

# The Ambitious Heart

by Ray C. Stedman

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Our study in the Gospel of Mark finds Jesus and his disciples now on the road to Jerusalem, heading for the tense drama of that last action-packed week before the cross. As we read this account we will see how clearly the Lord Jesus foresaw the cross and all that it would involve, and how resolute was his determination to go ahead and face what was coming. We will also see how blind and foolish the disciples were, how stupidly they acted in the face of the revelation which was given to them. And we will see how Mark illustrates all this with an incident which occurs as Jesus leaves the city of Jericho.

Let us begin with verse 32:

**And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; and they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was going to happen to him, saying, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles; and they will mock him, and spit upon him, and scourge him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise." {Mark 10:32-34 RSV}**

This is the third time we have seen Jesus make this special announcement to his disciples in which he informs them, in increasing detail, of what the cross will involve. And each time, you notice, he includes the promise of the resurrection, which they never seem to hear. Mark particularly indicates that this is a very tense atmosphere as they are going along the road. He tells us Jesus went first, all alone, with no one accompanying him. Behind him came the band of twelve disciples, who, Mark says, were astonished, amazed. Behind them came the crowd, the multitude which was following, waiting upon the teaching of Jesus. And they were afraid, Mark says -- all of which indicates that there was a strange sense of impending doom, a sense of approaching crisis, with sinister possibilities. The disciples were very much aware of this, and even the crowd felt the tension.

What made the crowd afraid and the disciples amazed, unquestionably, was the attitude of Jesus. One of the other Gospels says at this point that he "set his face like a flint" to go up to Jerusalem. There was a resolute determination on his part to go; he was adamant, and would not be dissuaded. Though he was going into danger, and he knew it, and the disciples knew it, and the crowd sensed it, there was this strange, determined resolve on Jesus' part to go forward.

Notice also how filled with detail is the announcement that Jesus makes. He knows what he is heading into. He does not quite know the timing of it, although he knew this would unfold as he went on. But he knew he was going to be delivered into the hands of the priests and the scribes, and that he would end up in the hands of the Romans, and would be condemned to death. And he adds three details here which had not been included in any prior announcement: they will mock him, and spit upon him, and scourge him. How did Jesus know that? He learned it from the Scriptures. Every one of these events is predicted in the prophets. In fact, Luke tells us that at this very point Jesus said to his disciples, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written of the Son of man by the prophets will be accomplished," {Luke 18:31b RSV}. Our Lord was not given some special insight; he learned it by studying Isaiah 53, and Psalm 22, and other Old Testament Scriptures which clearly predict these events.

So Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and to the cross; but the disciples, Mark goes on to reveal, see something different awaiting them. They are looking at the pathway to glory:

**And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him, and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right**

**hand and one at your left, in your glory." {Mark 10:35-37 RSV}**

Matthew tells us that it was the mother of James and John who asked this of Jesus, suggesting that they had talked her into making this presentation. But Mark goes back of the mother to the two disciples, shows us that it was their idea. Jesus knew the request had come from them, so he answered them. Notice what it is they are asking for, because many have misconstrued this story and felt that these disciples were wrong in asking for it. But that is not true. They were asking for something which Jesus had given them every reason to ask for, just a few days before. Matthew records that Jesus had promised them that when he came into his glory they would sit on twelve thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel. This is what they have on their minds as they walk up to Jerusalem. There are thrones waiting for them.

So they ask for three specific things:

- First they ask for preeminence. They want to sit on those thrones and have the honor and exaltation that a throne represents. This is what they had been promised.
- Second, they want proximity. Once the disciples knew that twelve thrones were waiting for them, and as they had twice now fallen into a discussion as to which of them would be greatest among them, you can understand why they would discuss where these thrones would be placed in relationship to Jesus. James and John, talking this over with their mother, decided there was no good reason why they could not belong to the inside circle, with one on the right hand and one on the left. So they come with this request. They want to be near to Jesus. Now, is that wrong? No, it is not wrong to want to be near to Jesus. They know they are going to sit with him, and think it perfectly in order to ask to be given the positions nearest him.
- And, third, they want power. Because, of course, that is what a throne represents. In some sense, they had already experienced the gift of power from Jesus. They had been sent out and given power to raise the dead and heal the sick and cast out demons. So they are only asking for what had already been promised. There is nothing wrong with that.

