

In this series, we are attempting to encounter Jesus more intimately, to learn to know and follow Jesus because he is our rabbi and our teacher. But of course, even more so, he is our savior—both of these go hand-in-hand. And what I really believe, and hope you are starting to put together as we begin our journey through Mark, is that to encounter Jesus is to change.

As we often talk about around here, to be human is to be dynamic—always changing, always being formed in one direction or another. This can work toward great harm, or when we understand and encounter Jesus in such a way that we allow him to change us, great comfort.

Because that is what it means to encounter Jesus, it is to change. We are going to encounter a story of Jesus that will invite those who have encountered Jesus to change. You see, what our text is going to ask of us is to locate ourselves within the story. It will suggest two groups of people that are present to Jesus and are invited to change.

The Crowds (represented by the friends and the paralytic)

This crowd is desperate to see Jesus. They will do whatever it takes to come into contact with him. This group is eager and open to the movement of God; they know Jesus will change things and will move.

The Scribes (Teachers of the Law)

This group was considered the religious teachers. They were a group of significant influence and power. They were the in-crowd that were often skeptical of Jesus. They knew the scriptures inside and out. They were passionate about the scriptures, and they are depicted here as skeptical, cynical, and closed to the work that Jesus was doing.

Through all of this, we have a story of the radical forgiveness of God right at the center. It is a story that will draw us into the very character of Jesus and, by doing so, the very character of God.

What we will see in the text is that the radical forgiveness of Jesus is an invitation to change. Jesus will confront two different groups of people—the powerful religious teachers and the desperate crowds. Both will be invited to change because of an encounter with Jesus' forgiveness. And both will have the opportunity to respond utterly differently than anticipated. What

would it mean for us to encounter Jesus in a manner that will transform us? Are you open to that possibility?

The Crowd

Now, up until this part of the gospel, we have yet to see Jesus face opposition. But that will all change here in chapter 2. You see, there is something that challenges the world around us when you go around preaching a gospel of a new kingdom that challenges the status quo. But what I want you to notice right now is who the opposition is against.

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. Mark 2:1-2

Scholars are not sure what is meant by "home," whether it was Jesus' home or what seems to be more likely is Peter's home. There is something beautifully simple about the concept of Jesus returning home. There are so many of these simple snippets in the gospels about the humanity of Jesus. Jesus had a home.

Within our faith and within the life of Jesus, there is a deep commitment to the simplistic. The means of ministering the Kingdom of God are nothing more than simply home. For Jesus, the epicenter of his kingdom work is as straightforward as his home.

This is a fascinating counterbalance to the *eremos* (solitary or lonely place). Remember a few weeks ago when Jesus would practice solitude by escaping into the lonely place? That was the place he would refresh and recharge in the presence of God.

His home was the place of ministry. Table welcome and hospitality are all a means of deep kingdom work that Jesus and the early Church used to turn the world around. A profound simplicity. And while he arrives home trying to escape the crowds, the bottom line is that it isn't a possibility anymore. Jesus' influence has risen to incredible heights.

The picture Mark is painting here is Jesus inside the house preaching the Kingdom of God to the crowds, and they have so pressed in on him that they are now inside the house and overflowing onto the streets, "...there was no room left."

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.

Mark 2:3-4

The scene became all the more interesting as the night went on. Four men come with their friend who is paralyzed, but the house was so crowded that they couldn't get to Jesus for healing, so they devised a plan to take him up to the roof, dig a hole, and lower the man down. I would have loved to have heard this plan come together. I imagine it was one of those, "It's not the best idea, but it's the idea we got!"

These guys must have been old college buddies because only the brains of old college friends devise this and think, "That's a good idea!" But nonetheless, the idea hatched by this band of friends emphasizes both the seriousness for which the paralytic needed healing and the deep faith espoused by the friends that if they got him in front of Jesus, Jesus would do his thing.

The more literal phrase in Greek about them opening the roof is that they "unroofed the roof." They dug a hole and began to lower the man down. Now imagine the scene inside the house Jesus is teaching, and all of a sudden, bits of roof start cracking and following. I would assume that everything stopped at the distraction. In a typical Galilean home, the homes would have roof access via a staircase on the side of the house leading to a flat roof. At least, according to the narrative, no one seems too distracted by the property damage. But nonetheless, the man is lowered before Jesus.

