

world of the heavens was separate and pure because of God's perfect presence in the heavens. The two only met through the special arrangements God had made through the laws of Moses and the system of priests and worship which he introduced. In Jesus' day, the scribes were attempting to ensure that such matters were rigorously observed in order to separate the Jewish people from the pervading Greek / Roman culture of the day. They were simply not ready for Jesus to upset all their assumptions!

When Jesus came into the world, He came as God, but as a man; in other words, He personified the connection between the spiritual world and the physical. This is why Mark's Gospel can talk about Jesus as 'God's Son' in the first chapter (1:11); and then in this passage, tell us that Jesus talked about Himself as the 'Son of Man' (2:10) and mean nothing different. The expression 'son of man' is used in the Old Testament (see Psalm 8:4) to mean 'humanity' in general, but it is also used (see Daniel 7:13) to describe the Messiah who comes with God's authority, and this is what it means here in Mark.

In summary, here in our story of the healing of the paralysed man, Jesus saw the connection between the sins of the man and his condition and offered him both the spiritual healing of forgiveness and the physical healing of release from his paralysis (2:5 and 2:11). Jesus could do this because He embodied this connection between the spiritual world and the physical; He was the Messiah no less, and it was this claim that so incensed the scribes (2:7), and His challenge to them (2:9) was met with silence. Any watered down understanding of the nature of Jesus (as you may find in some commentaries) just does not make sense of the story as a whole.

Application

These study notes have already challenged the modern consensus amongst scholars that when Jesus talked about Himself as the 'Son of Man', he did not mean to say that He was the Messiah. To me, it just does not make sense, and it may not do to you. I write about this with care because there is much written about Mark's Gospel which claims that Jesus did not present Himself as the Messiah within the Gospel, and one of the prime texts used to make this case is this passage of scripture. I cannot go into all the arguments about this here, but I can describe it, and I do so because this argument lies at the heart of the dispute between those like myself who believe that our heritage of faith is found in a classical understanding of these truths (which is still as valid today as it has ever been), and those who feel that we must re-interpret the Bible in different ways.

It is best for all of us to do our best to appreciate how Jesus connects the spiritual and the physical in His own being, in His ministry, and ultimately in eternity. The ministry Jesus began in Galilee was one in which He sought to demonstrate the Kingdom of God and its permanent arrival on earth. The forgiveness of the paralysed man and his healing is one of the signs of the Kingdom which lead us to believe that when Jesus returns in glory, the Kingdom will be complete, and will be re-made physically and spiritually into a 'new creation' in which there is no more sickness or suffering, because we will be in the presence of Almighty God.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Does it matter whether the paralysed man showed 'faith' or not?
2. How are sins forgiven in the life of the church today, and what does this passage tell us about how this should be done?
3. Who are the equivalent of the 'scribes' in the world today, who oppose Jesus and the evidence of His work amongst us?

Discipleship

Consider how you think about the 'spiritual' world and the 'physical' world. Do you think of them as two different things, or how do the two relate to each other? Remember that Christ came to bridge the gap between the two, and it is through Him that we know the spiritual world of God the Father. Try writing down a list of things you possess which make a connection between what is spiritual and what is physical, for example, a cross or a Bible, etc. Let these things remind you of your faith.

Final Prayer

Glorious Lord, conquer our fears, have victory over our inhibitions, dispel our doubts and calm our failing nerves. Then, when we have found our peace in You, may we praise You with all our being, through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

Prayer

Almighty God, Your faithfulness has been proved through the lives of countless numbers of Your servants throughout the years. May we be worthy of being considered as one of them, as we seek to do all in our power to live a life which is centred upon selfless service and not ourselves. May those who come after us receive from us the true heritage of faith; Thanks be to God: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: World Politics

Please pray today for the United Nations. People sometimes have high but unrealistic hopes for what this organisation can achieve, though its charter does make it the only international body that has any political influence. Whatever you think of this institution, please pray that it may be used for good, and that it will be properly run so that we may have confidence in it.

Meditation

- Where can the care be found to feed the hungry, today?
- Where can the will be found to challenge corruption, today?
- Where can the strength be found to act for justice, today?
- Where can the heart be found to meet the needs of the poor, today?
- Where can the vision be found to safeguard our planet, today?
- Where can the intellect be found to defend the truth, today?
- Where can the courage be found to confront all evil, today?
- Where can the passion be found to advocate what is right, today?

Only where people accept that the source of all good,
Is Jesus Christ, who has won the victory over all evil,

Only where people face their responsibilities in Christ
And are liberated by the Spirit to do His will today, with
Care, will, strength, heart, vision. intellect, courage and passion.