So when our Lord replies, he does not rebuke them. He does not say, "What's the matter with you fellows? How can you be so proud?" He does not rebuff this ambition to be near him, to have preeminence, and to have power. But he does say to them, in effect, that they are going about it entirely the wrong way. This brings us to his answer:

**But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized ? " And they said to him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." {Mark 10:38-40 RSV}**

He is saying, "The trouble with you fellows is not that you are asking for the wrong thing, but that you are asking for it with no understanding of what is involved. You're ignorant, and know not what you're asking." Then he goes on to tell us what it is they are ignorant of. They are ignorant of the cost of this, the price that it would demand. He implies that he himself is on the same path as they desire to follow. He is on the way to glory. But he is ready to pay the price.

"Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" Here he employs two beautiful figures to help us understand what he was facing -- a cup, and a baptism. What does the cup mean? I am sure there is not one of us who has not quoted the twenty-third Psalm: "My cup runneth over," {Psa 23:5b KJV}. What do we mean by that? It has been made into a popular song: "My cup runneth over with love." Well, it is clear that the cup symbolizes the realm of your experience, the circumstances into which you are placed -- perhaps producing a joyful, happy reaction on your part. In the Old Testament the figure is also used of things which are not so joyful. Jeremiah speaks of Israel as having to drink the cup of the fury of the Lord at his hand. Here again it is something which was handed to Israel, which they had to drink.

So a cup is a figure of what life hands to you, in which you have no choice. It may produce either a good or a bad reaction, but a cup is something given to you which you must drink.

Our Lord, of course, is speaking of the cross. He sees it as a cup given to him by his Father. Later, in the Garden of Gethsemane, he will pray, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not my will but thine be done," {Luke 22:42b}. So he is speaking of the whole spectrum of events involving the suffering, the anguish, the pain, the rejection, the mocking, the scourging, the spitting -- all of the cross -- as the Father's choice for him, handed to him for him to drink.

When he uses the figure of baptism, what does he mean? Again, this is a figure which is very common in the Scriptures, found in both the Old and the New Testaments. To "baptize" means to "dip," to "place into" -- to dip somebody into water, or some other liquid, to immerse them in it. It is used of the Israelites. As they left Egypt, they were "baptized into Moses" in the Red Sea. That is, as they passed through the waters of the Red Sea, in the way that was opened up to them, they were surrounded by the waters, baptized by them in that sense. They were overwhelmed by the water.

This, then, is a figure of some event which was given to the Lord and which would totally affect him. It would overwhelm him. He would be immersed in it so completely that it would touch and affect everything about him. That is a baptism, and that was what was waiting for him. The cross would seek him out at every level of his life, would immerse him and overwhelm him. Remember how beautifully descriptive of this are some of the Psalms: "All thy waves and thy billows have gone over me," {Psa 42:7 KJV}. He would be completely saturated with this terrible event.

So he says to James and John, "This is the price of glory. Are you able to pay it?" Look at the self-confidence they exude. They sound like Muhammad Ali just before a fight! "Sure, Lord; whatever. Just bring it on. We can take it. We are able." Notice how Jesus replies. He does not try to explain it all to them. He leaves it to later events, and to the hand of the Father, to unfold it to them. Rather, he takes them at their word. "All right. If you want to drink of my cup, and be baptized with my baptism, you shall."

Now, these disciples did not know what they were asking for. And sometimes neither do we, when we ask of God. But God sometimes grants it anyway. If they had known what it meant, they would never have asked for it, I am sure. Dr. A. B. Bruce, in connection with this, once wrote, "If crosses would leave us alone, we would leave them alone, too." But they do not. They are handed to us. They are cups given to us. And these disciples could not escape it. What it meant was that they, too would have to suffer like Jesus. They, too, would have to bear reproach and shame and anguish and suffering and death.

As it turned out, this is what happened. James was the very first of the apostles to die, as recorded in the twenty-second chapter of Acts. He was taken and murdered, beheaded, by Herod -- the first of the apostles to be martyred. John was the last. These two brothers formed a kind of "parenthesis of martyrdom," within which all the apostles, as the turn of each came, were put to death for the sake of Jesus. We are not told exactly how John died, although some of the writings of the early church fathers suggest that he was boiled in oil. Others say that he died a natural death. Though his actual mode of death is uncertain, we do know that he was exiled to the island of Patmos for the testimony of Jesus, and underwent much suffering and shame and punishment for the Lord's sake. So Jesus granted them their request.

