

Blind Beggars & Blinded By Materialism

Luke 18:35-19:10

Perhaps it's a more British trait, but I wonder if you've ever had the experience where you had the opportunity to make a choice, and you went for the lesser option?

I can think of times where I have been out with friends, perhaps for coffee. Now, my first thought would be "I really fancy one of those new posh coffees they have been advertising." You know - those ones with six words in the title that usually include things like "ultra", words ending in "issimo". And they definitely come with whipped cream.

Anyway, it goes like this: my plan is to get the super decadent coffee, until all of a sudden, my friend turns to me in the queue and says "I'll get these - what would you like?" All my hopes and dreams come crashing down. How can I possibly ask someone else to pay for this daft beverage? So with barely a second thought I respond, "Oh I don't want anything special, just a regular filter coffee for me, thanks."

Let's take a look today at two people whose lives were transformed forever through their encounters with Jesus. On the face of it, what Jesus seemed to do for them was very different, but as we will see, the differences that we use to categorise each other mean nothing in the eyes of Jesus. He wants us all, and he wants all of us.

So: Luke chapter 18, starting from verse 35...

"As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard the crowd going by, he asked what was happening. They told him, 'Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.'"

In Mark's account of this story, the beggar is named: Bartimaeus. It's something of a quirk that his name is mentioned, and many scholars agree that this tells us that this man was known. He's a historical person. It's possible that by the time the gospels were being written, his story had already spread and perhaps people knew him personally.

Now I'm not blind, or a beggar, nor have I ever been. I can't begin to imagine what it must be like. I've spent some time over the last few months getting to know a young man who currently has no home. From talking to him, it's been clear that he has to be strategic about where he chooses to place himself.

On the one hand, he tries to be in locations where many people will pass by, often the high street on weekend evenings, in the hope that people will show mercy and kindness. But on the other hand, he is in a very vulnerable position - it's often cold and wet, drunk people may be violent towards him, and because of begging laws he runs the risk of getting in trouble with the authorities.

The blind beggar we find here in Luke's gospel was strategically placed. We are told he was by a roadside. It's possible that there were all manner of poor and needy people here. We all know the key spots in our towns and cities where people choose to sit and beg.

But this man does something that gets him noticed. When he asks what is happening, he's told that Jesus of Nazareth is passing by, and he calls out: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Now, isn't that interesting? He doesn't shout "Jesus of Nazareth, have mercy on me!" This man is blind, he is in a desperate situation. He lives as an outsider, he's probably dirty and people don't want to touch him. He most likely has nothing to do with the people who were following Jesus around - and yet not only has this man heard something of Jesus that makes him cry out for him, but he knows and understands something deeply significant about who Jesus is.

"Son of David."

This is important because it tells us that this blind man, while his physical eyes were broken, he saw the truth. Jesus is who he says he is; he is born of the line of King David, and the Jewish people knew to expect a messiah to come in this way. This beggar *sees* Jesus' divine authority and his holy identity.

As he shouts out to Jesus, his entourage tried to call him down: “Those who led the way rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more.” This man knows that it’s now or never. This is his one shot, and he is pulling out all the stops, going for broke, it’s ‘get Jesus to notice me or bust.’ And he does notice him.

“Jesus stopped and ordered the man to be brought to him. When he came near, Jesus asked him, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ ‘Lord, I want to see,’ he replied.”

Talk about up front and to the point!

If this guy was being asked for his coffee choice, there’s no doubt in my mind that he’d ask for the super-mega-massimo-choccaccino. With extra whipped cream. And chocolate sprinkles. This guy knows what he wants, and he’s going to ask for it.

Up until this point, chances are he’s been asking for money, for food, for whatever he can get from those who are passing by. But right here, right now, he knows exactly what to ask for.

As Doc Brown says in Back To The Future when he reveals his Delorean converted into a time machine, “This is the big one, the one I’ve been waiting for all my life!”

When an opportunity like this presents itself to you, you take it, don’t you?

Maybe. Perhaps we’ve been conditioned to lower our expectations. Maybe it’s time we raised our expectations of what God can do for us, because he can and does do great things in our lifetime.

In that moment, this blind man was healed:

“Jesus said to him, ‘Receive your sight; your faith has healed you.’ Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God. When all the people saw it, they also praised God.”

I love Luke's gospel. Luke was a medical doctor, and his gospel is distinctive for its attention to the healings of Jesus. It's likely that Luke spent time with people who were directly healed by Jesus as he gathered his research and information.

