

Identity and Forgiveness in Mark

Mark 2:1-17 • Class Transcript

The Problem of Forgiveness

Good morning. We're glad you're with us today as we continue our study in Mark. We're in the second chapter today, and we're going to talk about something we're all aware of but all confused about at the same time — which always makes for a better class if you can manage it. If everybody were clear on this, we'd just all go home and move on. But I don't think we're all clear.

I want you to think about this problem and tell me what you think ought to happen. I've seen this more times than you'd imagine: you have a couple, and over time things begin to slip a little in their marriage — they become familiar but not close any longer. And suddenly, for some reason, one of the partners — usually the man, not always — ends up in an affair. He sees the error of his ways. His wife has found out about it. She's obviously hurt and upset, and all he says to her is, "I just need you to forgive me. Can you forgive me?" Can she forgive him? What does that take? What does it look like to forgive him? She may forgive him, but she won't forget — that's exactly right.

There's some authenticity in a response like that, but let's be clear about something: forgiveness doesn't always mean the absence of consequences. Think about David — Nathan tells him, "Your sin has been forgiven," and yet David lives through a cascade of just horrible things afterward. Forgiveness doesn't undo what's been done. It has to do with something else. This is one of those hard things, and I'm not going to tell you it's easy.

I dealt with a couple once in which the man had had multiple affairs and wanted to put everything back together. He made the dumbest statement I've ever heard: "All I want her to do is trust me." It doesn't take a lot of counseling experience to know what I said next: "That's not something that's ever going to happen. Do you understand? That ship has sailed. Don't expect it." He didn't want to hear that, and he never came back to see me — which was probably good, because I wasn't going to tell him anything more pleasant.

WHY FORGIVENESS IS HARD

Forgiveness is hard for lots of reasons. First, it's easily misunderstood. A lot of people think forgiveness means sweeping it under the rug, keeping the skeletons in the closet — "let's just not talk about this anymore, and we'll all be fine, we're going to put that in our past and never think about it again." Hooey. You're going to think about it all the time. It's like me telling you not to think about a white bear — what are you thinking about right now? A white bear. That's what happens. If you think you can just make it all go away, it keeps coming back like a bad dream.

We also tend to think forgiveness is just saying "I'm sorry" and moving on — that doesn't happen either; it's a fairly cheesy way of thinking about it. In premarital counseling, there's a model I learned forty-some years ago about how people reconcile. Briefly, it goes like this: every little offense gets put into a paper sack, so to speak, until it finally fills up with one last little thing, and the sack breaks. So couples say, "Let's just kiss and make up" — they do, and the next time something happens, it shatters everything, because it was premature. That's not how it actually works.

Second, forgiveness is hard because it's always lingering in the background. I've had people I've had to forgive, and they've probably had to forgive me at the same time, and there's still this aura that seems to hang around it. Saying "I forgive you" is correct, but there's more to it than that, as we'll see today.

Reading Mark Through Three Questions

Whenever we read Mark, I try to read it through the same lens every week, and I hope it becomes yours too. There are three things Mark wants from us. First: what does Mark want you to see? What do you observe when you look at the passage — what's going on there? You have to see it before you can understand it. Second: what does Mark want you to understand — what are the key elements when you dig deeper? Third: what does Mark want you to do?

That last question is a different concept than what many of us grew up with. I grew up in churches of Christ, and I learned what adult Bible class teaching looked like in the fifties and sixties: it means what it says, and it says what it means — let's go home. They'd go through every verse: "What does that say?" "It says this." "What does that mean?" "It means what it says." Nobody understood a thing, because the second half of the problem was that we never did anything with it. It was purely intellectual; it didn't affect you. That's the gap Mark is trying to close.

So, first: what do you see? At a high level, the landscape of today's passage is simple. There's a man who is forgiven and healed — and the order matters, as we'll see. Second, there are two confrontations with the so-called authorities, and the pattern is that the hated gets accepted, and the accepted gets questioned. That's the thumbnail of today's lesson.

