

# Truth for Today

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

---

For reply: Email: [truthfortoday@aol.com](mailto:truthfortoday@aol.com)

**Broadcast Date:** 21 October 2007

**No.** T0492

**Speaker:** Mr. Ian Mears

---

## God's Servant in Mark's Gospel: Mark 2

This talk is on Mark 2. It is all about our Lord Jesus Christ soon after the beginning of His ministry and is full of the most wonderful examples of His love, power and wisdom. The chapter consists of 28 verses and may be divided as follows:

- Verses 1-12 - the healing of a paralytic man
- Verses 13-17 - the call of Levi and why Jesus mixed with bad people
- Verses 18-28 - the effects of the new order that Jesus had brought in.

At the beginning of chapter 2, we read that the Lord entered Capernaum, the town on the shores of the Sea of Galilee which He had moved to from Nazareth after His baptism. At the end of chapter 1, we read that the Lord had healed a leper and told him not to tell anyone else, but the leper ignored this instruction. The result was that Jesus could no longer openly enter Capernaum. So He had retreated to deserted places but even there people still came to Him from every direction. Privacy and quietness were impossible so He came back to Capernaum. When people heard that He was in a house in the town, there was immediately such a crowd that the house was full. He preached the word to them.

And then four men came carrying a paralysed man. They wanted to get near Jesus but they couldn't because of the crowd. This did not defeat them. They did not say to their paralysed friend, "Oh well, we'll try and find Him some other time. You'll just have to wait." No, they were up on to the roof and making a hole in it to let their friend down. Getting him up the narrow stairs at the side of the house must have been quite a task but they did it. People are heavy and it's not surprising that it needed four to carry him. Now, what effort would you make to reach the Saviour? What would put you off? If you haven't already come to Him to be saved, what's keeping you back? And if you are already saved, what effort do you make to bring others to Him? How good a friend are we in spiritual matters? That's a question perhaps most Christians have to ask themselves. If all believers were the means of the salvation of just one other person each, the number of Christians would at least stop declining. If we all could bring two to the Saviour, the number would double and keep on doubling, wouldn't it? Imagine the difference it would make to the Church in Britain if we all showed the energy and persistence which the friends of the paralysed man did.

The Bible doesn't tell us what the owner of the house thought of a hole being made in his roof, nor what the people thought as bits of roof and perhaps spiders, insects and whatever else was lurking above their heads fell on them. What matters was that the friends let the paralysed man down on his bed. What happened next is not what we might expect. The Bible does not say, "When Jesus saw him," but, "When Jesus saw their faith." That was the really important thing. It was their faith in Jesus that He could heal the paralysed man that counted. How much faith have we in Jesus and His saving power?

What happened then is even more unexpected. The Lord did not say, as He did on other occasions, "Your faith has saved you." Instead he said, "Son, your sins are forgiven." We might think that being cured of paralysis was more important than anything else possibly could be, but that was not how Jesus saw things. The man's sin was the really big problem in his life, and it required being dealt with more than anything else. What do you think is the most important thing in your life - the one problem that overshadows everything else? It's your sins. It's what determines what sort of person you are and what your relationship is with God, your Creator. If you have been saved by coming to the Lord Jesus, then your relationship with God is that He is Your Father and you are his child. If you have not come to the Lord Jesus for salvation, then God is your judge because you are still in your sins. So having our sins forgiven does matter more than anything else.

It's quite likely that the paralysed man thought his condition was the result of his sins and so he may have had a very bad conscience, so what the Lord said to him was what he really needed to hear. Now the people crammed into the house were not just the neighbours and townspeople of Capernaum but also scribes, who were experts in the Old Testament and the Jewish laws and traditions. Their reaction to the Lord's forgiving the man's sins was to think to themselves, "Why does this man speak blasphemies like this? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" They were right; only God can forgive sins. The Lord, with His divine perception, realised what they were thinking so He asked them which was easier, to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven you," or to say, "Arise, take up your bed and walk"?

We can't see whether God has forgiven someone's sins, but we can see whether someone can walk. Of course, the scribes could neither forgive sins nor heal paralysis but both were equally possible for the Lord because He was God as well as man. To prove that he had both the power and the authority to forgive sins, He said to the paralytic, "I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house." And the paralysed man did just that. All were amazed and glorified God. Well, wouldn't you? Well, do you? Do you thank God when good things happen? Do you tell people what God has done for you? Not many of us do but it's a great pity that we don't.

At the beginning of the second section (verse 13), we read that Jesus went out again by the sea and the crowd came and listened to His teaching. It would seem that He never missed an opportunity to teach the people. There are two lessons here for us: firstly, how ready are we to hear His Word, and secondly, how ready are we to pass on to others what we have learnt from Him through His Word? In other words, how much are we prayerfully occupied with reading the Bible? How much time do we spend in prayer? Do we keep in contact with the Lord during the day? And how much does this time with Him over the Word spill over into our conversation with other people? We have to take this aspect of our lives seriously because, whether we like it or not, what we are in private before the Lord, how we spend our time, what we read, what we watch or listen to, or what we let our minds dwell upon will surely form what we are in public. As ever, Jesus is our perfect example with His long hours spent in prayer and his readiness to bring blessing to the people around Him by both word and miracle.

