

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
February 23 & 24, 2013
John Crosby
The Essential Teachings of Jesus: Authority to Forgive
Mark 2:1-12

We're here together because at the beginning of this year, we decided we would try to distill all the different teachings of Jesus down to what is at the core. We are trying to answer the question, what are the essential teachings of Jesus, the words that give life? Week after week we have been trying to build on the foundation of those essential teachings of Jesus where Jesus Himself is asked, "What's the most important thing we have to do?" He responds with what we are calling the Jesus Creed. We have made four printings of the Jesus Creed. If you haven't had a chance to pick one up, you can get one today. They are at the back of the sanctuary as you leave and on the round table in the Great Room. We are encouraging people to do what the Jews do. Every morning when they wake up and every evening before they go to bed, when they leave the house and when they have meals, they recite the most important thing to them, the *Shema*.

4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. **5** Love the LORD your God....
[Deuteronomy 6:4]

That is the root of the Jesus Creed, and we are trying to learn it together, so how about if we begin today by answering the question that Jesus was asked. "What is the most important commandment?"

29 "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this:

Say it together,

(All) 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. **30** Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' **31** The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these. [Mark 12:29:31]

We believe that when Jesus speaks and we really listen to what He is saying, it starts to change us, both in big ways and in very small ways. What we would like to do between now and Easter is ask you, how is the Jesus Creed shaping you? How has it changed you in big ways or small ways as you recite it, as you think about it through the day, as you try to follow it? We are going to ask you to share some of those stories in the weeks ahead.

Here is another essential teaching of Jesus. Would you pull out your Bibles, please? This teaching is found at the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, the end of chapter 1, the beginning of chapter 2. It's on page 1,490. Mark, chapter 1 ends with the story of Jesus curing a leper. He

has compassion on him. "Of course, I want to heal you," Jesus says. But then he says, "Now go to the temple and for God's sake, don't tell anybody how you were healed." But the leper could not help himself and he told everybody that Jesus had healed him. As a result of that, Jesus' private teaching, His life as an individual, was over. It says, "He became so popular, He couldn't enter into any of the towns because this man kept talking about Him." In modern parlance, Jesus had gone viral. He couldn't go anywhere without a crowd following, like Rich [Pastor Rich Phenow] told the kids. So it says,

1 A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. 2 They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. 3 Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. 4 Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. 5 When Jesus saw their faith...

By the way, if you don't have a pencil, grab one or a pen and underline that, will you please? Underline *when Jesus saw their faith*. Just underline that so the next person who reads this realizes that this is a story about faith. We are going to underline a couple of other things, so keep the pencil handy.

5 When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

I think the paralytic was hoping for something else.

6 Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, 7 "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

That, I believe, is the essential question in this whole passage. Underline that, *Who can forgive sins but God alone?* And if it's already underlined, circle it, please.

8 Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? 9 Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? 10 But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins."

The key word in this whole story is in that sentence. It is the word *authority*. Circle the word *authority*, please. Jesus has authority on earth to forgive sins.

So he said to the man, 11 "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." 12 He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

Everyone there was amazed. They were cheering God. Now hold your Bibles open because I want to show you another thing, but first I've got to tell you, I think we lose the power of this story because we have heard it all of our lives, or at least all of our church lives. We've heard this story so we lose the emotion of it. Anybody see *60 Minutes* this past week? In the middle of

a story about mercy ships, there was short teaching there on the story of the paralyzed man. One minute long. Here's what it looked like.

(Video begins.)

Gary Parker is the chief surgeon. "Hellooooo." And one of his patients, Edoh, was back for a checkup 17 years after surgery. You're thinking she's disfigured now, but in 1995, at the age of 9, a tumor destroyed her face and it was crushing her windpipe. "She was struggling to breathe. I was amazed at the sense of community, and lots of people were waiting outside the gate, and many with problems of their own, but when they saw Edoh, they picked her up, put her over their heads, and literally passed her through the crowd over the gate and into the screening because they recognized that her need was greater."

(Video ends).

