

BARTIMAEUS: PURSUE BLESSING**MARK 10:46-52**

James Ritch got up early one morning. He owned a 1972 Piper Seneca airplane. The twin engines had been overhauled and the plane completely repainted. Ritch wanted to show his plane to a friend in Crossville, Tennessee, which was about an hour's flight away from his home in Springfield, Kentucky. On the way, Ritch felt a little groggy, so he put the plane on automatic pilot, and went to sleep. Boy, did he ever! Six hours later, he woke up. When Ritch looked down, he didn't see Tennessee. In fact, he didn't see any land or ground at all! There was water in every direction. He discovered he was roughly 200 miles out over the Gulf of Mexico. He radioed for help. He figured he had roughly 15 minutes of fuel left. A helicopter was sent out to him. He had to ditch the plane in the water, but he used two pillows under his arms and floated until he was rescued. Is it hard for you to imagine anyone taking an expensive plane up for a flight lasting less than an hour, putting it on automatic pilot, and then going to sleep for the next six hours? Is anyone that careless, that nonchalant, or that unconcerned?

There are followers of Jesus who, in a sense, put their spiritual lives on automatic pilot. Here they are given the privilege of pursuing an abundant life made possible through Jesus with energy and passion, but they're content instead to be spiritually careless, nonchalant, or unconcerned. This is the second of three messages trying to answer a question, "How can you get and keep God's blessing?" God's blessings are any kind of good gift from God Himself to us that makes our lives better in some profound, important way. Today, I want us to consider the Bible story of a blind beggar named Bartimaeus. Yes, it certainly underlines the fact that Jesus possessed the miraculous power to provide literal, physical healing to a blind man because his sight was restored. But it's also a fascinating story about faith and a certain kind of approach to life with Jesus that I find compelling. Let's read Bartimaeus' story first and then think about it together. **READ, p. 1003.** You and I can learn much from Bartimaeus and his story.

LIKE BARTIMAEUS, RECOGNIZE YOUR CONDITION.

The facts about Bartimaeus' life were sobering and stark. He was both blind and poor. His blindness prevented him from holding any kind of job in that day and time that would have allowed him to escape poverty. His poverty, then, was a certain and lifelong result of his blindness. There was no Social Security or disability insurance available. Bartimaeus' only hope of survival was a lifetime of begging. Day after day, year after year, he was forced to pursue a demeaning, humiliating, and inescapable lifestyle. Can you see him in your imagination? A creature made in God's image, but reduced to sitting along a dusty road, hands continually raised holding a begging bowl, hoping that someone – anyone – would feel enough pity on him to drop in a few coins.

Here's something else. Bartimaeus couldn't do anything to help himself. He couldn't fix his own blindness. Nor could anyone else. No doctor could restore his sight. He was destined to live out his miserable, hopeless life, and then just – die. That was his condition and no one knew it better or understood it more than Bartimaeus. Now his

condition was anything but good, but the fact he recognized his desperate condition for what it was – that was good. Very good, in fact. Because recognizing his hopeless and miserable condition compelled Bartimaeus to cry out to Jesus for help.

“What a sad life he had,” you might say. Indeed, it was. But here’s a deeper point I want us to think about. What was true of Bartimaeus literally is true of every human being – including you and me – spiritually. The Bible makes it only too clear that our spiritual condition is just as hopeless and desperate as Bartimaeus’ physical and social situation. You and I can do nothing to earn or deserve a relationship with the God of the Universe. Even being a good person morally or a model citizen is utterly unimpressive to an absolutely holy God. Let the words of Scripture sink in. “For ever since the world was created, people have... no excuse for not knowing God.” (Rom 1:20 NLT) “For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard.” (Rom. 3:23 NLT) “If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth.” (1 John 1:8 NLT) “He saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.” (Titus 3:5 NLT)

My spiritual condition without Jesus is utterly hopeless and miserable. So is yours. That’s our condition and no one knows it better than a true child of God, a genuine follower of Jesus. And just like Bartimaeus, while our condition is not good, the recognition of our spiritual blindness and poverty is good. Very good, in fact. Why? Because it compels me to throw myself upon the Lord Jesus Christ – who He is and what He did at the cross and the empty tomb on my behalf.