Next we read that, as He walked along, He saw a man called Levi collecting taxes. Now tax collectors (or publicans) were exceedingly unpopular in the Roman Empire. Paying taxes is never a fun thing to do but it was especially bad in those days because of the inefficient system the Romans had. It appears that each Roman province would be assessed for a certain amount of taxes and an individual would pay this and then have the right to collect taxes from the population of that province. He would contract this out to others who then had the right to collect from the general population. It was a way of getting rich quick because the tax collectors abused the system and collected far more than they should have done. People who were disinclined to pay would find that the tax collector's demands were enforced by the Roman soldiers. Not only that, but the taxes went to the Romans, the hated foreign occupying force, whom the Jews were hoping the Messiah, when he came, would rid the country of. So, of course, anybody working for the Romans and collaborating with them, and making himself rich at the local Jews' expense would be utterly loathed. People would not even eat with them. It also explains why so often in the Gospels the tax collectors are grouped with the sinners. People who were openly sinful and immoral, and criminals with no respectability would be the only sort who would accept them. Nowadays our society isn't split between a respectable class and an unrespectable class, with the respectable looking down on the rest in the way society was in the Lord's day. But then, there was a class of people known as sinners. It was really only the Lord who pointed out the hypocrisy of those who thought they were righteous, that is, right with God. The fact is, we are all sinners in the sight of God and thinking that we're better than others won't improve us or impress God.

To get back to our chapter, it was that sort of man - a tax collector - that Jesus stopped by and said the very simple but amazingly effective and far-reaching words, "Follow Me." And Levi got up and followed Him. Just like that. He left behind the ledgers, the desk, the money, all that had been of such importance to him that they overrode all other considerations. A man that would do anything for money just got up and walked away from it all. But he did not just leave behind the job; he left behind what gave him his identity and gave his life meaning. In fact, he left behind himself. This reminds me of what the Lord said on other occasions were the conditions we must fulfil if we are to be His disciples. Mark 8:34-37 reads, "When He had called the people to Himself, with His disciples also, He said to them, 'Whoever desires to come after me, let Him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?'" Levi may not have thought of gaining the whole world but he certainly wanted to gain money and all the advantages it is supposed to bring. He certainly wasn't denying himself and he obviously wanted a lot out of life in a thoroughly materialistic way. But that way would have ended in death, the ultimate futility. But he saw Jesus and he responded to His gracious and compelling call.

When Jesus said, "Follow Me," Levi didn't say, "I can't speak now, I'm busy. I'll see you after work." Or, "We're pretty stretched this week; how about next Friday?" Or, "I'll have to discuss it with my wife." Or, "What's the pay like. Is there a pension?" Or, "I can't come until head office send a replacement." Or "I can't come, not with my mortgage." Or, "You won't want me; I'm not the religious sort." Or even, which might seem very reasonable, "I'll have to think about it." He didn't make any of the excuses people make when they think they're serious but aren't really. Instead Levi just got up and walked away, not only from his method of earning a living but from the bondage it had put him in - the awfulness of such a dreadful way of life, the cheating and extortion and corruption, and the terrible reputation that went with being a tax collector. Notice that he didn't just walk away from what was wrong; he walked away with Jesus. The Lord didn't tell Levi to give up anything. He didn't tell him how awful his life was and that he'd have to improve. Anyway, it would have been impossible for Levi to start living a better life by making a big effort to change. Instead the Lord invited Levi to a new life with Him. Levi was then free from the old life, not by his own efforts but because of the delivering power and attractiveness of Christ. And it wasn't just an improved life; it was in fact eternal life.

Things were never the same again for Levi. He could never have gone back to his former profession. In John 21 after the Lord's resurrection, Peter, the former fisherman, said to the other disciples, "I am going fishing." It may not have been the best thing to do in the circumstances but it was not disgraceful or immoral or anything like that. But Levi could never have gone back to collecting taxes.

Only the Lord has the authority to call a person from their home and family and from their whole way of life to follow Him. It has been truly said that, when Jesus calls a man, he calls him to die. Levi died to all that he had been. It no longer held any attraction for him nor did it have any grip on him. Have we turned our backs as decisively as he did on the past, on all that belongs to the past sinful life? Not just to the obviously bad things which marked us but to all the aspects of our characters and ways of doing things that really belong to the sinful flesh, that part of us which is perpetually opposed to God. Have we ever judged them? Have we ever walked away from them decisively? Are we truly dead to these things? Are we truly dead to our own self-importance and likes and dislikes? Have we even thought about it? May we all follow Levi's example. If there's room at the Saviour's side for a man like him, there's room for us all.

