

Christianity Explored

Choices—James, John and Bartimaeus

Mark 10:32-52

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Scripture

“We are the choices that we have made.” That is the comment made by Meryl Streep’s character, Francesca Johnson, in *The Bridges of Madison County*. Every day you and I are faced with choices. And choices have consequences.

Many of our choices are relatively inconsequential. For example, it really doesn’t matter if you eat at MacDonald’s or Wendy’s. It really doesn’t matter if you drive a Ford or a Chevrolet. It really doesn’t matter if you wear a blue suit or a grey suit.

But some of our choices *are* really consequential. For example, it really does matter with whom you will spend the rest of your life in marriage. And it really does matter where you will spend your eternity.

Last week we looked at the choices King Herod made. He had an opportunity to choose to repent and do the right thing. But, unfortunately, he did not choose to do so.

Today, I would like us to look at the choices made by some other people in Mark’s Gospel. Let’s read Mark 10:32-52:

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 to happen to him, ³³ saying, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. ³⁴ And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise.”

³⁵ And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us what-

¹ The material for this message is from *Christianity Explored* by Rico Tice and Barry Cooper (New Malden, Surrey: The Good Book Company, 2002), 100-106.

ever we ask of you.”³⁶ And he said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?”³⁷ And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”³⁸ 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?”³⁹ 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,⁴⁰ 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.”⁴¹ And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John.⁴² And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.⁴³ But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,⁴⁴ and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

⁴⁶ And they came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside.⁴⁷ 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!”⁴⁸ And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”⁴⁹ And Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart. Get up; he is calling you.”⁵⁰ And throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.⁵¹ And Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” And the blind man said to him, “Rabbi, let me recover my sight.”⁵² And Jesus said to him, “Go your way; your faith has made you well.” And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him on the way. (Mark 10:32-52)

Introduction

The movie *Flash of Genius* is inspired by the true story of Dr. Robert Kearns (played by Greg Kinnear). After creating the inter-

mittent windshield wiper, which he patented in 1964, Dr. Kearns pitched his idea to General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler. All three companies turned him down, only to steal his idea and add it to all their automobiles. Dr. Kearns decided to take on the Ford Motor Company in a legal battle that no one believed he could win, but which he eventually did win. (He later challenged Chrysler, GM, and Mercedes, as well.)

Early in the film, before Dr. Kearns had invented his famous intermittent windshield wiper, he was working as a mechanical engineering professor at Wayne State University.

As the scene begins, Dr. Kearns writes the word “ETHICS” on the chalkboard. His students enter the classroom. He turns and says, “Good morning, everybody! I want to welcome you all to the first day of the quarter for Applied Electrical Engineering. My name is Dr. Robert Kearns, and I’d like to start by talking to you about ethics.”

“I can’t think of a job or a career where the understanding of ethics is more important than engineering,” Dr. Kearns continues. “Who designed the artificial aortic heart valve? An engineer did that. Who designed the gas chambers at Auschwitz? An engineer did that, too. One man was responsible for helping save tens of thousands of lives. Another man helped kill millions.”

“Now, I don’t know what any of you are going to end up doing in your lives,” Dr. Kearns says, “but I can guarantee you that there will come a day when you have a decision to make. And it won’t be as easy as deciding between a heart valve and a gas chamber.”²

Dr. Kearns was stressing to his students the importance of making the right choices. You and I are faced with choices every day. All of our choices have consequences. Many of our choices are relatively inconsequential. But some of our choices are really consequential.

Did you notice the choices people made in today’s text? Let’s

² *Flash of Genius* (Universal Pictures, 2008), directed by Marc Abraham.

look more closely at the choice James and John made, and the choice that Bartimaeus made.

Mark sets the context for us in Mark 10:32-34. Jesus is leading the disciples and some others up to Jerusalem, and we read that they were amazed and afraid by Jesus' actions. Why? Remember that Jesus has already told them several times that the religious authorities will kill him. And these religious authorities are based in Jerusalem. So Jesus is marching deliberately into the jaws of death.

Look at the end of verse 33. Jesus says it again. He tells them that he will be condemned to death by the religious authorities and delivered over to the Gentiles—in other words, the Roman authorities. They will mock him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. He will be condemned in the capital city, Jerusalem, by the nation's leaders.

Against that backdrop, two of his disciples—James and John—make a request that is breathtakingly inappropriate.

Lesson

In today's lesson we examine what it means to believe and follow Jesus.

I. The Disciples' Choice (10:35-45)

First, notice the disciples' choice.

Look at Mark 10:35-37: **“And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up 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.’”**

Although James and John have addressed Jesus as **“teacher,”** it's obvious they haven't understood much of what he has taught, because they choose to ask Jesus for glory: **“Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”**

Now, as perverse as this seems after what Jesus has just said about dying, we shouldn't be surprised. It's not the first time the disciples have behaved like this. Towards the end of chapter 9, Jesus tells them that he will be betrayed and killed. And what's their response? Do they go into mourning, weeping that their beloved leader is going to be killed? No, they start arguing with each other about which one of them is the greatest!

