

“A New Conquest”
Matthew 20:29-34
February 24, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

The healing of these two blind men is one of the last miracles Jesus will perform. Even though we are only about three-quarters of the way through Matthew’s Gospel, we are in the last week of Jesus’ life before his crucifixion. He is on his way to Jerusalem, where in just a few days he will die on a cross. Jesus and his disciples are leaving Jericho, which was about 15 miles east of Jerusalem, a one day’s walk. They are going to Jerusalem, along with large crowds of other Jews, for the Passover celebration. This was the common route for Jewish pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem. They would come from the east instead of the more direct route from the north in order to avoid traveling through Samaria. Samaritans were seen as half Jews whose worship practices were corrupted, and the Jews wanted nothing to do with them. So they would travel a little extra distance and enter through Jericho to the east of Jerusalem.

It is of more than geographic significance that Matthew tells us that Jesus was leaving Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. His Jewish readers would all be reminded that Jericho was the first city conquered by Joshua when the Israelites were taking possession of the Promised Land. Jesus is a new Joshua (the Hebrew translation of “Jesus” is “Joshua”) and he is beginning a new conquest. This conquest is against sin and its devastating consequences upon the human race. So this miracle is something of a summary miracle, not simply telling the story of how two men received their sight, but telling the story of how Jesus conquers the curse of sin upon us as well. Sin has disabled us all, but Jesus is full of mercy. He knows how to lead us into the Promised Land of eternal life. Let’s explore this by looking first at the nature of the new Promised Land portrayed in this miracle, and then consider how a person enters this glorious land.

I. The New Promised Land

Israel entered the Promised Land after forty years in the desert. These two blind men were in something of a desert themselves. Matthew wants us to see their desert, which is why he uses the word “Behold” at the beginning of verse 30. When we look at these two men, what we see is that they are sitting by the roadside. Everyone else is happily on their way to Jerusalem for the great Passover Feast. These blind men are cut off from this part of Jewish life. What they are doing instead is begging. They were beggars out of necessity, not choice. No other means of provision was available to them. I can understand why they would choose this location for their begging. There were large crowds

traveling to Jerusalem, and they would likely be in a generous mood as they went to celebrate this greatest of all their religious feasts.

As they are sitting by the roadside, they hear a large and boisterous crowd approaching them. They start calling out to any who will hear, asking what is going on. They are told that Jesus of Nazareth is passing by. They had heard of him, of his miracles and his teaching. Perhaps they had longed to meet him and to ask him to restore their sight. In any case, they realize that this is their chance. We know that this was their only chance. Jesus would never pass this way again. So they begin shouting, attempting to be heard over the din of the crowd, **“Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!”** (v. 30). We get some idea of their social standing when we see the crowd’s reaction to them. **“The crowd rebuked them, telling them to be silent”** (v. 31). We’re not told why the crowd did this, but it’s clear that it was the opinion of the crowd that these two did not deserve Jesus’ time or attention. Undeterred, they increase their volume even more as they ask a second time for Jesus’ mercy upon them.

We then read what I think is the most beautiful verse of the passage: **“And stopping, Jesus called them and said, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’”** (v. 32). Why do I say that’s a beautiful verse? To understand this, we have to appreciate the fact that these men were social outcasts. They were cut off from the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover. They were rebuked by the crowd, who deemed them unworthy of Jesus’ time. I think that part of this rebuke from the crowd was due to the fact that their loud shouting made them unavoidably visible to the crowd, and the consensus was that such people should be ignored. Because they were social outcasts, they suffered from invisibility.

Do you know what I mean by invisibility? It means that you are not seen or known by others. You are, in their eyes, a non-person. Maybe it’s at work, where everyone associates you with your job, but no one really has made the effort to get to know you. Maybe you have experienced invisibility at a party somewhere. Even though the room may be filled with people, you feel yourself an outsider to what is happening. Maybe it’s at school, where everyone else seems to have a friend group except you. Lunchtime is the most painful time of day for you because the loud conversation as friends sit together reminds you of your outsider status. Though I shudder to think about it, maybe it’s at church where you feel this invisibility.

In a *NY Times* editorial this week, David Brooks wrote of this invisibility by describing the isolation that is so epidemic in our world today. It happens when we lack healthy connection to one another. He uses the metaphor of weaving to describe healthy community. Just as the threads of fabric weave in and out, intertwined with one another, so we are designed for such connections. These two blind men suffered not only from a disability regarding their sight, but also from a disability in their connections with others. David

Brooks said of these connections, “Every time you assault and stereotype a person, you’ve ripped the social fabric. Every time you see that person deeply and make him or her feel known, you’ve woven it.”

Jesus addresses their social isolation before he heals their blindness. He does so by seeing them and stopping. Don’t overlook this. Jesus sees you even when others may not. Not only does he see them, but he engages them in conversation. He asks, **“What do you want me to do for you?”** Jesus was certainly not asking this for his own sake, as if he needed the information they could provide to him. Jesus wants a personal relationship with them, and conversation is the normal expression of such a relationship. In the new Promised Land into which Jesus leads us, there will be no invisibility, no social outcasts.

