

# ***“Lord, Have Mercy”***

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***Don't dare pray that God will take away a crisis because we deserve better.***

***Mark 10:46-52***

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## ***Bartimaeus sandwich***

If you think the title of the sermon, “Lord, Have Mercy,” otherwise pronounced “Laudamercy!” has something to do with the coronavirus, you are partially correct.

The story of Bartimaeus in Mark 10 seems at first glance not to be that important. A blind beggar calls out to Jesus and is healed because of his faith and persistence. This miracle seems much less notable than a paralytic being let down through a hole in the roof or the raising of a 12-year-old girl from the dead. Jesus must have healed hundreds whose stories were not noted. Why this one?

Each of the four Gospel writers chooses and omits stories of Jesus with a purpose in mind. For Luke, the story of Bartimaeus isn't as important as another encounter in Jericho that same trip – the wee little man named Zaccheus. Matthew does tell about Bartimaeus, but offers a few differences in detail.

Bartimaeus' story is as important to Mark as peanut butter is to two pieces of bread. What follows his story is what we call the Triumphant Entry of Jesus on Palm Sunday. As much as Jesus has downplayed his true identity and told people to be quiet about his miracles, for him to allow a Messianic parade and to receive the praises and palms of accolade, something must set the stage. That's Bartimaeus.

Then there's the story that precedes this one. Two disciples in Jesus' inner circle, the brothers James and John who had been privileged along with Peter to see his glory on the Mount of Transfiguration, come to Jesus with a request that sounds rather third-

grade to me: “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.” These are men who have heard God’s voice affirming his son and have seen Jesus’ glory glow!

Jesus ignores their silliness, and insists they say out loud what’s on their mind: “What do you want me to do for you?” Their request is brazen: “In your glory, we want the number one and number two seats of honor and authority, on your right and left.” Jesus goes on to instruct all his disciples on the two prerequisites or requirements of sharing his glory: suffering and servanthood.

### ***A shrieking beggar***

In addition to what precedes and follows, there’s so much about this story that is unusual or unique.

*The place (46).* Only two miracles in the Bible happen in Jericho, and only one in the ministry of Jesus. You remember the walls tumbling down, and the curse Joshua pronounced on anyone who would rebuild those walls. Someone did, and the curse fell on him (which might be another miracle). Herod the Great built a winter palace in Jericho, with trees and gardens, swimming pools, bathhouses, and government offices.

The reason Jericho is significant to our story is because it was the hard right turn for pilgrims headed to Jerusalem from Galilee and Perea. Jericho is still today the lowest city on earth by elevation, about 850 feet below sea level. 17 miles to the west, Jerusalem is 3000 feet higher, and the way is rocky and dry and, as we learn in the story of the Good Samaritan, fraught with potential danger.

The “large crowd” accompanying Jesus and the disciples in Jericho may in part be those who had witnessed his healings or eaten the bread he multiplied by the sea, or heard the Sermon on the Mount. More importantly, they were on their way to Jerusalem for the Passover. They would be the ones shouting “Hosanna in the Highest!” as he entered Jerusalem.

*The name (46).* Can you name any person Jesus healed or raised from the dead? Only one is named in the Gospels, and he’s in John’s gospel: Lazarus. We know Jesus healed Jairus’ daughter, but we don’t know the girl’s name. Why is Bartimaeus’ name important enough to include, and his father’s name as well – especially because Bartimaeus means “Son of Timaeus”? The only logical conclusion is that either Timaeus, which means “esteemed” or “honored,” or Bartimaeus was a legendary figure in the church at Rome, where Mark wrote his gospel, or maybe in the Roman government.

*The shout (47).* So now we have a large pilgrim crowd heading through and out of Jericho, and a blind beggar named Bartimaeus. We don’t use or hear the word “beggar” much anymore. It’s pejorative. We speak of a “homeless person” or, if we want to be negative, “panhandler” or “bum.” Let’s be honest, all of those words describe someone most of us would prefer to avoid or ignore.

Bartimaeus will not be ignored. He's strategically positioned with his cloak in front of him expecting that a throng of singing, worshipping pilgrims, are going to be more likely than the passersby on ordinary days to drop a denarius into his garment. He began shouting. No, that's not strong enough. The word means he began shrieking: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." The word for "shout" or "shriek" is onomatopoeic, like "meow" or "oink." Only this is *krazo* in Greek, a word that imitates the raven's call. It is a piercing, annoying sound. And Bartimaeus keeps it up.