Jesus' response then is the same as in the passage we've just read. He teaches them.

Jesus knows that James and John are missing the point when they ask to be seated on thrones on either side of him. He takes them to task in Mark 10:38, where he says to them, **“You do not know what you are asking.”** And he tries to correct their thinking. He says, **“Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?”**

In the Old Testament, “the cup” generally referred to suffering. It also referred to the cup of God's wrath. The baptism language has the same meaning. So what Jesus is saying to James and John is: “Can you do what I will do? Can you bear the punishment that sin deserves? Can you bear God's judgment, and save others by doing so?” And the answer, of course, is that they can't. Like you and me, they need to be saved themselves from God's anger and judgment. As Jesus said, they don't know what they're asking.

Unfortunately, because James and John want glory, they don't see that Jesus' death is necessary. They anticipate that when Jesus' kingdom is established, there will be an unholy scramble for the best seats, so they judge it prudent to get in first by making an advance reservation. They want to be singled out. They are go-getters and status-seekers, they're very ambitious, hungry for fame and fortune. Suffering and death don't figure into their thinking.

Many people want the best job, the best car, the best house, and these two followers of Jesus are no different.

And perhaps it's not surprising, when we remember the sort of background James and John had. We know that their father Zebedee had a household of servants because they are referred to in

connection with their fishing business. And it may be that in following Jesus, James and John have missed having servants to wait on them. Maybe they were willing to leave their home and family and the fishing business and the servants, as long as they could be compensated with a little power and prestige.

And if we look at what's going on around us, I think we can see this lust for power almost everywhere. We see it in politics and in public life; we see it in big business and industry; we see it in the medical profession, the legal profession, in sports and in the arts. Sadly, we can also see it in the church. It's easy to turn the pulpit into a throne of authority and power.

When the other disciples hear about the request of James and John, we read that they became indignant. I wonder if they were indignant at the stupidity of James and John, or just annoyed that they hadn't got in there first?

But Jesus calls us along a different path. Look again at what Jesus said to his disciples after he called them to himself, in Mark 10:42-45: **“You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”**

Those who are regarded as rulers in the pagan world boss people around, and their high officials exercise authority, but Jesus says: **“But it shall not be so among you.”** We should underline these words in our Bibles because they are so important.

James and John—like all of Jesus' followers since—are not to embark on some kind of power trip, seeking prestige and status. Instead, they should follow the example their King sets. Look again at verse 45: **“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”**

You see, Jesus uses his power to serve. That's the big contrast between James and John and Jesus. The last thing on the

minds of James and John when they make their request of Jesus is service. They want nothing more than to be served, and what's worse, to be served by the very man who will save their lives.

By contrast, Jesus goes the way of the cross. He doesn't seek his own glory, but instead, in his concern for others, he walks deliberately towards pain and humiliation. He only wants to serve. As he heads deliberately toward Jerusalem, he chooses a cross, not a throne, a crown of thorns instead of a crown of gold. Jesus turns things upside down: **“But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.”**

The disciples have yet to grasp the truth that Jesus knows very well as he heads toward Jerusalem: that the only way to be great in God's kingdom is to humble oneself. To serve rather than to be served. And if that is true for Jesus—the God/man—it will certainly be true for us.

So we've seen that the disciples chose to ask for glory. But the blind man Bartimaeus chooses to ask for something very different.

II. Bartimaeus' Choice (10:46-52)

So, now, let us examine Bartimaeus' choice.

Let's read again the story of Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46-52:

⁴⁶ And they came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside. ⁴⁷ 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!” ⁴⁸ And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” ⁴⁹ And Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart. Get up; he is calling you.” ⁵⁰ And throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹ And Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” And

the blind man said to him, “Rabbi, let me recover my sight.” ⁵²
And Jesus said to him, “Go your way; your faith has made you well.” And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him on the way.

Bartimaeus is different from the disciples in many ways. In verse 47, he recognizes that Jesus is the **“Son of David”**—in other words, that he is God’s King in God’s world.

In verse 51, rather than addressing Jesus as “teacher” like the disciples, Bartimaeus uses the word **“Rabbi”** that means “My Lord” or “My Master” in the original language. So Bartimaeus says, “My Master, I want to see.”

Ironically, even though they’re not physically blind, that’s exactly the request James and John should have made, because they’re the ones who can’t see what it means to follow Jesus.

Also notice that while the disciples wanted Jesus to do whatever they asked, Bartimaeus asks for mercy. In other words, he recognizes that he deserves nothing from Jesus. He cries, **“Have mercy on me!”** (10:47).

Do you see how different he is to James and John? Bartimaeus’ cry is not for power and status, but for mercy. And even when people tell him to be quiet, he keeps on asking. This blind man has seen who Jesus really is and what it means to follow him. In contrast, the disciples are blind.

