

Blind Bartimaeus

Mark 10:46-52

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Most of us, at some point, have played a game that required us to be blindfolded. There are lots of games that do this. The idea is that losing your sense of sight drastically increases the difficulty of the game. Sighted people sometimes take for granted our ability to see.

I find it fascinating when I see interviews with blind people about how they navigate the world. They have a million little tricks they do to keep track of things that we often take for granted. For example, we don't think twice about how to choose the right paper money, because we can easily see the difference between a one dollar bill and a hundred dollar bill. Many blind people fold different bills different ways so they can identify them only by feel. While we may be frustrated when someone moves something from its normal spot, it's not a crisis, because we can simply go looking for it. For a blind person, this is a major issue, because it is exceedingly difficult to search a large area for something.

In our passage this morning, we encounter a man who was blind. We don't know if he was born blind or whether something caused him to lose his sight later in life. What we do know is that though he was physically blind, he had a keen spiritual insight that many around him lacked. This morning, as we unpack this short story, we want to see what we can learn from this blind beggar.

Background

Our story this morning takes place in Jericho, as Jesus makes His final journey to Jerusalem, where He knows the cross awaits Him. Most of us know about Jericho from the Old Testament book of Joshua, where God destroyed the walls of the city of Jericho and the Israelites were commanded to completely destroy it. In the intervening time, Jericho had been rebuilt, and the family and followers of King Herod had done significant renovations to the city, making it essentially a summer retreat for the King. As such, Jericho was a fairly wealthy city.

Jericho was also near Jerusalem. Most accounts put it about 18 miles away. The expectation at Passover was that good Jewish men would make a pilgrimage back to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices. Jesus and His disciples were doing exactly that. Many others would be doing the same thing. This meant that not only would Jerusalem's population swell, but many of the surrounding cities would also see an increase in people, as they stayed near Jerusalem. So Jericho would have been a busy place, and when news arrived that Jesus was coming, the city would have been abuzz with excitement.

It is in the midst of this charged atmosphere that we are introduced to Bartimaeus. We are told that he was a blind beggar who sat beside the road. Blind people in these days

had little to no means of supporting themselves. They would have been unable to work, so they were dependent upon the generosity of others to provide for their needs. Bartimaeus was likely a well-known (and oft-ignored) fixture along the road from Jericho to Jerusalem. He would surely have set himself up in an area with lots of foot traffic to maximize his chances of encountering people who might give him aid. It is in this place that he encounters Jesus.

The Man's Persistence

As we look at the first few verses of our text, we see Bartimaeus' response to Jesus' arrival to Jericho.

⁴⁶ Then they reached Jericho, and as Jesus and his disciples left town, a large crowd followed him. A blind beggar named Bartimaeus (son of Timaeus) was sitting beside the road. ⁴⁷ When Bartimaeus heard that Jesus of Nazareth was nearby, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" ⁴⁸ "Be quiet!" many of the people yelled at him. But he only shouted louder, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" ⁴⁹ When Jesus heard him, he stopped and said, "Tell him to come here." So they called the blind man. "Cheer up," they said. "Come on, he's calling you!" (Mark 10:46-49, NLT)

Matthew's gospel records a similar account, but he mentions two blind men. It is likely a different account of the same event, with Mark choosing to focus on Bartimaeus (who some believed became a leader in the early Jerusalem church). Whatever the reason, this is not a contradiction, just a difference in emphasis. Matthew mentions two men, and Mark chooses just to focus on Bartimaeus.

Bartimaeus, who would have been familiar with the normal sounds of the city, surely noticed an increase in the noise and excitement level of the people around him. I suspect he probably asked someone what all the hubbub was about. Someone told him that Jesus of Nazareth was nearby. It seems that Bartimaeus had heard of Jesus. We aren't told that he needed any further explanation. Instead, he immediately began calling out to Him.

Bartimaeus' shout was, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" This is significant and gives us a bit of insight into how Bartimaeus viewed Jesus. The term Son of David was a messianic term. It meant that Bartimaeus likely saw Jesus as the long-promised Messiah. He cried out to Jesus for mercy, which was a sign that he felt as though he didn't deserve healing but was asking for it anyway.

Throughout the Old Testament, there were accounts of miraculous healings, but there is not one recorded instance of a blind person having their vision restored in the Old Testament. Many people therefore associated blindness as a curse from God that couldn't be healed. However, there are several promises that in the day of the Lord (when the Messiah comes) the blind will see, the deaf will hear, and the mute will speak. Neither he nor anyone else believed he could be healed from his blindness before. But if Jesus, the Messiah was here, then he might be able to see!

