

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 17, 2021**

**TRAVELS WITH JESUS:
ENCOUNTER ON THE JERICHO ROAD
Mark 10:46-52**

We're jumping ahead a bit today as we continue our "Travels with Jesus." I invite you to turn with me to Mark 10:46-52 to take a look at this encounter between Jesus and a blind man on the outskirts of Jericho. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

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The travels of Jesus were not random or accidental. He did not go from place to place on a whim. The travels of Jesus were purposeful. *Jesus* was purposeful in His travels. Everywhere He went, He went for a reason. Sometimes His purposes were more obvious. But wherever He went, there was a purpose in His going there.

In today's Scripture reading, we find Jesus in Jericho. Jericho, of course, occupies a famous place in the history of Israel. Joshua, as the successor of Moses, "fought the battle of Jericho" through most unconventional means, as God directed him, "and the walls came a-tumbling down." From Jericho, the people of Israel proceeded to take possession of Canaan, the land God had promised to give them. Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) takes place on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, a stretch of road that was about 17 miles long, roughly a day's journey on foot.

Jesus, on this occasion, was not going from Jerusalem to Jericho. He was passing through Jericho on His way to Jerusalem. He was on His way to Jerusalem to die. He was on His way to the cross. Every step He took brought Him a step closer to His destination and His destiny.

Don't let this escape your notice. Jesus was going to Jerusalem to die. The facts of the gospel can become so familiar to us that we may take it all for granted. It can be so familiar that our spirits become deadened to the force and life-altering implications of it all. Don't allow that to happen to you.

Jesus was on His way to the cross, and He knew it. Already, though the disciples didn't understand what He was talking about, He had told them on three separate occasions what was going to happen to Him when they got to Jerusalem (Mark 8:31; 9:30-32; 10:32-34). The death penalty would soon be pronounced against Him. He would be executed on a Roman cross for crimes He had not committed. The guilt was not His; it was the world's. It was yours. And mine. But Jesus would bear the weight of it all on His shoulders. Though we all like sheep have gone astray, though each of us has turned to our own way, the Lord loaded on *Him* – on *Jesus* – the iniquity – the sin and guilt – of us all.

It was for *our* transgressions that He would be pierced. It was for *our* sins that He would be crushed. It was the punishment *we* deserve that He would endure on the cross. Coming to Jericho, Jesus knew the end was near. But think about this: Even though the cross in all its awfulness lay before Him, Jesus was not too busy or too preoccupied with His own fate to touch a soul in need.

The blind man – Mark tells us his name was Bartimaeus (I’ll call him “Bart” for short) – was, as Ralph Martin said, “a nobody on the road of life.” He was one of those helpless, hopeless people who embarrasses others just by being there. He was the kind of person you’d rather just ignore, hoping he’ll go away.

But not Jesus – because whoever and wherever they are, even if they are just “nobodies”, just taking up space (in our view) along the highway of life, people in need matter to Jesus.

Jesus knew how to ask good questions. Great questions. Powerful, penetrating, point-blank questions. For example, there is this question He asked His disciples: “Who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8:29).

Or this question addressed to His religious nemeses, the Pharisees: “Why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?” (Matthew 15:3).

Or this: “When the Son of Man comes (again), will He find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8).

Or this: “What good is it if you gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul? Or what can you give in exchange for your soul?” (Mark 8:36-37).

Perhaps it doesn’t seem so, but I think the question Jesus asked blind Bart is one of the greatest questions He ever asked. Why? Because it demonstrates beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus cares about “nobodies” and all of us who may feel like “nobodies.” It shows that in God’s eyes, the weak, the vulnerable, the less gifted, the have-nots are just as important, just as valuable as those who seem to have everything going for them in life. It shows that Jesus is concerned about those whom nobody seems to love every bit as much as He is about those whom everybody loves.

At the heart of Jesus’ question to Bart is a quality of love that every one of us needs. I hope you can see that the question Jesus asked is not just for this blind beggar. It is for all the “beggars” of the world, including you and me.

The question is in verse 51: “What do you want me to do for you?”

Think about it: What do you want Jesus to do for you? What do you desire more than anything else?