Then he went on to explain that he could not grant what else they had asked. "It is not mine to give -- but it will be given: somebody will sit there -- but it is the Father who determines who it will be." He says something very illuminating here. He does not say, as we might expect, "It is for those who are prepared for it." That is how we would put it. But he says, "It is for those for whom it has been prepared." If you think carefully on those words you can see that he is implying that the Father chooses men for this honor. He prepares the man that place by the circumstances, by the cups and baptisms, that he puts him through. And then, he prepares the honor for the man. Did you notice that? God always starts with people, not with events. His goal is the shaping and molding of lives. That is where he begins. And he fits the events to that end. So, two of them are going to sit at the right hand and the left hand of Jesus. But God is going to mold those two and prepare them for it, and then he will prepare that height of glory for them, as well. At this point Mark turns to the other ten:

**And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." {Mark 10:41-45 RSV}**

We have already seen that, as they go up the road to Jerusalem, Jesus sees the cross waiting for him. James and John see thrones waiting for them. And what do the other ten see? They see James and John! They are angry and upset at them. Why? Because they got to Jesus first. Obviously they wanted the same things that James and John did, and were angry only because James and John beat them to it. This is often the explanation for our anger, is it not? We are so often upset because somebody thought of it before we did.

But notice how Jesus sets aside all this business of politicking and maneuvering and asking for favors and special privileges. That is the way the world works, but it is not to be part of the kingdom of God. In the kingdom -- the church, if you like -- there is not to be struggling and striving for position and honor. Paul brings this out so beautifully in his development of the body of Christ, in First Corinthians 12, where he says that because we have gifts given to us by the Holy Spirit, and a ministry opened to us by the Lord Jesus, and power granted to us by the heavenly Father, we do not need to be in competition with anybody. Each one has his own ministry, and no one is a rival of any other. We do not need to envy one another. "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,'" {1 Cor 12:21a RSV}. We are not to despise another, and look down on him. Nor can the foot say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," {1 Cor 12:15a RSV} because all the members are necessary to the body of Christ. All competition is removed from the church by these terms.

This is what our Lord wants to set before his disciples, so he gathers them together and patiently -- my, how patient he was! -- says, "Now, fellows, sit down. I want to say something to you. You've looked at the Gentiles, the nonbelievers around. Have you noticed that when they exercise authority, it is always over somebody else? They measure their power by how many are under them. That is the mark of their authority." Now, I do not think he means to say that must be eliminated, or that we should attack that sort of thing. He is simply recognizing it as being there. It is still true today. That is the way people do things, the way they judge their success. And although it produces all kinds of rivalry, competition, skullduggery, politicking, conniving, maneuvering, manipulating, and trying to undercut everybody else, nevertheless, you cannot blame people for that, because that is all they know. They do not know any other basis for achieving authority or power.

Notice what Jesus is doing -- something very radical. The key is in these words: "... but it shall not be so among you." The church is not to be that way. It is not to be set up as a hierarchy of power. There is no chain of command in the church of Jesus Christ. Jesus had already said to these disciples, "One is your Master, and all you are brethren," {cf, Matt 23:8}. Every apostle is careful to remind us of the danger of lording it over the brethren, of those in positions of authority thinking they have the right to tell others what to do, or how to act, or what to think, or how to behave, thinking that they have the right to make decisions which others must follow. This is not true in the church. Paul is careful to say to the Corinthians, "We are not lords over your faith," {2 Cor 1:24 RSV}. That is, "You can do what you want. You stand before God, responsible to him, not to me." But he is also faithful to point out what it is they need to do, and to warn them of the results which may follow if they do not want to do it. But no one is ever to be commanded to do something by another brother in the church. Only the Lord commands.

We need to think this through in great detail.

