

“To Will One Thing”

“What do you want me to do for you?”

Mark 10:46-52 ¹

As we continue our journey with Jesus through the Gospel of Mark, we have now finished the trek from Galilee and are about to make the ascent into Jerusalem for Jesus’ Passion.

Because of the animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans, most pilgrims making the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem did not go straight south through Samaria but crossed over to the east side of the Jordan to make their way south. They crossed the Jordan again at Jericho before making their way up the steep road to Jerusalem.

Although Jesus sometimes traveled through Samaria and did ministry there, on this final trip He took the usual route, and this morning’s text finds Jesus and the Twelve arriving at Jericho. The city of Jericho has been continuously inhabited for more than 10,000 years, which makes it the oldest continuously inhabited town in the world. Located about sixteen miles east of Jerusalem and 3,500 feet lower, Jericho is 853 feet below sea level, making it also the lowest town on earth. ²

Jesus surely did many things while He was in Jericho, but only two things were noted—two rather extraordinary encounters along the road—one with a poor blind man named Bartimaeus and the other with a rich white-collar crook named Zacchaeus. Our focus today is on the conversation with Bartimaeus.

Each of the Synoptic Gospels recorded this encounter, but, as usual, they recorded it in different ways. Mark and Luke mention only one blind man, but Matthew noted that there were two. Matthew and Mark say that Jesus was *leaving* Jericho when this encounter took place, but Luke says that Jesus was *entering* Jericho.

The question about entering and leaving is fairly easy to unravel. In Jesus’ day, there were two towns named Jericho. The older, ancient city was still inhabited, but it was in decline.

About a mile south of the old city, a new, far more magnificent city had been built. Herod the Great was fond of construction projects, and he had built a huge winter palace compound there. Matthew and Mark, writing from a Jewish perspective, focused their narratives on the older city, while Luke, writing from a Greek perspective, focused on the new one. And so, this conversation seems to have happened as Jesus left the old city and approached the newer one.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on September 2, 2018. Parallel passages include: Matthew 20:29-34, 21:19b-22; Luke 18:35-43.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*. Digital Version; Williamson, Lamar, Jr., “Mark,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, digital version.

² Pottery was invented in Jericho a thousand years before that happened in Mesopotamia, and the famous walls of Jericho were standing 4,000 years before Egypt’s pyramids were built. Jericho is mentioned sixty-five times in the Bible, and Jesus probably went there a number of times, but only one of these visits is recorded. Our text this morning is part of the record of that visit. This encounter is recorded in Luke 18:35-43, Matthew 20:29-34, and Mark 10:46-52.

Perhaps there were two blind men. Maybe Bartimaeus was the more prominent of the two and was the one who shouted out and engaged Jesus. In any event, Bartimaeus was sitting beside the main road, hoping to benefit from the generosity of the pilgrims heading up the road to Passover in Jerusalem.

When Bartimaeus learned that it was Jesus of Nazareth who was passing by, he began to cry out, “*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*”³ As the disciples had earlier tried to keep children from Jesus, so the crowd tried to quiet Bartimaeus, but he only shouted louder, “*Have mercy on me, Son of David!*”

Jesus heard Bartimaeus at last, stopped, and told those nearby to bring Bartimaeus to Him. “*Cheer up!*” they told him. “*He’s calling for you.*”⁴ At this, Bartimaeus threw off his coat, jumped up, and made his way to Jesus.⁵

As He had recently asked James and John, so Jesus asked Bartimaeus, “***What do you want me to do for you?***”

“*Rabboni,*” (“Master”) the blind man said, “*I want to see.*”

And Jesus said to him, “*Go, your faith has saved you.*” And at once, Bartimaeus’ vision was restored, and he joined the crowd following Jesus.

