



Contents

Introduction: He Can Make the Difference	9
1. Embracing the Priorities of Jesus	17
2. Trusting Jesus in a Storm	31
3. Trusting Jesus to Set You Free	51
4. Trusting Jesus at a Dead End	71
5. Trusting Jesus When All is Spent	91
6. The Danger of Knowing Jesus Too Well	113
Notes	133
Acknowledgments	135



CHAPTER 1

Embracing the Priorities of Jesus

The miracles brought the crowds to Jesus, but they distracted from the teaching ministry of Jesus. The carpenter's son, now Himself a carpenter turned teaching rabbi, had been born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth. But Capernaum was His home and headquarters during His Galilean ministry. Simon Peter, one of the initial disciples, also lived in Capernaum. Here, Mark tells us, Jesus healed the sick—including Simon Peter's mother-in-law—and cast out demons.

The people wanted more miracles, but Jesus knew His mission was to teach about the kingdom of God. So He left Capernaum to preach and teach in the neighboring cities along the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Now Jesus had returned to Capernaum. And the news spread

quickly that He was at home. When they found out where Jesus was, they packed the house (Mark 2:1–2). There was standing room only. People huddled around the doors and windows to see and hear Jesus.

THE MIXED MOTIVES OF THE CROWD

But not everyone was there for the right reasons. Some were there because they believed Jesus to be the long-awaited Messiah-King. Others were not sure and wanted further evidence. Still others were just there to see the wonder worker do His thing. Verse 6 tells us the scribes were there. Luke 5:17 adds the Pharisees were also present. They hoped to catch Jesus saying or doing something they could use to discredit Him.

These competing motivations of the crowd did not move Jesus. The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. Yet the last thing many of us know is what to put first. And we are prone to impose our mixed-up priorities on Jesus. But the priorities of Jesus will not and cannot change. Jesus always prioritizes the eternal over the temporary.

A cathedral in Italy has three entrances, each next to the other and each having an inscription above it. Over the left entrance is written the words, “All that pleases is but for a moment.” Over the right entrance is inscribed, “All that troubles is but for a moment.” In the center is the larger main entrance over which is the statement: “Nothing is important except that which is eternal.” That simple statement is a profound truth.

Now, here’s some good news and bad news. The good news is

your bad days will not last forever. The bad news is your good days will not last forever. All that pleases and troubles is but for a moment. Nothing is important except that which is eternal. Jesus always prioritizes the eternal over the temporary. And the priorities of Jesus are to be the priorities of every Christian, every church. Mark 2:1–12 affirms the priorities of Jesus in four movements.

Mark reports that after the people learned that Jesus “was at home . . . many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door” (vv. 1–2). This is the way it ought to be. The presence of Jesus ought to be our drawing card. Unfortunately, the church often tries to draw people by unworthy means. Church advertisements spotlight charismatic preachers, excellent music, multiple programs, impressive facilities, and fun activities without mentioning Jesus. These things may have their place. But if Jesus is not obviously present and actively in charge, people will not experience transforming grace.

Nothing we do in church matters if it is not about Jesus. Let me state what the church should be about in five words: Jesus only and only Jesus. In John 12:32, Jesus said, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” May this be the report published about every church: Jesus is here!

JESUS’ RESPONSE TO THE CROWD

How did Jesus respond to the presence of the crowd? The end of verse 2 says, “And he was preaching the word to them.” Jesus did not put on a show for the crowd. Indeed, there were those who were there to be entertained by the wonders Jesus performed. And

by the time the crowd left, “they were all amazed” (v. 12). But that was not Jesus’ agenda. Jesus wanted those who were present to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. So Jesus preached the Word to them.

In Mark 1, Jesus healed the sick and cast out demons. Then He went to a desolate place to pray. Simon and the others hunted Him down. When they found Him, they said, “Everyone is looking for you” (1:37). The name of Jesus had become prominent. The works of Jesus had become publicized. And the ministry of Jesus had become popular. Jesus should have struck while the iron was hot, built on His momentum, and taken advantage of the opportunity. Instead, Jesus wandered off into the wilderness to pray.