This man was blind, and Jesus restored his sight. He still heals today. Not all the time, it's true, after all miracles by their nature are infrequent. But we are still in a position today to ask him for healing in whatever way we need it.

So that's the story of blind 'Bart'. Luke goes on in chapter 19 to introduce us to an altogether different kind of character, and his reputation precedes him.

The story of Zacchaeus is a particular favourite of Sunday school teachers. It's a very visual story, as we shall see, but I find that often when I come to study it more closely, its message often feels obscured. There is a great deal left unsaid in which we are invited to read between the lines, and ask the Spirit to reveal to us more of what is going on.

"Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy."

A quick word of explanation: at the time, Israel was under Roman rule. The way to build an empire is to oppress the locals and tax them hard.

One of the methods the Romans used was to employ resident Jews to collect tax on their behalf. This made them the worst kind of traitors possible.

They were given the remit to collect the tax required, but they had free rein to extort any extra money they wanted - they had the Romans behind them as leverage, so essentially Zacchaeus is a racketeer.

He is a *chief* tax collector. He is rich. He is loaded. And everybody hates him.

"He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way."

Now, I'm of average height and don't usually have a hard time seeing when I'm in a crowd. But my wife Abi has a somewhat shorter stature than I do. It's a problem at concerts and that kind of thing. Sometimes I've ducked down to her level to get an idea of what it's like, and I can confirm it's pretty frustrating.

If you really want to be able to see, you generally have two options: push through the crowd, or seek higher ground.

Now, Zacchaeus wasn't well liked. The chances are that in a crowd people weren't going to be very accommodating. "Um, excuse me, could I just get through?" "What? It's you! No!"

So he has to seek higher ground, and he climbs a nearby tree. Climbing a tree isn't the most dignified of activities for a grown man, and he would have been dressed in fine clothes which could have got dirty or damaged. He really, really wants to see.

"When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.'"

Now at that time, to go to someone's house - which would usually involve food - was basically to seek friendship. This is Jesus saying "Zacchaeus, I want to be your friend."

Can you imagine what the people around were thinking? "What is he doing? Doesn't he know who this guy is? *Why?*" Actually, we're told what people thought: "All the people saw this and began to mutter, 'He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.'"

I think something happened in that moment in the tree. Jesus looked up into the eyes of a man who was also blind, but wanted to see.

This man had been blinded by the dazzling riches he had gained, but he knew it wasn't enough, and he knew that it was killing him - eating him alive from the inside out. He knew that Jesus could return his sight.

When Jesus looked up into that tree, and looked into the eyes of Zacchaeus, he saw his pain and his brokenness, not his choices or his behaviour.

We're not told what Jesus said or did at Zacchaeus' house. We can only speculate. Maybe all they did was eat and enjoy each other's company. Maybe Jesus answered his questions, all his deep worries and concerns. We don't know.

What we do know is that whatever happened, there was a total change of direction in his life.

“Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, ‘Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.’

Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.’”

In that moment, he could see clearly for the first time. He saw that all the money and stuff he had acquired meant nothing, and the way he had acquired it had been wrong. He had held power over others and oppressed them. His response through the revelation of Jesus' love and acceptance was to give it all away.

When we meet Jesus and choose to follow Him, He restores us into the people he always intended us to be.

Zacchaeus' true self had been distorted. His gifting and ability to be a generous giver had been corrupted by selfishness, power, and extortion. But with that distortion lifted away, he became whole. His generous nature resurfaced.

Zacchaeus and blind Bartimaeus both responded to Jesus's extravagant love and acceptance with a no-holds-barred display of faith. Zacchaeus chooses to return all he has stolen - and more! Bartimaeus had the faith to ask for the biggest thing possible, and responded with praise and worship.

The grace of Jesus doesn't distinguish between good or bad, rich or poor, young or old. Actually, it doesn't distinguish between 'Christian' or 'Muslim' - he just sees people who He loves with a deep, unending, passionate love.

And he wants us to seek Him, just as He seeks us.

He stands before us today and says "What do you want me to do for you?"

He is actually offering us everything he has to give us. What will you ask him for today?

Just as my friend was willing to bless me, I could have asked for that really special coffee. Are we going to leave this place today wishing we had asked: "Lord, heal me." "Lord, help me." "Lord, show me."

Do we hold back out of fear, perhaps fear of disappointment? Are we afraid that we won't receive what we ask for right away, and if so, is that a reason to stop asking?

Jesus said, "Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and the door shall be opened to you."

Chris Marsh // 23th March 2014