

# “Discipleship in Mark’s Gospel: 2) The Hard Cost of Forgiveness”

a sermon by

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Text: “Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk?’” (Mark 2:9).

One of the most powerful and important books I have come across in recent years is a book by Richard Hays, entitled *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. In this book Hays wrestles with some of the difficult sayings about the Christian life that are found in the New Testament: the sayings of Jesus about divorce, money, war, nonviolence and the sharing of our possessions with others.

I think that anyone who takes the New Testament seriously finds that looking at the teachings of Jesus is like trying to look at the sun. There is a brilliant light that causes us, when faced with it, to turn and look the other way.

That is why the only persons to whom this message is addressed are those who are conscious of some moral wrongdoing. If there is anyone here who does not have an uneasy stirring of conscience about an attitude or relationship, then this sermon is not for him for we are going to talk about the forgiveness of sin.

## I.

Most of us, when we think of sin, think about a specific list of gross iniquities--murder, robber, sensuality, or drunkenness. Those plainly are sins. But they are not the only ones.

What about the sins of temperament--sullenness, vindictiveness, envy, jealousy, and a bad temper? How much more prevalent they are. From where I see it, often these types of behaviors do far more damage than even sins of passion. In Jesus' great story of the "Prodigal Son," the younger brother represents the sins of passion, and ruinous as they are, at least he came home. But the elder Brother represents another form of sin-- the sin of temper. When he saw that his father had received the prodigal home and that there was light, music and dancing over the return of a lost son, "he was angry, and would not go in." Bad temper, sullenness, envy and bitterness-- Jesus saw how these things could keep a person from the Father's house.

Then, there are the sins of social attitude. Thomas Friedman recently wrote in the *New York Times* a piece entitled, "No Mullah Left Behind," in which he made the point that Americans are participating in a very bizarre situation in which we are funding both sides of the War on Terror. We are supporting one side by borrowing money to pay for the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. We are supporting the other side by refusing to do anything to conserve energy in the United States, thereby generating huge windfall profits for Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Sudan, who in turn finance the madrasses, mosques, and militant fundamentalists who promulgate the rash of "suicide bombers." Friedman calls this misguided policy of our government "No Mullah Left Behind."

So maybe it is time, he suggests, for every college and university campus in American to demand that its boards of trustees disinvest from every U.S. auto company until they improve their mileage standards. Maybe it is time for every college town to declare itself a "Hummer- free zone" and insist that anyone who wants to drive a Humvee be required to join the Army and go to Iraq.

Or what about the sins of neglect? It is not only the things we do; it is the things we leave undone that haunt us--the letters we did not write, the words we did not speak, the opportunity we let pass by us. Jesus stressed the importance of this type of evil. He once told a story of a man with one talent who hid his one talent in a napkin. What did the man do? That was the problem. He did nothing. What was the trouble with the Priest and Levite who saw a man beaten and robbed on the road to Jericho? What did they do? They did nothing. They passed by a man in great distress.

Sins of the flesh, sins of temper, sins of social attitude, sins of neglect--I suppose there must be others, but this ought to take in most of us and make us wonder if we do not need this gospel of forgiveness.

This morning I want to stress the difficulty of forgiving sin. So often the church has stressed the forgiveness of sins as if it was some easy and lighthearted thing. But it is not.

## II.

During the weeks of Lent we are looking at the theme of "Discipleship in Mark's Gospel." One of the most frequent types of narratives in the Gospel of Mark is the "miracle story" in which Jesus performs great "signs and wonders." In Mark 2:1-12 we read of a paralyzed man who was brought to Jesus by his friends. Because of the large number of people who had crowded the house in which Jesus was speaking, these friends made a hole in the roof and lowered the paralyzed man from the roof. When Jesus saw their faith, he turned to the paralyzed man and said, "Your sins are forgiven. Take up your bed and walk."

Mark then introduces a "disputation speech" into the middle of this miracle story. In this instance some of the scribes who witnessed this healing were incensed. They wanted to know how Jesus could forgive sins. After all, they argued, only God can forgive a person's sins. Jesus replied to them by saying, "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven' or to say, 'Take up your mat and walk?'"

Let us not mistake the point Jesus is making. It is easier to tell a paralyzed person to walk --it is easier to meet any human need than it is to say, "Your sins are forgiven."

At first that sounds strange from Jesus. We would have thought it would have been easy for him to forgive sins. He said so many wonderful things about forgiveness; he exhibited it so freely in his life; he forever made it memorable on the cross. But it was hard for him to forgive, as it is for us. So why was it hard for Jesus to forgive?