Do you know about the car salesman who lost everything gambling and ended up on skid row? One day he found a wine bottle, and when he unscrewed the cap, a genie emerged and told him he could have one wish. Whatever he wanted. The guy's eyes lit up, and he said: "I want a big foreign car dealership." Instantly, he found himself in a brightly lit showroom, surrounded by Buicks and Chevys, in the heart of Tokyo.

What we think we want doesn't always turn out the way we hope, does it?

Jesus is not like a genie who grants our every wish regardless of the consequences. Jesus never said: "Ask me for anything, and I'll do it, no matter what." Unlike a genie, He does not say: "Your wish is my command." That is not how Jesus works.

What He did say to His disciples in John 14:13 is this: "I will do whatever you ask *in my name*" [*italics added*]. That is, if you ask anything according to His will, anything that is consistent with His purpose and plan for your life, He will do it – "so that (God) the Father may be glorified in the Son" (14:13).

I've just started reading my brother Gary's new book on the spiritual life of Mark Twain. In it he tells the story that when Twain (whose given name was Samuel Clemens) was about 6 years old, his schoolteacher read to her class the statement of Jesus in Matthew 7:7: "Ask, and it shall be given to you." She promised her students that God would answer their heartfelt prayers. In response, Samuel Clemens (Twain) prayed fervently that he would receive a slice of the gingerbread the daughter of a baker brought to school each day. As he later explained: "I did as much praying in the next two or three days as anyone in that town, I suppose, and I was very sincere and earnest about it too, but nothing came of it." Frustrated, he sneaked a piece of gingerbread one day when the teacher wasn't looking. He would discover that "not even the most powerful prayer" would bring more gingerbread (Gary Scott Smith, *Mark Twain: Preacher, Prophet, and Social Philosopher*, 15).

Twain concluded from this that God does not answer prayers. What he misunderstood is that God *does* answer prayers, though He does not always give us the answer we want or when we want it. But He *always* answers our prayers. In His time. According to His purposes.

This is why Jesus said Yes to Bart when he asked for his sight, right after saying No to James and John when they asked for the places of highest honor and glory in the coming kingdom of Jesus. You can read about that in Mark 10:35-45.

My sister Lisa died from cancer 8 years ago last week. She was only 54 at the time of her death. I can't tell you why Jesus said Yes to Bart but He said No to Lisa and our family and everyone who prayed for her to be healed. Of course, Lisa did experience the ultimate healing from cancer in death through the power of Jesus, whose love is stronger than cancer or death itself.

I can't tell you why God chooses to heal some people and not others. I can't tell you why some people get cancer and others don't. Or why He doesn't restore the sight of everyone who is blind.

God doesn't always let us in on why things happen the way they do.

What I can tell you is that God has a plan. Sometimes His plan involves healing. Sometimes it involves suffering. Sometimes it requires perseverance in pain. Sometimes it does not include healing in this life.

Sometimes the glory of God is revealed in healing. Sometimes it is revealed in the way a person or a family or a church handles suffering. We can't dictate to God what He should do or how He should answer our requests in any given situation.

Jesus did not come to do our will. He did not come to fulfill our desires or to grant our wishes. He came to do the will of the Father and to bring glory to Him.

And yet, as with Bart, when Jesus passes by the place where we live and sees our need, He stops to ask: "What do you want me to do for you? What can I do for you?"

At one point in his life, before he embraced the gospel and surrendered to the sovereign rule of Christ, Augustine of Hippo cried out: "O Lord, make me chaste ... but not yet." Do you know anyone like that, who knows what is good and right in the eyes of God, but wants to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season, to have a good time, to do what he or she wants, to satisfy their own desires before giving any serious thought to what God wants? "Lord, please straighten my life out, but let me have my fun first!" Augustine came to understand that you can't trifle with God. You can't fool God. God sees you as you are. He sees your heart as it really is, not as you want Him (or others) to think it is.

When Jesus stops to ask: "What do you want me to do for you?", there are some who say: "Lord, what I want more than anything else is to be successful. I want You to help me get ahead, to get to the top, to be #1. I want You to help me reach my goals in life."