When little Edoh came out of the clinic, people stood and clapped and cheered and said, "It's unbelievable!" And every time they saw her face, they were reminded of what can happen when someone from the outside comes and does what *they* cannot. This teaching is about what happens when we take the poor and the broken and put them up above and pass them forward. In this case, lay them in front of Jesus to do what we cannot do. That's how that teaching felt. They were amazed because Jesus did something miraculous. Miracles are part of the teachings of Jesus. They are part of what makes Him a different kind of teacher. Miracles authenticate the message of Jesus. They are signs of power, signs that this is not an ordinary teacher. They are also signs that show the kind of God that Jesus is talking about. Not a crusher, not an angry person, but a loving, restoring, recreator God, and He doesn't want anyone to ever forget that.

Rich showed the kids how this story felt, the power of friendship, what it's like when someone is put in front of Jesus. I hope that the kids never forget that. I hope they always think Jesus can heal people. We need friends. That's the PG version of this story. Today I would like us to speak as adults, one to another, and see a different slant on the story. First, just a little about the Gospel of Mark. Mark is the first story that's told about Jesus. Somewhere in the 50s, that is, about 20 years after Jesus dies and is resurrected, a manuscript starts to circulate that has the teachings and the sayings of Jesus of Nazareth. Quickly it is called Mark.

We find out in about the year 110 how we got the Gospel of Mark. There was a bishop from Turkey named Papias, and he says this about Mark. "John Mark, who had been Peter's interpreter," remember Peter is in Rome, John Mark "wrote down carefully all that he remembered of the Lord's sayings and doings but not in order." That is, John Mark wrote down carefully all that *Peter* remembered of Jesus' sayings and doings, but he did not put them in order. Instead Mark arranges the story of Jesus to tell it in ways that we won't forget.

Here in the first 12 verses of chapter 2 is the first of four challenges to the authority of Jesus. Then in just 21 verses, the crowd goes from "Everyone is amazed. We love this guy," Jesus went viral, to "Let's kill Him." What happened from verse 12 in chapter 2 to verse 6 in chapter 3?

Jesus healed to prove that He can forgive sin, and they were **amazed**. Next, and we will talk

about this next week, Jesus was hanging around with sinners, and they were **shocked**. Right after that, Mark tells the story of how the disciples did not fast like religious people were supposed to, and the religious people were **challenged**. Amazed, shocked, challenged, and then **Jesus does two things which are illegal on the Sabbath**. He lets His disciples pick grain and then He goes into the synagogue and heals.

1 Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. **2** Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath.

It says Jesus looked at them in anger, furious at their indifference to human need, and He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand," and Jesus healed him. Then, 21 verses after "Everyone was amazed" is this.

6 At once the Pharisees went away and met with the supporters of Herod to plot how to kill Jesus. [Mark 3:6]

These four stories are not stories about teaching. They are not stories about miracles. These stories are about who is in charge, who has authority. The Pharisees say, "Who does He think He is to forgive sins? Who has the authority except God? These are stories about authority, about loyalty to the King. Cute little stories about friendship but mostly stories about which king you will follow. Will you follow the king of this world? Will you follow the king of religion? Or will you follow this new King? There is a difference. It depends on who you put your faith in.

I listened to a lecture this month that reshaped my view of faith. I've always thought that **faith is about trust**. I think it is true that the difference between faith and knowledge is that faith is knowledge that trusts. I also think it is true that **faith is about belief**. You have to know what you trust in. So faith is about trust and about belief, but this professor said, "In the Bible in the story of Jesus, faith is about believing the right things," which churches spend a lot of time on, telling people how to trust Jesus. This is important. But then he says, "**Faith is about loyalty.**" Faith is about to whom will you be loyal when the pressure comes? Who is your authority? Jesus teaches not for belief but for obedience, for loyalty to Him, to His authority. Jesus knows, the Pharisees know, you can believe anything you want as long as you don't act on it. People don't get in trouble for what they believe. They get in trouble for what they *act* on.