"When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, 'Son, your sins are forgiven'" (Mark 2:5). Imagine the scene before Jesus; he is teaching and watching these friends lower the man down and is in awe of their faith. "Their faith" may have included the paralytic, but the text seems to point to Jesus' response being focused on the groups over the top effort to bring their friend before him. According to the text, there was no verbal affirmation of their faith in Jesus, but it is the actions of the group of friends that demonstrated the faith they had.

What Jesus does in response to their faith is astounding and would have been utterly shocking to all present. Jesus looks to this paralytic being lowered, and rather than physical healing (at least at this point in the narrative), Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven."

As we have been tracking throughout the Gospel of Mark, we have seen physical healing after physical healing. The reader expects the physical healing of this man. Certainly, those present and the friends who brought the man to Jesus expected physical healing, but Jesus had different plans.

Mark included Jesus forgiving the sins of the man in his gospel as an opportunity to fully assert the identity of Jesus to his readers. Because it is one thing for Jesus to physically heal the people who come to him, it is another thing to assert the forgiveness of sins.

This was (as the Scribes will note in a few verses) a task that only God can do, and this was exactly Jesus' point in forgiving sins.

For as shocking as the four friends' actions were, so too was Jesus' response forgiving the man's sin. It wasn't that this man was uniquely and unusually more sinful than others, but rather, it is the recognition that we all have a deep wounding from sin that needs healing. And Jesus is here to address this wounding. Jesus is using this encounter to confront the audience—especially the scribes that we will see in a second—with the reality of his identity.

There is a beautiful desperation in this group of friends seeking healing. They are in deep pursuit for their friend, and they are eager to get before Jesus. I wonder if there is something for us to learn here about how we come to God and how we seek God in light of our needs?

Mark is very careful to always draw and illustrate the crowd that was surrounding Jesus. There is careful attention to who was in that crowd, and here we see the faith of these four friends like those in the crowd who were open to the movement of Jesus. So far, this crowd is one defined by the eagerness of these friends and the paralytic to come before Jesus, but there is more in the crowd that Mark is about to reveal.

The Controversy

But as we do, I want to point out that this text actually launches a new section in the Gospel of Mark that starts here in 2:1 and extends all the way to 3:6, where Jesus will now face confrontation for his teaching and the Kingdom of God. And here, in verse 6, we see the Scribes confront Jesus for his forgiveness of sins

"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 sins but God alone?'" (Mark 2:6-7). Mark now introduces a second group of people within the crowd called the teachers of the law. Your Bible also might say Scribes because those are the same people. This group of people was trained in the religious law of Judaism. They were experts in opinions of proper conduct and took it upon themselves to instruct Israel in their moral conduct. They will appear several times throughout Mark's gospel, and the majority of the times they appear, they are critics of Jesus.

Now, by forgiving the man's sins, Jesus is directly confronting and offending the Scribes who are present at the house. The Scribes offense is, in some respects, well earned. Jesus claims to be able to forgive sins by the power of his own name. But only God can do this, no one can forgive sins except God, but this is exactly Jesus' point. Their direct concern was Jesus attempting to play the part of God; for the Scribes, this was very much blasphemy. And in one sense, they are thinking appropriately; if Jesus is not God, then it is blasphemy.

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? Which is easier: to say to this 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 authority on earth to forgive sins.” Mark 2:8-10a

It is interesting that the Scribes do not communicate verbally their internal offenses to what Jesus is claiming, but Jesus is able to perceive their thoughts.

The masterful work here of Mark is on display. Mark has been opening his gospel with the question, “Who is Jesus?” Mark often answers this question by putting the answer in the mouths or the minds of his characters. This is exactly what Mark is doing here in the minds of the Scribes. Timothy Gombis, a Mark commentator, states, “Since Jesus is doing what only God can do, it must be that Jesus is identical with the God of Israel” (Gombis). In Jesus discerning their thoughts, he challenges them to change their thinking. “Why are you thinking these things?” And yes, Jesus is confronting them, but he is doing so in an invitational manner. He is leaving the opportunity for them to join the good kingdom work that he is about.

Jesus then asks them a pretty perplexing question, one that doesn't exactly have a straightforward answer. “Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, ‘your sins are forgiven,’ or to say ‘get up, take your mat and walk?’”

The reality is both of these statements have a strong case for being difficult. To say his sins are forgiven may at first seem easier because it is not externally verifiable. The forgiveness of sins takes place in the unseen realm, so it can be said by anyone. And yet, the challenge of saying this is that only God can forgive sins, so to say it is to put your life in danger of being killed for blasphemy.

The opposite is also incredibly challenging—healing his affliction. With physical healing, there is proof in external evidence, making this also a challenging statement to confess. So, in reality, neither statement is easy to say. But of course, Jesus says both of these statements.