When he calls Jesus "Son of David," I don't know how much theology or history he knows. But Mark clearly sees this as setup for the crowd chanting, "Hosanna in the highest!" as Jesus enters Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives in the next chapter.

The dominant word in his shriek to me is "mercy." In the Greek Old Testament, "mercy" usually translates one of my favorite Hebrew words: *hesed*. It's rooted in covenant, but the covenant is from a greater to a lesser, not two equals. All the authority and privilege and prerogative are on one side. On the other is helplessness and need. Bartimaeus is screaming, "Please! I have nothing to give you, nothing to offer you, no right to demand. Son of David, take pity on this poor, blind, needy bum."

*The rebuke (48).* The crowd, or at least "many" of them, have no pity at all. They "rebuke" him – that word I introduced last week having a double meaning of censure (for something done) and warning (against a future action). "Shut up!" is both a way of saying you've already said too much and you had better not say more. These may have been his friends, even his father, but they have zero effect on Bartimaeus. Well, that's not true. It just provokes more shrieking: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

*The response (49).* Jesus stops. Stay there for a moment and listen to the ripple effect of silence in the crowd. All eyes and ears turn to Jesus as he gestures to Bartimaeus: "Call him." This is what makes me think it may have been his friends who had told him to be quiet. The "Shut up" turns to "Cheer up!" They use the same word Jesus will use in the Upper Room when he says, "In this world you will have trouble, but take heart...." "Cheer up!" they say to Bartimaeus, "On your feet! He's calling you!"

*The leap (50).* Bartimaeus has a cloak spread out in front of him to take donations. Remember, he's a beggar. At this point, though, coins fly through the air as Bartimaeus jumps up. I don't think you see many blind people jumping. It's too risky. His heart is pounding as he follows the voice and stands in front of Jesus.

*The question (51).* Jesus asks the same question he had asked of James and John: "What do you want me to do for you?" This time he's asking it not of disciples who had walked with him for three years and still thought only of power and privilege, but of a beggar who needed Jesus' invitation to state his need directly and plainly.

*The request (51).* The response is personal and simple: "Rabbi, I want to see." In some translations it's "Rabboni." The only other use of this Aramaic word is from the

lips of Mary Magdalene in the garden on the day of Jesus' resurrection. It's both more personal and more exalted than just a simple "Rabbi." This blind beggar knows he has come to the one true Master, and he knows him and cares.

*The salvation (52).* "Go," Jesus says, "your faith has healed you." Bartimaeus doesn't seem at first like the model of the kind of faith Jesus would honor. Doesn't he honor respectful, patient faith? Sometimes. Remember, there's no formula in the gospels. But we do have many examples of those who wouldn't take no for an answer – the friends who dug a hole in the roof, the woman who touched the hem of his garment, the father who didn't let the inability of nine disciples obliterate his faith.

*The journey (52).* "Immediately he received his sight," Mark tells us. No fingers in his ears or spittle on his tongue, no incantations, no mud on his eyes, not even a touch. Bartimaeus joins the pilgrims headed for Jerusalem. No doubt he was in that crowd the next Sunday shouting praises with palm branches. Bartimaeus becomes what the book of Acts will call a "follower of the way."

### ***The mercy of coronavirus***

I find the story of Bartimaeus to be the perfect platform for what we need to talk about today: the coronavirus. Some of you are thinking what I would be thinking if I were sitting where you are: "Not at church too! I'm sick of hearing about the coronavirus. Is there not one place I can go and not hear that word? Laudamercy!"

My point exactly. Mercy is the perfect word for talking about this pandemic, because I want to say what I haven't heard enough of – looking at this crisis through the lens of my faith in Jesus, the Son of David. What we need is his mercy. Before I get to that faith perspective, let me repeat what I think is the most practical advice.

*First, stop the panic!* I can't say much about the crazy stock market that will have any impact, but if the market fails and we fall into recession, I blame the hype far more than the virus. Just in the last 24 hours I've heard about people stealing supplies from hospitals – imagine that, taking from those who actually might need them – and hoarding toilet paper and paper towels. Really? Your computer didn't crash with Y2K, and neither Obama's nor Trump's election brought on Armageddon. We all need to take a chill pill. If the virus lands in Hickory, we'll follow the advice of the authorities and let you stay home and watch the service on our livestream, but as far as we know we're a long way from there. Live your life, for goodness' sake!

