

## “HOW WILL YOU ANSWER?”

Mark 10:35-52 (p. 980)

Two times people approached Jesus with a request – first James and John, then Bartimaeus. In both cases he responded with the same question, “*What do you want me to do for you?*” And both times faithful people responded – but with very different results. Before we look more closely at the text, let me caution you. It would be rather easy to reduce these two encounters to a kind of cautionary tale about making appropriate requests of the Lord. But I don’t think it’s that simple. I suspect Mark included these back-to-back encounters in his Gospel, not so much to teach us a lesson, as to confront each of us, quite personally, with our Lord’s marvelous diagnostic question.

Suppose Jesus were to ask you, “*What do you want me to do for you?*” What would you say to him? I suspect your answer would reveal a good deal about your priorities, about what’s at the center of your life. Our lesson is a study in contrasts. It begins with James and John, two brothers who had been Jesus’ faithful followers from the beginning of his ministry. They had given up everything to follow him. They had witnessed his miracles. They were convinced he was the Messiah, and they were eager to see his reign unfold. They wanted to be in on the action. They expected to be in on the action. In fact they probably would have done almost anything to advance the cause.

There was one catch. Jesus had warned his disciples repeatedly that he must suffer and die. In fact, just before this incident, he had told them bluntly: “*The Son of Man will be betrayed, condemned to death, mocked and spat upon and scourged and killed, and after three days he will rise.*” And all the while, he had been pulling them aside, telling them: “*the first shall be last and the last first,*” and “*the greatest among you must be the servant of all.*” But in spite of all their faithfulness, their willingness to follow him, the disciple just didn’t seem to make the connection.

And it wasn’t just a problem for James and John. Every last one of them had this blind spot. They all agreed that Jesus was the Savior, yet they couldn’t see (or wouldn’t see) that following him might mean that they, too, must serve and suffer and possibly even die with him. But perhaps never had their blindness been as apparent as when James and John approached Jesus for a favor. “*Rabbi,*” they said, “*we want you to do for us whatever we ask.*” ~ “*What do you want me to do for you?*” Jesus countered. ~ “*Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.*”

What shameless self-promotion! No wonder the other ten disciples were indignant when they heard about their request. It was nothing but a boldfaced play for power! Perhaps. But before we jump on James and John, let's give them the benefit of the doubt. It could be their request was motivated more by unthinking enthusiasm than by blind ambition. In fact, they may not have thought that this was a power play at all.

After all, you know how brothers are, how they'll compete with each other; and these two had certainly earned a reputation. Remember, when they first met, Jesus gave them a nickname. He called them "Sons of Thunder." And now these two loudmouth competitors came to Jesus, probably pleased with their own modesty, proud of their ability to compromise. After all, they were asking Jesus to show no favoritism. In fact, they asked him to treat them as equals – one on the left and one on the right. What could be more humble? But a little humility can be a dangerous thing. And given their competitive reputation, I suspect they both secretly thought they were equally devoted disciples and therefore probably thought they deserved equal places of honor at the messianic banquet.

The problem was that, in their enthusiasm to be Jesus' favorite humble disciples, they were deaf to what Jesus had been telling them all along about what it really means to be a disciple – about real humility. And so Jesus had to say to them, "*You don't know what you're asking.*" Then, once again, he reminded James and John and the rest of them that any of them who wanted to be great must become a servant of all. "*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve,*" he said, "*and to give his life as a ransom for many.*" End of discussion! Right? Well, you might think so. But I can't help but wonder if, even then, they had a clue what he was talking about.

They followed the Jordan valley to Jericho, and there turned to go up the road to Jerusalem, where Jesus knew a cross would be waiting. As they started up the hill, they passed a blind beggar sitting by the road. His name was Bartimaeus. When he heard it was Jesus passing by he, like James and John, had a request. "*Jesus, Son of David,*" he cried out, "*have mercy on me!*" Those in the crowd following Jesus told him to be quiet; but he cried out all the louder, "*Son of David, have mercy on me!*"

Jesus stopped in his tracks and said, "*Call him.*" Throwing his cloak aside, Bartimaeus jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. And for the second time that day we hear Jesus asking the same question: "*What do you want me to do for you?*" The blind man's answer was as straight as it was simple: "*Rabbi, I want to see.*" ~ "*Go,*" said Jesus, "*your faith has healed you.*" Immediately the blind man was given back his sight; and without another word, he followed Jesus on the road.

Twice Jesus had asked, "*What do you want me to do for you?*" But unlike James and John, Bartimaeus knew that he had nothing to offer, and nothing to lose.