This is why Bartimaeus shouts as he does. Of course, Bartimaeus was not the only person who was trying to get the attention of Jesus. Surely there were many others. And there was a significant crowd surrounding Him. As Bartimaeus began to shout, the people around him got annoyed. They felt that he should be quiet and stay out of the way. But he was undeterred. Nothing was going to stop him from trying to get Jesus' attention. So despite the protests of the people around him, he kept shouting even louder.

Eventually, all the shouting paid off, because Jesus heard him, and He stopped and told the crowd to bring Bartimaeus to Him. This shows us something about the heart of Jesus. Remember that Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem to die. He knew what lay ahead for Him. He quite literally had the weight of the world on His shoulders. And yet, while He may have been contemplating all the things that lay ahead, thinking through all the things He needed to prepare Himself for, Jesus heard the cries of this blind man. He heard them, stopped what He was doing, and called the man to come to Him.

This is a beautiful picture of exactly what Jesus had just finished telling His disciples, that "...the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45, NLT) Jesus understood the importance of serving others. That's why He made time for Bartimaeus, who everyone else ignored.

Today, people are marginalized for many reasons. People with disabilities continue to be marginalized because they are an inconvenience and people don't know how to treat them. The poor are often marginalized because people get tired of helping and don't feel like those people have anything to offer in return. We marginalize the elderly as out of touch and children as naïve. We can easily overlook those with different viewpoints (political, sexual orientations, gender identities, religious beliefs), because we find it difficult to work with them. We should take a lesson from Jesus and recognize that just because the rest of society says it's ok to overlook someone, that doesn't make it true.

Jesus saw people that society overlooked. He made time for people that others thought weren't worth it. Let's be honest, we struggle to do this. It is not always because we think people aren't worth it. Often it is because we just don't think we have the time. We all feel tremendous pressure to stay busy. We pack our schedules full of so many things that we convince ourselves we just don't have time for other people's problems.

If we're honest, often the things that make us feel so busy are really not that important. Many of us are so consumed by our phones scrolling through social media or playing games that we don't even notice the people around us. We fill our schedules with things that in the grand scheme of things don't really matter, and yet we feel like we don't have time to serve others. Jesus shows us what we should do. We should remember that people matter. They are important. They are worth our time. And they are more valuable than many of the other things we might do. Jesus viewed the world with this perspective. We must do the same. We might be surprised at how many opportunities for ministry we are missing because we simply don't see others. Because Jesus made time for Bartimaeus, his life was forever changed.

Bartimaeus' Response

After Jesus called to Bartimaeus, the crowd relayed the message. We see his response in vv. 50-52,

Bartimaeus threw aside his coat, jumped up, and came to Jesus. ⁵¹ "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked. "My Rabbi," the blind man said, "I want to see!" ⁵² And Jesus said to him, "Go, for your faith has healed you." Instantly the man could see, and he followed Jesus down the road. (Mark 10:50-52, NLT)

There are a lot of details in these short verses, and it is easy to miss them if we aren't careful. We are told that Bartimaeus threw aside his coat, jumped up, and came to Jesus. This would not normally be a surprising reaction. In fact, it would be exactly what you would expect to happen in this situation if not for one important fact—Bartimaeus was blind!

Two things are important here. First, the fact that he threw aside his coat was a big deal. In those days, your coat (or cloak) was the most important and probably most expensive article of clothing you had. It would keep you warm at night, it provided protection from the sun during the day, and could be used as a blanket. For someone like Bartimaeus, this article of clothing may have been the most important thing he owned. It may have been all he owned. And he threw it aside like it was nothing. Nothing, not even his most important possession was going to keep him from Jesus.

The text leads us to believe that he threw it aside without any care of what happened to it or where it went. Again, remember that as a blind man, simply throwing something to the side and not knowing where it was left would be a huge crisis. If you can't see where it is and don't know where it was left, it would be exceedingly difficult to find it again. I believe this gives us a glimpse into his mind. Bartimaeus was not concerned about his cloak, because he fully expected that after he got to Jesus, he would be able to see! He'd easily be able to find his cloak, and he'd be able to work and provide for himself. Even though no one prior to Jesus had been healed of blindness, Bartimaeus was convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, and therefore could and would heal him—and his actions reflected it.

The second element that is surprising is that he instantly got up and went to Jesus. We are not told that he received any help. In my mind, he was in such a hurry to get to Jesus that nobody even had time to offer him any help! He couldn't see Jesus, but he jumped to his feet and made a beeline to the voice of the One who had been promised.

When Bartimaeus got in front of Jesus, Jesus asked what he wanted. Bartimaeus didn't mince words, he said, "I want to see!" Jesus told him that his faith had healed him, and instantly his sight was restored.

I can only imagine the sheer joy of this man's experience. Imagine never being able to see, and then having your sight miraculously restored. The first thing you ever see is the face of Jesus looking at you with love and joy. What a great experience!

