

**+ Mark 2:1-12 + What do You Need to Hear? + Series: What Does This Mean? +  
+ Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY +  
+ 15th Sunday after Pentecost + 17 September 2017 +**

We love to hear what we want to hear. For example, we all like receiving compliments. If I receive a compliment, it makes me feel good. It encourages me. Compliments can also be very powerful. A compliment from the right person at the right moment in the right situation can have a positive impact on your education, your job, your relationship to another person, or even a cause for which you've worked hard. We like to hear compliments.

We love hearing good news. That's obvious! Good news is positive. It's encouraging. Good news can be heartwarming or even a cause for joy and celebration. Given the choice, we'd want to hear good news all the time.

So it's no surprise that we don't like to hear what we don't want to hear. Who enjoys being criticized? Hearing that you were incorrect or wrong isn't something any of us enjoy. We'd rather be complimented or praised! We naturally dread receiving bad news of any kind. Who of us wants to hear that we failed at a school or work assignment or that a diagnosis is worse than we thought or that something sad happened unexpectedly or that our foolish actions have real-life consequences? Given the choice, we'd avoid hearing bad news all the time. To paraphrase an old Charlie Brown comic, we want life to always be "up and up and up" and never down.

...But sometimes what we don't want to hear is what we need to hear. Failure on a school assignment or a work project helps you to learn what you didn't know or see things from a different point of view. A doctor's diagnosis may enable you to catch the existence of a harmful condition in your body before it becomes deadly giving you the opportunity to have it treated. Your parents' discipline may lead you to think twice before being foolish in the future. Sometimes what we don't want to hear is exactly what we need to hear.

Now back in Jesus' day, people weren't all that different than we are. They enjoyed a pleasant compliment. They loved to hear good news and they preferred to avoid bad news. They naturally preferred to hear what they wanted to hear rather than listen to what they needed to hear.

Jesus knew that. Jesus knew how people just like us prefer to hear what they want rather than what they need to hear. He knew what we all need to hear, while also understanding that what you and I need to hear at any given time may be a different message. So Jesus started preaching up north in Galilee near a town called Capernaum—***"The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"***—and people took notice. (Mark 1:15)

His preaching wasn't like that of the rabbis, who endlessly cited what this rabbi said or that rabbinic writing stated. No, Jesus preached with God's authority. He also healed. People were amazed when Jesus cast out a demon during a synagogue service or when he healed debilitating diseases like leprosy. Jesus was unlike anyone they had ever seen.

When people heard that Jesus was coming to town, they flocked to hear him preach and see him heal. One time when word got out that Jesus was back in Capernaum after preaching and healing elsewhere, people started showing up at his door—individuals, couples, families, common folk and local religious leaders. They kept coming until soon the entire house was packed.

A man who was paralyzed lived in Capernaum. He couldn't walk. Whether it was the result of a disease or a health condition or an accident, we don't know. He was completely dependent on his friends. Unable to get around, he had a lot of time to think—and his thoughts reminded him of his sins. Not only was he physically paralyzed, but guilt left him spiritually paralyzed too.

The man's friends had heard about Jesus. Perhaps they had listened to Jesus teach there in Capernaum. Perhaps some had even been at the synagogue when Jesus won a Sabbath showdown with a demon. We don't know, but we do know they trusted Jesus. In fact, they didn't just trust Jesus. They trusted in Jesus. They cared very much about their paralyzed friend, and they knew by faith that Jesus could help their friend.

So the four buddies came up with a plan. "We know Jesus is back in town. If he can cast out demons and heal leprosy, surely he can help our friend!" So they carried their friend along Capernaum's black stone streets to the house where Jesus, but there was a problem. Jesus was in the middle of that house preaching the Word of God, but the crowd was overflowing out the front door.

We'd understand if those friends turned around and went back home, but they didn't. They knew that Jesus could help their friend and they were going to get their friend to Jesus. So they took a different route to the Savior.

At Jesus' time, homes in Israel were built with flat roofs. You could store things up there or use it for guest space. You could go up there on a warm summer day and catch a cool breeze off the lake. The roof itself was usually over a foot thick made of branches and pitch and other waterproofing materials—and the friends saw that flat roof as an opportunity.

