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Mark 2:1-17

If you could have dinner for one evening with anyone, alive or dead, who would you go for?

I always answer, "Well ... alive, please!"

Well when I was a bit younger, I used to live in a house with a few other guys, and we thought, "Why just ask the question? Why not *do it?*"

So when it came to birthdays or special occasions we used to actually send letters to invite famous people to our celebrations. Jennifer Morrison ... Sarah Chalke ... Christopher Lee (Count Dooku / Saruman)! And Christopher Lee actually replied! I never actually read his letter, but I believe it was words to this effect: ..."No."

It was fun. It was something to look forward to and enjoy ... but we never really believed that people like that — rich, famous, talented — would actually eat with — or even be seen with — people like us. We weren't eating at a five-star restaurant ... it wasn't even a one-star restaurant. We were just going down to the local Indian! They were never going to come. The best we could hope for was a polite "No" from Saruman.

That's how many of us think of us and God. Perhaps you don't believe in God, or do believe but have never really been serious about religion or Christianity. And the way you see it, if there is a God, He is 'out there', and I am 'down

here'. And between us there is this huge gap. And why would some transcendent, everlasting being, ever come down and join us at our table? And how? I mean, He's God, we're people!

But if you're a Christian, you've used language like, "I know I'm right with God", or "I've been forgiven" ... you get to pray to God ... and yet even then, He still seems more like an infinite Alexa than an intimate dinner guest.

And you know that the problem isn't God being far away ... it's that *you* are far away. You know God is wonderful, you know God is awesome, pure, truthful, loving ... but intimacy with God doesn't feel right when you still haven't mastered your bad temper, your lust, you still hold a grudge, your prayerlessness. Your faith tells you that God accepts you. But there's a voice that tells you He doesn't have to *like* you.

No ... God would never come and eat at my table.

But what we'll discover this morning in Mark is a God who goes out of His way to invite uninviteable people just like you and I to come to His table. A God who delights to dine with people like you.

How's that possible? Well, verses 1-5 of our passage this morning shows how ***He cleans the uncleanable.***

1. He cleans the uncleanable...

Have you ever queued up for something for ages, only to be turned away eventually. I remember I went to Manchester once to watch a cricket match, but when I got there, the queue for the gate went round the block twice. I queued for about an hour before they send word around that the tickets were sold out. The ground was full.

Well spare a thought for the people of Capernaum in chapter 1. Last week we read a sort of 'day in the life' of Jesus — in the morning He taught at the synagogue, in the afternoon He

healed Simon's mother-in-law, and in the evening, people brought Him the sick and demon-possessed. But the next morning, if you glance back at chapter 1 verse 37, "everyone" was still looking for Jesus. People who had missed last night's miraculous healing session, but had been queuing up outside Jesus' house for the same again this morning. But Jesus says in verse 38, "Let us go somewhere else..."

Turned away. Gutted.

So when we begin chapter 2, it's no surprise that Jesus is mobbed on His return:

"A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them." (w1-2)

And what happens next may be really familiar to us, so we have to be careful to look closely to see the things that Mark really wants to surprise us with.

Because here comes the paralysed man with his four heroic friends. It's clear that it's hopeless trying to get to Jesus by squeezing through a crowd. But a bit of out-of-the-box brainstorming and they remember, "You know that they say, *When you can't get through the door ... dig a hole in the roof!*"

Mark's pretty economical with the detail here; he leaves it up to us to imagine the scene inside the house. The awkward pause and silence as dust and plaster and straw start to fall from the ceiling. Does Jesus carry on? Then a growing shaft of bright sunlight shines on Jesus like a spotlight, and everyone realises, "Ok. We've got a scene here. They're making a scene."

The jeers of the crowd, captivated by Jesus' sermon, now cut short by some morons on the roof with a spade. And the owner of the house, effing and jeffing, looking to Jesus to send the

men away and get this beggar out of his living room.

And the poor guy on the mat, feeling like a lemon, being lowered down in front of a thousand angry eyes.

It's dramatic. It's great for the children's story Bibles. But Mark records none of that, because he wants to get us quickly to the big shock. Forget the hole in the roof. For Mark, the drama kicks in when we hear Jesus' shocking words: "Son, your sins are forgiven."

We'll look in a minute at why these words scandalised the whole house and religious community. But they're shocking today for a different reason. Christianity: The religion that follows a teacher who says that disabled people are sinful.

