

# “The Strange Embraces of Jesus”

Mark 2:1-17; Isaiah 56:1-8; Matthew 9:1-13 <sup>1</sup>

Some years ago, a small Korean-American girl was abandoned to the streets of Seoul, where she lived for two years, until she finally found her way to an orphanage. One day, word came to the orphanage that a couple from America was coming to adopt a little boy. All the children in the orphanage got excited, because at least one little boy was going to have hope--*he was going to have a family*. So this little girl spent the day helping to clean up the little boys—giving them baths and combing their hair—and wondering which one would be adopted by the American couple.

The next day the couple came, and this is what the girl remembers about what happened then: “It was like Goliath had come back to life. I saw this man with his huge hands lift up each and every baby. I could tell that he loved every one of them as if they were his own. I saw tears running down his face, and I knew that if he could, he would have taken the whole lot of us home with him.

“And then he saw me out of the corner of his eye, and I was not a pretty sight. I was nine years old, but I didn’t even weigh 30 pounds. I had worms in my body. I had lice in my hair. I had boils all over me. I was covered with scars. But this man came over to me, and began saying something in English. I looked up at him, and he took his huge hand and laid it on my face, saying ‘I want this child. This is the child for me.’ Against all odds, I had been chosen”<sup>2</sup>

It was a strange, unexpected, and wonderful embrace. This American couple, who had traveled halfway around the world to choose a son, chose a daughter instead. Has anything like that ever happened to you? Has there ever been a moment in your life when you were chosen—not for a ball team, and perhaps not for a new family, but for something very important and unexpected in your life? Have you ever been surprised and blessed by a “strange embrace”?

There are many kinds of embraces. While we usually use the word “embrace” to refer to a physical hug, the word also means “welcome,” “acceptance,” “adoption,” and “blessing.” Jesus gave many embraces while He lived among us. Indeed, we wouldn’t be far off the mark if we called His whole ministry on earth a kind of embrace. Some of Jesus’ embraces, though, were thought quite strange by those who witnessed and experienced them, and the truth is that Jesus gives “strange embraces” still. I’d like for you to think with me for a few minutes about some of these Strange Embraces.

I’m sure you know that forgiveness was a major theme of Jesus’ ministry, even as forgiveness is a major theme of God’s plan for Creation. So how many people do you think Jesus specifically forgave on the pages of the New Testament? Five? Fifty? Two hundred and fifty? I was surprised to discover that, apart from Jesus’ cry of forgiveness from the Cross (“*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*”; Luke 23:34), I could only find six instances in which Jesus offered forgiveness to an individual—and four of these involve implied

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on October 30, 2016. Parallel passages include Matthew 9:1-8 and Luke 5:18-26.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke. Digital Version.

<sup>2</sup> Lee Strobel, “Meet the Jesus I Know,” *Preaching Today*, Audiotape #211.

forgiveness, not an explicit statement of forgiveness. So far as the text goes, Jesus explicitly forgave just one man and one woman. Let's see what we can learn from these encounters.

The first of those instances took place in our text this morning, as Jesus forgave the sins of the man whose friends lowered him through the roof. This encounter was a dramatic moment, for sure. After working miracles on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus had returned Capernaum, His northern base of operations. When it became known that Jesus was back in town, "*soon the house where he was staying [became] so packed with visitors that there wasn't room for one more person, not even outside the door*" (Mark 2:2).<sup>3</sup>

Having heard that Jesus was a miracle worker, four men decided to bring their paralyzed friend to Jesus for healing. The Bible says that they were carrying him "on a mat." Now if you've ever tried to carry—or even lift or move—someone whose condition made them unable to assist you, you know something about what these guys were going through.

We don't know how far they had carried their friend, but we do know that when they saw the crowd, they went to the further effort of carrying him up the exterior stairs to the roof of the house, ripped a hole in the roof, and lowered him through the roof so that he was right in front of Jesus.

While carrying their friend to the house and then to the roof was challenging enough, getting through the roof may not have been as big a deal as we may imagine from our own experience with roofing. In those days, such roofs would have been constructed of wooden beams, with the intervening spaces filled with brush and packed tight with clay.

It wouldn't have been too difficult to pull part of this stuffing out, and it wouldn't have been too difficult to repair it afterward. And as the debris began falling, the crowd below probably backed off enough to create a space for the man to land in front of Jesus.

