

## **ARE WORDS STRONGER THAN THE SWORD?**

### **Mark 2:1-12**

#### **Introduction:**

Last Sunday was Valentine's Day, and the internet was full of posts and memes, all asking one question: "Would you be my Valentine?". In everyday language, it seems everyone was trying to say, "You are important to me. I care about you. I love you."

Words are powerful, but they are often misunderstood. In his now-classic book, "The Five Love Languages", Christian psychologist and author Gary Chapman described five ways in which we communicate love to each other. They are:

1. Words of affirmation
2. Quality time
3. Receiving gifts
4. Acts of service
5. Physical touch

As Chapman explains, we each have our own love language. We tend to express love for others in the same way we want them to express their love for us. Unfortunately, they do the same. The result is that we often fail to communicate love to others in ways they understand, and we ourselves fail to appreciate the ways others express their love for us.

When we first met, Renata and I spoke different languages. As we got to know each other better, we discovered that the difference in our love languages are greater than the difference between our native languages, between English and Polish. My personal love language features frequent words of encouragement together with physical touch. A hug and a kind word from a close friend or loved one – that communicates to me that I am loved, that someone cares. Renata also likes kind words and warm hugs, but she speaks a different love language. Acts of service and spending quality time together make her feel special, -help her to feel loved and cared for. After thirty years of marriage we are still enjoying the process of learning to speak each other's love language.

Jesus also speaks his own love language. The story of Jesus and the paralytic in Mark chapter 2 is a story of faith and healing, both physically and spiritually. But even more it is a story of the power that words have to help and to hinder, to wound and to heal, to condemn and to forgive. In this short passage, words for saying or speaking are used nine times. At first Jesus seems speak a different love language than the paralytic and his friends. They came for healing, yet he offers forgiveness. Did he miss the mark in communicating his care and compassion for this man? And are words really stronger than swords? Let's look at the text to find out.

**Text: Mark 2:1-2 (ESV)**

1 And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home.

2 And many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And he was preaching the word to them.

3 And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men.

4 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.

5 And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

6 Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts,

7 "Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

8 And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question these things in your hearts?"

9 Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'?

10 But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"-he said to the paralytic-

11 "I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home."

12 And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!"

**Interpretation:**

**1 And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. 2 And many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And he was preaching the word to them.**

Jesus came preaching the Kingdom. His message was clear: “The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel.” In the previous chapter we read that Word of his preaching and his power to heal the sick spread so quickly, that he had to retreat into the wilderness to escape the crowds. And still they came to him. When he returned to the city, the news spread that he was at Simon Peter’s house, which served as his base of operation in Capernaum. Once again, a large crowd gathered to hear him teach.

**3 And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. 4 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 paralytic man was unable to walk. He could not get to Jesus on his own power. He needed someone to carry him. And he needed Jesus to heal him, to cleanse him, to forgive him. I like this man, but I like his friends even more. True friends stand by their friends when they are in need.

But paralyzed limbs were not the only difficulty they had to overcome. There was another obstacle - the crowd. The paralytic’s friends could not get close to the door of the house where Jesus was teaching, much less get inside and approach Jesus to ask him for healing. So they improvised, and in the process took full advantage of the opportunity to demonstrate friendship, courage and faith.

Houses in Israel were built of brick walls. They made the ceiling by placing wooden beams on top of the walls, spread branches over the beams, then covering it all with mud or clay. Such ceilings were easy to build, and almost as easy to tear apart. What is more, you could reach the roof using a wooden ladder fastened to the outside of the house.

The man’s bed was a simple litter, like those which most poor people slept on. Making a man-sized hole in the roof would result in a lot of noise and dust. How do we feel when

a baby cries during Sunday worship? When someone's cell phone goes off during a music concert? The paralytic's friends made a big mess and a much bigger disturbance.

**5 And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."**

Jesus saw *their* faith – but there is no mention here of the paralytic's faith. Did he ask his friends to take him to Jesus? Did he also believe that Jesus could heal him? Whatever words the paralyzed man expected Jesus to say, these were not the words Jesus spoke to him. The man wanted to be healed, to be able to walk on his own power. Instead Jesus forgave his sins. As surprised as he was at Jesus's words, there were others present who were even more astonished at the love language Jesus spoke to the paralytic.

**6 Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 7 "Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"**

Here we find a new element in Mark's Gospel. For the first time the Jewish scribes come on the scene, and immediately there is a conflict. This is the first of a series of controversies in Mark 2:1-3:30 between Jesus and Jewish religious leaders. This initial controversy is over the identity and authority of Jesus. Mark included this story in his Gospel to show that Jesus has power and authority, both to forgive sins and to heal sickness. In the structure of this passage, this controversy occupies the central place, which serves to confirm that the main message of this passage is to demonstrate that Jesus has the authority to forgive sin.