But the rest of the Bible doesn't allow us to make that link between a person's disability and their sin. In fact, Mark has been very clever with his material to show the very opposite. Mark didn't write with these chapter divisions. The way he wrote it, this episode follows back-to-back with chapter 1, verses 40-45, where Jesus heals a man with leprosy.

Ken showed us last week that leprosy was a skin disease that had been given a deeper meaning in Israel's history. It was used as a visual illustration of sin in a person's life — it numbs you, it's painless ... but it spreads beneath the surface, causing the skin or the limb to die inside. Because you can't feel it, it seems like it doesn't have any consequences, but it's eating you up, and will kill you.

So to demonstrate that a sinner is unacceptable to God, God says that people with leprosy can't come to worship in the temple.

But Mark is careful never to say that Jesus "healed" the man with leprosy, but that He "cleansed" him — so that we begin to learn that Jesus has come not to heal the bodies of the sick, but to clean the hearts of the uncleanable.

To make sinful people fit to be in God's presence.

Two things happen at once with the man with leprosy: his body is healed, and he's made acceptable to God.

Here in chapter 2, Mark shows the two things happening separately. Verse 5: no healing: but, "Son, your sins are forgiven." And Mark will go on to make it explicit in verses 14 and 15 when we meet a, wicked and greedy cheat with no sickness whatsoever, yet Jesus still calls Himself this man's "doctor."

The paralysed man is still paralysed. But what made him unclean and unfit for God's presence is now removed.

I want you to see that that's an amazing work that Jesus does. He sees what's inside us, our guilt, our cynicism, our prejudice ... and He is prepared to clean it all out. That's not something we can do ourselves.

If what came between us and God *was* physical, then we could try to heal it, or at least it would all go away when we die. But all the ways we reject God and refuse to listen is an offence that is simply uncleanable. It's irreversible. You can't take it back. *But* "Son, your sins are forgiven." "Daughter, your sins are forgiven." The uncleanable inside you ... is now clean.

He does it **by saying the unsayable.**

2. ...By saying the unsayable...

Imagine that I'm a talented painter. I paint a beautiful landscape of the most beautiful place in the world — the Clwydian Range in North Wales. Then one night someone breaks into my home and throws paint all over it and ruins it. The police manage to catch the vandal and bring them in to our church office to apologise. But before they do, [Ken] stands up and says, "Hey, no worries. I forgive you."

You can imagine how absurd and offensive that would be! What business has [Ken] to forgive a

offence committed against *me*? And don't you think that by doing that, he'd be implying that *he* was the artist, and he's taking credit for the beautiful piece of art *I* made?

It's just wrong. It's unjust, and it's robbing me of honour that's mine. The only one who has the right to forgive is the person offended.

That is why verse 5 is 'unsayable' in the eyes of the religious leaders there in Capernaum. Verse 7 spells out their thinking:

"Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

And aren't they right? Sin is against God — so He is the only one with the right to forgive. To claim you can forgive sins is putting yourself in the place of God, and taking credit for what God has made. That's precisely what blasphemy is.

But in verses 6 to 12, Mark gives three clues that lead us to a different conclusion. First — verse 8: "Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts..."

Who can possibly know what we are thinking in our hearts?

Second, verse 10, where Jesus calls Himself the "Son of Man". The Son of Man is from a vision in the Old Testament, where God on the throne in heaven gives glory and authority to another God-like figure. The Son of Man is worshipped by all the earth, just like God. And He is an everlasting sovereign ruler, just like God.

Can you put the clues together yet? Jesus knows our hearts, just like God. He's the Son of Man, sharing God's power, authority and worship. What's Mark saying about Jesus?

Clue number 3 is less a clue and more a punch on the nose, and it's how this story develops. Knowing that these teachers of the law were scandalised, Jesus poses a question in verse 9:

“Which is easier: to say to this paralysed man, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk?’”

Ask the paralysed man for the answer. He’s lying there, can’t move, he’s gone out on a limb to be healed, but he’s also put Jesus in the spotlight. It’s a test of Jesus’ healing powers in front of a captive audience. And instead of pronouncing a healing, Jesus seems to bottle it. Has he lost his confidence? Are his abilities fading? Is he having an off day? Because instead of a powerful and glorious healing, Jesus dodges it and says the easy thing: “Your sins are forgiven ... but it’s all internal, of course, so no one can see it ... you just have to take my word for it, and no-one can prove I’m a fraud.”

Yes, it’s *easier* to say, “Your sins are forgiven.” Harder to do, of course ... unless you’re God.

