

“The Audacity of Grace”

Mark 2:1-12

¹ And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. ² 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. ³ And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. ⁴ And 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. ⁵ And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” ⁶ Now 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?” ⁸ And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, “Why do you question these things in your hearts? ⁹ Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk’? ¹⁰ But 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.” ¹² And 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!” (ESV)

Probably ten years ago now (or it was longer than that), Judy and I originally came to the Seattle area to plant a church in Capitol Hill. At some point my best friend, Paul Warren, came from Baltimore to visit. I decided to take him for a tour of the city. Most of the time I took the bus throughout the city. Paul and I eventually wound up in Pioneer Square. We looked around there. As we were getting on the bus to come home, for some reason the bus was incredibly crowded. Of course, with an incredibly crowded bus there always has to be one crazy guy in the midst of the bus. The providence that I seem to experience – as we were standing (standing room only) hanging onto the handles, the crazy guy was standing right next to me. The bus is going back and forth, and he’s basically being belligerent and giving everyone around him a hard time. At some point the bus lurched and it made him bump into me. At that point he started to light into me. I turned around—I’m sure I was completely gracious—and I turned around and said, “Would you rather pick a fight with a Ranger or a preacher?” He said, “What’s a Ranger?” I said, “I’d pick the preacher if I were you.” He was completely quiet. Everyone around was standing there looking and you could tell by their faces they’re thinking, “Who is this guy?”

As you read the Book of Mark, that’s the question that Mark is constantly putting before us: “Who is this guy?” As you read the Book of Mark it’s actually a bit of genius with regard to adult education theory, because adult education theory says that adults only learn something when they feel they have a need to know it. What Jesus is constantly doing is tweaking people so they ask, “Who are you?” At which point He says, “I’m glad you asked.” That started last week. If you were here last Sunday evening I preached the passage that came right before this: Jesus’ healing of the leper. If you were not here last week, you can get that on iTunes or the church website. But if you remember, this leper comes to Him and says, “I know you can heal me if you want to.” Jesus says, “I will.” Yet, Jesus begins at that point (I don’t know if this is the right way to put it), but He starts to pick a fight. He starts to pick a fight with the scribes and the Pharisees and those who are self-righteous because He heals the leper, and in those days the only one who could heal a leper (according to Jewish tradition) was God Himself. The only thing that would be harder than healing a leper would be raising the dead. So, Jesus heals the leper and He tells him, “Don’t tell anyone except go to the priest and show him so that he can pronounce you formally or ceremonially “clean.” What Jesus is doing there is He’s picking a fight because you see, when the leper goes to the priest and says, “Look I used to be a leper and now I’m completely clean. All you have to do is recognize that and proclaim me clean.” What’s the priest going to do? If the priest proclaims the leper to be clean, that means that Jesus is who He said He is. That means that Jesus, in fact, has the power and Jesus, in fact, is God. On the other hand, if the priest doesn’t proclaim him clean, then the priest is an idiot. Everyone can see that he’s clean, so the priests are now in a bind. Starting with the leper, the next five passages in the Book of Mark (in chapters 2 and 3) are five different conflicts that Jesus has with the scribes or the Pharisees. Every time He is the one who instigates them. So that’s what we’re going to look at today. Today is the first formal fight between Jesus and the Pharisees, and it’s going to last for the rest of the New Testament.

Basically we’re going to look at two things this morning. We’re going to look at the attraction of grace, and the second thing we’re going to look at is the audacity of grace. We’re only going to make it through about verse 7 this morning. If you want the rest of the story, you’re going to have to come tonight. Let’s look first at the attraction of grace. It says,

¹ And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. ² 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. ³ And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. ⁴ And 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. (NIV)