Now this development was pretty surprising, but things were just getting started! The Bible says that when Jesus saw their faith—presumably the faith of the sick man who allowed himself to be brought, as well as the faith of his friends—Jesus said to him, "*My child, your sins are forgiven.*"

I don't know about you, but this seems to me to be an odd way to approach the matter. To say such a thing seems to be both irrelevant and inappropriate. Were a physician to say such a thing when entering our examining room, we'd probably get up and leave.

In those days, though, sickness was presumed to be the result of sin and God's resultant disfavor, as is so clearly addressed in the book of Job, so in a way, Jesus was beginning where many people would have expected Him to begin. The problem was that there had been no confession of sin and no expression of repentance, both of which were considered essential before forgiveness could be pronounced.

While, according to what Mark has told us, neither the sick man himself nor any of his friends have said anything up to this point, only a tenacious faith would have caused these men to go to such trouble, and faith had been required for the sick man to agree to the plan. So Jesus was not responding to their words, but to their faith.

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<sup>3</sup> We don't know for sure whose house this was. It seems likely that it was the home of Peter and Andrew.

The Scribes and Pharisees, who are here making their first appearance in Mark, took great offense at Jesus' offer of forgiveness, saying to themselves, "*What is he saying? This is blasphemy! Only God can forgive sins!*"

It was in fact the duty of the religious leaders to deal with false prophets and with false teaching, and to their credit, they took the job seriously. They were correct in their presupposition that only God is able to forgive sin, and if Jesus had been anyone but God in human flesh—a connection they did not make—they would also have been correct in their assumption that Jesus *was* acting in a blasphemous and culpable way to say such a thing.

But notice what happened next: "*Jesus knew what they were thinking*" and He answered their thoughts. Basically Jesus told them, "Yes, I know. Talk is cheap. It's easy to say 'Your sins are forgiven.' And you're certainly correct to think that only God has this authority. But watch this! I'm going to do something visible that only God can do to prove to you that I have the authority to do something invisible that only can do. See if you can connect these dots." And He turned to the paralyzed man and said, "*Stand up, pick up your mat, and go home!*" And the paralyzed man jumped up and went home!<sup>4</sup>

Let's call that Strange Embrace #1. Jesus' **Strange Embrace #1** was of a man whose body was pretty much ruined. Jesus' **Strange Embraces #2 & #3** were of women whose spirits were pretty much ruined. In Luke 7, "*a certain immoral woman*" burst into a banquet and knelt at Jesus' feet weeping and kissing his feet. The Pharisee who was the host thought to himself, "*This proves that Jesus is no prophet. If God had really sent him, he would know what kind of woman is touching him*" (Luke 7:39). Once again, Jesus answered his thoughts.

Jesus said to the Pharisee, "*I tell you, her sins—and they are many—have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love. But a person who is forgiven little shows only a little love.*" Then Jesus said to the woman, "*Your sins are forgiven*" (Luke 7:47). Now, for a second time, Jesus offered forgiveness on the basis of sinful actions that all could see and on the basis of repentance that only He could see—without the forgiven person having said a word.

In **Strange Embrace #3**, the religious leaders had set a trap in which they caught a woman "*in the very act of adultery*" (notice that they let the man go free—he may have been a party to the trap) and brought her to Jesus to be stoned to death as the Law of Moses required. Jesus responded, "*All right, stone her. But let those who have never sinned throw the first stones!*" (John 8:7).

"*When the accusers heard this, they slipped away one by one, beginning with the oldest, until only Jesus was left in the middle of the crowd with the woman. Then Jesus . . . said to her, 'Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them accuse you?'*"

"*No, Lord,*" she said.

"*And Jesus said, 'Neither do I. Go and sin no more'*" (John 8:9-11).

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<sup>4</sup> Jesus referred to Himself here as "the Son of Man." No consensus exists about what that title was intended to conjure in the minds of Jews of the first century. No one besides Jesus uses this term in the gospel of Mark. Indeed, other than Stephen in the vision he saw as he was being stoned, no one besides Jesus no one besides Jesus applied the term to Him in the New Testament. Although the term remains undefined, we are told what the Son of Man does. He has the authority to forgive sins (2:10). He is Lord of the Sabbath (2:28). He will be betrayed (14:21, 41), He will suffer ignominy and death, and to be raised on the third day (8:31, 38; 9:9, Twelve; 10:33). He comes not to be served but to give His life as a ransom for many (10:45). He will be seated at the right hand of power, return on the clouds, and gather His elect (13:26-27; 14:62). See also Exodus 15:26.

