

Jesus: Able to forgive, willing to welcome.

Mark 2:1-17

Introduction

I think true forgiveness is something that many people long for, but often struggle to find. You sometimes see this when a public figure or celebrity says or does something wrong. Usually, in the aftermath of it all, the figure pleads for forgiveness via social media or in a press-conference. But forgiveness often doesn't come easy and sometimes it doesn't come at all.

Michael Richards, who played the beloved character of Kramer on *Sienfeld* – someone I loved to watch growing up – he experienced this after an onstage melt-down at a comedy club back in . Richards was filmed yelling out racial slurs at those who were heckling him. No matter how much he apologized he never really found the forgiveness he was looking for. He became the butt of other comedian's jokes, and a show biz outcast. Years later, he still speaks of the burden of his sin that night.

But it's not just public figures who struggle to find true forgiveness, it's all of us. Many of us have had moments where we desperately longed for someone to forgive us but have been met with a less than enthusiastic response. None of us like the burden of unresolved sin in our life. None of us like the feeling of remaining an outcast in the eyes of others.

In Mark 2:1-17 we see someone who is both able and willing to bring the kind of true forgiveness that the world struggles to provide. Jesus, we see, is able to remove the stain of sin and He is willing to associate with the sinner.

As we'll see, all wrongdoing is actually an act against God for which we will have to answer. That's why it is crucial we take note of the bigger and better forgiveness *from* God that Jesus promises to bring in this bible passage.

I've broken our bible passage into two parts – the first part deals with the paralysed man of vv.1-12 which shows us Jesus' ability (authority) to forgive sin. The second part - which shows Jesus' eating with the societal outcasts of his day highlights His willingness to welcome the sinner into fellowship with him. So, they are our two big points – Jesus is able to forgive sin, he is willing to welcome the sinner.

1. Jesus is able to forgive sin (vv.1-12)

First, Jesus is able to forgive sin. Let's look at what happens in this first story of a man who is paralysed.

A needy man.

It's a beautiful thing when good friends act like great friends. I still remember the care of my friend when I was in extreme pain with pneumonia back in my uni days. She came over to our share house, help me get in her car and then drove me to hospital. And there she sat beside me until she knew I was going to be alright. It was a wonderful demonstration of care.

Our passage starts with a picture of four good friends acting like great friends. Four men desperate to see their paralysed buddy healed do whatever it takes to get him to Jesus – the One now famous for his teaching and miracles. And they really are prepared to do whatever

it takes aren't they? You see that in story. When they come to the house where Jesus was teaching, they realize there's no way in! Verse 2 tells us that people had:

² ... gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them.

Now, I suspect, if we were faced with the same dilemma, most of us would simply start thinking up a sensible plan B. What do read that these guys do? Look at verse 4.

⁴ Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they [took their place at the back of the queue outside the door.]. No, it doesn't say that.

⁴ Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they [resolved to try again the following day]. No, it doesn't say that.

These guys don't go with sensible. They go with crazy because they have a crazy amount of love for their friend, and a crazy amount of trust that Jesus can help Him.

⁴ 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.

So convinced that Jesus could help them, these guys haul their paralysed friend up onto the roof (which is no small task!), and without hesitation, destroy the roof of some guy's home in order to get the friend to the feet of Jesus.

A shocking statement.

Now, just imagine the scene from inside at this point. As people brush dust off their clothes which feel from the roof above them, they watch with eager expectation to see if Jesus will do for these four men what they had come for. Everyone, I think, in that room is ready to hear the words, “Son, your paralysis is healed.”

But, that’s not Jesus says is it? Look at verse 5:

⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralysed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

My kids often get us all to play the game “would you rather.” You are given two random options – either both positive or both negative – and you have to choose one of them. So the one the asked me the other day was:

- Would you rather bull ants crawling up your back or snails?

But, they also give positive options too. Like:

- Would you rather cuddle a koala or cuddle a panda?
- Would you rather have a personal maid or a personal chef?

What do you think the paralysed man might say if Jesus had first asked him, “would you rather your paralysis healed or your sins forgiven?”

What would you say if you were the guy? What do you think most people in our society might say? I actually think many people, perhaps many of us, might actually say, “I’d rather have my paralysis healed please.”

I mean, on the face of it, that appears to be the bigger problem doesn't it? It's kind of hard to imagine a more desperate situation than being unable to move your limbs. And healing is certainly what the friends hoped would happen right?

