

## Who's in the Family?: The Healing Hound

Mark 2:1-12

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Dan Hoffman

We are entering the beginning of a new section in Mark's Gospel which I've titled "Who's in the Family?" It's a really interesting section because in these next couple chapters Jesus challenges the things we naturally think of as most valuable.

And in our world being family is perhaps the highest virtue. Nothing's more important than family. Blood is thicker than water. Your friends are going to come and go but you will always have your family.

And our world loves this truth because it is 100% relative. It can be true for everyone without infringing on anyone else. Of course your family is the most important thing to you.

But in this section Jesus flips family on its head. The section ends with what would have been a scandalous scene. Jesus is in a room teaching and His mother and brothers show up. And they call out to Him. "Come with us." And Jesus responds by saying "Mary's not my mom. The guys she is with aren't My brothers. Instead, you guys here listening to Me and doing God's will, you are My mother and brothers."

And these words would have cut like a knife. Mark doesn't tell us how Mary responded, but I'm sure she wasn't smiling and saying "Oh, that Jesus. He is always saying nice things." No. It would have hurt.

And Jesus' words didn't just cut 2000 years ago, they cut today. But unlike Mary in that moment, we know how the story ends. And we can see that Jesus' knife is the knife of a surgeon cutting to heal. And in this section Jesus cuts to graft us into His family.

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So today we are looking at a simple story everyone will recognize, but interestingly it's one that has stumped theologians for 20 centuries. In this story we find out who gets included in Jesus' family, and who is excluded.

We are starting in Mark 2 verse 1 today, so please grab your Bible. And would you stand with me as we come to God's word? Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Mark 2:1-12]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

In Mark 2 we get the beginning of the road to the cross. Up to this point everything Jesus has done has made people happy. People got healed, demons got kicked out, and everyone was saying "Yeah Jesus!"

But in chapter 2 all of a sudden people are starting to realize that Jesus is claiming to be more than a miracle worker. And this caught people off guard and angered some. But Jesus continues because His mission is bigger than healing some bodies 2000 years ago. He is inaugurating a kingdom and adopting people into His family in a way that will continue for all time.

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So this text is probably the best known healing story in the Gospels. It's core elementary Sunday School curriculum because it's simple and it's exciting. A crippled man wants to see Jesus so his friends dig a hole in the roof. Jesus forgives his sins and heals him and the bad guys don't like it.

That's the way the story goes – at least the one where we create Jesus in our own image. It turns out the real Jesus Mark paints for us is way harder to get your mind around; way messier; and way bigger. And as always it is the real Jesus we need to meet.

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So the story does start the way you heard in Sunday School. This paralyzed man makes a very dramatic entry into a room where Jesus is teaching. It would have been impossible for anyone to miss this guy. And it would have been obvious to everyone what he was hoping for.<sup>1</sup>

Right? Some man is lying on a mat. He can't get up. And now his friends are dangling him in front of Jesus. Is there any confusing about what he wants?

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None. No one is confused... except Jesus. In verse 5 Jesus seems to think the guy has come confessing sin and needing to be forgiven.

Now imagine that's you dangling in front of Jesus with shriveled legs. And Jesus says "Your sins are forgiven." What do you do now?

Probably the same thing you do when you ordered an Xbox from Amazon and a dog collar shows up instead. You give the Vendor 1 star. You didn't order this. You don't want it. It's not helpful. And so you write a scathing review. "Product not delivered as promised."

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So, if you've got your Bible open, notice how the man responds. Can you see the shock and disappointment in the text after verse 5's forgiveness?

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If you're looking you probably have a little difficulty finding it because this guy's 15 seconds of fame is gone. Mark doesn't even bother to mention how he responds. Verse 12 tells us he got healed and walked out. But this story really isn't about him. There is, however, something here for us.

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<sup>1</sup> Outline adapted from Tim Keller <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/the-healing-of-forgiveness-5445/> (Accessed February 10, 2021)

Have you ever noticed that Jesus often doesn't deliver what we order? Often when we come to Jesus it is with requests like this man has: "Jesus, take away my suffering." Have you ever prayed that prayer?

And when we come to Jesus like this we come thinking that the thing we are suffering is the problem in our life. And if we could just get rid of it then we would be happy. And we believe this. We really think that the main problem in our life is suffering. That's why we always pray like we do: "Jesus, take this sickness away from me. Jesus, fix this relationship problem I've stumbled into." But Jesus looks this man in the eye and tells him, "You think your main problem is your legs but you're wrong. Your main problem is sin."

