him in years of his life.

No pats on the back from friends, no hugs from loved ones. And all of a sudden, touched by Jesus, welcomed and restored. Jesus says to him in verse 44, See that you say nothing to anyone, but go and show yourself to the priest.

[13:43] And offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded as a proof to them. It's the offering that Samuel read for us in Leviticus 14, offering of a lamb.

It's a sacrifice of atonement, interestingly. Now, if we know the word atonement, we often rightly link that word to atonement for sin. And that is absolutely right.

But atonement goes beyond just taking sin away, into being purified and welcomed back into the presence of God. The sacrifice of atonement wasn't just for sin, but to bring you back to God purified.

Something else taking the cost for you, so that you could be welcomed. Now, if you want to hear more about that, Reset Later is entirely on that. So go listen to Anne talk about atonement more. But for now, isn't it interesting that Jesus sends this leper to do as his father's law commands. Go and show yourself to the priest. Because if this man does that, then a priest can pronounce over this man, he is clean.

[14:49] He is welcome back. Because Jesus isn't just restoring this man's health. He is restoring him to his community, to his life, to all the things that that illness took away from him, cleansed and beautifully, compassionately restored.

But there's an irony to what happens next. Jesus commanded the man in verse 44 not to speak about what happened. And yet the man, even after a miracle cleansing, just straight disobeys Jesus.

And the consequence for Jesus in verse 45, Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was in desolate places. And notice, an outcast man comes in, and Jesus becomes an outcast.

Just at this early stage of Mark, we're already getting a sense that Jesus' work is going to lead to him taking the place of somebody else.

That he's going to be a substitute. Now Mark has a lot more to say about that later, but for now. We have to continue. As Jesus moves on to Capernaum, and we get to our second point, Jesus has authority to forgive sin.

[16:06] Now, let me give you a small insight into being a preacher. I know I haven't been here all that long. But sermon points are like a real art form.

Some people can do kind of stunningly poetic verbal gymnastics on sermon points. You can tell that I'm not one of those people. And this sermon point is, Jesus has authority to forgive sin.

And I just, when I wrote it, thought, well, that's pretty artless. But then, you know, I immediately found myself repenting. Because actually, that's the most magnificent statement I could actually possibly write.

Jesus has authority to forgive sin. Jesus, because he is the Christ, the Son of God, actually has the authority to take the sins of mankind against a holy God, and through his work, bring forgiveness and bring them home.

If it's true, and wonderfully it is, as Mark is showing us, that it's the single greatest spiritual intervention in human history, core to the story of Mark's gospel that he's telling us, ultimately, this is why Jesus came.

[17:19] So we find ourselves back in Capernaum with the home crowd that we're getting used to. They're always there. The crowd's so large in front of the house that people can't get anywhere near Jesus.

Four men come with their paralyzed friend on a stretcher, hoping to bring him to Jesus, but conundrum. You can't get a stretcher through a crowd. So some bright spark thinks, okay, well, can't get round them, can't get through them.

Let's go over them. Let's just dig a hole in a roof. These men are so sure that Jesus can and will heal their friend, that they're willing to cause some very public property damage just to get him there.

So imagine you're standing in the house, dirt rains down, a man is lowered through the roof on a stretcher, and you're expecting the words, be free from your paralysis and walk, because that would be obvious, right?

So how would you feel on hearing in verse 5, son, your sins are forgiven? I imagine one of the men on the roof lowering their friend down might stick their head through and go, that's not what we're here for.

[18:33] But the thing is that Jesus came to deal with a much deeper problem even than this man's paralysis. Because sin is deeper than any other problem that we see or understand.

But the crowd have more than just confusion at this moment. Verse 7, why does this man speak like that? He's blaspheming. Who can forgive sins but God alone?

Those words are coming from the scribes. We've only heard of them so far that their teaching's not all that authoritative. But here, so early in the gospel, we get, in many ways, a legitimate question.

Why does this man speak like that? This is blasphemy. Who can forgive sins except God alone?

Because they're right, actually, what Jesus is saying, is that he can forgive sins.

And if that's true, Jesus is unmistakably claiming to do what only God can do. Anyone who has ever said to you, Jesus never claims to be God, is just kidding themselves.

