

November 14, 2010

# *The Greatest Miracle of All*

Mark 2:1-12

## INTRODUCTION

This is the first sermon that I never preached. In a seminary class I took in Sermon Preparation the second year I was a Christian, for whatever reason, I chose Mark 2:1-12 as my text. Something about it gripped me—I think the memory of the scene in the Jesus of Nazareth movie I watched as a kid. I remember spending hours staring at the question Jesus posed in verse 9: *Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk’?* My first thought was: What do you mean ‘which is easier?’ Jesus is God! Both are equally easy! My next round of thoughts was: Ah—the whole point is to silence the scribes by performing such a great miracle. The miracle is obviously more incredible and attention-grabbing, so there you have it. But then it occurred to me that the question still had straightforward meaning: Which is easier in and of itself? If neither is really difficult for God, but the question still has meaning, then why not examine which *phenomenon* is actually more difficult—for a man who can’t use his legs for what they were meant for to get up and walk, or for a sinner who can’t use his heart for what it was meant for to get up and praise God. Ah. I didn’t wind up preaching it. By the time I got around to it, too much of the church tradition I was part of would have never gone for it. But this theme won’t go away, will it?

- COME TO MEET JESUS IN HIS HOUSE, WHERE HE PREACHES
- COME TO BE FORGIVEN OF SINS BY FAITH ALONE
- COME TO GIVE GOD GLORY IN HIS GREATEST MIRACLE

**The Big Idea** is that the most awe-inspiring miracles of Jesus are *so that* you will know that He has authority to perform the greatest miracle on you.

The most important four words—and the easiest to miss—in these twelve verses is **THAT YOU MAY KNOW**. According to Jesus himself, He is performing this miracle and you are

reading it this morning so THAT YOU MAY KNOW that He can do this for your heart and you need this to be done for your heart. But let's see it clearly.

## DOCTRINE

### I. COME TO MEET JESUS IN HIS HOUSE, WHERE HE PREACHES

#### A) The Invitation to the House of Christ {1}

1. When Jesus came back to Capernaum it says *that he was at home (1b)*. So whether it was Peter's house or someone else's, this was the house that God chose to reside in. Beyond that it says that *it was reported (1b)* that he was in his house: meaning that a bunch of people told another bunch of people: "Hey, you've got to come see this Jesus!" The Psalmist says, O LORD, I love the habitation of your house and the place where your glory dwells [Ps. 26:8], and so do all true Christians. We love God's house and can't wait to bring others to meet him!

#### B) The Entertainment in the House of Christ {2}

1. It didn't really matter much to Jesus that everyone showed up because they were curious or because they wanted a cure. He knew what He was going to do for these guests: *And he was preaching the word to them (2b)*. Now let me answer the person who may be getting tired of this emphasis: a) it's in the Bible, so your weariness is really directed at the Holy Spirit; b) you have to admit that for someone who can raise the dead and command even the most powerful forces of nature (and Supernature) this choice of activities is a little weird—unless you take the view that we have been, namely that the substance of the preaching is the main thing for Jesus.

#### C) The Blowing Out of the House of Christ {3-4}

1. One more piece of background from the Old Testament is necessary here. These four men were like spiritual pallbearers. The man was as good as dead spiritually. Why? Because in the Jewish mind, and rightly so due to its focus in the Law, the physical condition was in direct proportion to the spiritual cause. Adam's race was cursed and its effects upon the nations occurred somewhat randomly, even if tragic. But this seemingly random tragedy would not be the case for Israel because they were to be God's people down to the 't.' The Jewish people (and every person who was a member of the body) would tell the story of God's glory, and they would also tell the story of the consequences of falling short of that

glory. So lepers, paralytics, bleeding people, corpses, and even rebellious children would serve as signposts for the disfiguring reality of sin. That's what would make this whole scene that much more difficult for the religious people. This guy's legs were already in hell. It says that they lowered him with his bed or mat. The word for this mat (*krabbatos*) is used in the Greek for the kind that would belong to a poor person. When ancient people saw such a thing, the assumption was that this was natural—the worse off you were, it was because of sin. This probably contributed to the resistance of the scribes. It was unseemly to give such access to God to people who obviously, really deserved to be mangled up in a stretcher!