In recent years doctors have been able to restore the sight of people with certain medical conditions. The response of those people is astounding. They said they couldn't believe how rich and colorful the world was, and they couldn't believe how big it was! They simply didn't have a sense of it before. They marveled at the things they could now see.

Bartimaeus, rather than stopping to take in the sights he had never been able to see before, instead chose to focus on something he knew was more important. He chose to follow Jesus on down the road. Tradition says that Bartimaeus became a significant part of the Jerusalem church after Jesus' resurrection.

So often, we are primarily concerned with getting what we want from the Lord, and then when we get it, we go off on our own way once more. We sometimes treat God more like a genie than our Lord. Bartimaeus had the right response. Jesus gave him the healing he desired, but rather than going off to enjoy this newfound blessing on his own, He recognized that this was the man he wanted to follow. Bartimaeus saw clearly what we are sometimes blind to: the greatest blessing is to follow Christ.

Conclusion

This story is the final miraculous healing Mark records in his gospel. It would be tempting to see it as just another one of Jesus' miracles, but we must remember the purpose of the miracles in Mark's gospel. They are signs that point us to who Jesus is and what He would ultimately accomplish. They are signs that point us to His love and to His care for other people. And they are signs of His power over all things great and small. So as we look at this last miracle, we should try to draw some applications.

First, Jesus cares for people like you. The crowd in the story overlooked Bartimaeus. They saw him as a nuisance. They tried to silence him, likely concluding that he was blind because he was cursed by God. Jesus, however, saw him and made time for him. There may be times where you feel like the world doesn't see you. You may feel like you don't matter to anyone. You may feel marginalized. Let me remind you, Jesus sees you. He cares about you. He wants to bring you the comfort and healing you need. Run to Him. Embrace Him. He is waiting for you with open arms.

Second, Jesus shows us how to care for others. Jesus was marching toward Jerusalem, his final destiny. He knew how quickly His life and ministry was coming to an end. I cannot imagine the pressure Jesus felt as He prepared for this task. Yet when Jesus saw a person in need, He stopped, made time for him, and ministered to him. How often do we miss opportunities to minister to people because we are too engaged in other, "more important" things? Jesus reminds us that people are important. People are worth our time and our energy. Too often, we are only concerned with what people can give us, but Jesus says we should be looking for how we can serve others. Doing that requires us to see beyond just what's going on in our lives and to see the struggles others are facing. Empathy doesn't just happen. We will never be good at meeting the needs of others until we start choosing to look for them. So take a page from Jesus, and

don't allow yourself to become so engrossed in your own struggles that you can no longer see the struggles of others.

Third, we must not allow anything to keep us from following our Lord. When Bartimaeus went to Jesus, he left his cloak behind, and it doesn't appear that he ever went back for it. When he regained his sight, he didn't get sidetracked by going off to indulge in some of the experiences he'd missed. He simply followed the Lord. There are many things that prevent us from following Jesus as we ought. Sometimes we are afraid that following Jesus will require us to give up things we value. We are afraid that we may have to give up leisure activities, or money, or time, or popularity, or influence. So we hold tightly onto these things rather than following the Lord. Other times we get too wrapped up in the blessings God's given us to follow Him. We are excited to enjoy our children, our friends, our leisure activities, our wealth, our stuff, our desires, or many other things. But we allow those things to become all-consuming, and so we no longer have time to do the things God has called us to. Enjoying the blessings of God is good, but many Christians today have come to worship the blessings instead of the Lord. Bartimaeus got the order right. We must make sure we do the same.

Finally, we must see our own blindness. Bartimaeus knew he was blind, so he asked Jesus to heal him. Unfortunately, there are many people today who have 20/20 vision yet remain spiritually blind. Even in the Church, we often suffer from a form of spiritual blindness, where we are able to clearly see the faults of everyone else, and yet are unable to see our own failures. God wants to heal us from our spiritual blindness in much the same way He healed Bartimaeus of his physical blindness. But Bartimaeus knew what he needed, often we don't. We must come to God and ask Him to open our eyes to the ways in which we need to change. Ask Him to show you the attitudes that are not in line with Him, the things in your life that are pulling you away from Him, the habits you need to change, or the people He wants you to make time for. Until we recognize our own blindness, we cannot be healed. But if we ask God to help us see clearly, I believe He will—just as He did for Bartimaeus.

This passage reminds us that we serve a powerful God who sees us, cares for us, and can help us to see clearly. Bartimaeus was given a wonderful gift. Having his sight restored was something he had likely dreamed about forever. But Bartimaeus also understood that the greater blessing was to follow Jesus. He worshiped the Lord rather than just what the Lord could give him.

I hope you come away from this passage seeing more clearly than you did before. I hope you clearly see God's love for you, the people around you, and where God is leading you. And then I hope you'll follow Him too.

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