But dig deeper, and the real question being asked is: do you know who Jesus really is? There's a phrase in this passage — "so that you may know" — and that's what Mark wants us to get. Who is Jesus? We tend to think about Jesus as biography. No — we're talking about identity. There's a difference.

PIGEONHOLES: HOW THE LAW SORTED PEOPLE

Part of what's lingering in the background this week, and probably for weeks to come, is a religious pigeonhole approach. Pigeonholes are only good for pigeons, but we all have them. We say things like, "Oh, you went to that college," "you live in that part of town," "your kids did what?," "you believe that now?" If you've ever said any of that, you've got a set of pigeonholes in your head — educated people, rich people, poor people, blue collar, white collar. We've got them all.

Their pigeonholes looked like this: sinner or righteous. Righteous was defined as performance against the laws and traditions. The law of Moses has six hundred and thirteen commandments — not ten, six hundred and thirteen — most of them negative, some positive. But that's not even what they were teaching. Over four hundred years, coming out of Babylonian captivity, they developed a code called the Talmud, asking: what does the law really mean in daily life? How do you know if work is happening on the Sabbath? Have you really washed your hands right? It ended up looking like a tax code a foot thick. Will Rogers said there are two things you don't want to know how they're made: sausages, and laws. There's a lot of truth to both.

So righteousness became performance against criteria the teachers of the law had established. If you didn't follow the rules, you were called a sinner — not because of what you did, but because of your lifestyle. If you were fastidious, you were righteous; if not, you weren't. And sin always had to be dealt with through sacrifice: you hauled yourself down to Jerusalem with a lamb, and that took care of it. The motto was, "Try harder, do more, perform to a higher level to prove you have a relationship with God."

Lest you think that's just something old folks believed, think about it: we have a scorecard in our own minds too. Play any game — Uno, dominoes, poker, bridge, whatever — and somebody else already defined the rules for you: what counts as winning, what counts as losing. You didn't choose it; it was imposed on you. We've developed a scorecard for what makes a good Christian, and through my experience, here's what it is: attendance, contribution, activity. If you don't come all the time, people have an opinion about what kind of Christian you are. There's an old joke about a man who shows up at the pearly gates shouting and running around, thrilled, and someone asks what's the matter. He says, "They're not counting Wednesday nights!" That's the scorecard problem. What about CEOs — Christmas and Easter only? Do they count? Not as good as the ones who are there every Sunday. You can hear the tone. We don't call it that, but that's what it is. We're trying to

perform for God.

Back in Capernaum

Now let's move into the passage. Jesus comes to Capernaum — he's been away; Mark tells about a journey through Galilee in a single verse, and now he's back. Last time he was in Capernaum, there was a stunning teaching in the synagogue, interrupted by an unclean spirit he had to dispense with, followed by a large-scale healing of people. So when word gets out that he's back, expectations are sky-high — everybody's going to get healed, spirits are going to be cast out, they're going to hear things they've never heard before. The house is packed — so packed you can't even get near the door to hear. It's the equivalent of a church so full you're stuck in the far wing hoping to catch whispers over the sound system.

The Paralytic and the Silent Objection (Mark 2:1-12)

Four men have a paralyzed friend, and they want him healed, so they bring him to Jesus — and they do something strange. They cut a hole in the roof. Picture a Palestinian roof: main beams running across, with smaller perpendicular ones holding the thatch that keeps the water out. These men probably worked between two big beams, cut through the smaller ones, pulled the thatch away, and lowered the man's mat down into the room. If you're the homeowner, your reaction is, "What are you doing to my house?" "Well, we've got this friend." "I don't care about your friend, I care about my house." But that's what happens.

