

The Ripple Effect

Openness: Receiving from God

Mark 10:46-52

February 25, 2007

Over the next six weeks we're going to explore the ripple effect. I don't know many people who want to come to the end of their lives and say, "I never made an impact on anything or anyone - but I'm okay with that." The Living God who made you in His image wants your life to matter and to make an impact. When a stone plunges into the world it makes a mark. (Demonstrate with a stone). That's the ripple effect. It creates waves. In the same way, as Christ begins to change our hearts, He empowers us to change the people around us. How do we live a life that matters for God and for eternity? We don't begin by getting busy for God; we begin by receiving from God. That's the lesson of Bartimaeus.

This passage contains a story about receiving grace from God. It's the story of a man – a poor, blind, powerless man, by the way – who not only receives but almost grabs God's grace. He goes hard after God's grace. He's a man who says, "If God really is gracious, if Jesus is real and alive, if the power of the Holy Spirit is truly available, I'm going to ask big and live large. If God is generous with his grace, I'm not going to ask for a thimbleful; I'm going to ask for a fountain-full." There were hundreds of people tagging long with Jesus on that day, but only one of them shines as a model of discipleship: surprise, it's the poor beggar named Bartimaeus.¹

We pick up the story in verse 46 – "Then they came to Jericho." Jericho is about 15 miles northeast of Jerusalem and Jesus is heading straight into Jerusalem. "As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city..." So imagine of mob of people hanging around Jesus and they are all walking on a road, leaving the city of Jericho. There is tension in the crowd. On three separate occasions Jesus has told everyone that he's headed into Jerusalem so he can die for the sins of the world. If you back up to Mark 8:32 we read, "They were on the way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus heading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid." I want us to enter into the feelings of this scene: astonishment, fear, uncertainty. Everyone is on edge and uptight and "stressed out." Jesus isn't uptight but he is focused on one goal: get to Jerusalem, suffer, and die for the sins of the world.

As they leave the city, there's a blind man by the roadside. In Jesus' day that would have been a common sight. But there's a surprising twist to this story: this blind and poor and

¹ Notice two things about this story: (1) This is clearly an eyewitness account – the details are too vivid and concrete. This clearly reads not like a mythological, legendary story but as real history recorded by an eyewitness. (2) It ties into Mark 8:22 – "They came to Bethsaida and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him." The story of the blind man at Bethsaida and the story of the blind man at Jericho form two bookends for a section on what it means to follow Jesus. Here's the point: the disciples, who should see Jesus, really don't see him. But the blind men, who shouldn't see him, really do see Jesus. So it's a warning to all of us who say we follow Jesus: Do we really see him? Do we really follow him?

marginalized beggar will become the kind of person the Gospels hold up as the model disciple. We don't know much about Bartimaeus. We know his father's name is Timaeus – which implies that the early church may have known his whole family. Isn't that amazing? That's the ripple effect. As Jesus touched and transformed Bartimaeus, he also transformed his whole family. We also know that Bartimaeus was "sitting by the roadside" or literally translated "sitting by the way." That's an important detail because in the Gospel of Mark "on the way" becomes a code phrase for following Jesus.² At the beginning of this story Bartimaeus is "sitting by the way"; by the end of the story (see verse 52) he gets up and follows Jesus "along the road" or "along the way." So the key question of discipleship becomes this: are you on the way with Jesus or not? Bartimaeus gets on the way. He becomes a model disciple for us. How so? Bartimaeus becomes the model disciple by (1) Understanding grace; (2) Living confidently; (3) Desiring Deeply.

Understanding Grace. Verse 47 – "When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." So as this mob of people start walking down the road, Bartimaeus grabs someone's sleeve and asks, "Hey, what's going on?" And when someone tells him that it's Jesus, he shouts – and I mean shouts – "**Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!**" Ever since King David the Jewish people heard God's promises to send a great deliverer – Messiah. For instance, Isaiah 35 pointed to a merciful "Son of David" – "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf be unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer ... Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away" (Isaiah 35:5, 10). Bartimaeus connects these promises with Jesus –and that's why he's so excited.

So he shouts at the top of his lungs – "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." Now imagine if someone started doing that right in the middle of our service. We'd do exactly what happened in this story: we'd start *shushing* him. Verse 48 – "Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet." Throughout the Gospels the disciples try to protect Jesus from problems, like messed-up human beings. And Jesus keeps saying to his disciples, "The messed-up people aren't the problem, you are – because you keep blocking me from the people who need me the most." So the crowd shushes Bartimaeus. Jesus is really busy, they say. Jesus has important things to do. Shush. This is what people in power always do to the powerless: they shush people. You have questions about your faith? Shush. You were abused as a child or raped as an adult? Shush. You're a mess? Shush. You desperately need mercy and healing and compassion? Shush.

Now notice that Bartimaeus isn't a pretty sight. He's poor, unpleasant, loud, rude, inappropriate, socially marginalized (he's not the kind of person you'd want at your dinner parties), religiously marginalized (he's not the kind of person we'd invite to our worship services and choose for church leadership). Yep, he's one screwed up human being, but remember: he's the model disciple in this passage.

