

The King's Power

The Servant King & the King's Servants: A Study in Mark 1-10 Sermon 3

Mark 2:1-12

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A friend of mine, when observing that someone keeps dealing with the same problem, is fond of saying, "That's not about, what it's about." What he means is that whatever problem that person is dealing with, is ultimately a symptom, not the root, of their real problem. This friend is always trying to get at the bigger problem—the one lying beneath and giving rise to all the others.

What do you think is your biggest problem? What do you think is our biggest problem, today? When you look around the world, around society, at the many things that can and do go wrong, what do you see as our biggest problem?

How you answer that question determines so much about you. What you see as the biggest problem, can and will shape your life—the career you pursue, how you spend money, how you think about the world.

We are studying the Gospel of Mark this fall. Last week we considered the inauguration of Jesus' ministry, as he arrives in Galilee, preaching the Gospel of God, the good news of God's reign. Through the rest of Mark 1, along with his teaching ministry, Jesus has been confronted with an endless array of human problems. And he's shown remarkable power in confronting them. From sickness to ignorance to uncleanness to demonic possession, Jesus has become known as Israel's great healer. People want to get their problems before Jesus' power.

In our passage for today from Mark 2:1-12, Jesus is presented with someone whose problem is extreme: he's paralyzed. In any time period this is devastating but imagine it in the first century. Jesus' healing of this man, however, involves a surprise, even a shock. For the first time in his ministry, he puts his finger not on a symptom, but on the root, of our problems. The point of this passage contains the answer to our question, *what is our biggest problem?*

We'll make our way through this vivid encounter by noting how Jesus gets to (1) the root of the problem, (2) consider why this problem is so poisonous, then ask (3) what happens when the root of our problems is put before the power, or the healing balm, of Jesus.

I. The Root

This event is recorded with vivid detail and has surprises and twists. The detail with which Mark recounts the scene draws the reader inside this crowded house where Jesus is preaching.

And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. And many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And he was preaching the word to them (Mark 2:1-2).

Since beginning his ministry, Jesus has been on a tour of Galilee. And he's left people amazed through the power of his teaching, healings, and exorcisms. His fame and following are skyrocketing.

Now in chapter 2, Jesus has returned to Capernaum—a town alongside the Sea of Galilee. He is likely in the home of Simon Peter, where previously “the whole city had gathered together at the door, and he'd healed many who were sick and demon-possessed.” (1:33-34). Now the crowd has only grown so large that people cannot even get near the door to hear him.

Here is where the surprises begin. Four men, undeterred by the crowd, carry their paralyzed friend up the staircase alongside the house and onto the roof (2:3). If we're sitting inside listening to Jesus, we'd first hear thuds then scratching on the roof. Then chunks of dirt start falling. Looking up, a patch of light appears. More chunks of ceiling fall. Then we see the silhouettes of four men against the bright Galilean sky, peering in at us through the hole.

Even more shocking, not only are these men so brazen as to rip a hole in someone's roof, but they proceed to lower a man on a mat (2:4), basically into Jesus' lap. Now into this crowded room comes this paralyzed man, lying awkwardly for everyone to see. We're all wondering—the crowd, scribes, disciples—*what will Jesus do next?*

We, of course, anticipate a healing. Jesus has been on something of a *tour de force* of healings of late: sickness, fevers, demon possession, leprosy, you name it. These men haven't gone to all this trouble

just to hear Jesus teach—they want a touch of his power. And here is where the surprises only grow. Jesus looks at the man in sore need of physical healing, and instead of addressing that, he pronounces something that seems entirely unrelated: “Son, your sins are forgiven” (2:5).

Let us take a moment to feel the shock of this. Yes, it’s a shock that Jesus would claim he can forgive sins—a point we’ll return to. But first, it must be shocking to the paralytic, perhaps even disappointing, that Jesus hasn’t addressed his pressing need: he can’t walk! Wouldn’t you feel a bit let down?

We might not fault this man if he said, “*Jesus, the truth is, I have far bigger problems than this religious issue about sins; I’m paralyzed. I just have more pressing problems than sin.*” And we can imagine Jesus looking at him and saying, “*No, you don’t. There is nothing more serious than the problem of your sin. Nothing.*”

Jesus will go on to heal this man’s body. Jesus is not indifferent to our physical pain. Jesus’ mission includes inaugurating a new creation and the resurrection and perfecting of our bodies. But Jesus is making a point here we cannot afford to miss: *our biggest problem is often not what we think it is. Our biggest problem is sin.*

Think back to the beginning, Genesis 1-3. Recall the events that created the fall. The curse pronounced in Genesis 3, announcing that everything from relationships to vocations to creation would be touched by corruption and death, is preceded by sin. Adam and Eve don’t sin *because* of the brokenness of the world; the world is broken and battered as a *result* of and *following* their sin. Sin is the problem, before all other problems—it’s even deeper than the problem of death, as Paul says, “death came through sin” (Romans 5:12; Genesis 3:19).