Simon and the boys were dumbfounded. “Everyone is looking for you,” they said. “Where have you been? What are you doing? Why are you letting this opportunity slip away?” Jesus answered, “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out” (v. 38). The priorities of Jesus were exercised through biblical preaching.

I love music. I live and work with an ongoing soundtrack of Christian music in my mind and heart. And I am looking forward to heaven where there will be no pulpits, only choir stands. But if that heavenly choir stand is to be populated with redeemed voices in praise to God, the church on earth must preach the Word. Unfortunately, many pastors and churches have jettisoned the centrality of biblical preaching. Ours is the day described in 2 Timothy 4:3–4: “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves

teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.” But it is still the will of God to save the lost and sanctify the church through doctrinally sound, Christ-centered, and Spirit-empowered proclamation of the Scriptures.

The apostle Paul wrote, “For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’” (Romans 10:13) Then he explained why the spiritually lost do not call on the Lord for salvation: “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?” (verses 14–15). If lives are to be changed for eternity, someone has to preach the Word.

JESUS’ RESPONSE TO THE FAITH OF THE STRETCHER-BEARERS

After setting the scene, Mark plunges us into the drama with the actions of the stretcher-bearers and the reaction of Jesus.

As Jesus was preaching the Word to this packed house, five nameless men arrived. One was a paralytic. Was he born this way? Did he become paralyzed by some tragic event? Was his paralysis the result of sin? We are not told. The text only tells us that four men carried this invalid to Jesus. We know a couple of things about these four who brought this paralyzed man to Jesus.

First, these stretcher-bearers loved their friend. The text does not call them friends. But their actions make it clear they had a special relationship to this paralytic. They carried him to Jesus. In our day, a person with paralysis can live with relative independence. That

was not the case in Jesus' day. Without assistance, a paralytic was helpless. John 5 records the story of a man crippled for thirty-eight years who lay by the pool called Bethesda. No one would help him into the pool. But this paralytic had four friends who cared enough to help him overcome his condition. In Acts 3, another crippled man was laid at the temple's Beautiful Gate to beg for money from the worshipers. But did they try to get him help beyond the gate? These stretcher-bearers loved their friend so much that they took him to Jesus for healing.

Second, *these stretcher-bearers believed in Jesus*. Verse 4 says, "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." The houses had flat roofs made of wood planks covered with branches, thatch, and mud. Accessed by ladder, these roofs were used like patio decks. The stretcher-bearers carried the paralytic up the ladder, dug through the roof, and lowered the paralytic to Jesus' feet. They

Scripture emphasizes that faith is seen more than it is heard. James 2:17 says, "Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."

were determined to get him to Jesus. The presence of the crowd could not stop them. The potential anger of the homeowner could not stop them. The possibility of rebuke from Jesus could not stop them. Their friend had a need only Jesus could meet. They had to get him to Jesus.

Do you have loved ones whose lives are in paralysis? It may not be physical. But they are nonetheless crippled, impaired, and broken. Do you believe

Jesus can help them? Then grab your end of the stretcher. Tear up the roof. Do whatever it takes to get them to Jesus.

Preachers do not like their sermons interrupted. But Jesus did not get angry when these men interrupted His message to lower the paralytic to Him. Instead, He “saw their faith” (v. 5). This reference to faith may include the paralytic, but it focuses on the stretcher-bearers. Jesus saw their faith. It was evidenced by what they did, not by anything they said. There is a popular but false teaching that claims faith-filled words create reality. But Scripture emphasizes that faith is seen more than it is heard. The profession of faith does not assume the possession of faith. James 2:17 says, “So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”

These stretcher-bearers had living faith. Even if the paralytic didn’t believe, they did. Verse 5 says when Jesus saw their faith, he addressed the paralytic. Jesus addressed him as “Son.” This is not a statement about his age. It is a term of endearment. Jesus cared about the man like a loving father cares for a troubled son.