But that was not all. Levi invited Jesus to dine at his house. The tax-collectors and sinners were there - all the local riffraff - and the Lord Jesus too. We read that many of them also followed Him. This was not missed by the hyper-religious, the scribes (experts in the Jewish law) and the Pharisees (the very strict and much-respected religious party). They were mystified that a man like the Lord could eat and drink with such people. But He could and He did. Why? His own words explain it all: "Those who are well have no need of a doctor, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."

What wonderful words! What truly wonderful words. If the Lord had come to call only the righteous, we'd all be in a terrible situation for the Bible tells us that there is none righteous, no, not one. How could we ever be accepted by God if only the righteous could be saved? But, of course, the Lord was only referring to those who thought themselves righteous, like the scribes and Pharisees. It is those who realise their own sinfulness and need of salvation that the Saviour came to call. Have we realised just how sinful we are and how unacceptable to God our condition is? He would be unjust not to judge us for our sins. However, when we realise even only something of our need, we can turn to the Lord and find Him to be a welcoming Saviour, One who is well aware of all our faults and to whom everything, however shameful, can be admitted. And we do need to admit, to confess our sins. He came to call sinners to repentance. We have to repent, to turn away from our sins and the lifestyle that goes with them. Without repentance, we can't really be saved from our sins and the judgement they deserve.

The last section, beginning at verse 18, tells us that the disciples of John the Baptist and the disciples of the Pharisees were fasting, that is not eating for religious reasons - it's not dieting! You only fast if you're serious and, if you're serious, you think that everybody should be serious the way you are. Even if we are truly following the Lord and living in obedience to the Scriptures, we need to be careful not to be critical of the imagined shortcomings of others. The Pharisees were not worried about being too critical of others as being critical was all part of their way of life. But something had happened which they had failed to understand. The Lord Jesus had brought in something completely new and there was, for the time being, no need to mourn and go about miserable. Is anybody sad at a wedding? Think of the differences in dress and behaviour between a wedding and a funeral. The Lord said that the friends of the bridegroom (meaning His disciples) had with them the bridegroom (meaning Himself) so they could not fast. However, it would not be for long because the bridegroom would be taken from them and then they would fast. The Lord's death brought the disciples great sorrow and, despite the resurrection and all that it means for us and the real Christian joys which we experience, there is still at the very least an element of longing because the Lord is not with us, and the more He means to us, the more we will miss Him. One day, soon we hope, we shall be with Him and shall see Him face to face but not yet. So there are times for us now when fasting is appropriate.

The Lord then went on to say that nobody would put a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; or else the new piece would pull away from the old, and the tear would be made worse. We don't have clothes like that now; we don't have to keep them from getting wet in case they shrink, but it wasn't that long ago when new clothes might well shrink. If you had used a new piece of cloth to patch a hole in old clothes, it would have shrunk and torn a bigger hole.

And, He said, "No one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine bursts the wineskins, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins." New wineskins were needed because they would stretch as the wine fermented, whereas the old ones were too rigid to cope with the fermentation. Jesus had brought in something new which couldn't be put into the old form of Judaism without the kind of result which the torn cloth and split wineskins are pictures of. We can see from the reaction of the scribes and Pharisees that the new order would not fit in the old one at all.

How well the disciples had learnt and applied this lesson can be seen from the final verses of our chapter. Jesus and the disciples were going through the grainfields one Sabbath and the disciples plucked the ears of grain and ate them.

Eating other people's grain like this was permitted under the Jewish law but it looked like work, especially rubbing the ears to get the grains out. The Pharisees - who else? - spotted this and criticised the disciples. They could not find fault with the Lord directly because it would seem He had not been plucking the ears of grain; His enemies could never accuse Him of breaking the Law. The Lord, however, pointed out that when David and the men with him were fleeing from Saul, they had eaten special bread which was only for the priests. It would seem that, because of the special circumstances and danger David was in that this had been permitted. The implication was, if it was all right for David for the Law to be flexible, it was all right for the disciples. In addition, Jesus said that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. The Sabbath gave everybody, even animals, a day completely free of work every week. Not even slaves could be made to work on the Sabbath. People like the Pharisees had made the Sabbath a burden with numerous rules, some of which may seem pretty petty to us and far from the weekly liberation from grinding toil which God had intended. In any case, Jesus announced that He was Lord of the Sabbath. It was His Sabbath and He had the right to say how it should be kept. This is another mark of His divinity.

We also see how Jesus supported His disciples when they were criticised. They were His and He looked after them. He does the same for us today.

To sum up, we have seen in this chapter the power of the Lord Jesus to heal and deliver the physically and morally powerless, and the liberating effects of the new order which the Lord was introducing, marked by grace rather than law. We have also been challenged by what our response to the Lord should be - faith, determination to be blessed, repentance, turning away from sin and this evil world, whole-heartedly following the Lord Jesus, experiencing the liberation He has brought to believers, and to be more eager to pass on the good news about our Lord Jesus Christ to others. And we've learnt not to be like the Pharisees. May God's Spirit truly impress these lessons on our hearts.

---

**Please Note:**

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.