So Jesus says: “But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.’ So he said to the man, ‘I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.’” — He says it! — “He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all.”

Jesus says the harder thing to say to prove He’s done the harder thing to do.

Back to verse 7: “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” We have two options — either Jesus is blaspheming ... or He has forgiven the man’s sin *because He is God*. He is the Son of Man, eternally one with the Father.

What I love about this is that Jesus puts a physical and historical proof out there to assure us that our uncleanable heart is clean before God. It’s easier for me to preach to you about invisible things like Jesus making us fit for God’s presence, than it is for me to alter your world and heal your body. But because history records hundreds and thousands of eye witnesses to Jesus healing this man and many other, we have no reason to doubt that when Jesus says the unsayable, it’s true. He means it.

And He has authority to do it. If Jesus offers forgiveness of sins, it’s because God the Father has planned a way to invite us to His table to enjoy intimacy with Him.

That’s why Jesus has authority to say the unsayable. It’s ***in order to invite the uninviteable***.

3. In order to invite the uninviteable

At this point in the story, there’s a massive hole in someone’s roof. And there’s a paralysed man doing cartwheels in the streets. Jesus’ Twitter following mushrooms, every moment is being videoed, and Capernaum has sold out of selfie sticks as everyone wants a piece of Jesus.

His actions are miraculous. His teaching has authority. And it looks like He’s the Son of God.

The crowds are captivated.

He can now do pretty much whatever He wants. So this is what He does: He goes to find the most hated person in the community and welcomes him as His table.

That’s Levi, in verse 14 — he’s collecting taxes for the Romans, so he’s a traitor to his country. Rome requires £5 tax per person. Levi charges £35 and drives round in a Bentley. He’s a cheat. He’s selfish and he exploits others. He’s greedy. He’s the reason the schools can’t afford new books. He’s the reason local businesses are closing down. He’s a benefits cheat. He’s a substance abuser. He patronises women. He’s a racist.

Jesus says, “Follow me.” And by end end of the day, Jesus is behaving like they’re best friends — even inviting Levi’s mates round.

Scandal number 2 hits the Capernaum religious community. Verse 16:

“When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

Why? Because Jesus has come to clean the uncleanable from their hearts, by saying the unsayable and forgiving their sin, so that He can invite the uninviteable to have table fellowship with God.

“It’s not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

I love this: if Jesus really is God’s Son, with God’s authority, God-in-the-flesh, then it’s not that Jesus is just an open-minded, tolerant rabbi who’s gifted at outreach. It’s that the Father in heaven is so compassionate to failures, so merciful to stubborn rebels, so warm towards cold hearts and so tender towards broken hearts that He is determined to invite the uninviteable to His table.

He’s more ready to forgive than I am to ask for it. How slow we are to come to God, when we realise that God the Son came to earth in human flesh, lived among us, with all divine power and authority and sovereignty and glory ... and He used the infinite power and authority to heal sick souls of sinners.

For you and I then, there’s a glorious invitation. Come to Jesus. Come sick. Come sinful. Come guilty. He’s here offering to clean the uncleanable out of your heart; He’ll say the unsayable and forgive your sins; He invites the uninviteable to God’s table.

But notice no-one else can come to His table: “I have not come to call the righteous...” Did you maybe think that your charity work, your good character, your honesty, even your church attendance makes you welcome at God’s table? I’m afraid none of that qualifies you. In fact, trusting in those things is the most dangerous thing in the world — more than living a life of sin. Because the guilty come to Jesus for healing like an invalid to a doctor, and He invites the uninviteable. But until you accept the diagnosis of sin, you won’t even want to come, and you’ll forfeit God’s compassion and mercy.

Whatever thing you believe in your heart gives you confidence to face God — please, it’s not enough. Face up to sin, and join Levi’s table of sinners. There we meet Jesus, the doctor of souls, with authority on earth to forgive sins.

But if you carry the shame of things done in secret you can’t mention out loud; if you see in the mirror someone who keeps trying but failing to control your tongue, curb your temper, or conquer your temptations; if you regret that time you snapped last week, or you shouted yesterday, or you sulked this morning ... well come sick and be healed. Come sit at his table and enjoy.

If you could have dinner for one evening with anyone in the world, who would it be? God chooses the uninviteable. In Jesus, we see Him invite the sick and sinful to His table. If you feel far away, guilty, convicted, shameful, then that’s you. So accept that invitation and come to His table today.