So, what's going on here? Why does *Jesus* opt first for forgiveness over healing? Are we to assume this man is a heinous sinner? The text doesn't suggest so, so I don't think we should draw that conclusion. I think, Jesus says what he says in this moment, to show his audience (and us!) that there is something more serious, more in need of fixing than, than even the worst conditions of the human body – and that is the problem of sin in the human heart.

Remember, what was Jesus doing in this house before this guy arrived? He was teaching (verse 2). I think, the teaching session continues on in this moment. And the lesson Jesus gives is on the big problem of sin and his power to deal with it.

Many people in Australian society, and at times, even in the church, actually have a pretty “not serious” view of sin. Christian author, Rico Tice, quotes from an article he read on the topic of “the seven deadly sins” in which the writer said this:

“In this day and age sin has lost its sting. A bit of sinning is much more likely to be seen as a spot of grown-up naughtiness. The kind of thing that send a delicious shock through the system.”

And I think that sums it up well. Even if people believe there are some behaviours that are seriously wrong, the term ‘sin’ has, for many, lost its sting. In fact, every time I go to visit my Mum, I pass by a burger joint called Burgatory – and they really play off this popular

world view of sin. Their food is described as “sinfully delicious”. They have burgers named after the seven deadly sins. You can order the envy, or the pride, or the sloth.

We live in a world that does not take the idea of sin very seriously. So why does Jesus view it as our biggest problem and not simply “a spot of grown up naughtiness”?

Because Jesus knows, and Jesus teaches that sin is not just doing naughty things, like lying, lust or laziness. To quote again from Rico Tice:

“According to the Bible, sin is ignoring our creator in the world he has made. As we know ignoring other human beings is damaging enough... living without reference to the One who made us and gives us each breath is even more damaging. Because when I insist on my independence from the One who made me, and sustains my life, it will lead to death. Not just here, but eternal death, described in the Bible as Hell.”

That is why Jesus goes straight to the issue of sin at this point. He is revealing the greatest need of us all – including the man in front of him. And he is showing us His authority to fix it by forgiving it.

A vindicating miracle.

But notice not all are happy with Jesus words. Look at verses 6 and 7:

⁶Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, ⁷“Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

The teachers of the law were part of the influential and powerful religious class of Jesus' day. They advocated for strict obedience to all the OT law including the other various laws they developed to help with one's scrupulous observance. They were considered by many in their day as the religious rule-keepers.

Now, on the one hand these teachers of the law had their theology correct. They were right that only God can forgive sins. That is made clear throughout the OT. And it was also Israel's great future hope. The prophet Jeremiah spoke of a Day when God would:

*“For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more.”*

Their theology was right. But their logic was wrong. They were wrong to assume Jesus was blaspheming – that is, wrongly claiming to be God by claiming to do only that which God can do. But Jesus had already been working in the power of God to heal the sick and cast out demons. We saw that last week. Therefore, there was every reason to believe that he was also working as God, in God's power to forgive sins here.

But they are not convinced. And Jesus knows it and calls it out. Look at verse 8:

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? ⁹ Which is easier: to say to this paralysed man, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk’?”

You see the point Jesus is making here? Just saying the words “your sins are forgiven,” can, in some sense, be viewed as an easy thing - because it is hard to verify. Saying “get up” to a paralysed man appears harder - as that can be verified instantly. But Jesus wants his critics to know that for Him forgiving sin is not just something he says, but can actually do – which is why he does a miracle in the power of God to show his authority to forgive in the same power of God. Verse 10:

¹⁰ But I want you to know that the Son of Man [a OT title which Jesus often used for himself] has authority on earth to forgive sins.” So he said to the man, ¹¹ “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.” ¹² 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!”

Jesus’ healing of this man was a great act of kindness. It was what the four friends had hoped would happen. But, we must not miss the main point of this healing. It was a vindication (a proving right) of Jesus’ power - to fix the bigger problem in us all – the problem of sin.

Application.

Before we move on, there are two questions I think we need to wrestle with.

- Do I know my greatest need?
- Do I know Jesus is able to meet it?

Do I know my greatest need?

So, first, “do I know my greatest need?”

If I had asked you as you came in the doors tonight to finish this sentence, what would you say? What I really need from Jesus is _____.

- A good job?
- Enough money for a house deposit?
- A romantic partner?
- Physical healing?

Now, don't get me wrong, they are all good things to desire. But if we believe that any of those things truly are our greatest need, it will be easy to reach the wrong conclusion that Jesus is short-changing us in life. When we don't get the spouse we want, or the healing we long for, or the job we desire, it will be easy to become disappointed and distant from Him. It will be easy to believe that Jesus has really failed to help us at the deepest level.