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Now I don't know about you, but I'm offended. How would you respond if someone came to you while you were lying on a mat, or after you lost your job, or when one of your loved ones was in trouble? And they said: "You might think you know what your problem is, but I'm telling you your problem is sin." I'd choke on my tongue.

And Jesus doesn't apologize for His offence. You see the human condition is such that we make gods out of our situations. So it's natural that a paralyzed person would want to walk. It's natural for us to want reprieve from suffering. But it is also natural for us to put our hope in our healing.

Don't we say, or at least think things like: "If only I could walk again, I'd never be ungrateful. I'd never complain. If only I could be successful at work; if only my sickness would go away, then I would never be unhappy again." Don't we think that?

But Jesus' response is "You're mistaken. If I only heal your suffering you'll be happy today, but tomorrow or a few months down the road you'll forget. And that's because new legs isn't what you need. You are hoping to find happiness by looking to the wrong god. And no other god will deliver. No other god will satisfy."

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In June of 1997 Bill Harrell won \$31 million in the Texas Lottery jackpot. And it felt like an answer to prayer. His struggles with money and the inability to be generous were finally over. So he purchased a ranch for himself and his wife along with houses and cars for his kids. Then he made large contributions to his church and helped several members of his congregation. He had always wanted to be able to do this.

But then, all of a sudden, Harrell discovered that his life was unraveling almost as quickly as it had come together. Everyone, it seemed, family, friends, fellow worshipers and strangers, were asking for handouts. His spending and lending spiraled out of control. His wife left him and 20 months after winning the lottery, Harrell committed suicide.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/03/terribly-sad-true-stories-lotto-winners/329903/>  
(Accessed February 11, 2021)

There is an interesting thing about the human condition, and that is that people go through life wishing they could arrive at some goal. And most of us never get there. But the few who do find themselves disillusioned. The goal posts move or, worse yet, when the ultimate dream is achieved the dreamer finds out “I am still me.”

And O the disappointment! But we build these idols for ourselves. We put our hopes in all sorts of things – if I just had that then I would finally be good. If I could only arrive my life would have meaning.

And Jesus says: “You don’t know what you need, but I do.” I’m the only Saviour that can fulfill you. And if you fail Me, I’m the only Saviour who will forgive you. But here’s the deal, I’ll fulfill you if you make Me God in your life. But I won’t help you serve another.”

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You see, while we never say it, when we ask Jesus for help we often mean “Jesus, just get me over the hump so I can get back to saving myself. Once this thing is fixed, once I get better, once I get out of debt, then I’m going to be able to take care of my own happiness.”

But Jesus will not be used as a stepping stone to our greater desires. And so Jesus looks this man in his eyes and tells him, “You think you know what will make you happy, but you’re wrong. Your legs aren’t the problem, sin is the problem.”

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What problem does Jesus want to heal when He looks at you?

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The strangeness of this story doesn’t end here. Throughout history people have noticed something else that appears to be problematic. Here Jesus forgives this man before he repents, and his healing is tied to his forgiveness. This is weird.

In fact this is the only time in scripture where it happens like this. Everywhere else people come and repent and then they receive God’s salvation. So Jesus seems to break protocol here. What’s going on?

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Well, of course Jesus isn’t making a mistake. Okay, but how are we supposed to read this, and other tricky sections of scripture for that matter?

The rule is that we need to read these passages in the context of scripture as a whole. And so a few verses down we find that “Jesus knew what the Pharisees were thinking in their hearts.”

And Jesus knows what’s going on in this guys heart as well. So while the man is silent, Jesus must see a soft and repentant heart.

We know from other places that God never forces hard hearted people to be forgiven. So Jesus can’t be doing that here. But here’s the beautiful side of this. Jesus is so

hungry to pour out His forgiveness that He offers it when only the slightest move towards Him is made.

I think it's safe to say that when this man showed up he wasn't looking to find grace, he wasn't looking to repent, he wasn't looking to be forgiven, he was looking for new legs. But Jesus looks in his heart and sees something beyond this – some fragment of desire for forgiveness – and Jesus pursues it.

It's wrong then to think this is a story about a man looking for Jesus. The reality is Jesus is looking for this man.

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The English poet Francis Thompson called Jesus the Hound of Heaven. Which at first seems derogatory but is anything but. He pens 180 lines of chase beginning with the words:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;  
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;  
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways  
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears...

But always the Hound of Heaven chases on with unhurrying and unperturbed pace, so does God follow the fleeing soul by His Divine grace.

And this is our story. This is the human story. Nobody comes looking for Jesus. We are all looking the other way. Sure we want His help. We want His trinkets. But we don't want Him. We want to be the master of our own fate.

