

What Jesus Can Do for You

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Mark 10:46-52

Sermon Series:
Best Spiritual Practices

How do we reconcile a merciful God with a brutal, nasty world?

AN. Wilson is a renowned British journalist and biographer. Twenty years ago, at 38 years of age, Wilson had a profound conversion experience. He converted to atheism. He became, to use his own words, “a born-again atheist.” He writes of that time, “After a lifetime of church-going, the whole house of cards collapsed for me— the sense of God’s presence in life and the notion there was any kind of God, let alone a merciful God, in the brutal, nasty world.” He concluded that belief in a loving, personal God in this suffering world was “nonsense, nonsense, nonsense.” He began to question how much of the Easter story he accepted. “It felt so uncool to be religious. I felt at some visceral level that being religious was unsexy.” He even wrote a book to establish that Jesus failed as a messianic prophet.

After the glow of conversion had worn off, Wilson found himself a rather unconvincing atheist. Watching a whole cluster of friends, including his own mother, die in a short period of time caused him to re-evaluate. It bothered him that many of the people he admired and loved most, whether in life or in books, had been believers. What really “put the tin hat on any aspirations to be an atheist was writing a book about

the Wagner family and Nazi Germany and realizing how utterly incoherent was Hitler’s neo-Darwinian ravings and how potent was the opposition, much of it from Christians; paid for, not with clear intellectual victory, but with blood.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s heroic opposition to Nazism and his serenity before being hanged left its mark on Wilson.

He shocked the English literary establishment the day before Easter last year when he published an article in a London paper entitled, *Why I Believe Again*. “My departure from the Faith was like a conversion on the road to Damascus. My return was slow, hesitant, doubting... As time passed, I found myself going back to church, although at first only as a fellow traveler with the believers, not as one who shared the faith that Jesus had truly risen from the grave. Some time over the past five or six years, I could not tell exactly when, I found that I had changed.... The more I read the Easter story, the better it seemed to fit the human condition. That, too, is why I now believe it.”

How do we reconcile a merciful God with a brutal, nasty world? That wasn’t only Wilson’s question, it must have been Bartimaeus’s challenge also. His blindness reduces him to begging. He relies on people of good will who toss a few coins his way as they make their

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way to Jerusalem to observe the Passover.

When he hears Jesus passing by, he seizes the moment: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me” (10:47).

The crowd attempts to hush Bartimaeus, as do the disciples. They act more like handlers of Jesus than faithful followers. But Bartimaeus will not be silenced. He shouts over the crowd, “Son of David, have mercy on me” (10:48). I’m over here, Jesus. Pick me!

Somehow, Jesus distinguishes his soul’s cry over the din of the crowd. Jesus stops and calls Bartimaeus. How quickly the crowd changes its tune. Cheer up, Bartimaeus. Today is your lucky day. Jesus is calling you.

Bartimaeus jumps to his feet in eager expectation. “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asks.

Ah, isn’t it obvious? You’ve got a blind man standing before you. Do you really need it spelled it out for you?

Maybe the question is asked for Bartimaeus’s benefit. It gives him the chance to speak his heart’s desire. “Teacher, I want to see.”

“Go,” Jesus announces, “your faith has healed you” (10:52). Jesus could have said, “Go, I’ve healed you.” Jesus recognizes the part Bartimaeus plays in his own healing. His cry for mercy sets the stage for a healing to occur. Our story closes with Bartimaeus receiving his sight and following Jesus on the way.

“What do you want me to do for you?” Bartimaeus could have requested money. After all, that’s why he’s begging by the side of the road. Spare change, anybody got any spare change. No, he asks for sight. “Teacher, I want to see.”

“What do you want me to do for you?” is asked in another place in Mark’s gospel. In the story preceding our lesson, two disciples, James and John, question Jesus: “We want you to do for us whatever we ask” (10:35). Essentially, they want Jesus to cut them a blank check.

“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asks. This question posed in successive stories is hardly coincidental.

“What do you want me to do for you?” Well, Jesus, if you really want to know, “We’d like to sit on your right and left in glory” (10:37).

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” Jesus says (10:38). Sure enough, a few days from now, the right and the left of Jesus mark the location of two people hanging on either side of him.

“What do you want me to do for you?” Bartimaeus requests something utterly human. “Teacher, I want to see.” James and John make a superhuman request— we want to be guests of honor in your coming kingdom.

