

Series: *Neighbors of the Bible*  
Title: *Burden-bearing Neighbors*  
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Scripture: Mark 2:1-12

How many of you have seen the film, *Forrest Gump*? I remember the summer it came out we took Redland's teens to *Centrifuge* and one of the kids in my team handball track time was named "Forrest." Can anyone guess what we'd yell every time he got the ball? Right: "Run, Forrest! Run!"

I want us to begin today's study by looking at a clip from this Academy Award Winning film. It's early on in the story of Forrest's life: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y3m9dAst7\\_g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y3m9dAst7_g)

I thought of that scene because as we continue our series on neighbors from the Bible we come to a story about four neighbors who, like Jenny, befriended a person---helped bear his burdens---even though he had been rejected by others in the community due to his challenges.

Take your Bibles and turn to Mark 2:1-12. In respect to God's Word as it's read, let's all stand:

- 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, He said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."**
- 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?"**
- 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." 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!"**

In order to better see how this story applies to our lives today, let's go back and take a closer look. The first thing I want you to note is that this miracle happened in the early phase of Jesus' ministry---when His popularity was first beginning to grow. Now of course there was no social media back then, but they did have a way for news to spread and it was almost as effective as our "twitter feeds." It was known of as "*word of mouth*" and it was so effective that Jesus' fame as a powerful Teacher and miracle Worker caused crowds to follow Him wherever He went. So, when people learned that Jesus was in Capernaum, they came from all over to hear Him teach and to see Him work the miracles He had become known for. The Scripture we just read tells us that Jesus was in a HOME in Capernaum---probably Peter's.

Now---in those days an open door meant, "*Come on in!*" and the rules of hospitality stated that you kept your door open pretty much all the time. I mean, an open door was more than a door---it was an invitation to come

inside and make yourself at home. I guess if you didn't want dinner guests you kept the door shut! Perhaps this is where what we call the "open-door policy" started---I don't know, but the customs of that day said the door to your home was only closed when you wanted privacy, like when you were sleeping at night.

Well, this day everyone took Peter up on his "open-door" invitation, and not just people from Capernaum. No, in his account Luke tells us that people came from every village and town. In fact there were some scribes and Pharisees—the leaders of Jewish religion—who came from as far away as Jerusalem—that's 120 miles! This would be like walking or riding a slow-moving donkey from where I grew up in Dover, Delaware all the way to Redland. The reason these religious leaders made this long journey was because it was their job to investigate Jesus, in case He was a false prophet. They had interrogated John the Baptist and now they would examine Jesus of Nazareth, to be sure His teachings did not lead the people astray.

The great desire of the Pharisees was to understand and magnify God's law and apply it to their daily lives, which was of course a good thing. But the movement soon became very legalistic and its leaders laid so many burdens on the people by ADDING their OWN rules to God's law; that it was impossible for them to **"serve the Lord with gladness."** (Ps 100:2). And worse than that, many—not all—but many of the Pharisees were hypocrites and did not practice what they preached. Throughout His ministry Jesus exposed the shallowness of Pharisaical religion and explained that true righteousness is a matter of the heart and not external religious practice alone.

In any case, we see the honor that was paid the Pharisees in this culture because, as John Mark tells us, they were SEATED in Peter's crowded home. For everyone else it was standing room only but not the Pharisees. No, they got to sit down, in front row seats. Now in my mind they are not sitting in a relaxed position; but rather with their arms crossed in judgement, eagerly waiting for Jesus to say something they could criticize. I can't help but think of a group people who used to come to business meetings in my dad's church in Dover when I was a teenager. It was well known that these people always came with only one purpose in mind. They were eager to find something to criticize---something to be negative about---something to grumble about. They were *"professional fault-finders,"* much like these Pharisees---people who had forgotten that Godly people, **"do everything without arguing or complaining."** (Phil. 2:13)

Well, with these religious leaders present, wearing their expensive robes and priestly garments, I'm sure the air was charged. The people were waiting for the shoe to drop. A fight was brewing! Have you ever been in a meeting like that where the tension in the air was almost palpable?