This is the last of Jesus’ healing miracles that Mark recorded, and we’ll return later to the faith Bartimaeus demonstrated in Jesus. Right now, I want to focus on the question Jesus asked him: “*What do you want me to do for you?*”

I’ve told you before that I consider this question to be *Life’s Second Most Important Question*, with the *Most Important Question* being, “***Who do you say that I am?***” (Luke 9:20).

The question of what we want God to do for us raises the matter of prayer, a form of communication we use, more often than not, to answer that very question. I fear that much of the time, we answer the question quite shortsightedly, so let’s think about prayer for a bit.

It has been said that prayer is the “breath of the soul.” If this is true—and I think it is—then failure to pray is not a light thing. Failure to pray brings about the loss of the very life and breath of our relationship with God.

One of our most frequent problems with prayer is the idea that prayer is a way of persuading God to do things that we want done. Sometimes it seems that there’s no time for prayer except when we need something. Then, if after a few fitful and hurried attempts at prayer, we don’t seem to be getting what we want, it’s pretty easy to call the whole effort worthless. Have you ever been there?

³ This is the second time Mark identified Jesus as “Jesus of Nazareth” (1:24), and the only time in Mark that someone addressed Jesus as “Son of David,” a messianic title based on 2 Samuel 7:11-14. “Son of David” occurs in Mark only here and in 12:35, where Jesus used it Himself in connection with the title, “Christ.”

⁴ The word translated “have courage,” or “cheer up” (Θαρσει), occurs only seven times in the New Testament, and all the other occurrences are on the lips of Jesus (Matthew 9:2, 22, 14:27; Mark 6:50, 10:49; John 16:33; Acts 23:11).

⁵ Unlike the Rich Young Ruler, and much like the Widow and her tiny offering, Bartimaeus cast off his cloak, probably his only worldly “wealth,” in order to come to Jesus.

I notice that, for Jesus, prayer did not mean that God would give Him whatever He asked, because God did not, especially during that last week in Jerusalem. On the other hand, there is a sense in which we do rather consistently get what we pray for.

I suggest to you that those speeches we call “prayer” are frequently not really prayer; while at the same time, many yearnings that we fail to recognize as prayer are frighteningly effective. The most powerful of these unrecognized “prayers” is especially important. Harry Emerson Fosdick, a famous Baptist pastor in New York City during the 1930s and 40s, called this most powerful prayer “**the prayer of dominant desire**,”⁶ and it is in this sense that we generally do get what we pray for.

By this “prayer of dominant desire,” Fosdick meant that no matter what words we use, the only prayer that is really prayer is the yearning that is the expression of our deepest character, of the habitual desire and focus of our life. Many of the speeches we address to God and that we have called “prayer” are not really our dominant desires. They do not square with the actual course and commitments of our lives.

It’s sobering to realize that we are actually quite likely to get what we desire with our whole heart, because this desire is what we consistently think about. This desire is the goal toward which we spend our time, our resources, and our energy; and our real goal is sometimes very different from what we consciously think it is. Conscious or not, this prayer, this “dominant desire,” tends to achieve its goal with laser-like focus, which is why it’s so important to focus it well.

The saints have told us for centuries that prayer is in fact the most important work of the Kingdom. Fosdick noted that “Only a theoretical deity is left to any [one] who has ceased to commune with God, and a theoretical deity saves no [one] from sin and disheartenment and fills no life with a sense of divine commission. Such vital consequences require a living God who actually deals with [us]”; and the Good News is that through proper focusing of the prayer of dominant desire, you and I can become some of God’s open doors into this world.

Now, if prayer really is the living breath of the life of faith, the heartbeat of our life in the Spirit, and the primary channel of God’s power into space and time, it should be no surprise that our prayer is a target against which Satan deploys his best and most numerous weapons. Our Adversary understands far better than we do what prayer means and what it does. That’s why Satan’s primary attacks are often directed against our prayer life. If Satan can weaken our prayer—especially without our noticing it—his prospects for taking us out of action become very good indeed.