When the priests in the temple sacrificed an innocent lamb and announced forgiveness, the people's sins were only covered temporarily. Yet Isaiah prophesied that the coming Messiah would bear the penalty for our sins once and for all. [Isaiah 53:4-12]. This prophecy speaks of Christ, the eschatological high priest described in the Letter to the Hebrews, the Messiah who came to remove sins once and for all.

In the Old Testament God's servants, such as priests and prophets, could announce forgiveness of sins. They declared forgiveness to those who brought their sacrifices to the Temple, or who came to be cleansed in ritual baptism. Yet they knew that God and God alone has the authority and the power to forgive sins. The scribes here understood that Jesus was claiming to be the active agent, that is the one who accomplishes forgiveness, not merely the human agent who announces forgiveness.

Mark writes that when the learned scribes heard Jesus's words, they "questioned in their hearts". In the Bible the heart is the center of cognition and volition, of thought and will, of a person's emotional and spiritual life. The word used here "to question" means to reflect or to ponder, and often has a negative connotation. Mark suggests that their thoughts were rational, skeptical, calculated, in short - scheming.

**8 And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question these things in your hearts? 9 Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'?"**

Mark writes that Jesus perceived the scribes doubts and schemes "in his spirit". In the Bible, the spirit is the seat of human emotions, will and intellect. It is thus similar in meaning to the word for "heart", but overall more positive.

Our actions either confirm or contradict our words. There is a well-known saying in English: "Your actions speak louder than words." People use this test all the time, except perhaps when it comes to the politicians they choose to vote for. Jesus, however, was not afraid to be judged by the same standard we use to judge others.

Some things are easy to say, but hard to prove. It is easy to say, "your sins are forgiven", because no one can prove if it is true or false. Other things are easy to say, but hard to do. It is hard to say to a paralyzed person "stand up and walk", because

everyone can see whether or not healing has taken place. This is a common rabbinic argument “from the greater to the lesser”: If Jesus can do the harder thing, he can also do the easier thing. Note however that, theologically speaking, forgiving sins is the harder thing.

By his words and his actions Jesus forced people to think and to feel; he challenged them to dig deeper. He provoked their response by forgiving sin, or by healing on the Sabbath. Jesus answered questions few dared to ask, and asked questions few dared to answer. Even today his questions as well as his answers continue to surprise us. But we should not be surprised. Jesus speaks his own language of love, because he wants to give us more than we could ever hope for or imagine.

**10 But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" - he said to the paralytic - 11 "I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home."**

“The Son of Man” was Jesus’ favorite term to describe himself. It is used 14 times in the Gospels. In Ezekiel it is a messianic title, which implies divine origin and power. In order to carry out God’s will on earth, God the Father, who is in heaven, sent the heavenly Son of God to become the earthly Son of Man.

Jesus’ words, “I say to you” are parallel to Moses’ words to Pharaoh. [Cf. Exodus 7:17; 8:10,22; 9:14; 10:2.] There, Moses declared God’s judgment. Here Jesus declares God’s healing and forgiveness.

The Zealots were a Jewish group who wanted to overthrow Rome and re-establish Israel as an independent nation. They looked for a revolutionary Son of Man who would establish God’s Kingdom on Earth by judging sin and condemning the enemies of God. Mark on the other hand depicts Jesus as the one who would establish God’s Kingdom on earth by forgiving sin and offering reconciliation to God’s enemies through his death and resurrection.

In the ancient world it was generally assumed that sickness was a form of God's punishment for sin [cf. Job]. As seen in Rabbinic literature, a strong connection was made in Jewish culture between sickness and sin. Jesus does not address this issue directly.—He does not discuss the question of this man's guilt, or if there was any connection between his paralysis and his own personal sin. Nevertheless, we read in John 9:2-3 that when Jesus was asked whose sin caused the man's blindness, his own or his parents, he answered, "neither this man's nor his parents". Here as well the progression is from faith to healing, not from repentance to healing.

Jesus takes advantage of the popular link made between sin and sickness to establish both God's power to heal, but more importantly the reality of God's forgiveness of our sin. In forgiving the paralytic's sin, and then going on to demonstrate that he had the power to do so by healing the man's body, he freed the paralytic of the accusations he had heard all his life: "You are paralyzed because you are a sinner". We saw the same thing last week in the healing of the leper; he was cleansed, both physically and spiritually.

**12 And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!"**

The people declare, "We never saw anything like this!" This is radical newness! Note that they praised God, not Jesus for this healing. So were Mark's readers supposed to think that Jesus is God, or merely God's earthly agent? Mark chose to leave this a bit ambiguous, for both are true! Jesus fulfills God's will on earth, he carries out God's work. To do this in the way he did it can only mean that he himself is God in the flesh.