On the other hand, I think Jesus' disciples might also have been at least a little impressed that these religious leaders had come all this way to see their Master. After all, these guys represented the religious elite. So, I imagine Simon and Jon and the others were hoping that Jesus was going to impress this audience with His profound teaching. Hopefully, He'd throw in a miracle or two to show His divinity. Jesus would be recognized—certified as the Messiah—and then the disciples would ride His coattails to fame and glory!

Well, somewhere in the area there was a paralytic man. Perhaps he had been this way since birth—maybe his paralysis was the result of an injury later in life—we don't know. We DO know that, as a paralytic, he was totally dependent on others.

- Someone had to wash his face and bathe his body.
- He couldn't blow his nose or go for a walk.
- Someone had to feed him.
- Someone had to move him regularly to keep him from being covered with bed sores.

- Someone had to clean him when he soiled himself.

The only time this poor man walked or ran was in his dreams and every morning his dreams ended as he awoke to the living nightmare of a body that couldn't even roll over. Think of it---there was no way this man could contribute to society. The only occupation open to him was that of a beggar---laid by the side of the road every day---dependent on people dropping enough coins for him to live another nightmarish day.

Well, as I said the *“word of mouth telegraph”* broadcast the news that Jesus, the miracle-worker was in Capernaum. And as word got out, like bugs drawn to light, the SICK came from everywhere. Lucado writes, *“They came like soldiers returning from battle—bandaged, crippled, sightless. The old with prune faces and toothless mouths---the young with deaf babies and broken hearts. Fathers with sons who couldn't speak---wives with wombs that wouldn't bear fruit.”*

Among the throngs hurrying to see Jesus was a group of four guys carrying this paralytic man, each on a corner of a handmade stretcher of some sort. Mark tells us that this was the only thing this poor guy had going for him—a wonderful thing---four high-quality neighbors---people who lived nearby and had befriended him. Ortberg puts it this way: *“[This paralytic] was in one of the killer small groups of all time.”* I would certainly agree, and at this point I have to stop and say that the only reason this whole barrier-breaking miracle story happened was because of this man's four friends. Without these neighbors he would never have made it to Jesus; never have gotten healed physically or spiritually. All these blessings flowed from these four stretcher bearers. These four guys were special people indeed, especially in that culture because most people looked down on—despised---EXCLUDED people with obvious infirmities like his. You see, the Jews assumed that all suffering was a result of his sin---so these friends were special people---for in the face of formidable BARRIERS—social stigma---inconvenience---financial pressure---not to mention a high cost of time and energy—in spite of all this, they chose to help this poor man who lived with or near them.

I hope this helps you see that God needs us to be neighbors like these guys---friends who will stick with hurting people in spite of their weaknesses and failures and hang-ups and personality flaws. Well, when these four men learned that Jesus is in the area they decided to go and hear Him teach—but one friend said, *“We can't just go ourselves; we have to get our neighbor and take him. Maybe these things they are saying about Jesus are true. Maybe He can heal our friend. Wouldn't that be something!? We just HAVE to get him to Jesus!”*

Now understand this was no small task getting this guy to Jesus; moving his dead weight all the way to Capernaum would be difficult. Sue and I enjoyed a book last year called *“I'll Push You”* --- it's about a friend who pushed his paralyzed friend in a wheel-chair along the 500 mile long El Camino Trail in Spain. It was incredibly difficult to move his friend's dead weight all that way and as I said, he had a wheel chair. These guys didn't. They had to CARRY him all that way. But Christlike neighbors don't think about that kind of thing. They don't think about themselves, they think of others. So, these four tell their friend they are going to see Jesus and they literally pick him up on the way.