After that tender word, Jesus addressed the man with targeted words: “Son, your sins are forgiven.” The stretcher-bearers brought this paralytic to Jesus for healing, not forgiveness. This is the danger of coming to Jesus. He may give you what you need rather than what you want. Jesus is not preoccupied with felt needs. His priority is to minister to your biggest problem, which is not your physical condition, financial situation, or relationship status.

Our biggest problem is that God is holy and we are not. And we will have to answer to God for how we have lived our lives.

The Scriptures declare, “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one” (Romans 3:10–12). We are guilty sinners with no righteous merit to commend for divine approval.

We cannot reach up to God, but God has reached down to us through the death and resurrection of Christ. Jesus came to solve your biggest problem by providing forgiveness of sins at the cross. As Warren Wiersbe wrote: “Forgiveness is the greatest miracle Jesus ever performs. It meets the greatest need; it costs the greatest price; and it brings the greatest blessings and the most lasting results.”¹

JESUS’ RESPONSE TO THE CRITICISMS OF THE SCRIBES

Mark does not tell us how the paralytic or the stretcher-bearers responded to Jesus’ announcement of forgiveness. He instead turns his attention to the scribes, the theological scholars of the day. When they heard Jesus declare the paralytic’s sins forgiven, they began “questioning in their hearts” (v. 6). When we speak of the “heart” metaphorically, we refer to the emotions. But in Scripture, the “heart” symbolizes the intellect more than the emotions. The words of Jesus did not make the scribes feel a certain way as much as it caused them to draw negative conclusions about Jesus. “Why does this man speak like that?” they asked with contempt. “He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (v. 7).

These are damning indictments. As Christians, we do not agree

with them. But we can affirm the formula they used to reach their conclusion. The scribes asked, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” The assumed answer to this rhetorical question is no one. The priests could declare a person’s sins forgiven after he offered proper sacrifices and demonstrated genuine repentance. But the priests only ratified what God had done. True forgiveness comes only from God. Isaiah 43:25 says, “I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.” Forgiveness is God’s business. And He does not have any staff or partners or coworkers in His business.

The scribes were right. No one can forgive sins but God alone. But the verdict they rendered was wrong. They declared, “He is blaspheming!” Blasphemy is impious or irreverent speech toward God. It is to talk in a way that brings God down to your level or lifts you up to God’s level. Leviticus 24:16 says, “Whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death.” This is the crime for which Jesus was crucified.

During His trial, the high priest asked if He was the Christ, the Son of the Blessed? In Mark 14:62, Jesus answered: “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.” When the high priest heard this, he tore his garments and asked what more evidence was needed against Jesus. And they all condemned Him as deserving death. In our text, the scribes were convinced

**Anyone who reads
the Gospels and
concludes Jesus never
claimed to be God can
stare at a cloudless
sky at high noon and
never see the sun.**

they had evidence against Jesus. In announcing this paralytic's sins forgiven, Jesus was claiming the divine authority.

There are those who contend the deity of Jesus is the theological construct of revisionist Christianity—that the early church concocted this theory to boost their fledgling movement. Jesus never claimed to be God, they say, and would be embarrassed by the suggestion. But anyone who reads the Gospels and concludes Jesus never claimed to be God can stare at a cloudless sky at high noon and never see the sun. If the crowd did not know what Jesus was saying, the scribes did. Their stubborn unbelief did not allow them to believe in Jesus. But at least they had the theological integrity to draw the lines at the right places. Either Jesus is God or He is a blasphemer. There is no middle ground. It does not suffice to say Jesus was a mighty prophet or a good teacher or a moral example. If Jesus was not God, He was a fraud who deserved to die on the cross for His sins. This was the conclusion of the scribes. “He is blaspheming,” they said.