Bible Study - Mark 2:1-12

¹ When He came back again to Capernaum a few days later, it was made known that He was in a home. ² So many gathered that there was no longer any room for them, not even around the doorway; but He preached the word to them. ³ Then they came to bring Him a paralysed man carried by four of them. ⁴ Because of the crowd they were not able to bring him near to Jesus, so they removed the roof near Him, and when they had broken through, they lowered the mat on which the paralysed man lay. ⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralysed man, 'Child, your sins are forgiven.'

⁶ Now, some of the scribes were sitting there, thinking in their hearts, ⁷ 'Why does this person speak like this? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins except God alone?' ⁸ Jesus immediately perceived in His spirit that they were questioning like this in their hearts, and He said to them, 'Why are you going over all these things in your hearts? ⁹ Which is easier, to say to the paralysed man, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Stand up, take up your mat and walk?" ¹⁰ But so that you know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins ...' He then addressed the paralysed man, ¹¹ 'I say to you, get up, take up your mat and go to your home!' ¹² The man stood up, picked up his mat and walked out in front of all of them. This astonished all of them and they gave glory to God and said; 'we have never seen anything like this!'

Review

This amazing story adds immeasurably to our understanding of what happened at the beginning of Jesus' work and ministry. Here, Jesus went beyond performing healing miracles (see 1:35-39) and enabled people to listen to some of the Gospel He had come to declare.

Mark reports that Jesus' original message was 'repent and believe ...' (1:15), and by the time Jesus had finished with the paralysed man brought to Him on a stretcher, He had certainly both healed the man and also demonstrated the forgiveness of sins, a key feature of His Gospel. Whilst Jesus began His ministry in an understandable flurry of healing and deliverance ministry, He would not rest until He pushed the message of the Gospel to the fore, and applied it to the human need for healing.

Whilst Jesus was successful, He did not manage this without stirring up a potent evil. In His healing ministry He had easily dismissed demons and spirits (1:25,32), but another form of evil raised its head in this story which would not be simply dismissed 'by a word'. It was the evil of religiosity in the hearts of those who believed that they knew more about God than the Son of God Himself; the scribes (2:6 – in all likelihood, some would have been Pharisees).

Mark wonderfully describes how a paralysed was brought to Jesus for healing by four friends. It is a touching story which stirs our hearts, just as it clearly stirred Jesus' heart (1:5). Surely the effort and courage of the man's friends in getting him through the roof of the house to where Jesus was showed a faith in Jesus' power to heal which was different from anything as yet seen in His ministry. Perhaps it was the very fact that others present saw this strange incident and felt the same, which encouraged Jesus to plunge into a spiritual approach to the healing of the man rather than a merely physical one (as in all the previous healings in Mark). Moreover, Jesus' encroachment onto spiritual ground raised a response from the ever watchful scribes. They had doubtless heard reports of a 'Messiah' and kept a watch on Jesus, but up to now had remained silent, content to watch healings take place and ask no questions, for they were used to 'faith healers' in Israel. But now this man Jesus claimed to forgive sins (1:5-9), and this meant that He claimed to do the work of God. They would not let Him get away with that!

So it is that the central heart of this story is the tense moment when Jesus said to the scribes in the hearing of all, 'Which is easier, to say to the paralysed man, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Stand up, take up your mat and walk?"' Now, if we were faced with someone who was lying down paralysed, we might have to stop and think before responding to such a question. How presumptive of us to say to someone 'your sins are forgiven'; what sins? And how are they connected to the illness? What will it do to a paralysed man to be commanded to walk? But Jesus was in total command of both the spiritual and the physical issues faced by the man, so He, and He alone, was able to tell the man to stand, pick up His mat and go home, after previously being told that his sins were forgiven. He walked out of the house physically and spiritually liberated, as Jesus demonstrated the Gospel and the Kingdom, through a healing!

This was not the interpretation of the scribes, however, and neither is it the interpretation of a significant number of scholars today who find the passage impossible to handle at the spiritual level, or, indeed, make any connection between physical and spiritual. One commentary I read said outright, 'There is no connection between sin and sickness, so this story makes little sense to us as it stands.' It is tragic that the foolishness of the scribes is repeated throughout history, so it is imperative that we recover a clear understanding of Jesus' intent within this important healing miracle. This was to make people see that He was not just a healer, or even just a teacher. He was the Son of God preaching the Kingdom and demonstrating it by forgiveness and healing.

Going Deeper

If we are to understand this famous story, we will have to explore the difficult subject of the connection between sin and sickness, as well as the spiritual and the physical. However, the rewards of doing this are great, because it opens up our understanding of the Gospel and also the nature and work of Jesus. Matthew, Mark and Luke all record this incident at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and it is there for a reason; it is vital for our understanding of Jesus.