Well, imagine how they felt when after their long, arduous journey, they find that Peter's house is packed. They can barely HEAR Jesus much less SEE Him. People are sitting in the windows and spilling out the door. Jesus is so close—but they can't get to Him. So, the friends huddle up and say, *“What are we to do?”* Then one of them gets an extreme idea. He suggests they go around the barrier of that crowd, climb up the stairway on the side of the house and dig a hole in the roof through which they will lower their neighbor to Jesus. I think there must have been silence at this point after which another friend said, *“Are there any OTHER ideas?”*

There were none so they agreed—they realized this was an unorthodox way to get into the room---but after all, desperate times call for desperate measures. So, they set to work and most of the scholars I read this week agree it was a LOT of work. For example, in his commentary, R. Kent Hughes tells us that the typical roof of that day consisted of timbers laid parallel to each other about two or three feet apart. Sticks were then closely laid crosswise upon the timbers and the structure was padded with reeds, thistles, and twigs. Finally, the whole thing was overlaid with about a foot of dirt, which was packed down to limit leakage. All told the roof was about two feet thick. During the spring, grass often grew on these dirt roofs which means all these eco-friendly buildings that are going up these days---with gardens and lawns on top---they are NOT a new idea! They were in Israel a couple thousand years ago!

Anyway, the paralytic's friends had their work cut out for them. Plus by doing this, they were obligating themselves to repair this roof later—which would more than double their work—but that didn't stop these guys. Are they great neighbors or what!?

Now picture the scene inside Peter's house. Jesus is speaking and He's interrupted by sounds of shoveling above as these four men tore the thatch away and removed the roofing between the beams. Debris began to fall on the Pharisees' expensive robes. Dust and dirt filled the air and then a shaft of light streamed in. It grew until it was blocked by the paralytic's stretcher as it was lowered from above, secured by ropes no doubt retrieved from the nearby marina.

Once he got over the shock I wonder if Peter thought, *"What will my insurance company say? Will my homeowner's policy cover this? Wait---Jesus is here---perhaps I can get them to agree that this is an act of God."* Well, our Lord looks at the paralytic who now lay at His feet and He says a very odd thing. Jesus says: ***"Son, your sins are forgiven."*** I can't help but wonder what the man thought when Jesus said this. I mean, this guy wanted a new body. He wanted his dreams of running to become reality. He wanted to be healed! But Jesus said nothing about that.

Perhaps this man felt Jesus' words about forgiveness were cruel. I mean, at this moment his hopes deflated like a punctured balloon. And if you empathize with the paralytic at this point, let me remind you that our Lord knew the man's greatest problem was spiritual not physical.

Well, I imagine his friends were disappointed as well. They must have thought, *"We busted our backs to haul him all this way—we destroyed Peter's roof—which we'll have to fix later—for this?!"* Lucado writes, *"The friends expect Jesus to treat the body—for that is what they see. Jesus chooses to treat not only the body, but also the soul—for that is what He sees. They want Jesus to give the man a new body so he can walk. Jesus gives grace so the man can live."*

Now, surprisingly the Pharisees WEREN'T disappointed with Jesus' words. This is what they had come for! You see, Jesus' bestowing of forgiveness for sins was blasphemy. Only God had the right to do this. Blasphemy was a capital crime—punishable by stoning. So, like *"Barney-one-bullet Fife,"* I imagine smiles broke out on their faces at this point as if to say, *"Gotcha Jesus! You're going down for this one!"*

C. S. Lewis explains why the religious leaders had good reason to be upset. He writes:

*"Unless the speaker is God, forgiving sins is really so preposterous as to be comic. We can all understand how a man forgives offenses against himself. You tread on my toe and I forgive you; you steal my money and I forgive you. But what should we make of a man, himself un-robbed and untrodden on, who announced that he forgave you for treading on another man's toes and stealing other men's money? Asinine fatuity is the kindest description we should give of his conduct. Yet this is what Jesus did. He told people that his sins were forgiven,*

*and never waited to consult all the other people whom his sins had undoubtedly injured. He unhesitatingly behaved as if He was the party chiefly concerned---the person chiefly offended in all offences. This makes sense only if He really was God Whose laws are broken and Whose love is wounded in every sin. In the mouth of any speaker who is not God, these words would imply what I can only regard as a silliness and conceit unrivaled by any other character in history."*