I know a minister who once prayed with a soccer team before a big game. His prayer was just 4 words: "Lord, make us win!" This is the way a lot of people pray. But the truth is that not everybody can win. Only one team will win the baseball World Series this year. Only one team will win the Super Bowl. Only one candidate will be elected Governor of Virginia. As followers of Jesus, we know there is something more important than winning. Jesus didn't come to make you or me #1! It is not our success He is most concerned about, but our faithfulness, our character, our obedience born of faith, and our service to Him.

There are some who say: "Lord, what I desire more than anything is for You to keep me away from trouble and to keep trouble away from me. I want You to make the sea of my life calm." But what Jesus promised His disciples (and us) is just the opposite. He said: "In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33). Troubles and heartaches and problems

are all given in this life. Bad things happen, even to good people. Even to *God's* people. "In this world you will have trouble." Bart was not the exception to the rule.

But Jesus didn't stop there. He went on to say: "Take heart!" It is the same word (*tharsei*) the people in the crowd at Jericho spoke to Bart when they told him that Jesus was calling him.

(By the way, the word "to call" is used 3 times in verse 49. Listen:

Jesus stopped and said: "*Call* him."

So they *called* to the blind man: "Cheer up! (*Tharsei*) On Your feet! He's *calling* you."

This word "to call" is the verb *phoneo*. From it comes the word *phonetics*, which is the study of how letters and words sound. It is also the origin of the word *phone*. If they had had cell phones back in the day, Jesus could have had His Disciples call Bart on his cell phone to tell him that Jesus wanted to see him. Just a silly aside. ☺)

Back to what Jesus said in John 16:33: "Take heart! Don't let the problems and heartaches and disappointments of life overwhelm you, for I have overcome the world." Whatever troubles you may experience, whatever thorns you may have to endure in your flesh, whatever sorrows may pierce your soul – and you *will* have sorrows and thorns and troubles of one kind or another – you can be certain of this: God's grace is sufficient for you, and He will keep your heart and mind in perfect peace, if your heart is set on Him (2 Corinthians 12:9; Isaiah 26:3). You have His word on it.

Pride was not a barrier for Bart. Pride gets in the way for so many people. Including Christians like us who should know better. Bart didn't let pride get in his way. There was no way for him to hide his need, and he didn't care if the whole world knew. In fact, he was so loud about it that people around him were embarrassed by all the noise he was making. They tried – unsuccessfully – to shut him up.

Bart was willing to humble himself enough to admit his need. Not only did he know he needed help, he knew where to get it. He knew where to turn in his hour of need. He had heard of Jesus and His healing power, His ability to put the broken pieces of life back together again. He was not about to miss out on the opportunity to meet Jesus.

Bart did not have *eyesight*, but he had *insight* enough to know that Jesus was His only hope. When he finally met Jesus, his eyes were opened. Not just physically, but spiritually, too. He saw that Jesus is more than a miracle-worker; He is the Master. Not just a healer, but Lord of all.

What did Bart do when he received his sight and saw things as they really are, when he saw Jesus as He really is? He did the only thing that makes sense. "He followed Jesus on the road" (Mark 10:52). He became a follower of Jesus. He joined Jesus on the way to Jerusalem. It is possible that Bart was an eyewitness to the crucifixion of Jesus and saw Jesus with his own eyes after the resurrection.

Just a nobody on the road of life. But nobody is a nobody to Jesus. Everybody is somebody to Jesus. Even a blind beggar like Bart.

As you think about your life today, let me ask you:

What do you want Jesus to do for you?

Are you willing to admit that you need help? God's help?

Are you willing to turn to Him and trust Him with your needs and problems, your questions and doubts and fears?

Are you willing to be humble enough to ask God for what you need?

Have you given Him your heart?

Bart was a man who knew what he wanted. What he *needed*. He didn't hesitate for even a second to ask Jesus to meet his need. When Jesus had met his need, when Bart had received his sight, I think he saw that there is a question each of us must ask, in view of all God's mercies and grace to us: "Lord, what do You want me to do for You?"

And Jesus answers: "Follow me."

Which is exactly what Bart did. May we, like Bart, follow Jesus all the way. May we praise Him as we go. May we tell others of His greatness and grace with every breath we breathe, every heartbeat, and every step we take.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.