But Jesus hunts us down like He hunts this crippled man. And when He finds even a shred of desire, or a twinge of hunger he pours in His gift of grace. This is why Paul writes:

God saved you by His grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. (Ephesians 2:8)

This means none of us have our sins forgiven because we are better than anyone else. None of us are saved because we looked for salvation. Faith is a gift. And so at some point Jesus pushes it on the willing heart.

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Now just one quick thought here for those who struggle with doubt. Maybe you want to believe it's hard. This is a real thing. And it can be an incredibly uncomfortable place.

But if this is you then go to Jesus and ask Him for His gift of faith. It seems to me that if you honestly ask for Jesus' gift of faith you will find that the Hound of Heaven has been chasing you down to create the opportunity to give it.

Now will the doubt go away? I don't know. But in this passage, doubters, and all the rest of us, receive something beautiful. Jesus is eager to draw us in. He loves to bless and forgive. And so if we will just ache in His direction He will pour out His grace. And this is the way we enter His family. Indeed no one enters that Jesus hasn't hounded.

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Now there is a final group in this passage who don't receive Jesus' gifts and are excluded from His family. And it is important for us to see that they are the good religious people.

If you've been around the church for a bit then you know all about the Pharisees. And I think our tendency is to see them as evil opponents to Christ. And in fact they are. Jesus exposes that. But the trick is that they honestly didn't see themselves that way.

The Pharisees originated after Israel returned from captivity in Babylon. And they arose as a group of people committed to making sure Israel never stumbled into idolatry again. Idolatry was why they ended up in Babylon. And so they were committed to pursuing God by following the rules of the Old Testament as faithfully as they could.

Now did it get distorted into legalism. Yes. But the warning for us is that it is possible for well meaning people to become the unintentional enemies of God.

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Well, that's scary. So what's the antidote? The answer is humility and fostering a soft and teachable heart. Fostering a heart that is willing to come to Jesus and be changed. And of course that's what the crippled man has.

But let me dig in a little to the question that pops into the Pharisees as they see Jesus forgive this man. Verse 7 says they were thinking:

"What is He saying? This is blasphemy! Only God can forgive sins!" (Mark 2:7)

And the crazy thing here is – they are right!

Tim Keller gives an illustration. He says "If Tom, Dick and Harry walk into a room. And Tom punches Dick in the mouth. Blood everywhere. And then Harry walks up to Tom and says "I forgive you for punching Dick in the mouth." Dick is going to say "Harry, you can't forgive Tom. He wronged me!"

And so the Pharisees are right. Jesus is making a scandalous claim here. He is saying: "I'm God. And every sin you have ever committed has been against Me."

And the Pharisees are floored. Their job is protecting Israel from making theological mistakes and obviously it's not okay for people to claim to be God. People can't forgive sin.

And so, like a control room employee and a nuclear power plant, they discern Jesus is claiming to be God and immediately start pressing the big red button. Shut Him down!

And Jesus looks into their hearts and asks a question that 20 centuries of theologians still agree is such a good question we aren't sure of the answer. He says:

Is it easier to say to the paralyzed man 'Your sins are forgiven,' or 'Stand up, pick up your mat, and walk'? (Mark 2:9)

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Now, on one level both things are equally impossible. No person can forgive sins, and no person can tell crippled people to get up and walk. Only God can do both. And of course this is Jesus' point.

But at the next level it's a lot easier to say "Your sins are forgiven" than "get up and walk" because there is no way to prove whether the first has happened, but everyone is going to laugh you out of town if you try the second. And this is Jesus' point too. He heals in order to prove He can forgive.

But with Jesus you can always keep digging. And so at a third level it's actually way harder to forgive sin than heal a body. Jesus heals all sorts of people with little cost to Himself. But this healing is special because it is the first step towards the cross.

Jesus knows, if I heal this man the Pharisees are going to kill Me because with it I am claiming to be the God who forgives sin. And Jesus takes the step.

He looks out and sees one kind of person who wants to use Him to get his own happiness. And He sees another group who wants to kill Him. And Jesus forgives.

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Three years later His ministry will end with the prayer "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing." And it begins the same way.

Jesus knows the cost. He knows that to free the legs of the man on the mat will require His own legs to be nailed to the tree. And the Hound of Heaven poises and pounces.

The journey to the cross has begun, and the family He is calling to Himself has been defined. It is those with soft hearts, willing to receive His forgiveness who are in. And ironically it's those who are "right" and self-righteous who are out.

So will you stop fleeing Him down the nights and down the days? Will you let Him change the desires of your heart so that instead of seeking happiness in another god you will seek it in Him? Will you let Him give you the gift of faith and join His family?

Jesus sees you, He knows your heart, and extends His nail pierced forgiveness.