

Irreligious: Forsaking Religion and Finding Jesus' Forgiveness (Mk. 2:1-12)

Chris Altrock – June 20, 2010

Stephen King is one of the most prolific authors in the United States. He is most known for his horror novels, many of which have been turned into movies. In an interview two years ago, King mentioned one thing that gives him the creeps. Here is what Stephen King, the master of fright, said frightens him:¹ *"I'm not a vampire type, when somebody shows me the cross. ...But organized religion gives me the creeps."* The king of horror said that what horrified him was religion. Some people today have strong feelings against religion.

On Sunday mornings this summer we are exploring similar negative feelings against religion which existed even in Jesus' day. In Mark's record of Jesus, we find ten stories in which Jesus and religion butt heads. Even for Jesus, religion sometimes gave him the creeps. In these 10 stories, we get to the heart of the difference between just being religious and actually following Jesus.

The conflict we explored last Sunday morning took place in a synagogue. This morning's conflict takes place in a home: *1And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. 2And many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And he was preaching the word to them. 3 And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. 4And 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. 5And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." 6Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 7"Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" 8And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question these things in your hearts? 9Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'? 10But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic— 11"I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home." 12And 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!" (Mk. 2:1-12 ESV).*

Mark tells us in verse 1 that Jesus has *"returned to Capernaum."* Capernaum was a flourishing city situated on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, near the place where the Jordan River flows into the Sea of Galilee. The word "Capernaum" means "village of comfort."² Jesus had previously been in Capernaum, giving comfort to many, (Mk. 1:21). But he left there to minister in other towns. (Mk. 1:39). Now, Jesus returns to Capernaum. And once again Capernaum becomes a village of comfort.

Mark tells us that in Capernaum Jesus is *"at home"* (Mk. 2:1). The "home" is most likely Peter's home. There are still in Capernaum remnants of what many believe was Peter's home. Earlier in Mk. 1:29ff Jesus stays in this very home. Peter and his family now host Jesus again. The first time Jesus stayed at Peter's house, *"the whole city was gathered together at the door"* of the

house (Mk. 1:33)—people trying to be comforted by Jesus. According to verse 2 of our text, the same thing happens again: *And many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door.* Mark suggests that it is even more crowded at Peter's house this time than the last time. The first time, "the whole city was gathered" outside the door. This time, Mark notes "there was no more room, not even at the door." It may be that now even people from outside Capernaum are streaming toward Peter's house to receive comfort from Jesus.³

But we move from this sea of nameless and faceless people to five specific people: one paralytic man carried on his bed by four friends. The fact that he is being carried by four others indicates just how severe his paralysis is.⁴ This is not just a withered hand, as in the story we explored last Sunday. This is a withered body. Here is a man who can do nothing for himself. He cannot get out of bed in the morning. He cannot feed himself breakfast or brush his teeth. He cannot get to the bathroom. He cannot bathe himself. He cannot dress himself. Someone does all of this for him. He cannot find a job. He cannot woo a woman. He cannot father children. All this man can do is lie uselessly on his bed.

In fact, in the original Greek in which this story was written, the Greek word for "bed" is the dominant word in this text. Here is a Greek word frequency diagram of this text. The word "krabbaton" is the word for "bed." The size of its font and its placement in the middle of this diagram show that "krabbaton" is the central word in this story. What Mark wants to highlight above all is the man's bed. His bed is his home. His bed is his prison. His bed is his life. When we think about this man, Mark wants us to think primarily about his bed.

Unable to get through the crowd to Jesus, the four men carry their paralytic friend to the roof of Peter's house. It was common for houses in that time to have an external staircase leading to the roof. The language Mark uses suggests that this was a flat roof constructed of rafters. Over the rafters would have been spread mud-plastered branches. The four men dig through the mud-plastered branches, and lower the paralytic on his bed between the rafters.⁵

What Jesus does next is unexpected: *5And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." (Mk. 2:5 ESV).* The first shock is that Jesus says, "Son, your sins are forgiven." We expect Jesus to say, "Son, your paralysis is healed." But Jesus says, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Why does Jesus focus on forgiving his sins rather than healing his paralysis? The second shock is that forgiveness is given "When Jesus saw their faith." We might expect Jesus to forgive the paralytic's sins because Jesus sees the paralytic's faith. Instead, forgiveness is granted because Jesus sees the friends' faith.

