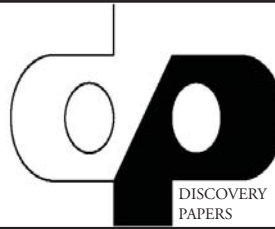


THE ARTISTRY OF GOD

**SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING
JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK**



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Mark 10:46-52
32nd Message
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It could have been a nice moment, but I missed it. My wife Karen and I were driving to church on a Sunday in separate cars because of our different schedules. She arrived first and parked her car. By the time I arrived, she was standing beside her car, waiting for me. When I pulled into the parking lot, she smiled at me and pointed to an open parking space next to her. But I parked in my usual spot, several spaces away from her.

“Didn’t you see me?” Karen asked. Well, yes, I saw her, but I had already made up my mind where I was going to park, and I was preoccupied with my responsibilities for the morning. It wasn’t until I had almost stopped my car that I realized she was inviting me to park next to her.

Two days later, as I shared coffee with a friend, I told him the story. He told me that a few days earlier, he had come home from work at dinnertime with a burrito. His wife had prepared a pot of soup and offered it to him, but he ate his burrito. He regretted his actions at home, just as I regretted mine in the parking lot. I told him, “I hope we learn to be more observant.”

Jesus also might hope we learn to be more observant. With our hands to the plow and our heads in the clouds, what are we missing? Would you like to be more observant, more aware of the work of God? Mark 10:46-52 can help us cultivate attentiveness to God and his ways.

The passage, which features the story of a blind man, brings “the way” section of the Gospel of Mark to a close. Not coincidentally, the section opened with the story of a blind man in Mark 8:22-32. As Jesus has journeyed from Galilee in the north to Jerusalem in the south, he has been teaching his disciples about the way of the Lord. The disciples, though, have not been receptive. They have been blind to the way of the Lord. Once again, they cross paths with a blind man.

Mark 10:46-52:

⁴⁶Then they came to Jericho. And as He was leaving Jericho with His disciples and a large crowd, a blind beggar named Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the road. ⁴⁷When he heard that it was Jesus the Nazarene, he began to cry out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” ⁴⁸Many were sternly telling him to be quiet, but he kept crying out all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” ⁴⁹And Jesus stopped and said, “Call him here.” So they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take courage, stand up! He is calling for you.” ⁵⁰Throwing aside his cloak, he jumped up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹And answering him, Jesus said,

“What do you want Me to do for you?” And the blind man said to Him, “Rabboni, I want to regain my sight!” ⁵²And Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and began following Him on the road.¹

Blind man cries out

As Jesus and his disciples travel south to Jerusalem, they come to Jericho, a day’s journey from their destination. By this time, a large crowd has joined them for their pilgrimage. From Jericho, the pilgrims will gain some 1,000 meters in elevation before arriving at Jerusalem. Leaving Jericho, they encounter a blind beggar named Bartimaeus, who is sitting by the road, or “along the way.” Hearing that the crowd includes Jesus the Nazarene—that is, the Jesus who hails from Nazareth—Bartimaeus calls out for him, identifying him as the Son of David, a more overtly messianic title than Son of Man, which Jesus has applied to himself.² Jesus, by identifying himself as the Son of Man, and not the Son of David or the Son of God, confounded potential enemies, who had their ears to the ground for messianic movements not to their liking. Up to this point, he has squelched public declarations concerning his identity as the Christ, Israel’s long-expected king.

Earlier, just before Peter, one of Jesus’ disciples, articulated belief in him as the Christ, Jesus touched a blind man twice in order to heal him, indicating that Peter’s confession was incomplete (Mark 8:22-33). Since then, three times Jesus has told the disciples of his impending suffering and death, but they still don’t understand “the way of the Lord.” The blind beggar sees what most of Israel can’t see—that Jesus is the Christ—and is willing to accept the risks that come with publicly appealing to Jesus as the Son of David. He is, however, like Peter and the rest of the disciples: he confesses that Jesus is the Christ, but he still can’t see. Especially, he can’t see the way leading from Jericho to Jerusalem.

Many in the crowd, deeming both Jesus and the pilgrimage too important to be sidetracked by a blind man, rebuke the beggar and tell him to be quiet. Up to this point in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus has literally “rebuked” both a demon and his own disciples to keep them from going public with his identity. However, he also was indignant when his disciples “rebuked” those who were bringing children to him (Mark 10:14). A blind man, like a child, has no status in his world, but Jesus has said the kingdom of God belongs to “little ones” such as children and others with no status (Mark 1:25, 8:30, 9:42, 10:13-14). Despite efforts to silence him, Bartimaeus will not be

deterred and continues to cry out to Jesus, identify him as the Son of David, and appeal for mercy in the manner of the psalmists.