## III.

In the first place, it was hard for Jesus to forgive because he took sin seriously. It is easy to condone sin, to make light of it; but when one takes it seriously, it is hard to forgive. Therefore, when you hear someone talking about forgiveness in a lighthearted way, you may be sure that the person is not talking about forgiving sin, he is talking about condoning sin, and that is another affair altogether.

Take, for example, the illustration of parenting. There are some parents who seem to have no moral depth or seriousness. They may have an instinctive care for their children, but if one of their children makes some serious error, they will receive the child, condone the sin, make light of it, say it does not matter, make more excuses for a child than a child could ever make for himself.

But some of us had parents who would have never forgiven in that way. They would have forgiven us, but it would have been serious. They would have taken upon themselves our misdeeds, as though they had done them themselves. They would have gone with vicarious steps to the gateway of any hell we turned our feet toward, and stood grief stricken at the door until we came out. They would have put themselves in our place, lived in our stead, felt upon their innocence the burden of our guilt. They would have forgiven us, but it would have turned their hair gray.

That is forgiveness. It always means self-substitution. The one who forgives gives himself. And it is never easy.

Which is easier, to say, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Stand up and take your mat and walk?"

#### IV.

In the second place, Jesus found it hard to forgive because he loved people. Now that may sound strange. If you love people, it is easy to forgive. No, you miss the point. If you love someone deeply, and that person does something to hurt you, it is very difficult to forgive that person. And sin always hurts other people. No one sins unto himself alone. Therefore when you care about people, it is hard to forgive.

The story of Joseph in the Old Testament tells us of a time when Joseph's brothers, jealous of his favored position with their father, dropped him into a pit, hauled him out again, and then sold him to a band of Midianite traders who took Joseph to Egypt.

Then his brother took the coat of Joseph that his father had made for him, dipped it in animal blood, and took it back to Joseph's father, telling him that his son was dead. Suppose these brothers had grown conscience stricken, remorseful, and in a deep spirit of contriteness had gone to their father confessing their sin and seeking his forgiveness. Can you not feel the first question that would have risen from this father's heart? Where is Joseph? Where is my son? You ask me to forgive you but your sin is not just between you and me. Where is Joseph? How can I forgive you until I know that all is well with my son?

When you love people, it is hard to forgive sin.

So in the gospels, you see that it was hard for Jesus to forgive sins. He was tremendously severe upon the Scribes and the Pharisees. "Beware," he said, "of the Scribes--they that devoured widows' houses, and for pretence make long prayers." Jesus' mother was a widow. He knew the difficult life a widow faced in his time. He knew widows had no rights. Whenever he encountered a widow, his heart went out to her. Maybe he had watched as the Scribes had taken advantage of these widows. "They had devoured widows' houses." That made it hard to forgive.

Jesus was hard on a wealthy man by the name of Dives. He had watched as Dives dined scrumptiously while at his gate a poor man by the name of Lazarus ate the food that the dogs would not touch.

When you love people, it is hard to forgive sin.

My friends, forgiveness is a miracle. No one ever took sin more seriously than Jesus. No one ever hated what it did to people any more than Jesus. And yet, he practiced forgiveness, and yet he taught forgiveness. That is the miracle. He taught forgiveness and practiced it in such a way that no poor human wreck was beyond the reach of its benediction.

Which is easier, to say “Your sins are forgiven,” or to say, “Stand up and take your mat and walk?”

#### IV.

In the third place, Jesus found it hard to forgive because forgiveness is such a difficult experience for the person who is forgiven. Now surely someone will object. One would think it would be a wonderful thing to be forgiven. But it is not. To hurt someone, to be alienated from that person, to be ashamed of yourself, and then by free forgiveness to be restored to friendship, that is one of the most difficult things a person can do.

For there is only one thing that forgiveness does--one thing only. Forgiveness does not take away the fact of the sin. It does not take away the memory of the sin. It does not and cannot take away the consequences of sin. Forgiveness can do only one thing. It can take a broken relationship and restore it again.

That is why Christians, when they have spoken of forgiveness, have always spoken of the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross of Christ means that forgiveness was not easy. It costs. That is why, when the gospel invites people to forgiveness, it has invited them to the cross. It reminds us that forgiveness is a costly matter. It is love putting itself in our place, bearing on its innocence our guilt.

Everything we have said this morning has led us to this: no person's sin is done with until it has come through the process of forgiveness. Either your sin has been forgiven or it is still in you as sin. That is one of the most solemn facts of human life.

Surely there is not one of us this morning who stands outside the need of this wonderful gospel of Jesus Christ. That is particularly true of the unforgiven sins that haunt each one of us.

Go down to that secret place. Unlock that hidden door. Take out that unforgiven sin. For your own soul's sake, get rid of it. There is only one way and it is the way of the cross--penitence, confession, restitution, and pardon.