The church has always opposed prelacy, i.e., papacy -- the idea of a human head over the entire church. Unfortunately, among Protestant and Evangelical churches, what we have done is to reject the idea of one Pope over all the churches, but have placed one Pope in every church. Surely that is just as bad, or worse. No, there is no authority in being a pastor. A pastor is just a brother who is given certain gifts in order to be able to help people understand what they are doing and where they are going. I have no authority over you, nor you over me. We are all brothers before the Lord. "It shall not be so among you," {Matt 20:26a}. The church must not reflect the position and the practices of the world in this regard.

Jesus goes on to give us the key -- what it is that makes for true authority: "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant; and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all," {cf, Matt 20:27}. He has said this before, but here it is underscored again for us that true authority arises out of servitude, out of meeting somebody else's need. Is this not what a servant does? The world is full of servitude. We are always serving each other, and being served by others. If you check in at a hotel, somebody picks up your bags and carries them to your room. Of course, you tip him 50 cents a bag, but he has served you. The maid comes in and makes up your bed, cleans up the bathroom, puts new soap in the dishes and clean towels on the rack. She is serving you. You are paying for it, I know, but still it is servitude. There are many ways we serve one another in our homes and various other places. What is the character of it? It is always meeting another person's need.

This is the key to service. Jesus says that when you are willing to give yourself to meet another person's need, something remarkable happens. Without your even wanting it, necessarily, you establish a strange authority in that person's life. They want to respond. Their attitude toward you changes. They want to do something in return. They do not have to; they want to. It makes them want to respond in kind, in some way. This, Jesus said, is a principle in the kingdom of God. This is the way authority arises. Those who have authority are those whom people have learned to respect and honor because they have been served by them, their needs met by them, in one way or another. This is where authority lies within the church. Of course Jesus himself is our great example:

**"For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." {Mark 10:45 RSV}**

He is the ultimate picture of the servant. The One who had every right to authority becomes the One who gives up everything to meet our needs. This is the mark of how to function in the kingdom of God. We often sing it:

Man of Sorrows what a name  
For the Son of God who came  
Ruined sinners to reclaim!  
Hallelujah! What A Savior!

There is a strange fallacy abroad today that Jesus died in order that we who believe in him might never have to face any kind of death. That is not true. That is not what the Scriptures say, or imply, in any way. To smooth out for you and you should have no trouble in your life, because Jesus bore it all, and you do not have to bear anything. No, the scriptural position is that Jesus died in order that he might go with us through death, and bring us out onto the other side. He does not eliminate death at all; it is there. But he goes with us through it and brings us out -- this is the point -- into a resurrection. That is why he died -- to give his life a ransom for many.

At this point something very remarkable occurs. Suddenly, almost abruptly, Mark changes the subject. He begins to tell of an incident that took place as they were leaving the city of Jericho. There is no apparent connection with what we have just been looking at:

**And they came to Jericho; and as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great multitude, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside. And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent; but he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" And Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; rise, he is calling you. " And throwing off his mantle he sprang up and came to Jesus. And Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" And the blind man said to him, "Master, let me receive my sight." And Jesus said to him, "Go your way; your faith has made you well. " And immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way. {Mark 10:46-52 RSV}**

It looks at first glance as though there is no connection. But was it just by chance that as Jesus was leaving Jericho, a blind man named Bartimaeus was sitting by the road? Well, it can be read as though all that Mark is

doing is giving a chronicle of the events that happened, and this was just one of those events which occurred by chance as they left the city. But do things happen that way? Or was it perhaps by the prearrangement of an infinitely wise Father, a Sovereign God, who arranged to have a blind man named Bartimaeus there because it tied in directly with what Jesus had been saying, and exactly illustrated something more he wanted the disciples to know?

Let me show you some rather interesting ties in this little account with what has gone before:

First of all, you notice that there is an unusual repetition in giving the name of this man. We are told that he was Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, sitting by the roadside. The name "Bartimaeus" means "son of Timaeus". So it is really redundant to say "Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus," because they mean the same thing. So, in a sense, this name is being underscored for us as is no other name in the account. It is translated for us -- "Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus." There must be something about this name that Mark wants us to note. When you look up the Greek meaning of "Timaeus," you discover why. The word means, "honor". This beggar was named "the son of honor." Now, what was it that James and John had asked Jesus for? Honor, was it not? "... that we may sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Here was a blind man named "the son of honor," who sat beside the road.