To really know God, to become truly useful in God’s purpose of taking back Planet Earth from the powers of Darkness, is a condition reached only through the refiner’s fire; and that involves trial and testing. As raw civilians are transformed into a fighting force through the rigors of boot camp, so we have to bring our lives to God for judgment, for cleansing, for strengthening, and for transformation.

You and I cannot experience God’s *extraordinary power* flowing through our lives and transforming the world without also experiencing *extraordinary cleansing*. I suspect that you have at least heard of the “clean rooms” in which computer chips and space vehicles are assembled. These rooms are constructed and operated with controls and filters and precautions of almost unbelievable stringency, so that the equipment being fabricated will be flawless.

⁶ Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Meaning of Prayer* (New York: Association Press, 1949).

Experiencing God is rather like that. Prayer that purifies is not done in five minutes. Real prayer, the Prayer of Dominant Desire, is a very different enterprise than “saying prayers.” I’m afraid that far too often we pray spasmodically and half-heartedly, trying to persuade God to advance our own small agendas, and unable to see that God’s primary gifts to us are a transforming personal relationship with our Creator together with partnership in an eternal purpose worthy of the very best we have to give.

God has told us that “*You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart*” (Jeremiah 29:13). The inevitable effect of such seeking and such commitment is that God becomes real and personal to us, and that God’s power flows through us into the world.

Marvel Comics’ “superheroes” have nothing on those who follow Jesus. And the experience of this flow of eternal, world-changing power through our lives is best described as JOY.

Sisters and brothers, here’s the Real Gift that your Father in heaven wants to give you: *God wants you to experience a joy that is deep and unquenchable, a joy that pain and sorrow, grief and loss are powerless to destroy, a joy that shines even through tears, and that nothing either in life or death can take away.*

Let me say that again. **God wants you to experience a joy that is deep and unquenchable, a joy that pain and sorrow, grief and loss are powerless to destroy, a joy that shines even through tears, and that nothing either in life or death can take away.** That’s what God wants for you.

It was this JOY of which David wrote in Psalm 27:4, *I have asked **one thing** from the LORD, it is what I desire: to dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, gazing on the beauty of the LORD and seeking him in his temple.*

It was this JOY that Mary chose, to the consternation of her busy sister, and about which Jesus said, “**One thing** is necessary. *Mary has made the right choice, and it will not be taken away from her*” (Luke 10:42).

It was this JOY of which Paul wrote when he told the Philippians, “**One thing** I do: *forgetting what is behind and reaching forward to what is ahead, I pursue as my goal the prize promised by God’s heavenly call in Christ Jesus*” (3:13).⁷

And that brings me back once more to Bartimaeus, who also **willed One Thing**. His crying out to Jesus, his persistent refusal to be silenced, his bold and eager response to Jesus’ call, and his clear focus on the one thing he wanted most in all the world, together with his keen anticipation that Jesus could and would grant it, are the attitudes and actions that Jesus called “faith.”

So, what does it look like “to Will One Thing”? Here are five steps that may help us to “get there from here”:

1. Be as honest as you can about what your dominant desire really is.
2. Be willing to reorder your life around loving God with your whole heart, mind, soul, and strength (Mark 12:30).
3. Open yourself to the searchlight of the Spirit, so that you can be purified from known sin as well as sin you have not yet recognized.

⁷ See also Soren Kierkegaard’s magnificent *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing* (1847).
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Søren_Kierkegaard

4. Expect to do battle with the Evil One. To will this One Thing is to become a bright and dangerous blip on Hell's radar (and remember 1 Corinthians 10:13).
5. Expect to be loved. Expect to be amazed. Expect to be sent to the front lines in God's transformation of the world!

Always remember, my friend, that **God wants you to experience a joy that is deep and unquenchable, a joy that pain and sorrow, grief and loss are powerless to destroy, a joy that shines even through tears, and that nothing either in life or death can take away.**

That's what life is really all about. And that, my friend, is worth all that you have to give.

Amen, and Amen.