Huh? This is foreign to most of us. Most of us have bought into what I would call the "Gospel of self-sufficiency," which basically says, "I can make it on my own." Or the

²In the Book of Acts followers of Jesus usually aren't called Christians; they are called "people of the Way."

“Gospel of self-esteem,” which says, “If I feel good about myself I must be okay.” We tend to assume that religion means getting our act together. Religion means getting it right – and until I can get it right, God doesn’t want me. As we would say, it means getting our ducks in a row. As a result we live with fear and insecurity – *I don’t have my spiritual ducks in a row* – or pride and self-righteousness – *I do have my ducks in a row, at least better than most people I know.*

But look at Bartimaues, our model disciple: he’s a mess. He doesn’t even have any ducks to line up. Nearly 1,600 years ago the brilliant theologian Augustine read this story and commented that “the wretched helplessness of fallen humanity is seen symbolically in the blindness of Bartimaues.” *Wait a minute I’m not sure I like that “wretched helplessness” part. Why does the Bible talk so much about sin? It seems so negative. How could one of the greatest Christians that ever lived – the Apostle Paul – come to the end of his life and call himself “the chief of sinners” (see 1 Timothy 1:15)?*

The Gospel about Jesus is not a message of “I’m okay, you’re okay”; it’s a message of “I’m a mess and you’re a mess.” Seeing ourselves as a mess is truly counter-cultural, but it is the start of a revolution in our hearts. Christian counselor Mark McMinn tells the following story:

A young woman I met described her childhood in a home where self-esteem was the primary virtue. Her parents taught her that she was delightful, talented, good-hearted, intelligent, and witty ... But as she grew up, she felt that something important was missing from her incubator of childhood self-esteem. Somehow, deep-down, she always knew there was an intrinsic need for healing, an inner darkness, a moral decay, which was also part of her character. As she ventured into the teenage traps of promiscuity and drugs, she felt like an imposter, as if no one could know about her true self or else they would stop loving her. She didn’t need another self-esteem button or sticker to wear around the house. What she longed for was authentic awareness of her good and bad qualities, and love that was big enough to embrace her regardless of her sin. When she turned to God as a young adult, she found what she had been longing for – One who knew every dark corner of her soul and still (offered) her love, forgiveness, acceptance, and grace.³

The church is one of the few places on the planet where we’re actually invited to come clean. We’re invited to step forward and say, “There is something bent and twisted and deformed inside my soul and I need help.” And at the same time we’re invited to be loved in all our sin. If you’re looking for the fellowship of the pious, I’ll save you some time: go look somewhere else. This is a fellowship of sinners. But let me say emphatically that this is good news, wonderfully good news. We’re not a country club for the world’s best people; we’re a hospital for people who have been salvaged by the power and skill of Doctor Jesus Christ. We are a company of the chief of sinners, who like Bartimaues, are opening our lives to the amazing grace of Jesus.

Living with Confidence. But notice something surprising about Bartimaues: he’s a mess but that doesn’t cause him to hang his head in shame and fear. He lives with joyful confidence. Notice the rest of verse 49: everyone is shushing him, all the nice and

³ Mark McMinn, *Why Sin Matters*, page 14.

religious people are telling him to shut up and settle down; but this only made him shout all the more, “*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*” This is what I admire about Bartimaeus: he’s scrappy; he’s persistent to the point of being aggravating. Bartimaeus is like a pit bull with a huge chunk of steak in his jaws: he clamps down and won’t let go. For Bartimaeus the steak is God’s grace. You can’t shake him off the precious steak. Everyone shushes him and he manages to ignore them all.

Wouldn’t it be great to live with that level of confidence and freedom? Wouldn’t it be great to be completely honest about your life – the mess, the pain, the temptation – and at the same time hold your head high with confidence and authority and real spiritual power? Is that even possible? Bartimaeus does. Now a psychologist might look at this story and say, “Hum, what an interesting specimen of unusually high ego strength.” But this isn’t ego strength; this is God-strength. Bartimaeus is a nobody. People walked by Bartimaeus every day and most of them ignored him or threw a few coins in his little beggar’s cup. But either way, he got the message: you’re a nobody.

Have you ever felt the sting of being a nobody? When I was 17 years old I was playing in a basketball game against our archrivals Southwest High School. I was assigned to guard their best player, an arrogant, hot-headed, condescending point guard. Every time he came down the court, he would dribble up to me and whisper under his breath, “You are nothing, man. You’re nothing. And ‘nothing’ can’t guard me.” I’m happy to report that I shut him down (and actually got him so frustrated that the referees ejected him from the game), but after continually hearing “You’re nothing, man” you start to believe it.

There are so many forces that cry out to us, “You’re nothing.” You may face it at work. You may hear it in your marriage – or lack of marriage. You may hear it in school. You may have heard it from your parents. You may hear it when you look in the mirror or view your own body. Or you may be trying to stay one step ahead of “You’re nothing,” holding on to your success or money or stuff or degrees or relationships like a drowning person clings to driftwood. Whenever you say, “I must have that _____ or else I’m a nobody,” that is the source of your confidence, and ultimately, that is your god.