But if we grasp the truth that Jesus is teaching in this passage – that our greatest need in life is the forgiveness of our sins, we will reach the right conclusion about Him. We will grow in our faith, in our thankfulness, in our contentment. For we will know that all the losses of this life do not compare to the gain of having our sins forgiven, our relationship with God restored, our eternal life guaranteed, and the sure promise, that one day, in the new heavens and earth all our sufferings, losses and disappointments will be overturned.

This passage reminds us that our biggest need is forgiveness of sin. But most significantly, it tells us that Jesus is the One who can deliver on that big need. He is able to forgive our sins and wash away the stain of guilt in God's eyes.

And I suspect that comes as good news to those of you who continue to feel stained by your sin – all your wrong decisions, bad choices, and foolish mistakes, and avoidance of God.

Jesus has the power to take your burden away. And he does this by taking upon himself the debt of death your sin deserved. Jesus went on in His life to die on a cross so that you, through faith in Him, could be forgiven and made right in God's eyes. And just as Jesus raised the paralyzed man to vindicate his power to forgive. God further vindicated Jesus' words, by raising Jesus from the dead – proving that His death really was sufficient to do the job and that we too will have resurrection life if we trust in Him.

Do you know Jesus alone has the power to meet your greatest need?

- Your religious rituals and practices won't do it.
- Nor will any futile attempt to simply be a better person – as nice as that sounds.

Forgiveness of sins, comes only through Jesus and his sacrificial death on the cross on our behalf. Only He has authority on earth to forgive sins.

2. Jesus is willing to welcome sinners.

So, we've seen that Jesus is able to forgive sin. Now, in this next section, Jesus shows us that He doesn't reserve his power for the "respectable" sinners that we might think exist. In this next section Jesus shows that He is willing to welcome any sinner – even those despised by the world - to come and follow Him. Look with me at verse 13:

¹³ Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. ¹⁴ As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

Tax collectors were a despised group of people in Jesus's day. They were Jewish people the Roman occupiers had employed to collect tax revenue from their fellow Jews. It was not uncommon for TC to pocket a little extra for themselves and grow wealthy off the backs of their neighbours. They were viewed as traitors and scumbags. And that's what makes Jesus' words and actions here so shocking – especially for his original audience. He goes out of his way to speak with one of these supposed scumbags. You see that in verse 13 – it's not that Levi goes to Jesus, it's that Jesus goes to Levi.

Jesus is not hiding the ball with regards to his intentions here. He wants people to know He has come to welcome in and bring forgiveness to the likes of Levi – a despised TC. And Jesus' actions only ramp up don't they. You see it there in verse 15 when goes to have dinner with Levi. It's now not just Jesus and one tax collector – it's now Jesus and “many”:

*¹⁵ While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, **many** tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were **many** who followed him.*

“Sinners,” was a catch up all term to categorize any particular group of people who were considered morally compromised.” That Jesus goes to eat with such people was a big deal.

I remember my Dad telling me that when He was a boy Christians were so keen to distance themselves from the pub in town that they would avoid walking past the front doors in case they were mistakenly viewed as having gone in. The pub was viewed by most in the church as an ungodly place to be and therefore to associate in. To walk into the pub even just for a lemon squash and a counter meal would be to invite religious scandal.

But notice how *Jesus* has no issue walking right into the face of scandal in His day. He happily walks right into the house of a tax collector and sits down to eat, with what the religious class of his day would have considered the riff-raff of society. And it does cause scandal doesn't it. You see it there in verse 16:

16 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?"

"Isn't Jesus supposed to be a godly teacher? Doesn't He claim to be working in God's authority? What's he doing rubbing shoulders with sinners?"

But notice Jesus doesn't back track, because of this scandal. He doesn't suddenly say: "Yeah, you have a point, the optics are pretty bad on this, maybe I'll tone it down a bit." No, instead he goes into teaching mode again and uses his actions to make a crucial point about his mission in this world:

17 On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

The teachers of the Law had assumed that God would reward their outward obedience to the Law. But Jesus is saying that is not His mission. He has not come to reward people, because no one – not even the teachers of the Law with all their outward rule keeping – are without

sin and worthy of reward. The tragedy of the teachers of the law was though they thought they were healthy, they were actually sick with sin, just like everyone else. In fact it will be this same class of religious men, who end up demanding Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus' mission is to not to reward but save. And we need to hear this, because I think is often confused by many in our society and in pop-culture.

I also think of the song *last kiss*, by a band I like called Pearl Jam. It's one of their hit songs and the chorus has these words:

Oh, where oh where can my baby be?