What's the attraction of grace? First of all, remember the context so far is that Jesus started His ministry in the synagogue in Capernaum, which was Simon and Andrew's home town. He cast out a demon and then He immediately goes from there and He heals Simon Peter's mother-in-law, and then after, it says, everyone came out to see Jesus and He healed many and He cast out many demons. The next morning it says that He went out to a lonely place to pray and everyone came to find him and said, "Everyone's waiting for you to heal." Jesus basically said, "That's not why I came. We have to keep moving on to preach because that's why I came, to preach this message of the kingdom." Then interestingly enough, as soon as Jesus says, "I have to go preach," the very next passage as they're walking along for Him to go preach, He comes face to face with this leper. So what's He going to do? He just said, "I didn't come to do this, I came to preach." All of a sudden there's a leper, and yet there's something about the leper that stops Jesus in His tracks. The thing about the leper that I think stopped Jesus in his tracks is because leprosy was a symbol of all that was wrong with sin. A person who had leprosy was a symbol in the Ancient Near East of everything that was wrong with the world. Sin had devastated this person. He's unclean. No one can come around him; he's isolated. I think Jesus had compassion and He looks and when the leper says, "I know you can do it if you want to," Jesus says, "I want to," and He heals the leper. Jesus tells the leper, "Now, don't tell anyone." The leper immediately goes out and begins to, in the Greek, "preach the good news." He begins to tell everyone about what had happened. Today is not the day to talk about whether or not what He did was right or wrong. People debate that. Was the leper being disobedient or did Jesus know he was going to be disobedient? That doesn't matter. It's like when you read the Chronicles of Narnia by Lewis. Remember what Aslan says: "In Narnia you cannot ask what might have been, you can only ask what is." What is, is this leper who had been healed and he began to tell everyone that Jesus is healing again.

So, Jesus comes back. It says, "Jesus came home" in our passage, probably Simon Peter's home, and He's sitting in there and people don't know He's there yet. He's preaching the word to them and the news starts to get out that Jesus is there, and before you know it, there are so many people there that there's not even room at the door. Why is that? At this point He's not healing, He's just preaching. Why is that? The answer is just this. It's that grace is attractive. In my experience, people who are not Christians, most of them have no problem at all with Jesus. If they have a problem, they have a problem with church. So why do people who are not Christians like Jesus but they dislike the church? Unfortunately, I think, one of them is filled with grace and mercy and one of them is not. Which one do you think Jesus is full of? Grace and mercy. The question is, "Why don't people perceive that of the church?" The answer is, I think, because the church oftentimes rightly deserves the ungracious, moralistic label that we get. But the reason we act ungracious (maybe not in our church, that would never be the case) is because we don't understand the grace of Christ. A place that is fully defined by grace cannot help but attract people. It can't help but do that. So people are coming around in droves. They want to be around this guy, Jesus. This is just to hear Him preaching. But if grace is attractive generally, grace is particularly attractive to the hopeless. Grace is particularly attractive to the hopeless and the helpless. Why? The answer is just this, because grace by definition is unmerited favor. So if you're helpless and you're hopeless and you can't do anything for yourself, you're only hope is that someone will show unmerited favor—something you can't earn—and they will give it to you. So grace is particularly attractive to those who are helpless and those who are hopeless. That's exactly what we see next in the text.

There are four friends, we assume. I'm going to call the paralytic, Bob, because it's quicker to say than "paralytic." Four of Bob's friends say, "This guy Jesus, he can fix anything. He healed a leper. If he can heal a leper he can certainly handle your paralysis." We know that the paralytic was helpless and hopeless not just because he was paralyzed, but in the Ancient Near East if someone was a paralytic, undoubtedly he was a beggar. He would have been beholden to everyone around him in order for them to show him charity. Four people, we don't know that they're even his friends, but four people take him and they can't get through the door, so what do they do? They climb up on the roof of Simon Peter's house, which in the Ancient Near East would have been a flat roof. It would have had some timbers and then it would have been covered with some kind of mud and palm frond mixture. They

climb up on the roof and begin digging their way through. Why? Because they know that this guy Jesus is the only hope for their friend the paralytic and they're willing to do whatever it takes to get their friend into the presence of Jesus.