Patterns and interruptions

The way of the Lord, as it has unfolded in the Gospel of Mark, is the way of the cross, which Mark further defines as the way of the servant. Jesus walked in this way and beckons us to join him on the path. When we follow Jesus in the way of the Lord, we follow him in self-giving, suffering love, even absorbing the anger of the world. We lose our concern for status and instead commit ourselves to serving others and serving the world so that that the world might be healed.

Do we know this way? Is this the way we're walking in? Perhaps we're like the disciples: following Jesus and hoping for great things but blind to the way of the Lord. The problem for many of us is that we don't know we're blind. Someone who is physically blind knows he can't see, but someone who is spiritually blind doesn't necessarily know he can't see.

The disciples were being alerted to their spiritually blind condition by their encounter with two physically blind men, the second of whom rudely interrupted the most important trip in history: the journey of Jesus and his disciples to Jerusalem. The second blind man was "along the way," but he managed to get himself in the way—in the way of the disciples' urgent mission. If we don't know that we're blind, how do we discover that we're blind? Often, through surprising patterns, like when two blind men show up independent of each other, or through infuriating interruptions, which can shake us loose from what we're doing to notice what God is doing. The two blind men were mirrors for the disciples. Likewise, patterns and interruptions may diagnose our spiritually blind condition. Therefore, be attentive to patterns and interruptions. God may be showing you something.

When visiting the University of Notre Dame, Henri Nouwen met a longtime professor who told him, "You know... my whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that my interruptions were my work." Nouwen took the conversation to heart and later reflected:

Books and articles have been important in my search for God, but it has been the interruptions to my everyday life that have most revealed to me the divine mystery of which I am a part. ... All of these interruptions presented themselves as opportunities to go beyond the normal patterns of daily life and find deeper connections than the previous safeguards of my physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being.³

Jesus, facing a possible interruption, is in an apparent double bind. On the one hand, he has squelched public declarations that identify him as the Christ. On the other hand, he has gone out of his way to embrace those with no status. Now, one with no status identifies Jesus as the Christ publicly and repeatedly. What will Jesus do?

The Son of David and the son of Timaeus

Momentum and anticipation are building as the pilgrims begin the final leg of their journey to Jerusalem, but Jesus stops the train for the blind beggar. Those who earlier rebuked the man for calling out now deliver Jesus' invitation. Bartimaeus responds immediately. Mark contrasts the beggar with the wealthy landowner from Mark 10:17-22. The landowner ran up to Jesus but couldn't part with his property. The beggar, on the other hand, throws aside his cloak. Jesus has spoken highly of those who leave houses, families, and farms to follow him (Mark 10:29-31). The beggar, at least for the moment, leaves what little he has. Earlier on the road to Jerusalem, two of Jesus' disciples, James and John, came up to him (Mark 10:35). Likewise, Bartimaeus, a potential disciple, comes up to Jesus on the road to Jerusalem.

Mark builds suspense, describing the scene in detail before finally reporting the interaction between Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, and Jesus, the Son of David. Jesus doesn't order the man to be quiet. His willingness to be publicly identified as the Son of David means that he is no longer so concerned with keeping his enemies off balance. He must sense that he's on the final leg of his journey and that his showdown with his enemies will come at the end of the road to Jerusalem. Earlier, Jesus ordered his disciples to stop hindering a stranger who was casting out demons in his name and to stop hindering those who brought children to him (Mark 9:38-39). Now, he commands those trying to silence a beggar to stop hindering him. Jesus ushers the blind beggar, another "little one," into his presence.

The blind man cries out for mercy, and Jesus asks him what he wants. Does the man's plea for mercy mean that he believes Jesus can heal him and that he wants Jesus to heal him, or does it mean that he wants from Jesus what he wants from everyone else: a few coins so that he can live to beg for another day? Does the man really want to give up begging, which he is familiar with and which requires little of him? Jesus asks him, "What do you want Me to do for you?"