What happened

The men who brought the paralysed man to Jesus had to take extreme measures because of the crowds who had surrounded Jesus and His ministry (see ch.1). Their ingenuity was considerable, as it cannot have been easy to manhandle a paralysed man on a mat onto the roof of one of the simply built mud and rock homes of the day. Moreover, the Greek indicates that the opening in the roof was close to Jesus, and their deconstruction of it would have to be astonishingly careful if it were not to rain down mud and sticks onto Jesus Himself! Once the man was lowered down, Jesus noticed the 'faith' not of the paralysed man, but of the four friends. Today, we tend to have discussions about whether the faith referred to the four men only or whether it could include the paralysed man. In my opinion, there is no doubt that it includes the paralysed man. We do not

know the extent of his paralysis or whether he could talk, but he was hardly inconsequential in everything that took place. The idea that the whole incident did not reflect his faith seems to me to be far-fetched, and Jesus would have seen the truth.

Jesus saw in this man the possibility of more than a plain physical healing. Most translations of Jesus' words to him are 'Son, your sins are forgiven', using the word 'son' because we already know that the sick person is a man; however, the Greek word here is 'teknon', meaning 'my child' or 'descendant'. It may be that Jesus saw in this man the potential for a faithful response to the Gospel which would one day make Him a follower. It is worth considering.

We will look at the details of the discussion between Jesus and the scribes in a moment, but it is important to note that Mark tells us that Jesus was capable of reading their thoughts. Here, though, Jesus did not simply 'read people's minds' in the same way that we can all tell something of what others are thinking simply by reading their body language. Mark specifically records that He 'perceived in His spirit' (2:8, see also Matt 12:25, Luke 6:8, John 1:48 etc.) what they were thinking, and this brief reference points us towards the theme of the connectedness of the spiritual and physical within this passage which we will look at shortly.

Jesus knew that the basic problem He faced was the denial and antagonism of the scribes, and their lack of desire to see God at work through Him. The famous conversation He had with the scribes was no conversation, for the scribes never spoke, except to say with everyone else at the end when the man was healed; 'we have never seen anything like this!' Jesus could not dismiss the evil in the scribes in the same way that He cast out demons. The evil of religiosity within the scribes and other religious authorities was one that would only be defeated on the Cross, and Jesus dealt with them here by being one step ahead of them, and able to rise above the predictable misunderstanding and antagonism of those who were jealous of Him and the authority which the people saw in Him.

Sin and sickness

There is an assumption in Jesus' words to the paralysed man (1:5) that his sickness was caused by some sin. If this were not so, then the idea that Jesus was forgiving the man his various sins so that this would restore his soul and gradually feed through into the general healing of the body, seems a little farfetched even if it may have been possible. Whilst we might prefer the second suggestion, it was far more commonly accepted in Jesus' day that sin caused sickness. But this matter needs some clarification.

With the lack of medical understanding of the ancients, it is perhaps understandable that they had a belief that sin caused sickness, but this was not a blind nor blanket assumption. They clearly observed as we can today that if you do certain things to your body or live life in certain ways then you will create physical problems, even sickness. Someone who is stressed in their relationships will probably get ill, for example. Also, it would be naive of us to assume that the ancients were not aware that not every sickness was caused by sin or mal-treatment of the body, soul or spirit. As we found out yesterday, whilst a leper was outcast because of illness, it was not assumed that any sin had caused it or made the leper 'guilty'. From a spiritual point of view, the ancients were far more attuned to the idea that if you contravened the laws of God in creation (you sinned), then you were likely to pay the price physically, in sickness. They might be quick to look at modern people and ride through our assumptions and political correctness and say 'you're fat and get ill because you eat and drink too much of the wrong things', or, 'you die because you smoke'. Both of these are things we know today but which we draw back from saying too much or too loudly for fear of giving offense. By throwing out the connection between sickness and sin, we have left ourselves open to misunderstanding of much illness today.

The truth is that sin does cause illness, but not all sickness is caused by sin, and that is as true today as it was in ancient times. It is likely that Jesus saw in the paralysed man some sin which lay at the heart of why he was paralysed, and with the courtesy of not mentioning it, told the man that he was forgiven (1:5).

The spiritual and the physical

At this point, we enter the difficult territory of the difference between Jesus and the scribes present in the house. The problem was that as far as the scribes were concerned, only God could forgive sins, and He did this through the sacrificial system of the laws of Moses. It was not acceptable under any circumstances for Jesus simply to say to a man 'your sins are forgiven'.

The reason that the scribes believed this was because they had been brought up to believe that the physical world in which they lived was made by God but tainted by evil, but that the spiritual