And these two surprising acts spark a conflict with the religious leaders: *6Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 7"Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mk. 2:6-7 ESV).* The "scribes" are legal scholars. They enjoyed a high reputation in that time as experts who knew the Old Testament law.⁶ They are Bible experts. And above all they know what the Bible says about forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness, they believe, can only come from God in heaven, not from some man on earth. And forgiveness from God, they believe, can only come through the right religious

means. It cannot be tossed out to someone in the careless fashion that Jesus, a non-religious-expert, has tossed it out.

8And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question these things in your hearts? 9Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'? 10But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic— 11"I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home." 12And 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!" (Mk. 2:8-12 ESV). Jesus asks, "Which is easier: to forgive sin or heal paralysis?" Jesus is asking which is easier in terms of someone's ability to observe it and verify it.⁷ Because sin is hard to see and so is forgiveness, no one can verify that this man's sins have indeed been forgiven. But if Jesus could heal the man's paralysis...that's something everyone could see. So Jesus does just this. And the man who's been lying in a bed, trapped in a bed, gets out of the bed, and goes home.

In order for us to get at the heart of this story, it's important for us to understand the implied connection between the man's sin and the man's paralysis. The four friends lower through the roof a man with paralysis. But Jesus forgives the man's sins. Then, in order to verify that he can forgive the man's sins, Jesus heals the man's paralysis.

It may be that the man's paralysis was caused by the man's sin.

- We see a similar connection in David's praise to God in Ps. 103: "2 Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, 3who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases..." (Ps. 103:2-3 ESV). David praises God because God forgives all iniquities and heals all diseases. There seems to be a link between the two.
- We find this connection elsewhere in Jesus' ministry. In Jn. 5 Jesus heals an invalid who has been lying near a pool of water. Jesus tells him to get up, take up his bed and walk. Shortly after that healing, we hear this exchange: 14Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you." (Jn. 5:14 ESV). It appears that the man's disability was tied to his sin. Jesus warns him to sin no more or something worse than being an invalid may happen to him.

Not every person with a physical disability in the Bible has the disability because of a sin. For example, in Jn. 9 the disciples assume a man with blindness has sinned. Jesus tells them he has not sinned. But it was sometimes the case that physical disease or disability was caused by sin.

At some level, it's likely that this paralytic's condition is tied to his sin. This wouldn't be the case for every paralytic, but it may be the case for this paralytic. Why else would Jesus' first response to the man be to deal with the man's sin?

This connection reveals two key elements in the story, two key differences between religion and following Jesus. *The first element has to do with the guilt of sin.* At first, this is a debate over how to handle the guilt of this man's sin. The scribes believe they know exactly how forgiveness of someone's guilt should be resolved. Guilt can only be forgiven by God. And God

only absolves guilt through the right religious means. If the paralytic wants forgiveness, let his friends carry him to the temple. If the paralytic wants forgiveness, let his friends carry him to the high priest. Forgiveness of guilt only comes from God and only comes to those capable of utilizing the right religious means.

Enter Jesus. Suddenly forgiveness is no longer locked away in heaven. Forgiveness is no longer as far away as the clouds are from the ground. Forgiveness is now as close as Jesus is to the man. And forgiveness no longer is restricted to certain religious means. It's not tied to the altar. It's not tied to the priests. It's not the domain of religious experts. Suddenly forgiveness has been let out of the religious cage and it's running around like a two-year-old golden retriever who's never been out of the cage before and is jumping and running and licking and wagging his tail in every place and on every person. Suddenly forgiveness is flying amuck like a set of balloons filled to overflowing and then released, the escaping air propelling them in loopy turns and twists into every corner of the room.