2. But there were (at least) four people who said, No—we're going drag this guy to hear the healing word! As Spurgeon said it:

Have you no wish for others to be saved? Then you are not saved yourself. Be sure of that...If sinners be damned, at least let them leap to Hell over our dead bodies. And if they perish, let them perish with our arms wrapped about their knees, imploring them to stay. If Hell must be filled, let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions, and let not one go unwarned and unprayed for.

It says that *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 (4)*. The roofs in these houses were a hardened substance that enabled people to walk and sometimes have their bedrooms up on the second floor or roof. The verb used for “remove” (*exoryxantes*) literally means to “dig out” which seems to clinch the notion that this was indeed a demolition job. The bottom line is that when the gospel is going out, you break down whatever walls and expand out in whatever ways to bring in as many people as possible. The assumption is that everyone needs this. But what great friends these four men were who carried him in!

## II. COME TO BE FORGIVEN OF SINS BY FAITH ALONE

### A) Jesus Declares Sinners ‘Not Guilty’ *through* Looking at Their Faith {5}

1. First let me draw attention to the fact that Jesus immediately addressed the spiritual concern. Is anyone more loving and compassionate than Christ? No. Can anyone peer into the feelings of the heart more than Christ? No. So this tells us something about the state of this man's heart. When he was brought nearer to the One who peered into the depths of his soul, all of a sudden he was not conscious of his legs anymore. Jesus sees the real burden and instantly relieves him of his burden.

2. But we should also notice that it was *when Jesus saw their faith (5a)*, that He declared every sin forgiven. He categorically forgives him of all of his sins and He does it through the instrument of faith, or belief, or personal trust:

we know that a person is not **justified** by works of the law but **through faith in Jesus Christ**, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be **justified by faith in Christ** and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified [Gal. 2:16].

Nor does this justification by faith alone depend on the strength of the faith but on its object. This man's faith was so weak because he was on his back that Mark emphasized that it was "their faith," not to say that someone else can believe for you, but to emphasize how weak this man's faith was. Why then was it even counted as faith? Paul's usage of Abraham as an example in Romans is a good picture of this:

For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness [4:3-5].

Abraham believed? What do you mean Abraham believed? He didn't know the gospel? But he *did!* God "preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham" [Gal. 3:8]. He believed in the promise of God and he was called "righteous" not because of how good his faith was, but because of how good the One who his faith was in was! This man is a great picture of the righteousness of Christ freely given through the weakness of a trusting sinner.

#### B) The Scribes Declare it a 'Legal Fiction' with a Distant Monotheism {6-7}

1. The first thing we need to see about the **Scribes** was to remember that we've already been introduced to them. You will recall that it was their lame teaching that was contrasted with the authoritative teaching of Jesus [1:22, 27]. What was at stake for the scribes? Everything. In other words, here is where we see the first human opposition to the ministry of Jesus. Israel was a religious nation. If you controlled the teaching, you controlled the people. If this special class of religious guardians lost control of the teaching, they lost control of everything—their identity, their livelihoods, their power, their pride and their prestige. Special elevated religious classes always have to oppose an authoritative word from above because an authoritative word from above levels the playing field down here.

2. The second thing we need to see is that in their world the physical condition just was connected to the spiritual cause. When Jesus said “your sins are forgiven,” these religious elites weren’t offended for the same reason that the Emergents would be—Oh, there He goes talking about spiritual stuff again when it’s obvious what the man needs is a new pair of legs—but instead, they saw such a man as getting his just due. Now of course every sinner does deserve to be punished. Their mistake came in thinking that they were running much better than him! “Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” [1 Cor. 10:12].