Jesus sees their faith, and then he says something remarkable to the paralyzed man:

"Son, your sins are forgiven."

cf. Mark 2:5

Where did that come from? The man needs to be healed, and instead Jesus forgives his sins. There's a silent objection in the room. The teachers of the law are sitting there like vultures on a line, thinking, "He can't do that. He doesn't know what only God can do. If he thinks he can do that, we know what that's called — blasphemy." It's an internal conversation nobody hears except Jesus, and he answers it anyway, speaking to someone who hasn't spoken a word out loud:

"Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'?"

cf. Mark 2:8-9

Why does he ask it that way? Because if you can do the hard thing, the easy thing already follows. So he says, "I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" — and then he does the hard thing, the thing nobody can verify with their eyes, so that everyone can see he also has authority to do the easy, visible thing. The paralytic is told to get up, take his mat, and go home — and he does, right there, verifiable, everybody watching.

The Call of Levi (Mark 2:13-17)

Immediately after, there's a call to discipleship. Jesus sees a man named Levi — we know him as Matthew, though Mark calls him Levi — a tax collector. Jesus says, "Follow me," and Levi leaves his tax booth and follows him. That creates another problem, because Levi throws a dinner and invites his friends — fellow tax collectors and "sinners," people who didn't keep the law particularly well — and Jesus is there enjoying their company. Now the objection is spoken out loud. The teachers say to the disciples, "Why does he eat with them?" The

unspoken thought underneath it: doesn't he know better?

So what you get in this quick overview is Jesus's identity questioned first — an unspoken accusation — and then his associations questioned, spoken openly, with Levi the tax collector at the center of it. Both are very interesting once you see how they connect.

WHAT "FORGIVENESS" MEANS

Let's start with forgiveness itself. It's an ancient word — the term Mark uses is really a word about debt, about having a debt forgiven, canceled. If you declare bankruptcy, the court discharges your debts; you're no longer legally liable for them. We sing, "He paid a debt he did not owe, I owed a debt I could not pay." That's the concept — a canceled debt. And the real question becomes: who has the authority to forgive sins?

An illustration: Suppose, over ten years, you've embezzled thirty thousand dollars from your business and gotten away with it, and your conscience starts bothering you. You go to your best friend and say, "I need to talk to somebody. Can you forgive me?" Does your friend have the authority to do that? When I was a boy, I lived in Santa Fe, New Mexico, before Hollywood ruined it. Every Labor Day, Santa Fe holds a celebration called Fiesta, blending Spanish and Indian culture, and on Saturday night they burn a three-hundred-foot-tall papier-mâché figure called Zozobra — supposedly burning away all the evil spirits for the coming year. My dad helped build it for the Kiwanis Club. There was one radio station in town, and the Archbishop of St. Francis Cathedral would get on the air at noon on Friday and forgive everyone's sins for the next seventy-two hours, because somebody was going to get drunk and run their car into a telephone pole and not make it to heaven unless he absolved them ahead of time. Did he have the right to do that? He might have had the right in some people's minds, but did he have the power? That's the real question — jurisdiction. Who has jurisdiction over sin?

Jesus's claim in this passage is bold: I am like God — I am God. And the teachers of the law are not wrong to think that only God can forgive sins; that part is true. Where they go wrong is in their syllogism: God alone forgives sins; Jesus is a man; therefore Jesus cannot forgive sins. The problem is that if this man really does forgive sins, it means they'd have to give up their positions — they'd have to admit they were wrong, and that's the hardest thing for anyone to do.

Notice that Jesus forgives the man before he heals him. The man has an obvious problem — he's paralyzed — and an inobvious problem — he's a sinner. Jesus deals with the inobvious one first, and that's not by accident, it's by design, because he has to prove who he is; he's not just a healer. He's already shown he has authority to teach, authority over unclean spirits, authority over illness and disease — and now that authority reaches even to the sin of people. So he forgives, then heals, so that everyone can see: if he can do the hard thing, the harder-to-verify thing, surely he can do the easier, visible thing too.

Eating with Sinners: Why Does He Do That?