### **Conclusion and Application:**

Words are indeed stronger than swords. But actions are stronger than words. This is true on our human level. On the spiritual level, however, things are quite different. God's

Word is both word and action. There is no dissonance between what God says and what God does. When someone is healed by our words of prayer and faith, it is because God in response spoke his word to restore health to their body. When someone is healed spiritually through prayer and faith, it is because God spoke his Word of restoration and reconciliation in Jesus Christ. (Heb. 1:1-4). The Scribes response to Jesus was doubt, calculated reasoning, scheming. The people's response to Jesus was amazement and worship. What will our response be?

Jesus was busy teaching, yet he turned his full attention to the paralytic. He spent quality time to learn and to speak a crippled man's love language. He took time out from his preaching ministry to speak with the paralytic, to perceive his physical and his spiritual needs, and to heal both his body and his heart. He spoke words of affirmation, of forgiveness and acceptance. Certainly the paralytic received Jesus's words and actions as a gift, and as concrete acts of service that met his specific needs. The only love language we don't see Jesus speaking here is that of physical touch, though he spoke that language on many other occasions.

Do we have the faith and courage to stand by our friends when they are hurting? On a practical level, this means more than telling them of Jesus' love and forgiveness. What will we do to let them know we care for and support them? What obstacles will we overcome to help them in their time of need? If we are to be like Jesus, we must be willing to spend time learning to speak each other's love languages. And in the process, we would do well to recognize that our friends and loved ones may be speaking to us in their own love language, that they are giving us tangible signs not only of the love that they themselves want to receive, but also of how they want to receive it. A smart person can learn to pick up on these clues. When we recognize other people's love language, instead of feeling frustrated they do not speak our language, we can appreciate their efforts to say, "I love you". And we can reciprocate by speaking their love language. And I might add this: as we say in America, "the squeaky wheel gets the grease". We cannot assume that others will understand the ways we want to be loved. That does not mean that they don't care, just that they are human like the rest of us. Since none of us have

the same insight into people as Jesus did, if we want others to express their love for us in ways that we understand best, we must teach them how to speak our love language.

Jesus still speaks to us today. He speaks through his Word, through the Holy Spirit, through other people, through our circumstances. The question is not whether Jesus is speaking, but whether we are listening. As I look back on my life I can recognize many times when Jesus was speaking words and deeds of love to me, and yet I missed it, because I wanted him to speak a different language. I was disappointed and discouraged, so I disregarded his words, I despised his gifts, I denied his good intentions and acts of love towards me. Even today, just as Renata and I are still learning to speak love to each other, I am still learning to understand and speak Jesus's love language.

We all have a choice. We can be like the learned scribes and respond with doubt and questioning. We can doubt whether God truly understands us, whether he is willing and able to meet us where we are. We can question his desire to bring physical, emotional and spiritual healing. Or in faith we can receive his good gifts, by faith we can accept his loving words and deeds, knowing that he loves us, and that he will meet not merely our felt needs, but ultimately our deepest needs, the unspoken needs of our hearts.

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## **SUMMARY: ARE WORDS REALLY STRONGER THAN THE SWORD? Mark 2:1-12**

This is the first of a series of controversies in Mark 2:1-3:30 between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders. This first controversy is over the identity and authority of Jesus. Mark included this story in his Gospel to show that Jesus has power and authority both to forgive sins and to heal sickness.

In Jewish culture it was often assumed that sickness was a form of God's punishment for sin. Jesus bypasses this argument. By first forgiving the paralytic's sin, and then demonstrating that he had the power to do so by healing his body, Jesus cleared him of the accusations he had heard all his life: "You are paralyzed because you are a sinner".

Words are stronger than the sword. But actions are stronger than words. This is true on our human level, because our words do not always match our actions. God's Word is

both word and action. There is no dissonance between what God says and what God does. When someone is healed by our words of prayer and faith, it is because God spoke his word to restore health to their body. When someone is healed spiritually it is because God spoke his Word of restoration and reconciliation in Jesus Christ. The Scribes' response to Jesus was doubt and calculated reasoning. The people's response to Jesus was amazement and worship. God is still speaking today. But are we listening? When we hear, what will our response be?

### **SHORT SUMMARY: ARE WORDS STRONGER THAN THE SWORD? Mark 2:1-12**

Words are stronger than the sword. But actions are stronger than words. God's Word is both word and action. Healing, whether physical or spiritual, results when Jesus, the Word of God, speaks salvation into our lives. God is still speaking today. But are we listening?

#### **Questions for discussion:**

1. Today are you more like the paralyzed man who needs healing and forgiveness, his friends who brought him to Jesus, or perhaps the Scribes who doubted the healing words Jesus spoke?
2. Gary Chapman lists five "love languages" we all speak: words of affirmation, quality time, receiving gifts, acts of service and physical touch. What is your love language? In other words, how do you like others to "speak" (express) love to you?
3. How good are we at speaking the love languages of our friends and loved ones? How can we improve at speaking their love language?
4. Can you think of a time when God has spoken a word of physical or spiritual healing into your life?
5. How can we pray for you tonight and this coming week using your love language?