I detect a subtle play on words in Mark’s gospel. At the outset of our story, Bartimaeus is sitting by the way (10:46). Yet by story’s end, he’s found “on the way” with Jesus (10:52). He moves from sitting “by the way” to going “on the way” with Jesus.

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Mark often identifies James and John as disciples “on the way” with Jesus (9:32). Yet, repeatedly they get in Jesus’ way. In chapter 9, they protest someone casting out demons in Jesus’ name who doesn’t have authorization to do so (9:38). In chapter 10, they try to put the kibosh on parents who bring their children to Jesus (10:13). I tell you, the irony is unmistakable! Bartimaeus sitting “by the way,” gets “on the way” while two people supposedly “on the way” are forever getting in Jesus’ way.

It’s no accident that the last miracle in Mark’s gospel involves sight. A blind man sees, while two disciples with perfectly good eyes remain blind to the things of God.

We believe the long-awaited Messiah, the Son of David, is alive. The grave cannot hold him. He has defeated death. He has been raised to life again.

If Jesus is alive, then his question, “What do you want me to do for you?” remains in play today. Your answer to this question says a lot about your life right now. What do you want me to do for you? How will you answer Jesus?

I used to lead workshops for engaged couples. One phase of the workshop was devoted to helping couples express their needs and wants with each other. This was a hard assignment for many couples to put into words. They had taken for granted what they needed and wanted from each other.

“What do you want me to do for you?” James and John want front row seats in the kingdom of

God. Bartimaeus wants to see. Not only is he given sight, he receives eyes of faith to follow Jesus on the way.

I’m speaking, today, to many guests to our church. We’re delighted and honored that you have chosen to spend Easter with us. You’re always welcome here.

Some of you, like Bartimaeus, may be sitting by the way, observing what is happening here. You may be watching with interest, amusement or even cynicism. I invite you to consider moving from a spectator by the side of the road to getting on the way with Jesus.

I will not lie to you. I won’t promise you that Jesus will make your life easier. He’s more likely going to complicate it. So many things bother me now that used to roll right off me. My conscience is on a heightened sense of alert.

“What do you want me to do for you?” This question helps us frame our desires. Desire can become a positive, catalytic event in our lives. God has placed these longings in our hearts so we can act on them. “Teacher, I want to see.”

To help you get on the way with Jesus, we’re reading a book together this spring entitled *Sacred Rhythms*. You might consider it a 3000-member book club. Chapter 1 starts with desire. Ruth Haley Barton begins with a provocative quote from Meister Eckhart: “The reason we are not able to see God is the faintness of our desire.”

You may think that what you desire are material prosperity, happiness and personal fulfillment. I’m here to tell you what you desire

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most is God. Blaise Pascal wrote that within each person is a God-shaped vacuum that only God can fill. If Pascal is right about this God-shaped vacuum, then we are filling this hole with everything imaginable to fill the void.

We're calling the next two months worth of sermons *Best Spiritual Practices*. Best Practice has become something of a buzz word in the business sector to identify better methods of making products and selling services. We'll introduce you to the best spiritual practices of solitude, Scripture, prayer, honoring the body, self-examination, discernment and Sabbath. We'll conclude by writing a rule of life to help you arrange life according to your desires.

If you seek proficiency in your job or school, or you want to master a sport or musical instrument, it takes practice, practice, practice! The spiritual life is no different. Best spiritual practices provide the structure and space for faith to grow.

Barton relays a story of something that happened at a youth soccer game. One day an overbearing father was yelling at two fourth-grade girls converging on the ball simultaneously. In an attempt to be motivating, he screamed, "How bad do you want it? You've got to really want it!"

In all my years logged on sidelines or in bleachers, I can recall parents hollering similar inane, silly things. Although Barton was annoyed by this display of unbridled emotion by an adult at a

children's game, she was struck by the truth of his statement. How bad do you want it?

Tim McGraw sings, "How bad do you want it?" The refrain of the song asks over and over, "How bad do you want it? How bad do you need it?" McGraw sings from the standpoint of one who has made it to the top and addresses those who aspire to be like him. Ambition can take us places, but blind ambition comes with a price. He sings about blues singer Robert Johnson who, according to legend, sold his soul to the devil as a Faustian bargain for the ability to play the guitar. Fame comes with a price. Fame and fortune are not always worth the price.

James and John want seats on the right and left in glory. That's blind ambition at its worst. Bartimaeus wants to see. That's the good kind of ambition. Do you want spiritual sight bad enough to do something about it? Are you willing to rearrange your life to get it?

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