In the 1930s and 40s, Germany was a Christian nation, overwhelmingly Lutheran. People believed in Jesus, but this is the 70th anniversary of Sophie Scholl. Sophie Scholl was a 22-year-old German student, who protested Hitler by wrapping the slaughter of the Jews into Christianity. She said, "*That's* not Jesus! *That's* not *my* Jesus!" She said, "Not all are called to martyrdom, not even many, but we are all called to lift up the cross and follow Jesus." She protested the killing of the Jews, and the Germans arrested her and Hitler killed her at age 22 because her authority was in King Jesus. All the Christians believed the same thing, but only Sophie was loyal enough to act on it.

So do we speak against child laborers or do we profit in silence? Do we protest the idea that many of our drug laws are inequitable because they punish people in the inner city and they don't punish kids in the suburbs, or do we say, "That's just the way life is"? Do we stand up against people who carve crosses in lawns or invoke Sharia Law in the name of God, or do we

just keep our heads down? Are you just trying to be loyal and get through this world and be safe? We're big on safe. What happened that day with the paralyzed man was, somebody decided not to be safe. Four men decided, "I don't care if they all think we're weird. I think this Jesus guy can heal him." They decided to be loyal to King Jesus no matter what people said. Mark Buchanan wrote a book called *Your Church Is Too Safe*, and he says this,

Historian Daniel Boorstin shows a huge shift in North America in the 19th century: we stopped calling people who went on trips travelers and started calling them tourists. Traveler literally means "one who travails."

Back then travel was tough. Travel was a travail.

He labors, suffers, endures. A traveler—a travailer.... If ever he returns, he returns forever altered. In that sense, he never goes back. A tourist, not so.

Instead, we started being tourists.

Tourist means, literally, "one who goes in circles."

In other words, you go out to return.

He's just taking an exotic detour home. He's passing through, taking pictures, acquiring souvenirs....

Tourists!

At some point we stopped calling Christians disciples and started calling them believers.

We are believers in Jesus.

A disciple is one who follows and imitates Jesus. She loses her life in order to find it. She steps in....Christ, until His Word and His world reshape her world, redefine her, change inside out how she sees and thinks and dreams and, finally, lives.... Friends who knew her before scarcely recognize her now. You can't be a disciple without being a believer. But, here's the rub; you can be a believer and not a disciple. You can say all the right things, think all the right things, believe all the right things, do all the right things and still not follow and imitate Jesus. The kingdom of God is made up of travailers,

Travelers, people who go out and come back changed.

but our churches are largely populated with tourists. The kingdom is full of disciples, but our churches are filled with believers. It's no wonder we often feel like we're just going in circles.

Because that's what tourists do. All the people crowded in that house saw the roof open up, saw the man lowered down, saw Jesus arguing with the Pharisees about who had the power, who had the authority, saw the man get up and walk out. Some of them said, "Wow! That's great!" What do you think happens tomorrow? They are tourists. Or are they are believers, coming to

believe? Some of them said, "I want to go where He goes!" and they became disciples. Would people who know your life, your life of faith, describe you as a traveler or a tourist? Would they describe you as a believer or a disciple? This is changing your life. What are the signs that somebody has come under the authority of Jesus, even when it's in tension with the authority of the world?

It's great that we are doing Feed My Starving Children this weekend. In part, because it gives us a chance to wear stupid things on our heads and look like followers instead of just tourists. But it also exposes us to somebody who has decided to follow Jesus instead of just believe in Him. His name is Chris Thompson. He works for Feed My Starving Children now, and he is one of us, trying to shift from being a believer to being a disciple. I thought you would be encouraged by about three minutes of his story.

(Video begins.)

Well, in 1996, I was introduced to the discipline of daily Bible study. I had been a Christian most of my life but until this point, I had never really read the Bible from cover to cover. A friend of mine challenged me and I accepted the challenge and have been blessed in the ensuing 16 years with all kinds of things I never would have anticipated. My life really took a very different turn in 2005 when my wife was diagnosed with stage 4 bone cancer. After 18 months of battling bone cancer, she died in December 2006, leaving me a widower and a father of a 10-year-old daughter. Had I not been engaged in daily Bible study for the prior 10 years, I'm quite sure my life would have gone off the tracks and I wouldn't be sitting here today.

