

REMOVING THE BLINDERS

SERIES: BRIDGES & BARRIERS



Catalog No. 20190331
Mark 10:17-31
Fourth Message
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March 31, 2019

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This morning we are continuing our series called Bridges and Barriers. In this series, we are exploring various barriers that get in the way of the spread of the Gospel.

For the past three weeks, we looked at internal barriers—barriers that prevent Christ-followers from sharing their faith with others. Starting today, we are pivoting to look at some external barriers—barriers that keep people from believing in Jesus.

Before this series started, we surveyed the church to see what you thought were the most common barriers that prevented people from believing in Jesus. The most common response (over 50%) was that people don't feel any need for religion in general and for Jesus in particular. If someone doesn't feel a need for Jesus, why would they follow him?

Selling a product that no one is buying

Jim Clark, one of the earliest and most successful technology entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley, had an incredible ability to anticipate the next major development in the world of technology. Over the course of his career, he started four billion-dollar technology companies.

The first was a company called Silicon Graphics. Founded in 1981, Silicon Graphics was a 3D computer imaging company, and they launched Hollywood into the world of computer-generated imaging that changed the film industry forever.

Clark's second billion-dollar company was Netscape. Founded in 1994, Netscape became the first widely-used internet browser, making the internet easily accessible to people like you and me, and changing the way we used the internet forever.

Between these two companies, Jim Clark had another idea that he thought was going to be the next big thing: the telecomputer. Nearly every home in America at the time had a television. His idea was simple: create

a device that would allow these televisions to connect to the internet so that people could do things like order goods online, stream movies, listen to music, all through their TV. (Good idea, right?)

After Clark's success with Silicon Graphics, he didn't have any trouble convincing people that the telecomputer was the next big thing. He hired a group of engineers, found investors, and \$300 million later the telecomputer was complete.

Any idea how many telecomputers Jim Clark sold? Zero. Was this because they built a lousy product? No! The engineers were incredibly impressed with their work. The problem was that ordinary people like you and I had no idea why we would want our TV to connect to the internet. There was no felt need. And where there is no felt need, it is nearly impossible to move people to do anything.

Spiritual blinders

We live in a culture in which most people have no felt need for Jesus. Life is working well for a lot of people in Silicon Valley. And if it's not working, there are 100 different things that promise to make it work better, and Jesus is probably not one of them.

The reality is that we all desperately need Jesus. I need Jesus. You need Jesus. Your friends, neighbors, and co-workers need Jesus. But many of us are blind to our need. We have spiritual blinders that keep us from recognizing our desperate need for Jesus.

The good news for us today is that God wants to remove the spiritual blinders that keep people from seeing that he is their only hope. God is in the business of removing blinders.

Our passage for this morning is Mark 10:17-27. In this passage, we are going to meet a man who is blind to his need for Jesus. We will consider our culture, and even our own lives, to see where we might be blind to our need for Jesus. And we will see how God wants to remove the spiritual blinders in our lives and the lives of those around us.

Bridging the worldview gap

Mark 10:17:

And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

What do we know about this man?

We know that he is rich (we find that out later in the story). In Matthew’s telling of this story, we learn that the man is young. In Luke’s version, he is identified as a ruler. (Thus, he is often referred to as the Rich Young Ruler.) So he is a man of means with some power and influence.

Other than that, he appears to be a typical Jewish man. His question for Jesus reveals that he looks at the world like a typical Jewish man would. The question implies there is an afterlife, that this afterlife continues forever, that some people spend the afterlife in heaven with God and some do not, that what we do in this life determines where we will spend eternity, and that Jesus, a rabbi, was the right person to come to with a question like this. That’s a typical-Jewish-man view of the world.

We will see as we look at the rest of the story that this man doesn’t understand everything, but he understands a lot that is true.

What about the people around us? How do people in Silicon Valley view the world? What narrative do they use to make sense of the world?

Obviously, not everyone here sees the world the same, but there is a common narrative that people in our culture believe: that human beings are the physical product of billions of years of evolutionary changes.

As we have evolved, we have changed for the better. We’ve gotten smarter. We’ve gotten stronger. We’ve gotten more sophisticated.

Somewhere along the way, we developed morality, which is relative (except maybe for something like the golden rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”). Because morality is relative, we are accountable primarily to ourselves. Or maybe in some sense, we are accountable to the community to which we belong.

Over time, we have developed technology, and through technology, we will eventually solve all the problems of the world (including the problem of death).

The concerns that used to drive some people to Jesus are now being solved by technology.

