

Several years ago I was talking with a missionary who told me how hard it was to communicate with people from a vastly different culture. The example he used was unforgettable. He was working with a primitive tribe that knew very little about hygiene. In fact, they knew nothing about the concept of a toilet. This posed an obvious danger to the health of the tribe so he tried to explain to them their need for a latrine. They listened through translation as he tried to explain how to build one. He sketched out a rudimentary drawing that looked something like this... The men of the tribe studied it and said they could get it done. The missionary left the village and promised to come back in a couple of weeks to check their work. When he got back they proudly showed him their new outhouse. To his great surprise, something had been lost in translation and the outhouse looked like this... Instead of digging underground they had simply built it 16 feet above the ground! “What we have here is a failure to communicate.” Needless to say this design posed new dangers and would not lead to a healthier village.

It never ceases to amaze me how a message that seems so clear can be so misunderstood. The reason for the confusion is often because the speaker and the hearer are immersed in two completely different cultures. I’ll never forget moving to East Texas and hearing a man say that his wife was so sick that he had to carry her to the doctor. I had two thoughts; one, that she must have been really sick since he had to carry her, and two, he was stronger than he looked because his wife was not a small woman! Of course what he meant was that he TOOK her to the doctor. He didn’t literally carry her there.

As we come to the end of Mark 10, I think you will agree that “what we have here is a failure to communicate.” The breakdown is not on Jesus’ end. The disciples failed to understand His words because they were immersed in a culture that did not value what Jesus values. This world values status. Jesus values service. This world promotes self-centeredness. Jesus promotes sacrificial love. A follower of Jesus renounces their own self-sufficiency and clings to a sacrificial Savior.

We have come to the end of the second major section in Mark’s gospel. The first section, from chapters 1-8 focused on the person of Jesus, who He is. The next section, from Mark 9-10, focuses on the mission of Jesus, what He came to do.

In 10:32-34 Jesus foretells His death for the third time in three chapters. Up until Peter’s confession in chapter 8, the disciples were trying to get their heads around the fact that Jesus is Lord. He was not just a good teacher, a prophet, a community organizer or political activist. He is “the Son of God” just as Mark 1:1 claims. He is God in human form. He has authority over heaven and earth. He holds the key to life and death. He is God’s only provision for man’s sin. After Peter’s confession Jesus begins to reveal His ultimate mission. Three times Jesus explains to His disciples what lies ahead and three times they completely miss the point. The first time Peter rebuked Him (8:32). The second time they were afraid to ask Him about His future (9:32). Now, in 10:32, the disciples are getting nervous. They are going toward Jerusalem, the very place where Jesus is least welcome. “Jesus was walking ahead of them.” That’s what shepherds do. Jesus did not take a vote. He did not ask, “Hey guys where do you think we should go

now?” He walked ahead of them knowing what awaited Him. Leadership is a lonely business. Sometimes, often times, you pursue a course not because it is popular, not because it is easy, but because it is necessary. Jesus, the shepherd, goes ahead of the sheep but He also knows the sheep so He gives them the clearest explanation yet of what is going to happen in Jerusalem using eight specific verbs.

What happens after that seems almost incomprehensible...vv. 35-37. Is this an appropriate question? “OK Jesus, enough about you, what about us?” This reads like the script from Dumb and Dumber. Is this a good time to bring this up? I will never forget one of my best friends getting everyone’s attention at our wedding reception. Everyone thought he was going to propose a toast. He proceeded to announce his own engagement – at OUR wedding! And he is still my friend! We were young and dumb. Matthew takes a little of the embarrassment off these guys by mentioning that it was their mother who put them up to this. I’m not sure that makes me feel much better about two momma’s boys but notice how Jesus responds...vv. 38-41. “You do not know what you are asking.” Jesus knows that the only two who will be on His right and left in Jerusalem are two thieves hung on crosses. “You will be on my right and left but not in the way you think. Just like those two thieves, you will share in my crucifixion.”

The other 10 disciples were “indignant” about James and John’s request. Same word as v. 14 where Jesus was indignant that the disciples were keeping the children away from Him. I would like to think the other disciples were indignant because they realized the inappropriateness of the request but I think we all know that it is more likely they were indignant because they didn’t ask first. Have you ever happened to see one of these bachelor shows? Because I am a student of human depravity I occasionally watch a little. What is amazing is how angry some of the contestants get with other contestants who are doing the very same things they are trying to do but they’re just better at it. “I can’t believe she did that to me.” Well, isn’t that how the game works? And that’s exactly what Jesus says in v. 42-45. “Hey guys, this is how the game works: the one with the most power wins the game. The one who can manipulate people best is the winner. These verses define what it means to be a Christian. Nowhere else is Jesus’ description of His mission as explicit as it is here. He explains why He is going up to Jerusalem to die.

A ransom is the price paid to set someone free. In our modern context it is a word associated with kidnapping. But in Jesus day it was the word used to describe the price paid to release a slave from servitude in the Roman world. It was often the payment of a debt the slave owed. Jesus came to earth to pay that kind of ransom. The beauty of the gospel is captured by the words of that old song, “We owed a debt we could not pay. He paid a debt He did not owe.”