Think of the arc of Jesus’ ministry—the main problem it ends up confronting by the cross. Have you ever wondered, in light of Jesus’ immense power, why he didn’t just heal all our sickness, drive out all our demons, and calm all our storms? Why he didn’t use his immense wisdom to give us the perfect teaching that could dispel all ignorance, answer all scientific questions and perfect all political policies? He has the power to do this. *Why doesn’t he?* Because he knows that beneath the problems of health, education, politics, and science lies a deeper root: sin. And this problem can only be dealt with by the cross.

The first point our passage makes, therefore, is that our biggest problem is sin. Sin lies at the root. Before we say more about *why* sin is such a pernicious problem, we need to pause and put a question to our church.

How does this fact, that our biggest problem is sin, shape our church's ministry?

We care about all the problems in and around our community because God does. But are we more than another school? More than another hospital? More than another loan agency? More than a non-profit or government program? Why is it that we have a cross atop our building—and not a bank sign, school name, nor political insignia? Friends, we are the only institution in the world that knows what our neighbor's real problem is—sin. This must shape how we love them.

Here we may ask, *why is sin so bad?* How can it possibly be worse than these seemingly more pressing issues I see? This takes us to our second point: the poison—*what's so destructive about sin?*

II. The Poison

In our passage, this man's sin is not unrelated to his paralysis. No, there is not a one-to-one relationship between every individual sin and every individual experience of pain. Some people taught this in Jesus' day, and some think it today. But Jesus debunks this when he heals a blind man in John 9:

And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:2-3).

Sometimes there is a specific or direct connection between our sin and brokenness and suffering, but not always. However, there is always a general and indirect connection between our experience of brokenness and suffering and the reality of sin.

We recalled that in Genesis 3, sin came before the fall. Notice, however, in that sequence, the ramifications of sin included a broad and universal curse being announced. This ran through relationships between people and people, people and vocation, and people and creation. And death was the final blow (Genesis 3:19).

Paul adds some color to this when in Romans 8 he speaks of creation—meaning the entire material world from our planet to our bodies—as “subjected to futility” and in “bondage to corruption” (Romans 8:20-21). This refers to the curse in Genesis 3. So, in a real sense, the fallout from our sin does include things like paralysis.

But here is where we need to make another insight: behind our physical, societal, and relational brokenness, lies a spiritual problem. The sin of Adam and Eve, they set off the physical corruption of the world, was not itself a physical act—it was spiritual. Before Adam and Eve moved a finger to take the fruit, they moved their hearts. With their hearts, they turned away from God and said, “I know better.” This is no small movement. It’s akin to changing the biblical mantra, “God, you are *my* God” (Psalm 118:28) to “God, I am *your* God.” Another Christian writer says, “Adam hit God. Not with his fist. He hit him with his heart.”¹

Here is the heart of sin. It is not only a disrespecting, disliking, and disobeying of God. It is also an act that puts the created world—the cosmos—out of alignment. Human beings are God’s image bearers, through whom God will build the world into His Temple and Kingdom. Adam and Eve’s act was akin to treason and treachery—and it opened a conduit through which the poison of sin could contaminate everything.

The ramifications of this are catastrophic and splinter in three directions:

1. Relationally

Humankind is now separated from their most fundamental relationship—union with God. Cast out of Eden, they are cast away from God’s presence.

2. Existentially

Existentially, humankind will now experience myriad types of pain and problems. The Bible at times likens sin to a “stain” or “sickness,” meaning we feel unwell and unclean like we need to be washed from the inside out (see Psalm 51:2). The Bible at other times likens sin as being out of alignment, or an arrow missing its mark. We go “astray,” get “lost,” and “turned away” from the truth path (see Isaiah 53:6). Our hearts—their impulses, desires, and loves—are confused, darkened, and misleading. This leads to blindness that is rooted in the hardness of the heart (see Mark 8:17).

3. Legally

And legally, the Bible speaks of sin as a “debt” we carry like a great “burden,” and experience as “guilt” (see Isaiah 53:10). This captures the fact that we stand before a holy God as a people condemned.

A theory arose in the past few centuries that the less humanity believed in God, the less guilty they would feel about sin. *Why?* Because without God, you don’t need to believe in, let alone feel bad for, sinning. But this is not what’s happened. People seem to be struggling with a sense of guilt just as much, if not more than ever.

In an essay I’ve referenced before, “The Strange Persistence of Guilt,” historian Wilfred McClay suggests that for the modern person, the range of possible reasons for feeling guilty only grows:

I can never diminish my carbon footprint enough, or give to the poor enough, or support medical research enough, or otherwise do the things that would render me morally blameless. Colonialism ... structural poverty, water pollution, deforestation—there’s an endless list of items for which you and I can take the rap. To be found blameless is a pipe dream.... Indeed, when any one of us reflects on the brute fact of our being alive and taking up space on this planet ... we may be led to feel guilty about the very fact of our existence.²

Sometimes it feels like we are combing through history and one another’s Twitter feeds, finding all the dirt and sin we can. We then play these findings on a giant digital screen in the sky, on repeat, for everyone to see. And we dare to ask: *who can stand before this “all-seeing-eye” and be found worthy?*

This is about more than our desire for fairness or equity. We all are clamoring to be found *righteous*. Whether we acknowledge God with our minds or not, our hearts and consciences know He’s there. And we are made in His image, and, therefore, we are forever wired to evaluate the health of our souls and lives based on the standard of His holiness.

So, as a culture the great irony in dismissing God has been that not only has it not removed our problem of sin and guilt, but it’s removed our only solution to it. This brings us to our final point.

Who can deal with this sickness in our souls? Who can deal with our guilt? Who can deal with our sin? The Scribes know, “only God can forgive sins” (2:7). Which brings us to the role of Jesus in applying the only balm that heals our sin problem.

III. The Balm

This is an encounter about healing. Jesus heals the man’s broken body: “take up your mat and walk” (2:9). But the point of the story is about a deeper healing. Jesus heals the man’s body, to prove to the scribes and other, that he has the authority and power to do the harder thing: *forgive sins*.

Everyone in Jesus’ audience—a Jewish audience—understood that “only God could forgive sin” (2:7). Here again is a window into Jesus’ identity: This is Yahweh having taken on flesh (John 1:14); the “Lord” has come (Mark 1:3; Isaiah 40:3).

Why God alone can forgive sins:

- **God alone is judge.** He has absolute and total authority to make judgments and pronouncements.
- **God alone is all-knowing.** Notice the emphasis here on Jesus’ ability to know the thoughts of men, even without hearing them speak: “In his spirit,” we are told in 2:6, Jesus could perceive what the scribes were thinking “in their hearts” (2:6). God is completely aware of every motive, every action. God has the knowledge to adjudicate perfectly. But God’s authority and wisdom do not necessitate that he forgives sins. Judge them, yes; condemn sinners, yes. But there is something else about his heart that we learn in the act of forgiveness.
- **God alone is truly merciful.** This mercy is uniquely displayed in Jesus. In Jesus, we see God’s mercy, tenderness, and love.

Notice how Jesus addresses the man, “child,” or “son,” your sins are forgiven.” (2:5) This is an address of tenderness; it bespeaks love. And consider the pain that Jesus will endure, in order to offer this man this forgiveness. Forgiveness is so terribly costly. I imagine Jesus looking at the paralyzed man, and perhaps thinking about a time when he, too, would be paralyzed—by being nailed to a cross. And

perhaps as the men lowered the paralytic's body into the room, Jesus thought of a time when men would lower his body from a cross and lay it in a tomb.

And consider the healing that Jesus is really after: *fullness of life*. In this encounter with Jesus, we encounter the healing of forgiveness. We are not just restored to a proper legal standing. We are reconciled to our Heavenly Father, by Jesus, who has come to us as our Elder Brother. In forgiveness, we come home.

In the healing of the paralytic, we see more than just Jesus' power over sickness, disease, demons, and nature. We see his power of *sin*—our sin. And in seeing this, we see more of his heart, God's heart. It is just and powerful, and it is merciful and tender. This heart alone is able to forgive.

What do you think is our biggest problem? What do you think is your biggest problem? Jesus could not be clearer: nothing is worse than the problem of our sin. Left undealt with, sin will foil all the other problems you're hoping to fix. But God has sent His Son into the world not only to teach but also to heal and exorcise our demons. He's sent him as our Passover Lamb, to be sacrificed as a perfect offering for the forgiveness of sins.

Those sins Jesus died for, are they yours? Have you put your sins onto Jesus? Has Jesus dealt with your worst of problems?

This man ends the story no doubt leaping for joy. But what he will come to realize, I am sure, in the days, years, centuries hence, is that on that afternoon in Capernaum, he was touched by grace. And the Son of God gave him more than his legs back—he gave him his very life.

Endnotes

1. John Piper, *Providence* (Crossway, 2021), 503.
2. Wilfred M. McClay, "The Strange Persistence of Guilt," *The Hedgehog Review*. Vol. 19, Issue 1 (Spring, 2017). T