The question you have to ask yourself is, "What about the paralytics that you know?" Just like the leper was a symbol of sin in Israel, so the paralytic would have been as well. All the scribes and the Pharisees would have looked at the paralytic and they would have assumed that the reason he was in that condition is because he'd committed some sin that was so bad that God was punishing him. Yet there are some people who so trusted the fact that Jesus would show mercy and grace to him that they were willing to do whatever it took even at their own expense because I can imagine Simon Peter outside going, "You boys are going pay for this." They tore his roof off to lower their friend down so that he could be in the presence of Jesus, because that was his only hope. Spiritually speaking, each and every person in this room is a paralytic. Each and every person in this room is hopeless and helpless in and of themselves. The question is, "Do you believe that?" You either believe that you're the paralytic or you think you're a scribe. The worst possible thing is to say you're a paralytic when in reality you're a scribe because then you're self-deluded. The question is, "Are you going to allow Jesus to heal you?" Are you going to go to Jesus and say, "I am helpless and I'm hopeless to do anything."

Did you notice what happened as soon as the man was lowered through? Now we're starting to move into the next point, the audacity of grace. As soon as he comes through the roof Jesus initiates with him. Remember a few sermons ago I told you that most of the things that we need to pray about we just need to tell Jesus. Just tell him. In the telling Him of your problems and the telling Him of your concerns the request is implicit. They lower Bob through the roof of the house, and what else does Jesus think they want Him to do? What is He going to say? "Can I help you? What do you want?" The request is implicit in their actions, and their actions show their faith because faith is always evidenced by its actions. They lower him through the roof and what Jesus says next would have surprised and shocked every person in the room, whether they were scribes and Pharisees, or they were prostitutes and tax collectors, because here the paralytic is lowered through the roof and Jesus looks at him and does not say, "Be healed." He doesn't say, "Rise up and walk." Isn't that what you'd expect him to say? I mean, the guy's a paralytic, he can't move." Yet, what does Jesus do when he is lowered through the roof? Jesus looks at him. Let me read it to you.

⁵ *And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." (NIV)*

That would have shocked the average Joe because common sense says, "What does that have to do with this man's problem? What does it have to do with anything? He needs to walk, so just tell him to rise up and walk and be out of here." But what made it audacious especially to the scribes is when he told him, "Son, your sins are forgiven." If grace is particularly attractive to the helpless and the hopeless, grace is particularly audacious to the legalist and the person who is self-righteous. Jesus here, He's picking a fight. He wants to get the scribes to a place where there's a teachable moment. So he looks at the man who has been lowered through the roof and he said, "Son, your sins are forgiven." And, how do they respond? Praise the Lord! Hallelujah! They're angry. Notice what they say,

⁶ *Now 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?" (NIV)*

Why is it so audacious for Jesus to tell this man, "Your sins are forgiven"? The answer is pretty simple. On one hand you have a guy who is lowered through the roof. He's helpless and hopeless. He's a burden upon society. In the scribes mind, in the Pharisees mind, he would have been that way because of some sin he committed. And now Jesus with one fell swoop, this out-of-work carpenter looks at him and says, "Your sins are forgiven." Whoosh—scott free! Now, what if you had spent your whole life trying to please God? What if you spent your whole life being a good boy or a good girl, you spent your whole life studying the Bible in hopes that God would love you because of that, or you spent your whole live being a Republican or a Democrat because you think only godly people are Republicans or Democrats, and then God goes to the worst possible person and says, "You, your sins are forgiven." You see, Jesus erased in one fell swoop what those guys had been working for their whole lives, and He gave it to someone who didn't deserve it. Grace is audacious. Particularly, it is audacious for those who are self-righteous and think they can earn their own salvation.

