

What Blind Bartimaeus Teaches Us About Stewardship?

Stewardship Emphasis Sunday

Mark 10:46-52
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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In today's Epistle reading from Galatians 6, the apostle Paul writes to that Christian community of faith, "God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow." Now there's a great teaching about good stewardship, and I have used that passage on several previous occasions on Stewardship Emphasis Sunday. But I decided not to preach on that today because it was just too easy. Instead, I felt challenged to find some kind of message about good stewardship from today's Gospel reading from Mark 10, the story of Blind Bartimaeus.

Some of you may remember a sermon from just three weeks ago entitled, "The Ethics of Finances." That was kind of a stewardship primer. That sermon came from the same chapter in Mark, about the rich young man who decided *not* to follow Jesus because he had many possessions of which he did not want to give away to help the poor or those in need. But as we all know, or should know, good stewardship is more than just the sharing of our finances to further the work and ministry of Jesus. It's also about the sharing of our time and talents. And as we will see, there's a strong connection between these two stories in Mark 10 because they both address the issue of discipleship, following the ways and teachings of Jesus.

Let's start with something often overlooked in the story, the actual name of the man who was healed. Rarely in the gospels is a name given to someone who was healed by Jesus. But here we are given the name of the blind beggar. By that way, that's basically a redundant set of words. If persons in that ancient culture were blind, then most likely they indeed lived the life of a beggar.

Mark provides the name, Bartimaeus. So, this must be important for some reason. The easy answer, from a literal approach, is that this person was an actual historical figure, and this just happened to be his name. There are other possibilities, however, like Mark intentionally choosing this name for its metaphorical meaning. Bartimaeus, which even as the biblical text explains, means Son of Timaeus. *Bar* means 'son.' The root of the word for 'Timaeus' has a couple of different possible meanings. This ambiguity itself may have been intentional on the part of the gospel writer, as is commonly done by the author of the Gospel of John.

The translation of the root of the Greek-derived name, Timaeus, means 'honor.' Therefore, it's possible to translate "Bartimaeus" as '**son of honor.**' An alternative root of the word from the Aramaic language, the language Jesus spoke, means something very different. It implies 'unclean' or 'impure.' In this case, 'Bartimaeus' could mean '**son of the unclean.**' This would be in keeping with the general bigotry and bias against

those with disabilities, which was commonly thought to be an inherited trait because of the sins of the parents.

Now what does any of this name study have to do with stewardship? We already know that Bartimaeus, because of his blindness, was at the fringe of society. The interpretation of his name as 'son of the unclean', adds to this reality of being an outsider. Mark adds to this by saying Bartimaeus was "sitting by the roadside," another indication of his exclusion. His crying out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me," applies the messianic term to Jesus. Perhaps Mark's point is that the Son of David chooses to engage with the Son of the Unclean, even though the disciples tell the man to be quiet and leave Jesus out of this.

If one goes with the interpretation of 'son of honor,' then Jesus' interaction with this person at the fringe of society brings him out of that condition to one of honor. Both understandings of this name contribute to the impact of this story.

Jesus hears Bartimaeus call out to him, and he asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" By the way, that's the exact same question Jesus previously asked of James and John before they ambitiously reply that they want Jesus to let them sit at his left and right side in his glory. They sought power, privilege, status, and authority. I preached on that passage two weeks ago, in which Jesus turns their request into a teaching about lording it over others, and that a proper understanding of discipleship as a follower of Jesus is to serve, not to be served. This, we will see, is meant by Mark to contrast with Bartimaeus' request and response.

Concerning Bartimaeus, Jill Duffield, while editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, commented: "Jesus offers the dignity of asking someone long sidelined and silenced to speak for himself, to have his voice heard, honored, and tended. When countless people sternly ordered Bartimaeus to be quiet, not make a scene, don't disrupt, accept your fate, Jesus stops, calls for him and asks: 'What do you want?' Jesus listens and gives Bartimaeus that for which he asks, requiring nothing in return. Jesus tells him, '**Go, your faith has made you well.**'"

This has a spiritual connotation as well as a physical one. Bartimaeus, once healed, does *not* follow Jesus' instruction to go. Instead, we're told that he "followed Jesus on the way." Historically, at first the followers of Jesus weren't called Christians, but rather, people of the Way. Bartimaeus becomes a follower of Jesus and therefore engages in active discipleship as his response of gratitude to the grace of God.

That's the key. **Theological and practical understandings of good stewardship are almost always tied to our response of gratitude to God's grace.** Duffield continues, "Imagine if Jesus' disciples, the church, Christ's Body," [this congregation, you and me], "responded likewise to the marginalized, silenced, suffering and vulnerable?" Like in this story, every "blind beggar." **every outsider, those still considered to be unclean, has a name, a family, a place, a history, their own story.** Therefore, when someone cries out for help, at the very least we ought not order them to be silent, as did Jesus' misunderstanding disciples. As followers of the ways and teachings of Jesus, we, like him, must honor and acknowledge the pain and hurt of those made in the image of God.

Duffield then offers this assessment. "Some of us, myself too-often included, value politeness and civility over justice... God desires abundant life for all people, not a false peace for those [of us] with the ability to cross to the other side of the street," or roll up our car windows and lock our doors. Perhaps the most Christ-like response is to stop and

see and hear and attend to the person that you and I too often see as a mere interruption.

In this story, Jesus asks Bartimaeus what he wants. That's a good precedent for us to follow. **Too often we good-intentioned church folks often presume to know what other people want. Only later do we learn that perhaps we shouldn't have presumed we know best what others need.** There is often a "white savior" mentality that accompanies us into the ministry field, whether that be in Nicaragua or in North Tulsa, in an area suffering from a natural disaster, or a stranger who approaches us on the street.

Bartimaeus asks Jesus for the ability to see, which is often a metaphor in the gospels for spiritual sight, not just physical sight. This should cause us to pause, to **look at ourselves in the mirror, and ask if there is anything to which we are blind. Our culture is filled with things which can distract and blind us.** Perhaps contributing factors include consumerism, information overload, self-gratification, white privilege, and color blindness.

We are told that after Jesus called for Bartimaeus to come to him, Bartimaeus "threw off his cloak" and went to Jesus. Mark most likely means this metaphorically, as well. **Throwing away one's cloak (which was probably his only possession) can mean leaving behind the old order of things, or throwing off an old way of life.** Again, that's something the rich young man, because of his attachment to his possessions, was unable to do. So let me ask, **are their "cloaks" that you and I, that we as College Hill, need to throw aside?**

As previously mentioned, this story is meant to contrast with the one of James and John asking Jesus for power and privilege. Again, we see this consummate "outsider" outshine the "insiders" and thus becomes a model of discipleship. As Duffield notes, and this is important, "Jesus gives Bartimaeus that for which he asks with nothing required in return. This is no transaction, no quid pro quo. There is no gratitude or deference expected. Jesus freely gives, Bartimaeus is free to respond as he is moved. Jesus says, "go." Instead, in his response of gratitude, Bartimaeus chooses to follow Jesus on the way." This is the way of discipleship. **How are we following Jesus on the Way?**

Yes, offering the opportunity for you and I to give of our time, talents, and financial resources to the church does indeed help to maintain our building and grounds, have a vibrant music program, meaningful children's ministries, offer services of worship and times of education and hopefully soon, in-person fellowship, and employ a professional staff. But it also makes it possible, as a congregation, to reach out, listen to, and minister to folks like Bartimaeus through vital outreach and mission programs. We are participating in one today in the 5th Sunday Offering of collecting necessary goods to help in the transition of our new Afghan neighbors here in Tulsa.

Whether we engage with someone who society deems as on the fringe or unclean, or as someone who has been bestowed with honor and respect, **our annual budget becomes a spiritual document. It declares to ourselves and to the public our priorities in our efforts to be good stewards and disciples. To follow Jesus on the way.** For it is in the freely giving of ourselves that demonstrates the mark of our Christian commitment and discipleship.

Amen.

Resources:

Gareth Hughes, "The Name, Fame and Shame of Bartimaeus," October 16, 2009,
<https://christhum.wordpress.com>.

Peter Lockhart, The Son of Poverty, October 25, 2012, on blog *A Different Heresy: Exploring faith & spirituality in a pluralistic world* at revplockhart.blogspot.com.

Jill Duffield, *Presbyterian Outlook*. <https://pres-outlook.org/2018/10/23rd-sunday-after-pentecost-october-28-2018/>.