James and John have heard that question before. Jesus asked it of them when they approached him a while back on the road to Jerusalem. They answered, "Grant that we may sit, one on Your right and one on your left, in Your glory." Jesus said they didn't know what they were asking for (Mark 10:36-38). The blind man, on the other hand, answers, "Rabboni, I want to regain my sight." (The word translated "regain" would be better rendered "gain.") Jesus then heals the man. He wants to do for James and John, and for the rest of his disciples, what he does for Bartimaeus: he wants to open their eyes.

He wants them to see the way of the Lord as clearly as they see the road before them leading to Jerusalem. He wants them to see that the road leads to glory, to the coming of the kingdom of God, yes, but that the kingdom is not coming in the way they supposed. The Son

of Man is coming into his kingdom, but the chief priests and scribes will condemn him and hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him, spit on him, scourge him, and kill him. Those who want to share in his reign must drink his cup and share his baptism. They must deny themselves and take up their crosses, lose their lives to save them. They must become last of all and servant of all. They must receive the kingdom as children. Are James and John and Peter and the rest of the disciples ready for all that? No, they're not. They don't even know what Jesus is talking about.

The beggar knew he was blind, and he knew what to ask for. The disciples are blind but don't know it, so they don't know what to ask for. When Jesus asked James and John what they wanted, the appropriate response, considering their condition, would have been, "We want to gain our sight."

Jesus tells the man to "go." Bartimaeus doesn't have to—or doesn't get to—sit by the road and beg anymore. Literally, Jesus tells him, as he told a woman he healed, "your faith has saved you" (Mark 5:34). Bartimaeus' faith, which includes the belief that Jesus is the Christ, was the channel through which Jesus healed him—and healed him in a way that hints of salvation from Satan, sin, and death. The disciples, like Bartimaeus, believe that Jesus is the Christ. If they keep following Jesus, they too can be healed.

Bartimaeus, who earlier sat "along the way," now literally follows Jesus "in the way." The prophet Isaiah anticipated the coming kingdom of God—that is, the advent of his healing, loving rule—in language that evoked the return of Israel to Jerusalem after exile in Babylon: "A highway will be there, a roadway, / And it will be called the Highway of Holiness. . . ." / "And the ransomed of the Lord will return / And come with joyful shouting to Zion." Isaiah also said, "Then the eyes of the blind will be opened," and, "I will lead the blind in a way they do not know, / In paths they do not know I will guide them" (Isaiah 35, 42:16). As the pilgrims travel on the highway to Zion with a man whose eyes have been opened, the kingdom of God is coming with them.

Did Bartimaeus even bother to pick up his coat? Mark's use of the word "immediately" in connection with Bartimaeus' response makes us think not. The wealthy landowner, whom the disciples most likely deemed a prime recruit for their mission, walked away when Jesus invited him to join them. One can only imagine what the disciples think when a poor beggar, unbidden, joins them on the road to Jerusalem. He may have no resources to contribute to the mission, but the disciples have much to learn from the no-longer-blind beggar of Jericho as they set their sights on Jerusalem.

Do you want to see?

If Jesus asked you, "What do you want me to do for you?" how would you answer? James and John wanted

preferential treatment; they wanted seats of honor. They were blind, and they didn't know they were blind. They didn't know what to ask for. If you don't know you're blind, it wouldn't occur to you to ask for sight. Bartimaeus knew he was blind and wanted to see. Have you been made aware of your spiritual blindness, perhaps through this text, perhaps through patterns, or perhaps through interruptions?

If so, do you want to see? Or, are you content in your blindness and would you just like something to help you get by, like preferential treatment or a seat of honor? Like the disciples, you've heard Jesus speak of the way of the Lord. You've heard, but do you see? Most people are blind to the way of the Lord, and happily so. We're familiar with blindness. We know how to be blind. We've learned to survive. Many of us have learned to prosper. Writer Upton Sinclair observed, "It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it."⁴ We have a vested interest in remaining ignorant. We are blissfully and defiantly ignorant because we fear that knowing comes with a price. In our blindness, little is expected of us. After all, if you can't see the way of the Lord, you have an excuse for not walking in it.

The question, if you're blind and you know it, is whether you're dissatisfied in your condition. Not much may be expected of you, but is that the way you really want it? You may be comfortable, but is being comfortable what you really want? Life might be predictable, but is predictability what you really want? Are you content sitting *along* the way while others pass by *in* the way. What are you afraid of? Suffering of some sort? Sure, if you ask to gain your sight, you'll see the way of the Lord more clearly. Sure, you won't have a good excuse for not walking in the way. Sure, if you walk in the way, you will probably suffer.