Jesus demonstrated His deity by responding to the unexpressed questions the scribes asked in their hearts. Jesus did not merely read their expressions. He saw their hearts. That is divine omniscience. Omniscience means that God knows everything—known, unknown, and knowable. Matthew Henry said, “God not only sees men, he sees through them.” Jesus knew what the scribes were asking in their hearts. He answered their question with a question: “Why do you question these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk?’” (vv. 8–9). This was a trick

question. On one hand, it was easier for Jesus to say, “Your sins are forgiven.” Because forgiveness is a spiritual issue, no one could verify if Jesus truly forgave his sins. On the other hand, it was easier for Jesus to say, “Rise, take up your bed and walk.” Jesus could heal him by cash but He would have to forgive him on credit. Jesus would have to pay for that forgiveness at the cross.

The scribes thought they caught Jesus. But Jesus trapped them. Either answer would have affirmed Jesus before the crowd. No mere man can heal sickness or forgive sins. *Only God can heal sickness.* If you are sick, take advantage of the skill of doctors, the benefits of surgery, and the power of medicine. But do not put your hope in the hospital. Doctors only practice medicine. They do not perform miracles. Only God can heal sickness.

Likewise, *only God can forgive sins.* In Psalm 51:4, David confesses, “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.” For the record, David sinned against a lot of people. But ultimately he was right. All sin is committed against God. It does not mean anything to get it right with those you have offended if you do not get it right with God. In the sense of removing guilt, no human can forgive sins and you cannot forgive yourself. Only God forgives sins. Jesus declared His true identity to the religious establishment by confronting them with the fact that only God can heal sickness and forgive sins.

JESUS’ RESPONSE TO THE NEED OF THE PARALYTIC

In verses 10–11, Jesus says, “But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’—he said to the

paralytic—“I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.” This is the first of fourteen times the title “Son of Man” appears in Mark. Mark 1:1 says, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” This is the most important title ascribed to Jesus. Yet Jesus refers to Himself as the Son of Man. It may be that He used this self-description for its ambiguity. It can refer to humanity or deity. It can be a human being or a supernatural being. It can express humility or authority. Jesus could be calling Himself a man or “The Man.” The hearer had to choose. But Jesus clearly uses the title here to state His divine authority: “that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.”

Earlier, Jesus had granted the paralytic forgiveness of his sins (v. 5). Now Jesus gives assurance of forgiveness. We need both. Guilt will burden you down without forgiveness and assurance. In his commentary on this passage, R. C. Sproul writes of being offered a handsome salary to join a psychiatric clinic. Sproul confessed he did not know anything about psychiatrics. But his friend rebutted that many people who came to his clinic needed a minister, not a psychiatrist.² Indeed, there are many people suffering from mental, physical, and emotional problems that are rooted in unresolved guilt. They need to know their sins have been forgiven. Only Jesus can do that. And Jesus proved it by saying to the paralytic, “I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.”

Verse 12 says the paralytic “rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all.” This crippled man was lowered through the roof on his bed. But when Jesus told him to arise, he immediately stood up. He folded his cot and began to carry the

thing that had been carrying him. And the crowd that saw the paralytic dropped in saw him walk out. Their reaction? “They were all amazed.” (v. 12). Their minds were blown. They knew this was a God thing. So they “glorified” God. Their worship was expressed in grateful praise. They said, “We never saw anything like this!” This is why we worship Jesus. There is no one like Him.

There is no door that Jesus cannot open.

There is no enemy that Jesus cannot defeat.

There is no need that Jesus cannot meet.

There is no pain that Jesus cannot comfort.

There is no problem that Jesus cannot solve.

There is no sickness that Jesus cannot heal.

There is no sin Jesus cannot forgive.

Jesus is still able to do amazing things you have never seen before. How do I know? On Good Friday, He died on the cross for sin. On Easter, He rose from the dead with the keys to death, hell, and the grave. And “He is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives” to make intercession for them (Hebrews 7:25 NIV).

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. And a great wind-storm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

MARK 4:35-41