*Second, use common sense.* Even those who live in areas of confirmed cases just say to do what you do in flu season. Stay home if you're sick, see a doctor if you have the symptoms, wash your hands and keep them away from your face, use hand sanitizer. I'm not ready yet to give up shaking hands any more than I would any other winter flu and cold season. We don't plan any changes in programs or mission trips at this point, not until it becomes clear that this is the right course for Hickory.

Having said that, let's get to the mercy perspective on corona virus.

During this Lenten season, my own discipline is focused on prayer. What's getting in the way of my prayer? And how can I learn to pray better – not meaning to get more of what I want, but to draw closer to the Lord in prayer. Prayer can be summarized into two manners before God: "Thank you" and "Please." You can apply this as you pray about the coronavirus through the lens of mercy.

*Thank you.* We opened this service singing "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," because of the phrase in the chorus, "Morning by morning new mercies I see." The Bible doesn't just use mercy to talk about something you need. It uses the word to describe what you already have. "I will sing of the mercies of the Lord forever" (Psalm 89:1).

The first use of mercy in the Bible is when God was merciful to Lot and his family to save them from Sodom (Genesis 19:16). Moses (Deuteronomy 4:31), David (2 Samuel 24:14), and Nehemiah (9:31) all praised God for his mercy. The psalms have as many 'praises' for mercy as 'pleases' for mercy. Paul's theology is summarized in Ephesians 2: "God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions and sins." Peter begins his first letter, "Praise to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

If mercy means not getting what we deserve, which is God's justice and wrath, then the fact that we're here is mercy. The people who are working hard to contain and prevent the virus are gifts of God's mercy. Modern medical technology and ubiquity of good healthcare is God's mercy. The fact that we're created in God's image to love and be loved, that's a beautiful mercy. It includes the mercy of touch. Don't neglect the appropriate embrace or descend into such fear that you're hiding your face or covering your hands when there's little medical risk. Touch is one of God's great gifts.

*Please.* The coronavirus does call us to pray for mercy. There are people who are hurting. There are people who are dying. And the most vulnerable need protection and care. Christian people are those who move toward and not away from risk, even plague. Samaritan's Purse and other organizations moved toward the Ebola epidemic. Martin Luther stayed in Wittenberg during the plague. The Miracle of Hickory during the polio epidemic was led by people of faith. All over this country are hospitals and clinics motivated by courageous people who love Jesus. We're not afraid of death or disease. Nothing can separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord.

The virus itself is a mercy – a "severe mercy"<sup>1</sup> perhaps, but still a mercy. When we find ourselves too high and mighty, too proud, too self-sufficient, too prosperous, it is God's mercy to remind us in our blindness that we need him. We think the best thing that can happen to us is so that we surround ourselves with human ingenuity and

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase borrowed from the book of the same title by Sheldon Vanauken.

safeguards so that we don't even need God. His mercy will not let that happen. More people pray during wartime and natural disasters. We need him.

Don't dare pray that God take away this virus *because* we deserve better. We don't deserve anything. But do pray that in the midst of this trial we will see ourselves like Bartimaeus, poor and blind. It is our true condition. Pray for those who face the worst of it in real time, but pray for all of us, that we might learn the lessons God would have us learn during this or any other crisis. Pray that in God's mercy he will convict the world of sin and pride, that he will help us proclaim clearly the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that his servants will display the greatest peace and courage that the world may know that we belong to the God whose mercies are new every morning. Amen.

Let us pray.

God our heavenly Father, you created us for eternity. We confess that we often act as if we have nothing to live for but a longer life on this earth. Forgive us. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, Son of Man, Son of David, you are the hope of the world. May these days call us to greater faithfulness in proclaiming your death and resurrection. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Holy Spirit, you are our comfort. Convict, comfort, and guide us in these troubled times that we may display the peace that passes understanding. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for all those who are terrorized and immobilized by the unknown, who live in the grip of anxiety and panic. Grant that we might point them to the One who gives peace and hope. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for those whose lives have been altered by this virus, who have become ill or have been isolated, who have lost loved ones or financial security. Grant reprieve and healing and a new day of hope. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for scientists and physicians and nurses and technicians who are exposing themselves to danger on our behalf to lessen the risk. Protect and direct them. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for government officials at every level, for decision-makers in business, church, and education, for consultants who guide them in prudent preparation while not fully knowing what impact, if any, they might face. Give them wisdom and courage. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Oh God, in all of our requests for mercy, help us to remember how many mercies we have already been shown, especially the mercy of life eternal through our Lord Jesus Christ. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen.