

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Mission of Mercy

Mark 10:46-52

We're just a week away from Palm Sunday, sometimes called Passion Sunday. Next Sunday is the beginning of Holy Week, a stretch of days when Christians focus more intently and reflect more deeply on the suffering and death of Jesus, leading up to the celebration of his resurrection on Easter. But before we go with Jesus into Jerusalem, we need to pay attention to what, or more precisely whom, is there along the way as we head toward the holy city. Yes, there will be plenty of people acclaiming Jesus as Israel's anointed ruler when he rides a colt into town. But there's already someone who hails him as king before he reaches Jerusalem. His name is Bartimaeus.

Though Bartimaeus can't see, his spiritual vision is 20/20. When he hears that Jesus is coming, Bartimaeus doesn't have to think long and hard about how to address him. "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (47). Bartimaeus sees what others don't see. He sees that the Messiah is passing his way, and he's not about to be silenced. When some in the crowd start to shush him, he just turns up the volume: "Son of David, have mercy on me!" (v. 48). Bartimaeus knows that he has to stand up for himself. He has to advocate for his own health care. Otherwise, he'll miss his opportunity, Jesus will be long gone, and Bartimaeus will end up suffering in anonymity as all the healthy people pass him by.

But Jesus, who knows faith when he sees it, stops and shushes the shushers. He summons Bartimaeus, who wastes no time responding. Bartimaeus's eyes may not work, but his knees and legs are still in good shape. "Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus" (v. 50). Why this reference to his cloak? Maybe because it was his only possession. Bartimaeus had nothing more than the clothes on his back. And now, in the presence of Jesus, he doesn't even have that much. What a contrast he is to the young man Jesus met just a couple of stories earlier here in Mark. You may remember him. He was really rich. No government stimulus check for him. His income was way above the threshold. So Jesus hit him right where it hurt most. Our Lord told him to liquidate all his assets and give the money to the poor. According to Mark, "At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth" (10:22).

But Bartimaeus didn't go away. He didn't go his own way. Having recovered his sight, he follows Jesus in his way. Bartimaeus may not have had much, but what he did possess, he now left behind to go with Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. Here was someone who received what he had sought, and what he needed most—mercy.

"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" From day one, that's what Jesus had been on, a mission of mercy. In Jesus' life and ministry, and soon in his death, the mercy of God was embodied and at work in a world full of sin and suffering. Through Jesus, God's mercy had been manifesting itself in many ways, especially acts of healing. So now, before Jesus enters Jerusalem and goes deeper into his own sacrifice for us, he restores a man's sight. This is the final healing miracle in Mark. Fifteen miles outside the holy city, eyes get opened and mercy makes its way further into the darkness and death of a suffering world. Slowly but surely, the cross is coming into sharper view. That's where the mercy of God will be most fully and decisively revealed.

In the early centuries of the Christian faith, a very simple prayer was developed in the deserts of Egypt and Palestine. Ever since then, this prayer has been practiced in the Eastern Orthodox Church. It's called The Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." In one respect, the prayer is inspired by Paul's exhortation to the Thessalonians to "pray constantly" (1 Thess. 5:17). So many people who use The Jesus Prayer will repeat it throughout the course of the day, often for extended periods of concentration. "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

The purpose isn't to repeat the prayer robotically but sincerely, speaking to Christ and sharpening your ability to tune in to God's presence. What's more, using the prayer repeatedly isn't an indication that you doubt God's forgiveness or that Christ's death hasn't cleansed you of your sins. It's simply an expression of the fact that even after you come to faith in Christ, you still struggle with the power of sin. As believers, we still sin against God and one another. And so we still need his mercy, not just once but across the course of our lives as we follow Jesus. As Frederica Mathewes-Green puts it: "God doesn't need us to remind him to be merciful; he is merciful all the time, even when we don't ask. But unless we make a habit of asking for mercy, we forget that we *need* it. Ego builds a cardboard fortress that humility must, every day, tear down."¹

Every day we need to join Bartimaeus in his plea, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" It's a plea for mercy, a cry for help. But this will not come easily. Pride and self-righteousness try to shush us into thinking that we don't need Jesus, or that even if we do, there are others who need him way more. Or we become blind to our desperate state, thinking that we already have all that's necessary to be truly alive, when in fact our own accomplishments and prosperity are keeping us from going forward with Christ. In order to make progress as disciples, we often need to lay aside our cloak of self-sufficiency and stand helpless before the Lord.

Author Anne Lamott wrote a book titled *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. As regards the first one, she speaks about how "There's freedom in hitting bottom ... relief in admitting you've reached the place of great unknowing. This is where restoration can begin" She goes on to say "Help. Help us walk through this. Help us come through. It is the first great prayer."²

"Help." It's often the best prayer we can utter. It was Bartimaeus's prayer. It was the prayer of the Canaanite woman who came to Jesus, crying, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Matt 15:22). It was the prayer of the ten lepers who called out to Jesus in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" (Luke 17:12-13). It was the prayer of the tax collector who stood in the temple, beating his breast and saying, "God, have mercy on me a sinner" (Luke 18:13). Our healing encounters with the mercy of the Lord often begin with one simple prayer: "Help."

I don't know if you did much to commemorate Saint Patrick's Day this past Wednesday, apart from clothing yourself with something green, but we would be wise to remember how Patrick, after escaping from slavery in Ireland, responded to God's call to return and preach the gospel there. In the record of his life called *Confessions*, Patrick wrote of God's grace: "And I am certain of this: I was a dumb stone lying squashed in the mud; the Mighty and Merciful God came, dug me out and set me on top of the wall. Therefore, I praise him and ought to render him something for his wonderful benefits to me both now and in eternity."³

Like Saint Patrick or Bartimaeus or countless others who've encountered the mercy of the Lord, you and I can't just return to business as usual. We have to continually seek Christ's mercy, embody Christ's mercy, and extend Christ's mercy to others. The way that we

practice mercy in our own lives reveals the extent to which we have received and experienced God's mercy.

The pandemic circumstances of the past year have been a critical period for us as followers of Jesus to participate in his ongoing mission of mercy. Every day, we've had opportunities to seek the mercy of God and to display his mercy toward others as they press through illness, grief, isolation, depression, family stress, financial loss, and material need. Discipleship during COVID-19 has been, and continues to be, a historical moment when we who confess that Jesus is Lord can exhibit his compassion toward the world. As one pastor put it when he was asked what he hopes will be said of Christians when the history of this pandemic is written: "This is an enormous opportunity for Christians to show the world what we are for rather than all the many things they've heard us say that we're against."⁴

And this certainly wouldn't be the first time the church has had an opportunity to do so. In the early centuries of the Christian faith, the Roman Empire experienced various calamities, including plagues and pestilences. In one case, while so many people, including physicians, rushed out of Rome, Christians rushed in to care for the sick. Many of these followers of Jesus got sick and died in the process of demonstrating the compassion of our Lord to others. Driven by the mercy of Christ, they not only comforted the dying but also saved enormous numbers of lives.

This kind of Christian compassion wasn't just evident during plagues, but in all sorts of other circumstances. Historian Rodney Stark has written, "In the midst of the squalor, misery, illness, and anonymity of ancient cities, Christianity provided an island of mercy and security."⁵ An island of mercy. Stark also points out that in the larger pagan culture, especially among philosophers, mercy was often regarded as a defect or a weakness. So this was the moral climate in which Christians preached and practiced the conviction that a merciful God requires humans to be merciful.

Today, as the coronavirus pandemic continues, our spiritual ancestors give us a great model of mercy. They followed in the footsteps of Jesus, whose journey to the cross took him on a route where Bartimaeus was waiting. "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" At first, Bartimaeus doesn't specify the nature of the mercy he needs, until Jesus puts the question to him more directly. "What do you want me to do for you?" So as Jesus walks among us here today, what do you want him to do for you? What manifestation of his mercy do you need in your life? Forgiveness of your sins? Comfort in your sorrow? Healing in your body? Guidance in your lostness? Vision in your spiritual blindness? Hope in your despair? Provision in your financial need? Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. May that be your prayer.

And may this also be your prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy not only on me but on others. And use me in your mission of mercy each day. Manifest your mercy through me to those whom I meet along the way. Lord Jesus Christ, speak, touch, heal, and help those whose lives and circumstances cry out to me, that in me they may meet you, and follow you along your way. Amen.

¹ Frederica Mathewes-Green, *The Jesus Prayer: The Ancient Desert Prayer That Tunes the Heart to God*. E-book (Brewster: Paraclete, 2009).

² Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* (New York: Penguin, 2012) 14-15.

³ John W. Cowart, *People Whose Faith Got Them into Trouble* (Downers Grove: IVP 1990) n.p.

⁴ Peter Wehner, "How Should Christians Act During a Pandemic?" The New York Times website. April 10, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/10/opinion/sunday/covid-easter-christians.html> (Accessed March 18, 2021).

⁵ Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion* (New York: HarperOne, 2011) 112.