### III. COME TO GIVE GOD GLORY IN HIS GREATEST MIRACLE

#### A) On the Surface, Jesus Establishes His Deity in Three Ways {8-12}

1. First, in declaring the sins forgiven Jesus was not simply declaring what God had done, but, being God himself, this was Him performing the act of forgiveness on the spot. Jesus affirms the scribes impression that He was the one forgiving by claiming the authority to forgive sins right then and there: *that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins (10)*.

2. Second, He calls himself the Son of Man. If you read any literature by the Muslims or the Watchtower Society you may sometimes hear the reference to this title as if this just means “an ordinary son of ordinary men.” But that shows a misunderstanding of what the Jews meant by the phrase. Back in the prophet Daniel there is a vision of the Last Day:

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven 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 an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed [7:13-14].

Note that the Ancient of Days specifically gives the final total dominion to this Son of Man and commands that all people, nations and languages should serve him. That means that He commands the world to worship Him. Yet this same God expressly says, “You shall have no other gods before me” [Ex. 20:3], “you shall worship no other god” [Ex. 34:14], and “My glory I will not give to another” [Is. 48:11]. The Jewish audience who heard Jesus understood that He was claiming for himself the distinct status of the Messiah who would be in some way commanding worship from his people.

3. Third, Jesus creates new life in this man's legs. Do not miss this again. Just as with the called disciples, the demoniac, the woman with a fever and the leper, with what does Jesus perform his work? The answer is with his word: *I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home (11)*. What is Jesus doing here? He is just being the Creator and He is showing us that He has the power to create life in himself: "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself" [Jn. 5:26]; "In him was life" [Jn. 1:4].

#### B) More Deeply, Jesus Points Us to His Greatest Work for Us {8-12}

1. First let's look at the question Jesus asks: *Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'?* (9). In the Old Testament a prophet could heal—think of Elisha and the widows son, or in the case of Namaan—but no prophet could forgive sins. Now why is this? Prophets delivered the mail; but no prophet could write it. Prophets were mere mortals. They were not the ones offended by sin and therefore only the One who sin is against can absolve it. Now why would we say that this is hard? God is the Creator; everything else is the creation. He can turn any part of it any way He pleases. That's as true after the Fall as it was before it.

But think about it this way: Lots of things are falling away from God like a rock falling by the force of gravity—forces of nature, intelligence, sickness, death—but all of these things are falling *passively* just like a rock. But there is one thing that is falling away from God with violence and malice aforethought, and that one thing is a rebel, a sinner. So which is easier, to catch and rock or a rebel? Now I'm not asking which is easier for God. God has all power! I'm asking, Which one should amaze *us* more?

What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted [Ecc. 1:15].

2. Now take a look at the rationale of Jesus himself—his motive for doing what He is about to do—*But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins (10a)*: This whole thing was SO THAT YOU MAY KNOW what? We have already seen that Son of Man is a title for God so that this is not just another son of man we're talking about. So this is not talking about something we can all just do. We can't declare people forgiven vertically; we can *tell* people that Jesus can declare them forgiven. This is not a horizontal forgiving going on here. I know there are verses that talk about the church "binding and loosing" in church discipline [cf. Mat. 18:18] or extending and withholding forgiveness in evangelism [cf. Jn. 20:23]—that's *horizontally* forgiving, not *vertically* forgiving—but that is

a delegated authority and not the same thing that this passage is talking about. This is Jesus saying, “I forgive you, I absolve you of your sins against Me.” Next it says that the Son of Man has this power “on earth.” Why that emphasis? Well God had to come down to deal with our sins: “to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins” [Lk. 1:77].

All through the Scriptures the display of God’s power to rescue his people is always drawing attention to his power to save us from the greatest danger. But then what does this say about how God ordains the trouble to begin with? Clearly it implies that God ordains difficult parts of life to bring us to this place of salvation:

Behold, it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness; but in love you have delivered my life from the pit of destruction, for you have cast all my sins behind your back [Is. 38:17].