The Lord took her away from me

She's gone to heaven, so I got to be good

So I can see my baby when I leave this world

The teachers of the law could have written those lyrics – I've got to be good to get to Heaven, to earn God's favour, to be welcome into His kingdom. But Jesus is clear in this passage that Christianity is not about God rewarding good people, but Jesus saving bad people – or to use the biblical term, sinful people – which we all are. Jesus has come not to call the righteous, but sinners.

Application.

Have you ever had that moment where you need to find a new GP, you hear about a really good one in your area, but then find out she's not taking new patients? It's frustrating trying to reach out to a good and reliable doctor only to be turned away.

It's not like that with Jesus. He is God's good and reliable doctor who, like Levi, reaches out to us? He's calling us to follow Him, willing to fix our greatest problem of sin and will never turn us away if we come to Him.

Have you done that yet?

Maybe you're someone who feels a little like some of the tax collectors of Jesus day. You know you are spiritually sick and need help. Maybe you're burdened by the grief of bad life decisions or harmful treatment of others, that you know God will not ignore. Jesus the doctor, calls you to follow him. To put your life in his hands, to trust in His death for your sin and to live for Him as your risen saviour.

Maybe you're someone who (like the teachers of the law) actually doesn't think you're that spiritually sick. Don't be like they are throughout the gospels and ignore what Jesus says. You wouldn't brush off a trusted doctor who says you need immediate surgery to remove a cancerous tumor – simply because you still feel pretty good.

Jesus is giving you the hard diagnosis because he loves you and does not want to see you come to grief at the last judgment Day before God – where your every careless word, every thoughtless deed, every defiance of God's way will be brought to account.

You too are being called by Jesus to follow Him and find life and forgiveness. That's the big application from this last section, but there is a final application I want to touch on before closing.

Jesus is willing to welcome sinners.

Finally, Jesus' words and actions here remind us that we live in a world of sick people who need God's doctor.

Throughout his life Jesus described people who were far from God in ways that highlighted their need.

In Luke 15 Jesus describes them as "lost, but valued".

In Matthew 9 they are "sheep without a shepherd."

Here it is "the sick who need a doctor."

Jesus uses these descriptors because He wants us to see the spiritual need of people. He wants us to have compassion and help the lost find their way to God, show the sheep their shepherd, invite the sick to meet with the doctor. In short, Jesus wants us to speak of Him to the desperately needy community around us.

Sometimes it's hard for us to see people who don't know Jesus as "the sick" who need a doctor. I find this. We had dinner with some friends of ours who are not followers of Jesus a couple of nights ago. They are lovely people. Great cooks. Dedicated parents. It's hard for to be in their company and instinctively say – these are spiritually sick people. Maybe you feel that too. Maybe that's part of the reason why we can struggle to speak of Christ with our friends. We're not convinced of their need.

But Jesus has told us tonight that he has not come to call the righteous. He will not be looking at our friends on judgment day and agreeing they are such lovely people and worthy of his kingdom. They, like us, are spiritually sick for they are live independently of God and they have not had their greatest need for forgiveness of sin met.

We must be like Jesus and out of love and compassion, speak of Jesus with them. Pray for them as a family. Invite their kids to the Wednesday GSF outing, to kids club. Bit by bit, helping them to see their need to call on Jesus, God's great doctor.

Conclusion

Jesus has shown us tonight His ability to forgive sin and willingness to welcome sinners.

Joni E-T is a Christian writer and speaker who has spent the past the past 55 years paralysed from a diving accident when she was 17 years old. Joni, who was raised a Christian, says that following her accident she found reading this bible passage difficult – wondering why Jesus was not healing her like he healed the paralysed man of vv.1-12. It was only when she started to reflect more deeply on Jesus' priority on forgiveness throughout the Bible that her mindset began to change:

“...my sister would get me up, plop a Bible on a music stand, and park my wheelchair in front of it. With a mouth stick, I would flip this way and that, trying to make sense of it all. I learned that the core of Christ's plan is to rescue us from sin. Our physical aches and pains and broken relationships aren't his ultimate focus—he cares deeply about these things, but they're symptoms of the chief problem in this fallen world.

I collapsed in tears when I began to glimpse how heinous my sin was. Physical healing paled in comparison to the unthinkable abuse my transgressions heaped on my Lord.

Why has Joni - someone who has quadriplegia – spent the past 50 years rejoicing in Jesus and making it her goal to share Him with others? Because she knows deeply the truth of tonight's passage - that Jesus is both able and willing to meet her *core* need of forgiveness of sin.

May God grow our confidence in that too as we commit to trusting Jesus.