Oliver Staley, a journalist and former reporter for *Bloomberg News*, has commented:

*“Traditional religion in the Bay Area is being replaced with another sort of faith, a belief in the power of technology and science to save humanity. It’s a creed that says poverty and disease are simply programming challenges yet to be solved, bad code to be debugged.”*¹

This worldview of most people in Silicon Valley is tremendously different than the worldview of this rich man who comes to Jesus, and it is tremendously different than the biblical worldview. The rich man came to Jesus with some sense that Jesus could help him. Most people in our culture can’t think of any reason why they should come to Jesus for anything.

How do we help people look past themselves and recognize their desperate need for Jesus? We’ve got to find ways to shift the narrative. We must find ways to move people from seeing the world through the eyes of Silicon Valley to seeing the world through God’s eyes. We must tell God’s story. We must tell God’s story because God’s story is the story that makes the best sense out of the world as we know it.

The reason that the snow-covered Sierra Mountains take your breath away every time you go up to Lake Tahoe is not because they remind you of how small you are in comparison to the grandeur of the universe; it’s because the God of the universe created those mountains to reflect his own beauty.

The reason that some people walk into mosques and churches and airports and gun people down isn’t because we don’t have strict enough gun control regulations; it’s because sin has corrupted our hearts so deeply and so pervasively that some people are driven to conduct heinous acts of violence that are unimaginable to most.

The reason that your heart skips a beat when you think back to your wedding day or forward to that next date with your significant other is not because of some evolutionary predisposition towards procreation. No! It’s because you were created to be in intimate relationship with your Heavenly Father and with other human beings created in his image.

God's story is the best story that makes sense of the world as we all experience it. As people around you experience joy, heartache, longing, and fulfillment, use those experiences to look for opportunities to bridge from their stories to God's story.

The temptation of morality

Most people in our culture have no sense of how their story connects to God's story, so they don't think they need Jesus. But the rich young man knew that he needed Jesus in some way. Unfortunately, as we continue in the story, we learn that he too was blind to his true need for Jesus.

Mark 10:18-20:

And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. 19 You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" 20 And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth."

Jesus answers the man's question, as he often does, with another question, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone." In this question, Jesus is setting up the man to be confronted with something that has blinded him to his true spiritual need.

If you think back to last week, you may remember that we looked at the parable of the Good Samaritan. Andy Burnham mentioned that Jesus told that parable in response to a question from a man who asked the same question that our favorite rich man asks, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

In that story, Jesus responds by saying, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). This was a summary of the Old Testament Law (of the Ten Commandments, in particular), and it was the answer that any rabbi at the time would have given.

Here, in Mark 10 (the only other place in which anyone directly asks Jesus this question), the answer is different. Jesus responds with a list of some of the Ten Commandments, specifically those that have to do with loving our neighbor. At this point, Jesus omits the commandments that have to do with loving God. In doing so, he is intentionally playing into the man's hand.

The man responds, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth."

We might read this as a bald-faced lie. I'm not sure if this man is bending the truth a little or if he genuinely thought that he had kept the requirements of the law. Regardless, he was missing something. Jesus was inviting him to acknowledge that he was not good enough, but he could not see past the blinder of his morality. He believed that salvation could be earned through good works.

And he is not alone! A lot of people think they can find eternal life through being good. In fact, this seems to be the default assumption about what it takes to be saved.

I recently started watching a Netflix series called "The Good Place."

The pilot episode begins with a woman who has died and finds herself in the "The Good Place." The immortal being in charge explains to her where she is and how wonderful it is that she made it to the The Good Place instead of ending up in The Bad Place.

A bit confused, the woman asks how one gets here. So the immortal being explains, "Well let's see, Hindus are a little bit right, Muslims, a little bit. Jews, Christians, Buddhists...every religion guessed about five percent." ²

Then he explains how the world really works:

During your time on earth, everyone one of your actions had a positive or negative value, depending on how much good or bad that action put into universe... When your time on earth has ended, we calculate the total value of your life based on our super accurate measuring system. Only the people with the total highest scores, the true cream of the crop, get to come to the good place. ³

Salvation by works! You get to the good place by being a good person. You earn your place in heaven by the way that you treat people on earth. This is the default assumption that people have of how life works.

John Hick was an influential scholar in the field of religious pluralism. Raised as an evangelical Christian, he eventually left Christianity and becoming a pluralist, believing that there was no one true religion and that all religions were equally valid representations of the truth.