That is the great ache in our souls—the need for forgiveness for what we’ve done. The physical traumas and distortions are real, but they’re signs pulling at our attention. The nineteenth century preacher J. C. Ryle said about this poor man, “Who can doubt that to the end of his days this man would thank God for his paralysis? Without it he probably would have lived and died in ignorance, and never seen Christ at all.”<sup>1</sup>

3. When this man was made new, it was very noticeable and yet parts of his old condition still remained. Think about this. It says that *he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We never saw anything like this!” (11b-12)*. So on the one hand his bed and his bandages were still visible. His muscles hadn’t been exercised in years, if at all, so he had to still be frail looking. But these people knew he was paralyzed one moment and walking the next.

## APPLICATION

**To the Skeptic** – Did Jesus claim to be God in the Gospel of Mark? Yes. In three ways from this passage, we can see the divinity of Christ come through: 1) In claiming a title of deity, the Son of Man; 2) In reserving to himself a divine prerogative, the forgiveness of sins; 3) In performing a divine power, the creation or restoring of life. Did Mohammed ever do any of this? Did Joseph Smith do any of this? Can Buddha or Krishna do any of this? You cannot be neutral about someone like Jesus Christ. Listen to the words of C. S. Lewis on this:

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<sup>1</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Mark* (Crossway, Wheaton 1993, fp. 1857); p. 20

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.<sup>2</sup>

If you are feeling neutral about Jesus you need to know that these scribes who opposed him felt more appropriate feelings about Jesus than you do. Jesus will either be worshiped or opposed. He was either God, man or bad! He will not have neutral, pontificating spectators to his glory in his world! You have to, at the very least, react like the crowds did who went away glorifying God because in seeing Jesus they said, "We have never seen anything like this before!" Is that what you tend to say when you turn in from a day of gazing upon the face of Jesus?

**To the Saint** – Let's talk for a second about felt needs with the imagery from this text—Jesus seeing the man on the stretcher coming toward him and looking into his heart, addressing the root. Is it the church's goal to address people's felt needs? One side says, NO—What God says you need trumps what you feel you need. The other side says, YES—Jesus was always meeting people where they were and giving them space to figure it out as they went along. But neither side reads the Gospels carefully enough. The actual Jesus always addresses felt needs, but He never allows the sinner the space to think he's feeling *what he thinks he's feeling!* Instead, the reason that you feel the way you do about your legs, or your relationships, or your attempt to make something of your life is because you feel guilt before God. And besides all that, we sinners have a tendency at work. You can feel it when you are sick or in trouble of some kind. When the pain or pressure comes, the prayers start; when the pain or pressure is lifted, the prayers cease. Our attention span is lifted to God only when it hurts and then when we feel better and secure, then we forget God and excuse sin. This is our tendency, and true gospel ministry has to always expose this tendency. But true gospel ministry yearns to bring people in and feel with them, where they are, so that there's someone there to speak *to*.

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<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (MacMillan, 1960, fp. 1943); pp. 40-41

**To the Sinner** – Who has authority to judge and make declarations about your sin? God alone, right? So, not the devil; but also, not even your own conscience:

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? [Rom. 8:31-35].

## CONCLUSION

Are you paralyzed to come to God when He calls? I am. Jesus said,

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day [Jn. 6:44].

As you are brought to Jesus in his house to hear his word, what are you trusting in to give life to your spiritual legs? Jesus said that ‘NO ONE CAN COME TO ME...’ with his old legs, but then in the next breath He says But “I WILL RAISE HIM UP!” It is good news that Jesus gives you new life—now and in the end—but what we see in this text today is that Jesus is in charge of your guilt or innocence to, and He’s ruled on it already. His righteous act counts to anyone who trusts him for it and nothing else counts! When God sees you, He sees Jesus’ performance and declares your sins forgiven. That’s the gospel.