In fact, he'd already lost everything when he went blind. In that culture, in that day, had had no status, no position, no power – nothing. As a blind man, he was stuck where he was, sitting by the Jericho road. Then along came Jesus. Bartimaeus had nothing but the cloak on his back – and that he threw aside, it says in verse 50. When he did that, he symbolically cast off the only identity he had – a blind beggar. Now, when he stood up he was nothing, and Jesus was his only hope. But when he did that, when he asked for help, Jesus met him at his need and made him whole. And then without a word, this nobody whom people simply called Bar-Timaeus “son of Timaeus,” joined the well-known “sons of Zebedee,” James and John, as a follower of Jesus.

What about you? Have you ever thought about what you would say if Jesus said to you, “*What do you want me to do for you?*” Please, don't waste time – his or yours. You might as well tell him what you really want – the deepest longing of your heart. What else really matters? Some of you, I'm sure, would answer much as Bartimaeus did. You're already aware that you're in need of healing. Maybe you see yourself stuck somewhere along life's road, and you may not see much reason for hope. In fact, you may have already cried out for someone to save you, as Bartimaeus did. I want you to know that, if that's where you are, Jesus has already heard you, and he will answer. You can count on it.

But a lot of us, I suspect – if we were truthful – many of us would probably have to answer much as James and John did when Jesus asked them, “*What do you want me to do for you?*” Like James and John, we've already committed our lives to Christ. We know we're on the winning team. But what we really want more than almost anything is to be recognized for our faithfulness. We want to know that we're loved and appreciated. And what's wrong with that? It's only human.

What's wrong with it is that, although it's understandable and even encouraged in today's culture to seek the recognition we are sure we deserve, there is a kind of subtle self-righteousness locked into it that is actually self-destructive. There's a paradox here, and if we don't catch on to what Jesus is saying then, like James and John, we too are going to continue to be frustrated disciples, proud of our humility – with Jesus shaking his head at us and saying, “*You still don't get it, do you?*” The paradox is this: Only when you are willing to give up all claims to your own righteousness can the Lord make you righteous. And that paradox is as true of the church as it is of individual Christians.

Let me put the paradox in present terms. Our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), is fractured, in spite of the fact that we seem to be carrying on with “business as usual.” Despite recent largely ineffective attempts to restore “peace, unity and purity” to our denomination, there is growing concern about how long we can maintain our present ecclesiastical structures. But who is bearing the brunt of our in-house troubles? I'll tell you who. It's the people who

are the objects of the Great Commission – the men and women and children who don't know the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ because we're too busy arguing with each other to go tell them the good news. And until we stop squabbling about who should be in power, about proving who's right and who's wrong, we're not going to have much that a hurting, broken world is willing to listen to. Like James and John, we in the church have spent far too much time and energy concerned with proving we're on the right track, rather than caring for those who have fallen off the track. To put it bluntly: In my humble but correct opinion, too many of us are more concerned with self-righteousness than with self-emptying.

Let's be honest. Aren't there many devout conservative Christians who want to be on the right with Jesus? "*Lord, let me be at your right hand!*" I think there are a lot of dogged defenders of orthodoxy who want to be sure we're all on the right with Jesus. But it's just as true on the other side. Aren't there a lot of devout liberal Christians who want to sit on the left of Jesus in glory? "*John can be your right wing man, Lord, but let me be at your left hand – your first lieutenant!*" I think there are a lot of passionate promoters of social righteousness who want to make sure that God's love and justice are available to everyone.

Now before you take sides, let's just admit that there is something very wrong, tragically wrong, here. A recent research project concluded that the one word that best describes modern American Protestantism is fragmentation. Not service, not unity, not spirituality, not commitment, but fragmentation. The report goes on: "*The church then finds itself virtually powerless to utter a discerning theological word amid the cacophony of competing voices.*" It's interesting to note that the study also goes on to say that: "*Presbyterians and mainstream Protestants are overwhelmingly moderate. Most of them comprise a moderate middle.*"

What, then, can you and I do about the problem of having nothing to say to a hurting world Christ came to save? What can we do to fix what is so sadly broken? The answer is that we can do nothing. Nothing, that is, until we admit that we're blind as bats and, on our own, clueless about what we ought to do. We can do nothing until we, like Bartimaeus did, cry out with all that we have, "*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*" Above the din of in-house squabbling, in spite of a benighted culture holding us back with its crazy, contradictory agenda – crying out for all we're worth for the healing that Jesus alone can give. We can do nothing until we, like Bartimaeus, are willing to throw off all that we think we are and all that we have, and ask Jesus to heal us – to make us see again.

But I'm here to tell you something as awesome as it is incredible. If we believe that Jesus Christ is Lord, if we will admit our blindness to him, if we will confess our need for healing, if we will step out in faith and trust Christ alone to make us whole, he will give us back our sight.

Jesus spoke to James and John and Bartimaeus, all of whom were blind (although Bartimaeus was the only one of the three who admitted it). He speaks to us. He speaks the same words: “*What do you want me to do for you?*” What we say to him will reveal much about ourselves. More importantly, how we answer him can make all the difference – all the difference in the world.

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