So Jesus welcomes him and calls him and asks him the same question that he asked the disciples: **“What do you want me to do for you?”** (10:51). And notice that while the disciples are rebuked by Jesus, Bartimaeus is healed.

“Go your way,” said Jesus, **“your faith has made you well”** (10:52). Literally that phrase means, “Your faith has saved you.”

So, whereas James and John ask for status and receive a sharp rebuke, with Jesus insisting, “You don’t know what you are asking,” Bartimaeus asks for mercy and is saved.

Conclusion

How, then, should we respond to Jesus?

If you are someone who has put your trust in him already for your forgiveness, then you may need to learn the lesson that James and John learned: following Jesus is about service, not status.

The movie *The Guardian* is about the heroic and sacrificial efforts of the U.S. Coast Guard.

In a DVD bonus feature, Rescue Swimmer Joseph Flythe comments: “Hurricane Katrina really brought out what a Coast Guard Rescue Swimmer is because we were plastered all over the national media. It was the Coast Guard Rescue Swimmers you saw go down to the roofs, pulling people out. We were all working 18-24 hour days, around the clock, pushing ourselves to the limit.”

Helicopter pilot Nevada Smith comments as more rescue scenes are shown: “I’ve been flying for over ten years, and Katrina was always this theoretical fictional story that everybody had in their minds—‘What if we had to save 33,000 people?’ And sure enough, that’s what the Coast Guard ended up doing.”

Bob Watson briefly talks about the moving nature of a rescue: “There’s nothing like looking at their face when you’re helping them out. Their eyes are this big, and you get to help them. That’s a cool thing.”

As other scenes of rescue are shown, Rescue Swimmer John Hall concludes: “I have volunteered to put myself in harm’s way for somebody that I don’t know. So I’d better be ready when that call comes in. Because that’s my calling, as far as I’m concerned. And I don’t take it lightly, and I never shortcut it. The Coast Guard Rescue Swimmer’s motto is: *So Others May Live*.”³

I love that motto: *So Others May Live*. Surely that is the motto of every follower of Jesus Christ. And if it isn’t, it should be!

But if you are someone who has not yet put your trust in Jesus for your forgiveness, then you need to do as Bartimaeus did:

³ DVD Bonus Features: “Unsung Heroes,” *The Guardian* (Touchstone Pictures, 2006), directed by Andrew Davis.

recognize who Jesus is, cry out to him for mercy, and follow him.

When a pastor named Michael was still in seminary, he took a required course in “Clinical Pastoral Education.” Each seminarian was assigned to be a chaplain in a hospital or other institution, and one night each week was on call for emergencies. Late one night, the phone rang, and Michael was called to Alexian Brothers Medical Center in the Chicago suburbs.

A 16-year-old girl had been driving at night with friends, and she had backed into a light pole. The pole had broken off and then fallen forward, crashing down onto the car. A 12-year-old friend in the car had been severely injured; in fact, she was brain dead when she arrived at the hospital. Michael walked with the 12-year-old’s family as they went through the wrenching process of realizing the truth and allowing the life support to be removed.

The following morning, Michael visited the hospital room of the 16-year-old driver. Physically, she was recovering well, but emotionally, she was distraught knowing that her actions had killed her friend. “I’m going to be like a daughter to her parents,” she told Michael. “I’m going to go over to their house every day and baby-sit for them. I’ll wash dishes for them every night. I’ll go over there every week and mow their lawn.”

Michael gradually helped her realize the truth that no matter what she did, she could never replace their daughter. She could never do enough to make up for her actions. All she could do was ask for forgiveness and hope that the parents would find it in their hearts to forgive her.

The parents who lost their daughter, amazingly, did forgive this girl. She was set free from trying to pay back a debt she could never repay no matter what she did.⁴

In our relationship to God, we have sinned so greatly that nothing we do could ever make up for it. But there is a way out. It is the way discovered by Bartimaeus: Cry out to God for mercy. And if you do, he will forgive you. Amen.

⁴ http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/article_print.html?id=23411.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

Our Father, in today's lesson we saw the example of James and John. They wanted to be served. They thought that following Jesus is about status, and not about service. Help those of us who have trusted in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins to commit ourselves again to a life of service.

And Father, there are some here today who are not yet Christians. But they have come to recognize who Jesus is, and they want to follow him.

If that describes you, if you want to become a whole-hearted follower of Jesus Christ, then let me suggest that you pray quietly the following prayer after me. Say:

Heavenly Father, I have rebelled against you. I have sinned in my thoughts, my words and my actions—sometimes unconsciously, sometimes deliberately. I am sorry for the way I have lived and ask you to forgive me. Thank you that Jesus died on the cross so that I could be forgiven. Thank you that I can now see clearly who Jesus is and why he came. Please send your Holy Spirit to help me follow him whatever the cost. Amen.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.