Let me take this analogy about Bartimaeus one step further. We’re thinking about how to get and keep God’s blessings in our lives. Just like we can do nothing to earn or deserve being rescued from eternal damnation in the future, we can do nothing to earn or deserve any of God’s blessings right now in the present. The simple fact is that you and I can never do anything to earn or deserve something good - a blessing - from God. Why not? Because everything about our relationship with God is about grace from first to last. Grace is a gift. As soon as we start thinking about earning or deserving anything when it comes to God, grace disappears. And, above all, you and I want and need grace to be the foundation of our relationship with God past, present, and future.

That’s really important to bring out right here because we’re thinking together about how to get and keep God’s blessings. It’s so very easy to fall into a way of thinking that if we just obey Jesus enough, if we live a moral life, if we attend church, if we read the Bible and pray, if we tithe our income to the Lord’s work, if we love other people, if we love lost people and point them to Jesus, then somehow we will earn or deserve God’s blessings in life. No, no, a thousand times, no! All blessing comes from God – only, completely, and forever – because of His unearned, undeserved grace. So, learn something from brother Bartimaeus. Recognize your condition. Next...

LIKE BARTIMAEUS, REJECT THE VOICES OF DISCOURAGEMENT.

When he heard Jesus was approaching him, Bartimaeus knew he had a window of opportunity that might never open again. He must have heard stories about Jesus' healing power previously. He must have wondered if Jesus could restore his sight. What did he have to lose? So he did the only thing he could do to attract Jesus' attention. He began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Mk. 10:47 NLT) It wasn't polite or well mannered. Bartimaeus' eyes didn't work, but there was apparently nothing wrong with his vocal chords! In fact, he was so loud, obnoxious, and persistent that many people in the crowd told him to be quiet. "Shut up, Bartimaeus!" Jesus was probably teaching and interacting with a group of people as he walked down the road toward Bartimaeus. They had a hard time either hearing or concentrating on what Jesus said because of the ruckus Bartimaeus was causing. So how did he respond and react to these voices discouraging him from getting Jesus to notice him and help him? "But he only shouted louder, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!'" (Mk. 10:48 NLT) The word for "shout" there is the Greek word for screaming and yelling. Bartimaeus was not going to be "shushed." He was frantic for Jesus to notice him. Desperate. He was not about to be discouraged from getting to Jesus by those who told him to shut up and stay away.

Likewise, there are many discouraging voices seeking to prevent you and me from pursuing a closer relationship with Jesus – the One who can bless our lives past, present, and future so profoundly. Some of those voices are blatant and direct, others are subtle and smooth. Some come from within our own minds while others are the voices of other people. But they have a single purpose: to prevent you and me from experiencing a blessing only Jesus can give. It's important to remember that the ultimate source of any voice of discouragement is our spiritual enemy – the devil himself. The Holy Spirit is incapable of discouraging anyone. If you're discouraged today, my friend, it's because you've been listening to the devil in some way for some reason. His sole purpose is to pull you and me away from Jesus and get us to forfeit any blessing Jesus wants to give us. Learn something from Bartimaeus. Recognize your desperate condition and reject those voices of discouragement. Instead, shout all the more, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Let's identify a few of those voices of discouragement. There are voices that will discourage you from ever even beginning a relationship with Jesus. One sounds something like this. "God could never love you. He doesn't care about you. You're a loser. You're worthless." Another voice says, "Sure, you've done a few things wrong in life. Who hasn't? But not any really bad stuff. Compared to a lot of other people, you're pretty good. God's going to send you to Hell forever because you didn't follow Jesus? Give me a break." Yet another voice says, "Go ahead, be religious. Get baptized. Join a church. But don't get all fanatical and make Jesus the center or focus of your life." Very different messages, but they all have the same result. They keep you from ever beginning a genuine relationship with Jesus.