As you can imagine, when you turn to God's Word as your authority, it's in distinct opposition to what the world is saying. When my wife got sick, I was an executive with Fidelity Investments, and I had this phenomenal job traveling all around the United States, representing Fidelity with some of the largest employee-sponsored retirement plans in the country. But I traveled 80 percent of the time. The day that my wife died, the Holy Spirit spoke to me in a literally audible tone and said, "Chris, you need to focus on your daughter Charlotte. You only have one child. I'll take care of everything else." For the next five years, I basically didn't work and spent down all my savings. I focused all of my energy on my daughter and to this day, I'm the luckiest man alive because my daughter and I have a relationship like very few dads and daughters do. That wouldn't have been possible had I not followed what God was telling me to do.

When you are spending time in God's Word every day, God's thoughts become your thoughts. In Isaiah 55, God says,

8 "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. **9** "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Well, God's thoughts were saying, "All right, this is what I want you to do. I want you to uproot your daughter from high school where she is a sophomore, and I want you to move to Minnesota, and I want you to join this organization that you don't know anything about, and I want you to put your daughter in a strange high school." It has been

absolutely worth it, but it is challenging when you bring a dad and a daughter into Edina, Minnesota, and everybody else has known one another forever. It's an uphill battle. But you know what? God's superintending all those details.

Jesus established Himself as an authority, not just to heal a body but to forgive sins. Even though my body might be intact today, I'm just like the paralytic. I'm in need of Jesus' authority to forgive me so that I can get right with God and know that if my number is called today, I can stand before God and say, "I'm here because of what Jesus did and not because of what I have done." I'm like Paul, the greatest of all of the sinners, so Jesus has the authority to forgive me. I mean, I started my career out on Wall Street in the early 80s and was doing a lot of things back then that I am absolutely ashamed of today. But God forgave me when I came to Him in humility and said, "Look, I've been talking the talk, but I haven't been walking the talk." And if He can forgive me, He can forgive anybody. The story about the paralytic and his friends lowering him through the roof is just such a great metaphor for all of us. When your friends come around you and put you before God after you have been away from Him, then God can do what God does which is the impossible.

(Video ends.)

Sometimes we need to be encouraged by a friend to take the next step and go from being a tourist to being a traveler with Jesus, or to stop just being a believer in church and become a disciple whose life is shaken up like Chris' was. Jesus teaches not so that you will believe facts about Him, even true facts, He teaches to call you to obedience, to loyalty, to follow King Jesus and accept His authority in the belief that He brings life and not just religion.

So how does your loyalty to Jesus show in your life? Our loyalty to whatever authority we follow shows in how we treat our friends who are down on the mat and how we treat our enemies. Whose authority do we follow? Are we tourists in the way that we deal with our possessions, "It's mine and I need more," or are we travelers who share the wealth of God in the way that we give? Are we following King Jesus in our fight for justice for the weak or is our need for comfort and popularity so strong that we stay quiet? Who is our authority in our willingness to talk about Jesus or our silence? Who are we loyal to when we pray more than we used to or we worry more than we used to? As you listened to this story about forgiveness, whose authority are you living under in your ability to forgive others and ask for forgiveness, or do we stay angry and find our hearts getting hard and our relationships getting brittle?

In each of these cases and many more, in the end only one will have authority over your life. You will only be loyal to one authority. Which side wins? Who are you following? Who are you imitating? Who are you starting to look like? Let me tell you this. Only one side can have the paralytic stand up and walk. Only one side can forgive the sins of all and bring the dead back to life.

Lord Jesus, I thank You that Your Words to us and Your actions in front of us are not designed to make the crowd cheer. No matter how good it makes me feel, they are there to help me choose this day again, who will be my authority? Whose protection will I be under? Who will I follow? I pray that You will help my brothers and sisters here to hear your unsettling, life-giving teachings and not just believe them and not just trust them but

be loyal enough to follow them to life eternal. In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Spirit, we pray. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.