In this case, there was certainly no penitence in the woman's coming to Jesus, but perhaps there was repentance in her addressing Jesus as "Lord." In any event, Jesus was once again surprisingly merciful.

**Strange Embrace #4** was Jesus' *Second Word from the Cross*, as Jesus offered forgiveness to the crucified thief. When the thief turned to Jesus and said, "*Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom,*" Jesus responded, "*I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise*" (Luke 23:42-43). Again, there was no clear request for forgiveness, but there was an attitude of repentance, followed by an implicit forgiveness.

**Strange Embrace #5** took place beside the Sea of Galilee after Jesus' Resurrection. There, Jesus forgave Peter's three betrayals by three repeated questions followed by three repeated commands: "*Do you love me? Then feed my sheep*" (John 21:15-19). While Peter had given plenty of *evidence* of repentance, there is no record of his having specifically *asked* Jesus to forgive him. Such an exchange may have happened, but it didn't get recorded.

Our final **Strange Embrace (#6)** followed immediately after this morning's text, and once again involved an implicit forgiveness. Jesus was walking down the road in Capernaum and passed a man named Matthew sitting at his tax-collection booth. Matthew was a Jew who was probably a customs agent for King Herod, and he and his compatriots in the Customs Department were despised by their neighbors as thieves and scoundrels—titles which they had usually earned.

Any voluntary contact with a tax collector was scandalous behavior, but Jesus stopped anyway, saying, "*Come, be my disciple.*" And Matthew got up immediately, "at once," and walked away from his business, and followed Jesus (Matthew 9:9).<sup>5</sup>

Matthew's decision to follow Jesus may have been one of the more daring commitments among the Twelve. Those disciples who had been fishermen could always go back to that work, as in fact they did after Jesus' death. But who would employ Matthew again? His fellow Jews certainly wouldn't, and now the government wouldn't, either.

The fact of the matter is that we don't know what eventually happened to Matthew. Legend has it that Matthew was martyred in Ethiopia, but although he wrote one of the Gospels, he is never mentioned again after the first chapter of Acts. Matthew was an outcast . . . and Jesus embraced him.

A paralyzed man . . . two immoral women . . . a notorious thief . . . a friend who had betrayed him . . . an enemy collaborator . . . What do these people have in common? Many things, perhaps, but the most important thing is that each of these persons experienced God's Embrace.

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<sup>5</sup> Although Levi is called in the same way as the four fishermen were, his name does not appear in the list the disciples in 3:17-18. In Matthew 9:9, one called Matthew is summoned from his tollbooth, and that name does appear in all four lists of the Twelve (Matthew 10:2-4; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:13-16; acts 1:13). A James also appears in all four lists who is identified as the son of Alpheus, presumably to distinguish them from James the son of Zebedee (3:18). His Levi son of Alpheus to be identified as one of the Twelve? The puzzle does not offer an easy solution. One explanation is that this toll collector may have been known by two names, Levi and Matthew, in the same way that Simon Peter is identified as Simon or Peter for Cephas. If Levi is not to be affiliated with the Twelve, as he is not in Mark, then the call to follow Jesus is not limited to the Twelve.

Whereas the religious leaders looked *down* on people they considered to be “common,” and “sinners,” Jesus looked *for* such folk. And after Matthew had chosen to follow Jesus, we’re told that he threw a party for his friends, who were also tax collectors, together with a number of other “disreputable” people, and Jesus went to the party.

When the religious leaders asked, “*Why does he eat with such scum?*” Jesus answered, “*Healthy people don’t need a doctor—sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners*” (Mark 2:17).

And so, after all this, my friend, does your heart yearn to be chosen? Have you become aware of a deep desire to experience “God’s embrace”? Are you strangely drawn to the news that, no matter who you are, no matter where you’ve been, no matter what you’ve done, and no matter what has been done to you, **you are totally and forever loved?**

The Bible tells us that “*long ago, even before he made the world, God loved [you] and chose [you] in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. His unchanging plan has always been to adopt [you] into his own family by bringing [you] to himself through Jesus Christ*” (Ephesians 1:4-5).

If you’ll take one step toward the Master, my friend, you’ll find His arms open wide. There is only one person in all the universe who can keep you from receiving God’s Embrace, right now, right here, and that person . . . is you. **God loves you, my friend.** Will you receive God’s love?