As part of his search for truth, he surveyed all the major world religions to see what they had in common

and where they differed. He found one thing that every religion had in common: the ethical imperative to move away from self-centeredness; you should not be concerned primarily about your own welfare.

Hick latched on to this idea and concluded that salvation must be “the transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness” (Hick 51). (If all religions agree that you must be a good person, then being good must be one and the same thing as salvation itself.

Most people in our culture agree with Hick’s conclusions: no one religion has the edge on truth, and the one thing that really matters is that you are a good person.

This is an exhausting way to live! If I am saved by being good, then I am always trying to measure up. I am always trying to prove myself. I am always trying to earn my salvation. And I’m never certain if I actually have! But this is not what God’s story tells us. Instead of salvation by works, God’s story is a story of grace— incredible, undeserved grace. As we tell God’s story, we need to focus on grace.

Grace says salvation is not about what we can do for God, but about what he has done for us in Christ. Grace says that we are not judged on our own merits, but on the merits of the perfect Son of God. Grace says that we don’t have to earn salvation by being good because Jesus has won salvation for us by sacrificing his own life so that we can live.

Salvation by works is exhausting. Salvation by grace is the refreshing gift that God has given to us because he loves us and wants us to experience eternal life with him.

As we tell God’s story, we must focus on grace. Grace is the one thing that sets Christianity apart from all other belief systems. Every other religion hinges on some version of salvation by works.

The default assumption of most non-religious people is that being good is good enough.

No other narrative includes the grace that we find in God’s story. As we tell God’s story, we must focus on grace.

The Danger of Success

So many people are blind to their need for God’s grace because they think that they are good enough on

their own. This seems to be what the rich man thought. But it wasn’t only his morality that blinded him to his need for Jesus. He was also blinded by another barrier as well.

Mark 10:21-25:

And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” 22 Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. 23 And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” 24 And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”

There is a lot about these verses that bothers people.

First, this man was the perfect recruit for the Kingdom of God. He was rich and powerful. He was a good person and well-liked. There is an outreach organization whose stated strategy is to find the most popular person in the room, get them to follow Jesus, and the rest will follow. That was this guy! And Jesus just lets him walk away. That really bothers people.

Secondly, Jesus asks this man to sell everything and give it to the poor. Some people think that’s a little extreme of a request.

The real icing on the cake for some is that Jesus generalizes the behavior of one rich man to all rich people.

If you had a similar reaction to this story, then you have something in common with a lot of American Christians, and apparently with Jesus’ disciples as well, as we will see in a minute. But whenever we are bothered by a part of the Bible, we should pay extra attention, so let’s take a closer look.

Let’s think about the blinder that is keeping this rich man from recognizing his need for Jesus.

After this man assures Jesus that he has done a superb job of loving his neighbor, Jesus looks at him. As he looks at him, it’s as if he stares deep into this man’s soul and

spots the biggest blinder in this man's life: his success. Jesus asks him to set aside his success—to give away his money and give up his position of power—to follow after Jesus, but the man is unwilling to do this.

Life was working well for this man. He had become successful. He had the right job. He had the nice house. He probably had the perfect family.

On the outside, the man looked like he had it all. Life was working for him. When life is working, it is really hard to feel that you need Jesus.

Life is working for a lot of people in Silicon Valley. Life is working for a lot of us in this room. I'm not saying that your life isn't working or that none of us are suffering; but on the whole, life is working pretty well for people in Silicon Valley.

We have jobs that most people around the world desire. We have the studio apartments that cost more per month than my grandpa made in his entire career. Lake Tahoe on the weekends. Hawaii for spring break vacation. Europe in the summer. Life is working pretty well.

When life is working, the blinders come up, and we lose sight of our need for Jesus. This happens for those of us who are already following Jesus. For people outside the church, it's that much more understandable. It's really hard to feel like you need Jesus when you don't need much of anything at all.

Karl Marx famously said that "Religion is a sigh of the oppressed creature... the opium of the people."

People may believe that religion is just a story you tell yourself to make you feel better—Jesus is only for those who are down and out; Jesus is the one that all of those weak and powerless people cling to, but not me. I don't need Jesus.

So what do we do? How do we remove the blinder of success and self-sufficiency in our lives and in the lives of those around us? Let's look again at what Jesus does.

When Jesus looked at this man, we are told that he loved him. He is not put off by his self-sufficiency. He's not upset at his spiritual blindness. Instead, Jesus loved him.