When Jesus calls Levi, he doesn't tell him to clean up his life first and come back once he's ready. We tend to have that backwards. Repentance is about direction, about vector, not about a finished result — a change of direction, a change of allegiance. We baptize sinners in this church, not the righteous. That's why we sing "Just as I Am" — God takes you just as you are, but he doesn't let you stay just as you are, because in the process of following Jesus, Levi is going to change. He can't keep being a tax collector.

Tax collectors were subcontractors to the Roman system, collecting whatever taxes Rome wanted — including a tax simply for being alive; you didn't owe it once you were dead. They were told to hand Rome its cut and could set their own commission on top of that, backed by the army if needed. Many grew wealthy while the peasants were overtaxed, and people hated them for it — tax collectors could put children and wives into slavery or debtor's prison with no way out.

So when Jesus eats with these people, the question comes: why does he eat with them? Is that a wrong question to ask? Think about what we tell our own children. Don't we believe it's inadvisable to hang around bad

influences? If your teenager comes home and says he spent the afternoon behind the cafeteria with the kids who smoke, no self-respecting parent says, "That's great, keep it up." Paul himself says, "Bad company corrupts good character." The ancient world knew that too. And yet Jesus is breaking that rule. Doesn't associating with people mean you're accepting their lifestyle? Isn't that the whole premise behind church fellowship — that we don't approve of a lifestyle, so we just don't hang around with those people anymore?

Jesus's answer is that it depends on what you're doing:

"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

cf. Mark 2:17

He uses their own pigeonholes to make the point. Doctors belong in hospitals, where people are sick, because that's where they're needed — not at the country club. We've even built our whole medical system around that idea. So if Jesus is a physician to the sick, of course he goes to the people who need him. There's an accusation folded into his answer too: are you doing anything about their souls? I'm trying to.

What Mark Wants From Us

So what does Mark ask of us? It's not enough to walk out of a good Bible class and say, "I understand this better." What are you going to do differently? Mark points to two audiences that Jesus speaks to. One is the needy — the man on the mat, the tax collector in need of cleansing, forgiveness, and acceptance. The other is the judges, watching everything Jesus does, looking to condemn what's wrong with it and with the people he's helping. The question for us is: which seat are you sitting in? Are you needy enough to need Jesus, or do you think you're qualified enough to sit in judgment?

WHO CAN FORGIVE MY SINS?

The second question is: who can forgive my sins? Intellectually we know the answer — Jesus and God forgive my sins. So why do we still struggle with it? Because we know exactly how bad our sin is. The hardest person to forgive is the face that looks back at you in the mirror every morning, because you know what you did, why you did it, the consequences of it, and the shame it brings.

An illustration: In ministry I'd get phone calls: "You need to go see so-and-so." One time I was sent to check on a man living in a trailer in the middle of a Galveston County August — hot and steamy. I climbed the steps and knocked, and when he opened the door he said, "What do you want?" I said, "My name is Robert Taylor, I'm from the church, and someone thought you might want to talk to somebody." He said, "Go away, I don't need any help." I said, "You sure? You sound like you might." He said, "You can't do anything for me. You wouldn't accept me anyhow, and God can't stand me. God doesn't care about me either." I asked what made him think that. He said, "When I was twenty years old, I got my girlfriend pregnant. I forced her to have an abortion, and there's no way in the world God will ever forgive me for that."

Who can forgive my sins is a real question — one you and I have to ask when we feel like nobody cares, when we wonder if we're even good enough for God. Can God forgive your sins? Can Jesus? Who has authority over that part of your life? Jesus's answer is: I do. I will. I can.

And finally: are you sick enough to need a doctor? Don't be surprised how many people don't think they're very sick. You've seen people with a cough that won't quit who insist they're fine right up until six months later, when it turns out to be something serious, because they were too stubborn to go see a doctor. Do you need to go see the doctor? Jesus says, "I am the physician to the sick. I will help you, if you'll let me." That's all he does — and then he leaves the rest to us.

Next week, we're going to go back into more clashes with the teachers about more things. Thank you very much.