That being said, it would seem that Jesus is playing on the fact that the latter statement, “get up and walk,” is the harder statement. To say get up and walk would require the miraculous power and authority over sickness. He is therefore implying that his ability to do the visible thing means he has the ability to do that unseen thing (forgiveness of sins).

And the purpose of him saying these two statements is to demonstrate his authority to forgive sins as the Son of Man. This title, “Son of Man,” is Jesus' favorite self-designation of himself. And it is connected back to Daniel chapter 7. If you remember, in Daniel 7, Daniel has a dream of four beasts that are each representative

of human kingdoms, and there comes a human one—a “son of man”—who ascends to the divine throne.

“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. Daniel 7:13-14

This human one who comes before the divine throne is given all authority, glory, and power. He is establishing a kingdom that will never be destroyed. When Jesus takes up this title in this scene, he is evoking all that imagery. He is boldly declaring that he has all of the authority, power, and glory that is bestowed upon the “Son of Man” that we see in Daniel. He is declaring that he is the Son of Man. Look down at verses 11-12 and see how the story closes.

So he said to the man, “I 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!” Mark 2:10b-12

Thus far in the narrative, the paralytic has actually played a very minor role. The occasion for the episode is his healing, but the main characters have been the crowd, the friends, and the Scribe's interactions with Jesus.

As the paralytic comes to the center stage of the action to close the text, Mark depicts him as responding with immediate obedience. The man does precisely what Jesus asked. Jesus' healing of this man in front of the onlooking crowd was necessary to externally demonstrate his identity as the son of man.

To close our time, I want to spend a few minutes reflecting on that final responsive statement, “We have never seen anything like this!” I want to spend a few minutes reflecting on this because I think that is what Mark is trying to get us to reflect on.

What was it that made this crowd say that they have never seen anything like this? It wasn't just the physical healing. They had just seen in the Gospel of Mark earlier healings that would have been profound examples of miracles. But in this encounter, it was the power of the physical healing coupled with the power of the forgiveness of sins.

When you think of your encounters with God, do you walk away with the same reaction? When you think of the forgiveness that God has graciously handed out to you, do you also swell up with this sort of reaction? If when we leave the presence of God and these sorts of encounters with Jesus and we don't respond with, “I've never seen anything like this.” how much of Jesus did we actually encounter?

The Response to Forgiveness

Let's step back as we close and consider this very question in light of this story. Yes, this story is about a healing and about forgiveness, yes, of course. But this story is about the manner in which we all encounter this transformative power of Jesus and whether we do so from a posture of openness and receptivity or a posture of skepticism and rejection.

If I can boil down this scene in Mark's gospel to one point, I would boil it down to:

The power of Jesus' forgiveness invites us to change.

One of the ways that Mark writes to draw his readers into the story is by drawing contrasts between two different groups of people who encounter Jesus, and in this text, it is no different. You see again the contrast between the crowd and, here in the text, the Scribes. In the first group, Mark is contrasting the response, and here for the first time, Jesus takes on the Scribes or the "teachers of the law." For us to understand this interaction with the Scribes and how deep the confrontation to Jesus is, we must understand the story of the Scribes.

The Scribes

As we know, the historical story of the Jews is one where they are continually displaced and taken captive. They are one of the few nations that, whenever they have been conquered, they have found a way to remain distinct and not acquiesce to the host culture. Throughout their history, they have found a way to resist assimilation and remain distinct. One of the primary ways that this took place was through their adherence and preservation of the Law and the Scriptures. They were deeply committed and tied to their story. Their commitment to the Torah sustained the community regardless of what it faced.

But as they faced challenge after challenge, the Jews had to figure out a way to keep this tradition of the scriptures alive, and so they formed this group called "the Scribes" or the "teachers of the law." Their jobs were primarily to write, copy, and maintain the written documents of Israel. Their entire profession was to maintain and oversee the sanctity of the Torah (the law).

Without a printing press or computer, the only way that written documents, especially those of as significant importance as the Torah, could be duplicated was by incredibly precise and accurate hand-written copies of the text. The attention to detail was stunning. They would have some in their ranks who would copy in writing, others who were then reviewing the writing and literally counting the words to ensure accuracy down to the last detail. These teachers of the law would continue on in their status as community leaders and would, over time, become known for their interpretation and teaching of the scriptures because of their intimate knowledge of the text. They would grow in stature and influence, and they would get more and more influential as they would interpret the text.