They got themselves and their paralyzed friend up on the roof, and then they went to work. They started tearing into the roof, ripping up layer after layer until they had a hole large enough to lower their friend on his mat down in front of Jesus. You can imagine the confusion of the crowd inside as they heard a tearing sound above their heads followed by tiny bits of pitch and ceiling dropping on their shoulders. How shocking to suddenly see a new skylight followed by a man on a mat coming down to Jesus!

The friends wanted to hear Jesus heal that man, but he desperately needed to hear something else first. Being true God, Jesus saw the faith of those friends. So he **“told the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’”** That paralyzed man needed to hear Jesus heal him spiritually. God's holy Law had crushed that man with guilt, but with that good news of forgiveness, Jesus lifted that great boulder of guilt off of the man's shoulders.

Yet that good news was not what everyone in that house needed to hear. No, some needed to hear the crushing message of God's Law first. **“Some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts: ‘Why does he speak like this? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins, but God alone?’”** Those scribes thought Jesus was a great teacher and miracle worker, but they didn't believe that he was anything more. A prophet, maybe, but God, surely not! They thought so highly of themselves and their efforts to serve God that they rejected Jesus for who he really was—God's Son come to save sinners. In their hearts, they condemned Jesus for blasphemy.

...But remember that Jesus is truly God! That's why he could forgive the paralyzed man's sins, but for those who rejected him, we're told, **“Right away Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were thinking like this within themselves...”** As true God, Jesus knew their thoughts. He knew their self-righteousness. He knew how and why they rejected him. He knew that they needed to hear God's thundering Law. **“Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat, and walk?’”**

Jesus posed questions to them that shined the glaring light of God's holy Law on their thoughts—and their own attempts at holiness couldn't stand up to it. So to make them hear what they needed to hear, he told them, **“But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’—he told the paralytic—‘I tell you: get up, take your mat, and go home.’”** Immediately, the man got up, took his mat, and went home. For those scribes, this example of Jesus' power was terrifying, but for the paralyzed man, that healing only further confirmed the good news of forgiveness he had heard.

So what do you need to hear? As Martin Luther often pointed out about himself, we, Christians, are both saint and sinner on this side of heaven. As sinners, we need to hear what we don't want to hear. You see, God's Word doesn't paint a beautiful picture of us. Instead there are portions of God's Word—portions we call God's Law—that work like a mirror showing the depths of our sin, our faults, our guilt, our helplessness, our deserved condemnation because we have all fallen short of the perfection that God demands. We don't want to hear that. We'd rather be like those scribes looking down on others out of self-righteousness, while mentally pounding our chests because we think God must love us more because we're more righteous. We fail to recognize our sins or feel no terror at the possibility of God's wrath. So the Law shows our sins in all their ugliness demonstrating how much we need a Savior.

At the same time, God's Word also paints a beautiful picture of Christ—a picture that vividly shows the heights of God's unconditional love and forgiveness even for self-centered sinners like you and me, a picture that provides comfort and peace and healing for our sin-sick souls. That good news we call the Gospel and it shows what Jesus has done for you and me.

Rather than terrify or condemn us, the gospel comforts and consoles us. Jesus tells us, **“Your sins are forgiven.** And if you're not sure about it, look to me and see my unconditional love for you. See it as I live a holy life because you could not. See it as I willingly suffer and die on a cross because you could never pay for your sins. See it as I abandon my tomb to give you life eternal and guarantee to all the world that your sins are forgiven. See how I make you a saint—one of my holy children through faith in me.” We need to hear that good news of Jesus just as much as we need to God's holy Law. That gospel message of Jesus makes me more than just a sinner. Like that paralyzed man, that good news makes me a forgiven saint in God's eyes.

As a sinner, I cringe at God's Law, but as a blood-bought saint, I hear God's Law as an opportunity to thank my gracious Lord. God loved me so much that he gave up his one and only Son to heal me, to set me free, to give me life! Christ's love then compels me to eagerly serve my God each day.

So what do you need to hear? By faith, we understand why we need to hear both Law and Gospel as two distinct messages with two distinct purposes even if we don't always want to hear them. Yet Law and Gospel work together to help us remain and live as God's people. May Law and Gospel, then, always be freely and clearly proclaimed to us and many others! Amen.