Rachel Winslow, a young woman in Charles Sheldon's novel *In His Steps*, came from a well-to-do part of town, but she told her mother, "I am hungry to suffer for something."⁵ Are you hungry to suffer for something? Are you hungry to participate in the establishment of the kingdom of God? Are you hungry to join the pilgrimage as we journey together to the new Jerusalem? Don't you want to believe—don't you really believe—that better things lie ahead, that new worlds wait to be discovered and explored along the way?

Jesus is calling for you. Throw your cloak aside, jump up, and come to him. Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" Do you want to see? If so, Jesus wants to help. Tell him, "I would like to gain my sight." Then watch what he does. See if he doesn't give you a glimpse of the beautiful way: the way of the Lord. If he does, maybe you'd like to walk in that way.

A second chance

Why does God relate to us in subtle ways such as patterns and interruptions instead of dealing with us more straightforwardly? Because he's an artist. He doesn't want

simply to convince you of his existence or tell you what to do; he wants to take your breath away. He wants your heart. He wants to inspire. Therefore, he doesn't foist himself on us like a demanding tyrant. Instead, he enchants us like a skillful artist. God is working on a masterpiece: your story. You can visit Yosemite or the coast and behold the artistry of God in creation. There's one vista you might not have considered for taking in the creative beauty of God: your own life. And for that, you have the best view of all, because you're the only one living in your own skin. God constantly takes my breath away by showing me what he's done in my life. I fancy myself as something of a writer, but I couldn't have conjured up a story like the one I'm living.

A few days after I missed the opportunity to park next to my wife in the parking lot, I pulled into another parking lot, this time for an appointment with the dentist. Karen also had an appointment with our dentist that day, but an hour earlier. As I arrived, Karen was standing next to her car. Her appointment was over with, but she was waiting for me to arrive.

She smiled at me and pointed to an open parking spot next to her. This time, I smiled back and thought to myself, "Isn't God good? He's giving me another chance." I parked next to her, got out of the car and gave her a hug. It was a nice moment, and I didn't miss it.

We can learn to cultivate attentiveness to God and his ways. You have to know what to look for and what to stop for, though: you have to watch for patterns and be open to interruptions. Be alert to them, for the divine artist wants to show you something beautiful. He wants to show you the way of the Lord.

Before leaving Mark 10:46-52, a passage that features the artistry of God, consider the artistry of the narrator. Mark skillfully reports the story in a way that evokes the story of an earlier blind man, a question that Jesus asked two of his disciples, and the prophet Isaiah.

Indeed, all the Spirit-inspired Scriptures come to us through the artwork of their authors. The biblical authors are not simply relaying information. They are not simply telling us what to believe, what to think, and what to do. If that's all they were doing, reading their works would be an exercise in boredom. In fact, many people find the Scriptures boring because they think that the biblical authors were simply telling us what to believe, what to think, and what to do. The biblical authors were not simply conveyers of truth; they were, like the God who inspired them,

artists. Of course they conveyed truth. But they conveyed truth in certain ways—certain artistic ways. Simple information leaves us cold. Art, on the other hand, inspires us. The Scriptures were written to inform *and* inspire. When you open the Bible, it's like you've stepped into a spiritual Louvre. Enjoy the masterpieces.

Now that we have traveled with Jesus from Galilee to Jericho, it's on to Jerusalem.

NOTES

¹ Literary structure:

A Bartimaeus, blind beggar, sitting by the road (46)

B He began to cry out: "Jesus, Son of David ..." (47)

X Many were sternly warning him to be quiet (48a)

B' He kept crying out, "Son of David ..." (48b)

C Jesus stopped and said, "Call him here" (49a)

X They called the blind man (49b)

C' He jumped up and came to Jesus (50)

D Jesus said, "What do you want Me to do for you?" (51a)

X The blind man said, "Rabboni, I want to regain my sight!" (51b)

D' Jesus said, "Go; your faith has made you well" (52a)

A' He began following him on the road (52b)

² The prophets expected the Christ to be a descendant of David, the preeminent king of Israel (Isaiah 11:1, Jeremiah 23:5, Ezekiel 34:23).

³ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Beyond the Mirror* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1992), 9-10.

⁴ Upton Sinclair, *I, Candidate for Governor: And How I Got Licked* (University of California Press, 1994), 109.

⁵ Charles Sheldon, *In His Steps* (Barbour and Co., 1993).