But every follower of Jesus here today knows that discouragement doesn't disappear when you're born again by the Holy Spirit, right? If the devil can't keep you and me

from becoming Jesus' follower, the next best objective is to make us essentially useless as His followers. There are countless voices intent on keeping you and me from doing anything but seeking the Kingdom of God first and foremost. Here's a sample of a few. "OK, God loves you, sure, but He could never use you to help build His Kingdom. You don't have any spiritual gifts that amount to anything. God just uses pastors, church staff, and other leader types. Just come, sit, and soak up ministry. Why, you could get tired or stressed out serving the Lord! Be content to be on the receiving end of any and all ministry, never the giving end." Another voice says, "Sure, go to church, but only when it's convenient. Sure, read the Bible and pray a little, but only when you feel like it. And whatever you do, don't force religion on your kids. Never insist they come and learn about Jesus and the Bible. Don't insist they participate in a church school class or a youth ministry. They might resent you for forcing Jesus on them!"

Other voices whisper, "You, tithe? Give me a break. Just look at your debts. Look at your bills. God will overlook your unwillingness to obey Him financially. After all, a relationship with God is all about grace, right? If you can get into Heaven without tithing, then why do it? Tithing is all well and good for some Jesus followers, but not you!" Yet another voice whispers, "Pray for some lost person you know? Why bother? And tell him or her why you're a follower of Jesus? He or she might think you're a religious fanatic and reject you as some kind of weirdo. That would be the worst thing imaginable!" The devil wants to make you and me essentially useless to Jesus. Some of us have been listening to one or more of those voices of discouragement for years now. The result is that we've missed all kinds of blessing Jesus wanted to pour into our lives. We've robbed ourselves of God's blessing. What if Bartimaeus had listened to those voices of discouragement telling him to shut up? There's a good chance Jesus would have passed him by. After all, there were many other blind beggars in Israel Jesus didn't heal. Why did Jesus heal Bartimaeus? Perhaps because Bartimaeus rejected those voices of discouragement telling him to shut up and not bother Jesus. That leads me to a final observation.

LIKE BARTIMAEUS, PUT YOURSELF ON THE PATH OF BLESSING.

Did Bartimaeus know Jesus was going to pass that way that day? We don't know. What is certain is he immediately recognized an opportunity that might never come again. This man, Jesus, who had a reputation for being able to heal people of all kinds of physical problems was coming right toward him on that day at that moment. Then when people tried to shush Bartimaeus, he got even louder and more obnoxious. It was impossible to ignore him. What did Jesus do? "When Jesus heard him, he stopped and said, 'Tell him to come here.'" (Mk. 10:49 NLT)

Can you imagine that scene? A hot, dusty day. Bartimaeus, as usual, sitting beside the road begging. Then he hears a crowd of people coming toward him and Jesus is in the middle of that group. He starts to shout, yell, and scream for Jesus. He begs Jesus to have mercy on him. To heal him. To bless him. People tell him to shush, but Bartimaeus won't shush. Jesus slows and then stops. He invites Bartimaeus to come

to Him. Now the crowd anticipates something interesting – even wonderful – might just happen. Scripture says, “Bartimaeus threw aside his coat, jumped up, and came to Jesus.” (Mk. 10:50 NLT) Can you see it? Blind Bartimaeus stumbling, tripping, and struggling to get in front of Jesus. A few people helping him up, stumbling and falling again, but with each faltering step getting closer to the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Bartimaeus could not restore his own sight. But he could put himself in the path of blessing. He could put himself right in front of Jesus and hear Him ask, “What do you want me to do for you?” and then answer, “My Rabbi, I want to see!” (Mk. 10:51 NLT) Jesus was coming. Jesus was passing by. What could poor, blind Bartimaeus do about it? He could put himself in the path of blessing. He did just that and he got the blessing. “Jesus said to him, ‘Go, for your faith has healed you.’ Instantly the man could see, and he followed Jesus down the road.” (Mk. 10:52 NLT)

Right there is a parable of how the Christian life begins. Without Jesus you and I are spiritually poor and blind. Just like Bartimaeus, we can do nothing for ourselves spiritually. We can’t forgive our own sins. We can’t earn God’s mercy or grace. We can’t somehow deserve Heaven. But here’s what we can do. We can throw ourselves at Jesus’ feet asking Him to do for us what only He can do. Yes, only Jesus can save you, but only you can put yourself in a place to receive that salvation. The Bible calls that faith – recognizing what only Jesus can do, bringing ourselves before Him, and asking Him to do for us what only He can do. “Have mercy on me, Lord!” And, yes, the opposite outcome is just as true. Until and unless you take that step toward Jesus – faith - you will never experience the blessing of the salvation He alone provides. Could Jesus have healed Bartimaeus if he’s remained silent and still? Sure. But Jesus didn’t.