Then Jesus does the exact opposite of what feels natural to me: he speaks truth to this man. Hard truth. He doesn't back off. He doesn't sugarcoat it. He just lays

out the cold, hard truth: if you want to follow Jesus, you must be willing to give up everything else. You must be willing to leave everything behind and follow him. That is hard to hear. That's hard to say. But it's the truth.

The truth is what it takes to make people aware of their need for Jesus. Yes, we tell God's story. Yes, we focus on grace. But we must not neglect the truth.

It's tempting to soften the demand of the Gospel in the name of love.

When I was involved in high school ministry before coming to PBC, I often felt this struggle. We had a group of football players that started coming to our youth group. These guys were the cool kids—one in particular. He was super smart, funny, a star on the football field, good looking, and easy to talk to.

As he got more involved, so did some of his friends, which wasn't surprising. What also wasn't surprising was that these guys weren't making the best choices—drinking on the weekends, engaging in sexual activities, and lying to their parents.

I wanted these guys to come to know Jesus. I wanted them to stay plugged into our youth group. I wanted them to feel welcome and invite their friends.

The temptation was there to soften the demand of the Gospel. "Hey, come hang out at our youth group. You can follow Jesus and experience his grace and his love." Then once you're in, I mean really in, then I'll just casually bring up that you might want to stop lying to your parents and having sex with your girlfriend and getting trashed with your buddies.

I've heard it said that "What you win people with is what you win people to." If you win people with a Gospel of grace without truth, then that's exactly what you win people to. The bait-and-switch doesn't work. You can't lead with grace and then ambush them with the truth once it's too late to back out. That's not the Gospel. The Gospel is the story of grace and truth.

Jesus loves you so much that he gave his life for you. You didn't deserve it. You didn't earn it. It's a free gift, and it's better than you could possibly imagine.

But following Jesus will also cost you your life.

"You are not your own, for you were bought with a price" (1 Corinthians 6:19b-20a).

"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

Grace and truth. That's the whole Gospel, and both are necessary if people are truly going to follow Jesus.

The Power of God for Salvation

The verses we read above are depressing, aren't they? Who's going to respond to a message like that? The disciples had the same thought. They respond to Jesus in v. 26.

Mark 10:26-27:

And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?" 27 Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God."

God is in the business of saving souls.

With man, these instructions seem impossible. With man, nobody sells all they have and gives it to the poor to follow Jesus. Nobody forfeits their hard-earned success to follow a Jewish rabbi from the first century. Nobody sees past the blinder of their own morality to the depth of their own sin. Nobody does that! With man, this is impossible.

But with God, all things are possible. Nobody is too lost. Nobody is too blind. Nobody is too rich or famous or successful or accomplished. Nobody is too good or too bad or too ordinary. Nobody is beyond the reach of God's saving hand. With God, all things are possible.

Our responsibility is not to sit back and try to figure out who is most likely to believe the Gospel. No. We share the Gospel of grace and truth, and we leave the results to God.

God is the one who saves, not us. God is the one who removes blinders, not us. God is the one who overwhelms hearts, who fills people with joy, who convicts them of sin, who surrounds them with his love. God is the one who saves.

2 Corinthians 4:4 says "...the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."

We can't make people see "the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ." But we can tell them about it. We can share the good news. We can love them as they've never been loved. We can live the Gospel with our lives. Then we trust and pray to the God of the impossible. We wait expectantly to see what he's going to do.

Conclusion

I have a little black box that sits next to my TV at home. Two boxes actually. They connect my TV to the internet. They let me stream movies, listen to the music, order goods from Amazon. They even tell me jokes. Unfortunately for Jim Clark, it's not his telecomputer.

Why didn't Jim Clark's \$300 million telecomputer take off? At the time (1990), no one thought they needed it. Now, nearly everyone has something that basically does the same thing. Have our "needs" changed? Maybe it's just our awareness of our need.

Paul tells us in Philippians 2 that one day, "at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:10-11). One day, we will all recognize our true need for Jesus. Let's pray that the God of the impossible would remove our spiritual blinders so that we can be awakened to that need today.

Endnotes

¹ Oliver Staley, "How to talk about God in Silicon Valley." (*Quartz at Work*, June 7, 2018), <https://qz.com/work/1298937/how-to-talk-about-god-in-silicon-valley/>

² *The Good Place*, "Everything is Fine." Directed by Drew Goddard. Written by Michael Schur. NBC, September 19, 2016. (In *Netflix*, August 29, 2017), <https://www.netflix.com/title/80113701>

³ Ibid.

John Hick, "*An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1989).