As they would debate the texts, teach the text, uphold the text, over the course of hundreds of years, these Scribes would lose the narrative, and eventually, their interpretation of the text became more important than the text itself! Their religiosity would overwhelm everything they did and would swell up in pride and arrogance, chasing power and influence more than the God of the scriptures they had at one time fallen in love with.

For the Scribes, the forgiveness of Jesus confronts their religiosity.

So in this encounter with Jesus, you see them missing the very movement of God that had been initiated by Jesus' arrival because it was confronting the kingdom they had built. You see them quibbling over the nuances of Jesus' action rather than understanding and seeing the incredible healing Jesus was bringing about.

And I just wonder Church that those of us, like myself, who have been in the Church and around Jesus for some time, might also get caught up in the same religiosity. The danger is a swell of pride and arrogance. The danger is to assume that we know what is best, that we know what is right, and actually, at some point, fall more in love with the Bible than God. We might fall more in love with our interpretation of the text than the God of the text. The danger is that our religious status can become what we are serving, and we lose the forest for the trees. You see, it is into this deep religiosity and elitism that Jesus comes in and completely offends them.

The Scribes are a perfect illustration of what can happen when institutionalism supersedes faithfulness to the way of Jesus. It is the religiosity of the Scribes that blinded them to the very in-breaking of the Kingdom of God in their midst. And I fear, Church, that we too can easily get so caught up in the institutionalism that is power-seeking, fame-generating, and self-centeredness that we miss the incredibly humble beauty and simplicity of the Kingdom of God breaking into our world.

Here is the truth that I faced that maybe you all can face as well. Can I fall more in love with my theological constructs and my theological training than I fall in love with Jesus? Those things are not bad, and in fact, I would argue that good theology should always drive one to worship and humility at the feet of Jesus. But this isn't always the case. It can, if we are not careful, take the radical and transformative edge out of the Bible.

Maybe we have been around the Church and have grown so familiar with the language and the stories and have found ourselves skeptical of any movement of God? Maybe we have found ourselves more caught up in the institutionalism that is more focused on the structures of the Church than the in-breaking Kingdom of God? Maybe today, the forgiveness and radical nature of Jesus is inviting us into change because Jesus wants to confront our religiosity. Would you be open to that possibility?

Would you be open to the potential of Jesus confronting you today? Are we more enamored with our interpretation and our story than we are with God? That is a problem.

Have you grown critical, cynical, or skeptical of the in-breaking Kingdom of God because it is challenging and threatening the status quo that you have grown comfortable with? Have you allowed your heart posture to grow cold to the living God and fixated purely on tribal interpretations? Jesus is inviting you to change.

But what does this change look like? Well, the story this morning also has this second group that responds quite differently to the act of Jesus' forgiveness.

The Crowds

Contrasted to the negative religiosity of the Scribes is the desperation of the crowds. There is a profoundly beautiful contrast that is made by Mark when you see the self-righteousness of the Scribes next to the humble openness of the four friends and the paralytic.

You see, for these friends and for the crowds packed into the house, they were desperate to be in the presence of Jesus. They were open and eager for the movement of Jesus in their lives. And so they did whatever they could to be in the presence of Jesus, even if that meant digging a hole in the roof ("unroofing the roof") in order to get into Jesus' presence.

And the wonder of Jesus that evoked the response like nothing they had ever seen was that Jesus not only had the power to physically heal their brokenness, but he also had the power to heal their spiritual brokenness and forgive their sins. Jesus not only can forgive sins, but he does forgive sins. This group's encounter with Jesus brings us to an altogether different posture.

For the crowd, the forgiveness of Jesus heals their brokenness.

You see this exemplified in the paralytic. His brokenness is evident, it is right there in front of him and the crowd for all to see. But it went even deeper, and the need that we all have for healing is both physical and spiritual. Jesus' forgiveness is an act that seeks the healing of the whole person.

And this encounter of Jesus' forgiveness brings about this healing; whether he walked out of the crowd or not, the man left changed—forgiven, healed, made whole by the transformative presence of Jesus.

Which group are you a part of? Are you a part of the crowd or the Scribes? Are you a part of the group that is eager and desperate to encounter Jesus, who will do whatever it takes to get into his presence because of the recognition that healing comes only from the presence of Jesus?

Or are you there in the Scribe's kind of cynicism? Those teachers of the law who are too familiar with all that we know about Church, and Jesus might want to stir the pot a little bit with you. But either way, we will change.

I want to leave you with the very question I think Mark is leaving us with, which group are you a part of?