But this is also a parable of how to follow Jesus every day of your life. Ironic as it may seem, that image of stumbling, bumbling, tripping Bartimaeus is actually a snapshot of what it means to know and follow Jesus well every day. We can’t bless ourselves. Our own feeble efforts to be good or to grow spiritually don’t amount to much. But like Brother Bartimaeus, we can put ourselves in the path of blessing. There are followers of Jesus who are always putting themselves in the way of getting blest. They never miss an opportunity to be in those places and do those things that result in Jesus’ blessing on their lives. God blesses those who continually and consistently put themselves in and on the path of His blessing.

What does it look like to put yourself in the path of God’s blessing? It’s not some kind of mystical, supernatural experience. It’s actually rather simple and straightforward. Just make up your mind to live life God’s way. Some examples. People who faithfully, consistently tithe their incomes to the Lord’s work put themselves in the path of blessing. They don’t earn or deserve God’s blessing, but they run right smack into it because they’re obedient to Him financially. People who excuse themselves from the tithe forfeit that blessing. People who faithfully, consistently put their spiritual gifts to use in God’s Kingdom and find ways and places to serve put themselves in the path of blessing. People who love the local church and make worship, study, and fellowship with other followers of Jesus a major priority in their lives put themselves in the path of blessing. People who show love toward and interest in those who are spiritually lost put

themselves in the path of blessing. People who love justice and show compassion for those the rest of society wants to ignore, or hate, or exclude put themselves in the path of blessing. Nothing mystical about it. It's never something you earn or deserve. But you will run into God's blessing, if you make up your mind to live life His way.

Sometimes there are some interesting parallels to be found between athletic achievement and spiritual achievement. Do you remember Dan Jansen? He was the favorite to win the gold medal in the both the 500 and 1,000 meter speed skating races at the 1988 Olympic Winter Games in Calgary. But just hours before the 500 meter final, Dan's beloved sister, Jane, died of leukemia. Dan was distraught over her death, but he decided to race anyway. He slipped and fell. Four days later, he slipped and fell again in the 1,000 meter final. Those were the 1988 Games for Dan Jansen.

He competed again in the 1992 Games in Albertville, France. He finished a disappointing fourth in the 500 meter final and a miserable 26th place in the 1,000. Talk about voices of discouragement. People were willing to give Jansen a pass for the 1988 games, but after his performance in the 1992 games, he was called a choker and someone who couldn't win the big one. But some of those voices were inside of Dan himself, quite frankly. Through a sports psychologist, Jansen learned he'd essentially denied himself triumph in the Olympics because of his sister's death. He unconsciously wanted to show everyone and himself that her death was far more important than any Olympic medal. He proved it twice by falling and twice by sub-par performances.

Jansen had one last shot at Olympic gold at Lillehammer in 1994. Would you believe it? Once again getting all the way to the 500 meter final, he slipped and missed out on getting a medal. His last chance for gold in his skating career was the 1,000. Unbeknownst to Jansen, the psychologist he'd worked with came to Norway to watch him skate. After the 500, he met with Jansen and suggested he write, "I love the 1,000" over and over again. That became the dominating thought in Jansen's mind over the next several days: I love the 1,000. The day of the race finally came. Jansen covered the distance in world record time and won the gold medal. Was it luck? No way. Dan Jansen rejected the voices of discouragement and put himself in the path of a gold medal by continuing to train hard and compete at the highest level. He eventually ran (or skated!) into blessing. When I hear that story, I can't help but think of the Bible verses that say, "Don't you realize that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win! All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize." (1 Cor. 9:24-25 NLT)

How can you and I get and keep God's blessings in this life? Like Bartimaeus, recognize your condition. Without Jesus, you're poor and blind. Then, reject those voices of discouragement that want to keep you spiritually poor and blind. Don't just keep sitting on the side of life's road content to live out a miserable or even a mediocre life. Come to Jesus in faith and with obedience. Put yourself in the path of His blessing. Pursue blessing. Live life God's way. Seek first His kingdom. Keep doing that day after day after day and eventually you will run right into God's blessing.