I may have told you this story before, about being in seminary, again with my friend Paul. They used to call us “The back row boys” because we always sat in the back row reading the newspaper. There was one class we took, and it was a huge class because R. C. Sproul was teaching it (a very famous theologian). There were probably 80 people in the class, or auditors, and he showed up on the first day of class and he said, “Alright, here’s how the course is going to be.” He assigned 5,000 pages of reading for one semester. “Here’s how the course is going to be. There’ll be one exam at the end of the class with four questions, one of which will come from somewhere in those 5,000 pages.” Everyone in the class started wiggling out, everyone except “the back row boys.” As soon as class was over it was like a beehive, breaking it down, they made a schedule. “Okay, there’s 80 of us and if each person reads 200 pages and takes notes on it and we share notes on it by the end of the semester, hopefully we’ll pass this exam. They came to Paul and me and they said, “Okay, here’s your assignment.” I said oh-no-no-no-no. I’m not going to do it.” They said, “What do you mean?” I said, “I’m going to give it my best shot. You know, I’m going to wing it.” Paul said the same thing. They said “It wouldn’t be fair if we gave you the notes that everyone else is working on.” We said, “Uh-Uh. We don’t want your notes. Don’t do anything.” Fast-forward a semester. Sproul shows up at class, hands out the exam. Four questions like he said. The problem is he forgot to put a question from the 5,000 pages. Seventy-eight people were very upset. Two people were very excited! What was amazing to me afterward is to see how angry some people were that they had to do all that work and were not able to show how they had studied. They were not able to be rewarded for all that work. And they were really angry at Paul and me because we didn’t do anything and we got off scott free. That’s the same thing that’s happening here.

Which would you be? Would you be the person who got upset because you worked really hard and God hasn’t given you what you expected? A lot of Christians are like that. You’ve been good your whole life. You try to be moral, you try to raise your family like the way you thought you should and then things didn’t turn out the way you thought they should, and then you’re angry. Is that who you are? That’s how I am sometimes, but if that’s how you are it shows you don’t understand the nature of grace. Grace by definition is unmerited favor. It is audacious because what it tells the self-righteous person is you can work all you want, you can work your fingers to the bone, and at the end of the day, and it’s still not good enough. You can read all 5,000 pages and those two buffoons sitting in the back reading the newspaper are going to make the same grade as you. That’s what it says. When they say, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” They’re right. If this story stopped at verse 7 that would have been the right question and they would have been in the right. It said, “He is blaspheming.” But what they didn’t get is that God alone is the only one who can forgive sins, but there’s also another type of person that can forgive sins: the person who has been offended. In other words, forgiveness of sin always has to do with someone else paying your bill. Grace is free, but it’s not cheap. Whenever forgiveness is extended in any circumstance someone is paying the bill there. It just doesn’t go away. Let’s say you’re a husband and wife and in the rare chance that the husband is wrong about something, or does something wrong, and he goes to his wife and asks her, “Honey, will you forgive me?” She may say, “Yes,” but that forgiveness has cost her something. She has paid the bill for that sin. She has paid the bill for that transgression. What’s interesting here is the accusation they make against Jesus. “He’s blaspheming. He’s blaspheming.” What is blasphemy? Blasphemy is basically talking out of school about God. It’s either saying something bad about God or putting yourself in God’s place. How in the world can Jesus say, “You are forgiven.” What they don’t know is the reason He can say that is because He is going to pay the bill. He’s going to be the one who pays the bill for that guy. He’s going to be the one who pays the bill for everybody. The irony is they accuse Him of blasphemy and do you remember what the charge was that got Jesus crucified at the end? The charge was blasphemy. It was trumped up and it was bogus, but nonetheless they charged him with blasphemy, and the irony is that their false charge against him would result in His paying the bill for them. When Jesus went to the cross He paid your bill—all of the sin that you and I have committed, all the sin we will commit, all of your unrighteousness, not just what you have done, but who you are. Have you ever felt like that? It’s one thing to say, “Man, I committed a lot of sins today.” It’s another thing to say, “Man, I am a sinner.” Jesus goes to the cross and He pays the bill, the debt that we owe to God, He just pays it. The fact that He has paid it means He has every bit of authority to extend that forgiveness to anyone He wants. Grace is attractive. Grace is audacious, but grace is only audacious if you don’t have the authority to back it up. We’re going to look at that tonight. Think about that.