And while we're reading the crowd, can you imagine Simon and Matthew and the gang rolling their eyes and taking deep sighs and whispering to each other at this point: *"What is Jesus doing? Does He want to get us all in really deep trouble? He's ruining this perfect opportunity!"*

Well, as John Mark reminds us, Jesus was God in the flesh so He knew what everyone was thinking and at this point, He turned to the Pharisees and asked the perfect question. He said, **"Which is easier to say: 'Your sins are forgiven,' or 'Get up and walk?'"** The Pharisees would naturally think that SAYING sins were forgiven would be easier because no one could verify it---and the healing would be HARDER because it would be subject to objective verification. Plus they linked physical infirmity with sin. In any case, Jesus put a lock on all this by verifying the MORAL miracle of forgiveness with the PHYSICAL miracle of healing.

But I get ahead of myself because I want us to consider this question ourselves. What IS more difficult: forgiving the man's sin—or healing his body? And lest you think, *"What kinds of sins could a paralytic do anyway?"* I would remind you that we don't need a functioning body to embrace deadly sin. Without lifting a finger we can lust, hate, resent others---become prideful and arrogant—not to mention bitter and unforgiving. This is because we are all born in a state of sin. Our sinful actions and thoughts and attitudes are all symptoms---indicators that we are sinners---fallen.

So, which act would be easier? I love Lucado's answer. He writes.

*"To heal the man's body took a simple command—but to forgive his sin took Jesus' blood. The first was done in the house of friends; the second on a hill with thieves. One took a word; the other took His body. One took a moment. The other took His life."*

Plus in spite of Jesus' healing, the man's limbs would one day age and wither and he would die. But thanks to the spiritual healing he got from Jesus' forgiveness---coupled with the man's faith---this paralytic would live forever. So forgiving his sin was much harder—much more important—and we must remember this principle! The most important thing we do as Christ-followers is helping lead our neighbors to faith in Jesus and the spiritual healing that only comes with that faith. So, at this point, in essence Jesus looked at the religious leaders and said, **"You say I have no right to forgive sins? Then watch this! Hey, you! Take up your mat and walk."** The man put his faith in Jesus and did exactly that—and John Mark says the people were AMAZED! By the way, this was the same word used in the book of Acts to describe the response of the crowds at Pentecost. It was the same kind of AMAZEMENT that led thousands to put their faith in Jesus.

As I wind down this message, I want to unpack two things we can and must learn from this story---basic, foundational qualities that will help us become Christlike neighbors.

### **(1) We have to love the CRIPPLES of the world.**

And before you accuse me of using a non-PC word---let me say that ALL people are cripples. We all have handicaps. We all are challenged in some way or another. All people are flawed. This man's "flaw" was his paralysis. Perhaps yours is your temper. Maybe it's your tendency to criticize or be negative at business meetings. Maybe it's your anxiety or depression or guilt or compulsive behaviors or whatever---but as sinners,

we are all broken. That includes all your neighbors. Like you; they all have problems, and one thing that helps them is for you to become like Jesus and love and stick by them no matter what crippling thing handicaps them at the moment. Understand, in a very real sense all people are crippled. It's just that some handicaps are invisible.

This week I came across a blog called *"The Invisible Wheelchair."* It's devoted to people whose handicaps are not clearly seen. This website takes its name from a teen who suffered emotionally and said, *"I wish they could see my invisible wheelchair, maybe then they would understand what I am going through and stop giving me trouble."*

There are people in your realm of influence who are like this teen. They are just as handicapped as this paralytic---its just harder to see. Well, it's our God-given job to love these neighbors, to help them bear their burdens. That's what these four guys did.

Think of it.

- LOVE was what made them ignore the cultural stigma that said this man was a sinner deserving of his illness---and UN-deserving of friendship or help.
- LOVE helped them not be put off by the unyielding crowd.
- LOVE led them to vandalize another man's home.