Notice, too, that Mark skips over a number of events. He eliminates the things that we know happened in Jericho from the other accounts. He says, "And they came to Jericho," and then he skips over the story of Zacchaeus and all that happened in connection with this short man whom Jesus met and went to lunch with, and he goes directly to the time when they left the city, in order to emphasize that there is a tie here with these events.

Furthermore, you notice that when the blind man came to Jesus, Jesus asked him, in Verse 51, "What do you want me to do for you?" When James and John came to Jesus with their request for honor, in Verse 36, he asked them, "What do you want me to do for you?" Exactly the same words! What was the trouble with these disciples? They were blind, were they not? They could not see what was involved. They wanted something but they did not see what was connected with it. They could not see the cup, the baptism, the hurt, the cross. They were blind. What was the matter with Bartimaeus? He was blind. Jesus asked, in both cases, "What do you want me to do for you?"

So the point of the story, the truly impressive thing about this account, and the reason why Mark has placed it here, is what Bartimaeus did. Here was a man who was conscious of his blindness, whereas the disciples were not. When he heard that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by, he became tremendously excited and began to demand his attention. "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Everybody said, "Shh! We're trying to hear what he's saying!" Bartimaeus paid no attention, said again, "JESUS, SON OF DAVID, STOP! HAVE MERCY ON ME!" They shushed him again: "Many rebuked him, telling him to be silent," but he would not be put off. Finally he got Jesus' attention. And when our Lord stopped to serve this man, to meet his needs, he called him to himself and asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?"

Doesn't that seem a silly question to ask a blind man, when you have the power, and he knows it, to restore his sight? But Jesus asked him this question. And Bartimaeus put it so simply, "Lord, I want to see. Let me receive my sight." And immediately Jesus said, "It is done. Your faith has made you well." And Bartimaeus saw, for the first time in his life.

So why do you think Mark has put this account of "the son of honor's" being enabled to see in this particular place? Well, Jesus is saying something to his disciples, and to us. He is saying, "When you come asking for good things from God, ask also to be able to see what they involve. Ask to have your sight given to you, so that you see yourself, and all that may be needed, before God can answer that prayer."

A couple of years ago, on New Year's Eve, we had a Watchnight service here at PBC. The room was completely filled, and I stood on the platform, with just a candle in my hand -- the only light in the room. I was talking about the verse in Proverbs that says, "The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord, searching the hidden things of the heart," {cf, Prov 20:27}. I remember how there came flooding upon me a consciousness of my own life and I remarked upon the fact that when I was just a young Christian, I felt that God had only a few

minor things to change about me, and then I'd be pretty well perfect. I knew there were some things that needed to be changed -- I could see them -- but they were not too serious. And once those were changed, there would not be much left that God had to worry about. That was many years ago, but "the spirit of man is the candle of the Lord, searching the heart." In the hands of the Holy Spirit, my human spirit was used of God to begin to unfold to me, gradually, over the years, all the many areas in which there were deeper involvements in evil than I ever dreamed. And I remember how, through the years, there came painful experiences -- cups and baptisms that I had to go through -- which opened my eyes until I began to see with increasing clarity how much of my life has been possessed with a spirit of selfishness, and how I have injured others and hurt those close to me, and how much I was in the grip of evil forces in my life which controlled me and devastated me. And yet, every time there came a new revelation of the depths of my own vileness, there also came a revelation of the cleansing power of God, so that through the course of the years, I discovered that as my self-esteem began to sink lower and lower, my sense of self-worth began to rise higher and higher. And I understood that I had value only as God possessed and cleansed my life. This is why I could sing, as so many of us have sung, about amazing grace, and thank God for having saved such a wretch as I. I began to pray increasingly, as the years went on, the prayer that David prays in Psalm 139:

**Search me, O God, and know my heart!  
Try me and know my thoughts!  
And see if there be any wicked way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting! {Psa 139:23-24 RSV}**

I think this is what God wants us all to pray.

This is what Jesus wanted his disciples to pray. How blind they were! How foolish and ignorant and self-confident they were, not knowing what was in them, and what God would have to do to remove it.

Would you join me now in this prayer?

**Prayer:**

Father, we ask it of you: Search us, O God, and know our thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in us. Show it to us, Lord, that we might see how much we stand in need of the cleansing of your grace, the forgiveness of your mercy. Lead us in the way everlasting, we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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