[19:40] If anyone else was saying this, the scribes would actually be correct, but Jesus sees the questions of their hearts, which in itself is something that only God sees, the truth of the human heart.

But he responds in verse 8. 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?

And the answer is plain. Both things are as easy to say as one another, but one is much more easily falsified. Say a paralytic, you are healed.

Well, you just got to wait to see if he gets up, and if not, well, then it's a lie. Say someone's been forgiven, how would you even know? And so he continues in verse 10, 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. And here in 10 is the very heart of our passage this evening.

[20 : 52] Because this miracle here proves the message that Jesus is speaking. This paralytic man is healed. Jesus' words are true, and therefore, his words about forgiveness must be true too.

He says the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. But who is the Son of Man here? Well, it's a title that's going to come up a lot in Mark, Jesus' favorite term to describe himself. But he's taking a huge claim even by using that term. Because it's a term taken from the prophet Daniel in the Old Testament. A vision that Daniel saw describing the Holy God, the one that he calls the Ancient of Days, giving his authority over to one called the Son of Man.

Hear these words from Daniel 7, 13 and 14. Behold, there came one like a Son of Man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is never a lasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. And Jesus says, here I am.

[22 : 13] And I can do what only the Son of Man can do. Because the authority of the Father has been given to me. Jesus is the king that God promised through Daniel's prophecy.

But notice the bit of the authority that that king over the whole world would have that Jesus front loads here is his authority not to rule, not to command, but to forgive.

Because he really can forgive sin against a holy God. He can truly forgive the sins of mankind. And in Mark's Gospel, we might now ask the question, how is Jesus going to forgive sin? And the answer is, for Mark, keep reading. And it will push us through the story all the way to the cross. But for now, in verse 12, that bare fact inspires praise from the crowd. They were all amazed and glorified God, saying, we never saw anything like this.

[23 : 19] And neither have we. Because nothing bigger has ever come to this earth than Christ in the flesh. With the authority to forgive the sins of man.

Even though our sin is against a holy God, the holy God sends his son to be with us. That we might be forgiven and be with him.

We're forgiven not just for the sake of feeling better, but that we might be drawn into God's family. And that takes us to our third and final point, Jesus calls sinners to himself.

Now, our final scene in 13 to 17 mirrors our first scene of the leper. We find another outcast, not a leper this time, but a Levi. Levi is a tax man, let's face it.

Tax man's not that popular in our day. HMRC, not everyone's friend. But back then, far worse. A tax collector was seen as race traitors to the Jewish people taking taxes from their own to give to the oppressors.

[24 : 25] So Levi's at work. And out of the blue, Jesus in verse 14 said to him, follow me. And he followed him. That's just as immediate of following as any of the other disciples.

But then Jesus goes round for dinner in verse 15. And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples.

For there are many who followed him. You kind of wonder if all of Levi's mates from the tax bureau heard about Jesus and thought, well, we would never be welcome here.

Surely not. All of the good Jewish people would be welcome there. We can't. And they find that Jesus had gone to Levi's house. And they think, we're actually welcome.

Are people like us actually welcome with Jesus? And so they go. Then you find Jesus having dinner with a load of tax collectors and sinners. All of his disciples there with him.

[25 : 26] Notice what didn't happen in the story. Jesus didn't turn up to a tax collector and said, you are rubbish. Be better. And then he grovels, really hoping that he might get something out of Jesus.

Not what happens. Jesus goes and says, follow me. And Levi follows and all of a sudden everyone's at dinner. Because Jesus seeks out the sinner before the sinner even repents.

Jesus' presence and invitation precede any repentance in this story. Not the other way around. It's only in knowing Christ that repentance can ever even come.

Until you know him. You can't say sorry to him for your sin but you come to the one who invites you first. Who comes to you that you might know him.

But there is Jesus dining in a crowd of sinners and that is very good news for sinners like us. But the scribes in 16 think this is the worst possible news.

[26 : 35] They cannot stand that he is with all the wrong people. Why is Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners? Now, isn't it interesting that they can't even bring themselves to say that to Jesus' face.

They say it to the disciples so they don't have to say it to him? And Jesus answers by giving the second of three purpose statements we'll see across Mark's gospel. The first one was 130 that he's come to preach and the second purpose statement that Jesus gives in this gospel.

Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous but sinners. Jesus says that he is the doctor for sin-sick people.

Now, there's really two important conclusions we want to see there. First, Jesus came for sinners and that just means Jesus came for everybody because the verdict on humanity from God and his word is that every single one of us has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

If you're here and you're a sinner, that's all of you and me and all of us all the time, we are just sinners, well, then Jesus came for you. He came for sinners, not for some other group of people but for sinners and that is all of us because Jesus calls sin-sick people to himself into fellowship with him that they may know him.

[28:14] The leper was kept out by the law, Levi kept out by the people, neither were welcome but with Christ Jesus they are brought in. But the second implication of I came not to call the righteous but sinners is look who's on the outside of this dinner party.

The scribes standing at the edge refusing to come in, the people who look like the right people, the holy people, the righteous people the people who couldn't ever have thought of themselves as sinners know they're too good for that.

Those who would hear Jesus' words and think I'm not sick with sin, I'm already righteous, I don't need that. Those people do, I don't. But look where they are, on the outside, not eating with Jesus, not welcomed in because their self-righteous pride separates them.

And it's a very important truth for us and one we must reflect on that if you don't know the depths of your sin, you will never know the depth of your need of a savior.

Ultimately, people are lost not because they are too bad to be saved but because they will not come to Jesus. And we're going to see that grow and grow of this gospel next week when Andy Robertson comes to preach.

[29:41] We will see the scribes take off the mask and show what they really think about him. But for now, what Mark is showing us is that Jesus has authority to forgive sins but with that authority he goes out and brings the sinners home, inviting them into his kingdom, cleansing them and forgiving their sin, purifying them that they might join in because he is their loving and compassionate savior.

He is the one who truly meets our deepest need. I started by saying that sin is powerful and has a terrible impact on us.

And there will always be something in us that says I am too far gone, my sin is too bad, it's gone on too long, there's too much of it, I've done too many things in too many areas of my life, Jesus wouldn't have someone like me in his kingdom, I'm not a Jesus-y type of person.

But all of those are expressions of fear, cries of what if I can't be forgiven, what if I'm just going to be rejected forever. And that's understandable.

There is something in that that wants to take sin seriously. But the good news of this passage is that Jesus comes to sinners first.

[31:07] He comes to us before we get it right, he comes to us in the full and very real mess of our lives. Jesus comes to you in your brokenness when you're getting it wrong. He says believe in me because I have authority to forgive you.

Sinner come home. he can cleanse and restore you. His death to wipe away your sins that you might be forgiven. His resurrected life that you might be restored into the family of God forever, united with Christ, sharing his inheritance, drawn into the kingdom and welcomed.

Sin is your greatest sickness and your deepest need is forgiveness. And thus Jesus comes to call you to himself and has the authority to achieve it.

Because Jesus knows that we need him. The only thing that will stop us, that will keep us from Jesus' kingdom is the self-righteous pride that says I can do it on my own.

Not being able to admit that I have that sin sickness. Pretending that my sin doesn't matter even when it's against a holy God. believing the lie that I'm good enough in my own merit or I could do something to achieve it on my own.

[32:34] Don't walk out of this building thinking that there is anything that you could ever give for your forgiveness from a holy God. The only thing we can do is accept what Christ has given for us, but in doing so we receive gladly and joyfully entry into the kingdom, eternal life, love and the love of our Father God forever.

He only exposes your sin that he might heal you and restore you. Painful though it is, it is right and good for us. We must not let our pride keep us from the truth of the gospel.

So here, for the first or hundredth time, come to Christ with your sin as he seeks you. Repent of it and receive the free offer of forgiveness and mercy and grace through Christ and be welcomed into his kingdom.

Let's pray together. Father, through the work of your Son, through the authority you have given him through his death and his resurrection, you have called us into life everlasting with you.

Father, keep us from self-righteous pride that says that we don't need you. Take it from us that we might not reject the offer of life in Christ.

[33 : 56] Father, forgive us of our sins but assure us of Christ's salvation for us and the power of his resurrection that we might live in your kingdom forever. Father, speak to us by your spirit we pray.

In Jesus' name, Amen.