These four stretcher-bearers obviously loved this poor man---and the same caliber of love is absolutely essential if we are to get our friends and neighbors to faith in Jesus. The fact is, in our own lives the lost people around us will probably NOT know the healing touch of Jesus unless we have the kind of love that *"rips open roofs."* If we really love people—love them as God does—then we will pray for their salvation daily—we'll risk being judged as fools in for our efforts to win them to Christ. In fact I would say, if we are not *"prying open any roof tops"*we can't say we REALLY love lost people! The truth is, the more spiritually mature we become, the more we find our hearts breaking for people---all people. In spite of their behavior, in spite of their appearance, in spite of their lifestyle choices---we love them---we long for them to experience the healing forgiveness that only comes through faith in Jesus.

And I know it's difficult, but we even have to love the Pharisees of our world---the legalists---the professional fault-finders. In fact, those Pharisees and scribes sitting on the front row in Peter's house that day---they were the real paralytics in the room.

Think of it.

They were just sitting there immovable while these four neighbors moved a roof to get their friend to Jesus. These pharisees should have been out of their seats directing traffic to Jesus, but they just sat there paralyzed by self-righteousness. There are people like them in your "neighborhood" and instead of hating them, we must love them. LISTEN! You and I can't say we love God---unless we love others. As Ortberg puts it, *"People who don't love people CAN'T love God---just as people who don't know the multiplication table can't do algebra. They may know a lot about the Bible, they may be quite churchy, and they may carefully avoid scandalous sins and be thought of as spiritually advanced. [But you can't really love God without also loving people.]"*

So, let me ask—do you find your heart breaking for people—even for the "crippled" people around you? If not, you need to talk to God because it may be that you don't really know Him very well! We can't reach people FOR Jesus—unless we LOVE them LIKE Jesus does!

One more thing and I'm done.

**(2) We have to believe Jesus is the cure.**

I mean, it was more than LOVE that led these four friends to do what they did. They carried their friend all that way---they ripped a hole in that roof---because they BELIEVED the Miracle Worker could and would heal him. We need the same conviction in relating to our lost neighbors and friends. After all, who would go to the trouble of witnessing about Jesus if there were other valid ways to Heaven? Why suffer social stigma? Why have uncomfortable conversations? Why waste our precious time? Listen, I'll be honest. I love my job but if I didn't believe Jesus is the only way to God---I'd find another way to make a living. I do what I do because I believe our message! I preach and teach from this book because I believe it is God's BOOK---His infallible Word.

I certainly don't mean to compare myself to them but this is why years ago Cathie Burke left family and friends to go to Kenya. It's why the Cashes went to Morocco, and why the Phans went to Taiwan, and Graham and Nicole Davis went to Panama. All, these people know that all people are crippled by sin----and Jesus is the only cure. That conviction prompts them to go to the uttermost parts of the world. When a Christian believes that as Peter put it, ***"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under Heaven given to men by which we must be saved."*** (Acts 4:12)---when they know this---they'll do anything to get people to Jesus---they'll pay any cost---they'll tear off any "roof." And as forgiven sinners we DO know that as God's book teaches, Jesus is the only way. AMEN? We know that He is the ONLY Son of God.

We know that as God's Son, He is the only person to ever live a perfect, sinless life, and therefore able to pay the penalty for our sins. We know that as the poet once put it:

*Alexander may build an empire.*

*Napoleon may change the nations of the world.*

*Newton may bring about an intellectual revolution.*

*Edison may create a new world for science.*

*Wyatt may usher in a new era of industry.*

*But there is only One who can cleanse and transform the human heart.*

*And that One is Jesus.*

This knowledge---this conviction prompts us to do all we can to get people to Jesus. I'm reminded of Francis and Edith Schaeffer who founded L'Abri by opening their alpine home in Switzerland to curious travelers as a forum to discuss the Christian faith. At one point they were averaging 31 visitors per week...seekers who had questions about Jesus. Edith Schaeffer once wrote: *"In the first three years of L'Abri all our wedding presents were wiped out. Our sheets were torn. Holes were burned in our rugs. Drugs came into our place. People vomited on our carpet."* I'm sure in many ways it was a danger to their family to welcome all these strangers in---but together they did that. They paid the price---took the risk---because they believed Jesus is the cure---the answer.

Let's pray.