That's one of those key differences between religion and Jesus. *Religion wants to restrict the forgiveness of sin's guilt. But Jesus wants to release the forgiveness of sin's guilt.* Jesus doesn't even wait for some demonstration from the paralytic that the paralytic has faith. Jesus sees the faith of the friends, and that's enough. Jesus is so eager to forgive, that he just needs to see someone acting with faith, anyone acting with faith, even if it's not the paralytic.

Some of you here this morning are burdened with the guilt of a sin. That burden of guilt is so heavy. That burden made it hard for you to get up this morning. You've been carried here this morning in that guilt. You are filled with shame. You are filled with regret.

You can take that guilt to religion. But your guilt will only get worse. There, you'll have a hard time finding forgiveness. If it's given at all, it will be given in as stingy a manner as possible. And it will come with all kinds of strings attached.

Or you can take that guilt to Jesus. At the slightest excuse, Jesus will forgive. Even if all you can do is get a friend to drag you to Jesus, he'll forgive. You follow religion, and forgiveness will always be restricted. You follow Jesus, and forgiveness will always be released.

But there is a second key element in this story. The story not only revolves around the *guilt* of sin. *It also revolves around the consequences of sin.* Jesus doesn't just want to send this man home with a nice warm feeling inside. Jesus doesn't just want to remove the guilt of the man's sin. Ultimately, Jesus wants to overturn the consequences of his sin. And that's something that religion can't even touch. *Religion can only attempt to deal with forgiving the guilt of sin. But Jesus can actually reverse the consequences of sin.*

We can literally say that this man "made his bed" and now "has to lie in it." There is a sense in which this terrible bed is connected to some sin of his. He has made this bed. Religion can attempt to do something about the guilt of the bed. But it cannot do anything about the bed itself. It can try to forgive the man for the bed. But it cannot rescue the man from the bed.

And that's exactly what Jesus does: *11 "I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home."*

Notice those three commands: Rise, pick up your bed, and go home.

- *Rise*. Jesus makes it possible for the very first time for this man to escape the clutches of the bed he's made. Jesus not only forgives sin's guilt. Jesus also frees him from sin's consequences. He rises and is rescued from the impact of his sin.
- *Pick up your bed*. The bed used to carry the man. Now Jesus makes it possible for the man to carry the bed. Jesus could have told the man to "rise and go home" and ignored the bed. But Jesus wants the man to feel with his own hands the control that Jesus has given him over sin's consequences. Jesus wants the man to feel with his own hands that he's not only escaped the guilt of that sin, he's also escaped its consequences. The past can no longer carry this man.
- *Go home*. Jesus specifically sends the man home. He doesn't send the man to the temple. He doesn't send the man to the synagogue. He sends the former paralytic and his bed home. Why? Home is a symbol of the man's normal life. Jesus wants him to go and experience a new normal. He wants the man to see what regular life can be like when you're no longer chained to the consequences of mistakes from your past.

If you want to go with religion, all you have the hope of getting is forgiveness of guilt. And that's a slim hope. But if you go with Jesus, he'll not only forgive your guilt, he can even reverse the consequences of sin. Some of you here this morning know you're forgiven. You accept the fact that Jesus has removed your guilt. But you still feel trapped. Your present is still imprisoned by the mistakes of your past. You're still lying on the bed you made. Let Jesus free you from that bed. Let his words to the paralytic be his words to you: Rise, pick up your bed, and go home.

Since moving to Houston Levee, 7 men and women have taken Jesus up on this offer. Rather than turning to religion, they've turned to Jesus. And through baptism, they've found forgiveness of guilt and freedom from their bed. This morning, 2 more will be doing the same. Why don't you join them? Let's all decide this morning to be irreligious. Let's give up on religion. And let's follow Jesus.

¹ Citizen (February 2008), 15.

² Strong, J. (1996). *The exhaustive concordance of the Bible : Showing every word of the text of the common English version of the canonical books, and every occurrence of each word in regular order.* (electronic ed.). Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship.

³ Robert H. Gundry, Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross (Eerdmans, 1993), 111.

⁴ Gundry, 111.

⁵ Gundry, 117.

⁶ Kittel, G., Friedrich, G., & Bromiley, G. W. (1995). *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (127). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

⁷ Gundry, 118.