Bartimaeus has real confidence in God’s grace in Jesus, and thus, he doesn’t have a fake, puffed-up, propped-up confidence that depends on externals; no, he has an internal joyful, focused, passionate strength. Once again, wouldn’t it be great to live with that confidence at all times and in all circumstances. Where do you get it? It’s in verse 49 – “Jesus stopped and said, ‘Call him.’ So they called to the blind man, ‘Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you.’” For Bartimaeus confidence hangs on those two words – “Jesus stopped.” Confidence hinges on the presence of Jesus. Jesus is here. Jesus is with me. The Son of God who loved me and died for me, is here in my life. The Eternal Son of God, the One whom the Bible calls the radiance of the Father’s glory (Hebrews 1:3), and the one whom “by him all things were created” (Colossians 1:16); this One now hears one blind beggar cry out to him. And Jesus stopped. Or literally “Jesus stood still.” Here’s where real, pure, passionate, love-filled confidence comes from: God stands still for you. Shortly after this encounter with Bartimaeus, on a dreary afternoon, this Eternal Son of God stood still long enough to allow his creation to nail him to a cross. By doing

so, the Bible tells us that every sin you and I ever committed was only nailed to that cross. That's the source and fountain of spiritual authority and confidence.

It's the confidence that belongs to every child of God. Notice how the New Testament describes this confidence: "For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but a spirit of adoption as sons (and daughters) of God, by which we cry out, 'Abba, Father!'" Or as the Message Bible translates this verse: "This resurrection life you received from God is not a timid, grave-tending life. It's adventurously expectant, greeting God with childlike 'What's next, Papa?' God's Spirit touches our spirit and confirms who we really are."

If you want to know what spiritual confidence and authority looks like, watch the new movie called "Amazing Grace." It's the true story of William Wilberforce, a young politician living in England at the end of the 1700's. In 1787 he proposed a bill to abolish the slave trade in England. At the time, the slave trade was at its height. Thousands of African men, women and children were being captured, put on a ship and sent to British colonies to work in the fields and sugar plantations. Often on a typical voyage half to two-thirds of the slaves would die in transit. But almost no one in the British Parliament thought it was wrong.

Paragraph from Os Guinness' book *The Call*.

Desiring Deeply. That's the confidence of Bartimaues – and it isn't just intellectual knowledge; Bartimaues does something: "Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus." Now keep in mind that Bartimaues is a beggar. He doesn't have a closet full of clothes color-coordinated by season of the year. He doesn't have an extra garage for all his stuff. This cloak is probably his only possession. But he flings it away because Jesus is near. Jesus is better than anything else you can own or achieve. That's what worship is all about. It's not about the preacher or the music, it's about the worth of Jesus; it's about telling him with our lips and our lives, "You're better than anything the world could ever give me."

Then notice Jesus question, "What do you want me to do for you?" I love Bartimaues' confidence and clarity: "I want to see." Now in the Gospel of Mark the recovery of sight isn't just a physical miracle; it's symbolic of discipleship. It means, "I want to see and follow you, Lord." Which is exactly what happens next: "'Go,' Jesus said, 'your faith has healed you.'" And then he followed Jesus along the road. He's not on the side of the road anymore. He's following Jesus along the road now.

Those two words are so important: I want. Bartimaues knows what he wants. It's so clear and focused. He's a man whose been saved by grace and he can't live without grace. He's a man who lives with confidence and spiritual authority because his power and hope rest in Christ. So he knows what he wants: I want to see. Or I want to follow you, Lord.

My friend Delbert owned a very successful printing business in Florida until he suddenly sold it and moved to Africa. He went to Zambia to work for a small Christian ministry that makes hand-cranking carts for handicapped people. I asked Delbert, “Why did you do that?” It was like flinging off his cloak and coming to Jesus. Delbert told me, “Look, when I’m dead and gone, there are three and only three things that will remain: my faith in the Lord (and that’s number one), my friends and family, and finally, the stories that people will tell about my life – in particular, the stories people will share about how I influenced others around me.”

You don’t have to move to Africa to say, “Lord, Jesus, you are better than anything.”

How about you? Are you still waiting beside the road or are you following along the road? Do you understand the Gospel of sin and grace? Do you live under the grace of God as your only hope for this life and the next? There is only one thing to give you confidence in the spiritual journey – Christ. Do you have that confidence? Do you pray with that confidence? Do you pass on that confidence to your children? Do we as a church family live with that confidence? Christian, follower of Jesus, do you know who you are and whose you are? Do you know your greatness? What do you want out of life? What are the stories that you want people to tell about you? What do you want?

(GO TO THE BOWL AND HOLD UP A ROCK). This represents your life – your one and only life. The Bible says that our life is a vapor. It will be over before you know it. What will you do with your life? Will you hold on to it, live it for yourself? Or will you surrender to Christ and allow God to make ripples through you?