This is what separates Jesus from all other gods and Christianity from all other religions. “The ancients understood the idea of the wrath of God, they understood the idea of justice, the idea of a debt and a necessary punishment, but they had no idea that God would come and pay it himself. The cross is the self-substitution of God.” (Keller, King’s Cross, p. 144).

The cross is not just another example of some primitive idea found in ancient bloodthirsty cultures about a bloodthirsty god who demands a sacrifice to release someone from their captivity. In *The Iliad*, King Agamemnon sacrificed his own daughter to secure fair winds so he could get to Troy. But here is where the gospel is unique. Jesus didn't die to satisfy God's thirst for blood, He died to demonstrate God's stubborn love. Love by its nature is costly. Love by its nature requires some sort of transfer so that the condition of the one loved is borne by the lover. Parenting is a good example of this. The only way your children will grow up to be responsible independent adults is if the parent abandons their own independence for twenty years or so. Either you pay the price or your child will pay the price. Either you suffer for a while in a redemptive way or they will suffer long term in tragic ways. Just as Jesus was willing to offer up His life as a substitute for ours we should be willing to sacrifice our rights, our privileges, our conveniences for the sake of others.

It is no accident that this episode concludes with the healing of a blind man. It was Helen Keller who once said, “The most pathetic person in the whole world is someone who has sight and no vision.” It is possible to have excellent sight and still not see what is most important in life. In fact, that is the natural human condition. That is why blindness plays such an important role in the training of the disciples. In vv. 46-52 blind Bart provides a lesson for all of us. He calls Jesus “son of David.” This man knows about the prophecy that one day a descendant of David will sit on the throne of this world and rule forever. Even though Bartimaeus is blind He sees Jesus for who He is.

Jesus asked him a strange question, “What do you want me to do for you?” Sound familiar? It is the same question He asked of James and John. There is a clear contrast here between this blind man and the two brothers. They made an illegitimate request. This man's request was legitimate. They were confident in their own abilities to follow Jesus no matter what. The blind man acknowledges His need for Jesus and simply asks for mercy. The brothers view Jesus' mission in terms of rank and privilege and worldly power. The blind man accepts Jesus' mission and “followed Him on the way.” Bartimaeus is not the blind man in the story, it is James and John. Bartimaeus discerns who Jesus really is and accepts His mission and follows Him. When he “threw aside his cloak, jumped up and came to Jesus,” He did what the rich young ruler was unwilling to do throwing aside his only possession in order to follow Jesus. A follower of Jesus throws off self-sufficiency and clings to a sacrificial Savior.

There is only one cure for our spiritual blindness – a genuine encounter with the One who came not to be served but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many. Jesus died not just to pave the way to Heaven. He died so that you and I could be set free from our fatal attraction to power and privilege. Only God can deliver us from that.

Have you ever had one of those moments when time seems to stand still? You recognize that this is not just the next ordinary moment of your life but something significant is happening here and you need to pay attention. That happened to me in a YMCA locker room on Wednesday, Oct. 10, 1979. I had just begun seminary and I was working at a YMCA. The job required me to pick up the towels in the locker room at the end of the

day. From the speakers in that locker room I could hear all the players being introduced for the first game of the World Series between the Baltimore Orioles and the Pittsburgh Pirates. I had spent three years with the Orioles and I recognized every name. I had practiced with those guys, I had eaten with them, I had traveled with them, I had won and lost with them. As the crowd cheered I sat in a blue plastic chair in the corner of the room picturing each guy as he took his place on the chalk line between third base and home plate. The picture in my mind was in stark contrast to the picture I saw in that locker room; towels scattered on the floor, two rambunctious kids gathering their belongings and taking their time leaving the room. If only they knew. If only they could appreciate that I could be standing in Memorial Stadium and not waiting to pick up after them in some YMCA locker room. I was indignant! Until Jesus tapped me on the shoulder. I didn't hear an audible voice, I didn't need to. The Lord spoke into my spirit in a way that transcends words. The translation of what I heard goes something like this, “Hey Gary, do you really want to be My disciple? Do you want to follow Me? Is that why you are in seminary? Then here is your first test – kneel down and pick up those towels. If you want to be like Me you have to humble yourself, cast away your outer garment and learn to serve.” I wish I could tell you that was the only time I have had to be reminded of what it means to serve Jesus. I have to be reminded every day. My life is not my own, I am bought with a price. I am not here to be served but to serve because Jesus gave His life a ransom for me. How about you? Do you want to serve or be served?

These are difficult days as the prevailing culture grows more and more hostile to the church. As persecution and suffering increase we will be tempted to follow the model of James and John and seek the place of power and control. But power and control don't change hearts. Never forget that the very heart of the Christian faith is the story of a man dying for His enemies. If that is what Jesus was about then those who follow Him will influence the world through loving, sacrificial service.

Next Sunday, we are going to take a break in our study of Mark and prepare for an all-out effort to serve our community by getting the gospel outside these four walls. Next week I want to share the results of our recent Reveal study and explain to you how we plan to address some of the opportunities before us. Then, for two weeks we will prepare to join over 300 other churches to blanket this city with the gospel through Explore God.

Explore God training and groups.