There are a couple of other things we learn from this verse. One is from the word “stopped.” Jesus stopped. He interrupted his journey, his agenda for the day, in order to address these men. He had a long walk ahead of him this day, but that took a back seat to spending time with these men. One thing we learn from this is the inescapable inefficiency of human relationships. They are not scalable. Do you know what I mean by that word? Businesses will often ask if the product they are selling is scalable. They are asking if they can increase production and sales merely by keeping the “widget factory” running longer. While the first widget might cost a lot of money to produce, if it is scalable, widgets two through ten million will be cheap. But relationships don’t work like that. We see Jesus taking time with two outcasts here that everyone else ignored. And what did Jesus interrupt in order to do so? He was on his way to save the world through his death and resurrection. Jesus paid attention to the relationship right in front of him. The new Promised Land into which Jesus is leading us will be relationally rich.

One more truth we learn from Jesus’ question is that this new Promised Land is also a place where our desires will be met by God. When Jesus asked them, “What do you want me to do for you?” he wanted them to be honest about their desires and to look to him for the satisfaction of those desires. I think this is the basis for prayer. It is a good thing to ask yourself, “What do I want God to do for me?” Then, it is good to ask him to do so.

At the very end of the story, Jesus finally gets to the place where we’ve sensed from the beginning this story was headed. He heals their blindness. Matthew tells us that he acts out of compassion. His heart goes out to these men. Rather than healing from a distance, which Jesus is able to do, he heals them with a touch. It was likely that their blindness included some kind of discharge of fluid that made them more repulsive to others. So human touch would not have been common to them. But Jesus touches them, bringing healing to their eyes and with it their full restoration to the community. They follow Jesus and join the crowd heading to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast.

Now they can walk with their new friend Jesus. That's the best description I can think of for the new Promised Land.

This new Promised Land is a place where our blindness will be healed. The Bible tells us that when Jesus appears a second time, we will be like him, **“because we shall see him as he is”** (1 John 3:2). Seeing Jesus will transform us to be like Jesus. The first thing these blind men saw was the face of Jesus. Just as it transformed them, so will it do to us.

II. Entering this Land

Entry into the new Promised Land is by faith, and these two men exhibit such faith in Jesus. We see it in the way they address Jesus, calling him both “Lord” and “Son of David.” That latter title is a Jewish way of saying that Jesus is the Messiah. Ironically, these blind men “see” what many in Israel did not see. Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, the Savior and Lord. Someone once bluntly asked Helen Keller, “Isn't it terrible to be blind?” She responded, “Better to be blind and see with your heart, than to have two good eyes and see nothing.”

Their faith is also seen in their plea for mercy. The cry of the two blind men has become part of the church's liturgy. In Greek, it is *Kyrie eleeson*, which, when translated means “Lord, have mercy.” They appealed to Jesus for his mercy, not his fairness. They didn't say, “It's not fair that everyone else can see and we can't. Jesus, treat us more fairly.” They acknowledged that they didn't deserve to have Jesus do this for them, but appealed to him based on his mercy. True faith acknowledges that our only hope is in the mercy of Christ. This was Charles Colson's experience the night he came to faith in Christ. Colson went to prison for his role in the Watergate scandal during the Nixon presidency. Here's how he describes his coming to faith in Christ.

That night when I... sat alone in my car, my own sin—not just dirty politics, but the hatred and evil so deep within me—was thrust before my eyes, forcefully and painfully. For the first time in my life, I felt unclean, and worst of all, I could not escape. In those moments of clarity I found myself driven irresistibly into the arms of the living God.

The two blind men also teach us the difference between belief and trust. It is the difference between being interested in something and committing to that thing. One of my Facebook pages is called “Birmingham Ride Finder,” where various group bicycle rides are listed and people can consider whether to go on that ride. One of the options beside every ride is a box that can be checked that says “Interested.” It is one thing to say you're interested and quite another to commit to that ride. When you commit to it, you have to plan your schedule and make the necessary arrangements actually to show up for the ride. There

are many people today who are interested in Jesus but not yet committed to him. They “believe” in Jesus in the sense of agreeing that he is who he said he is. They believe that he is God’s Son and that he died on the cross for sinners. That is belief, not trust, and heaven comes only to those who trust in Jesus.

Where do we see trust with those two blind men? I see it in their refusal to be silenced by the crowd. Had they merely been interested in Jesus, they would never have been able to overcome the opposition of the crowd. Do you know how hard it is to have a large number of people telling you to do one thing, but you commit to doing something else? When the crowd tried to silence these men, **“they cried out all the more, ‘Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!’”** They believed Jesus was their last and only hope, so they trusted him with their desperate need. They had no plan B. They knew it was now or never. Jesus would never pass this way again.

How about you? Do you believe in Jesus or do you trust in Jesus? Mere belief will not be sufficient to get you into the new Promised Land Jesus opens for us, a land we commonly call “heaven.” Only trust in Jesus will do that. Are you able to hold on to Jesus no matter what the crowd says? Trust in Jesus puts all your eggs in one basket. It bets the farm. It’s what you did when you sat in the pew you’re sitting in now. You committed your weight to it to the point that if it failed you, you would be on the floor. Belief looks at the pew and may acknowledge that it is sturdy enough to hold you, but it does not hold you until you trust it by sitting in it. That’s what these men did and what all who would follow Jesus must do.

CONCLUSION:

After the blind men were healed, they followed Jesus. What a journey that must have been! It was surely filled with joy as they marveled at all the sights they had only heard about before but were now seeing for the first time. They followed Jesus right into Jerusalem, and shared in the exuberance of Palm Sunday, as the crowds acknowledged Jesus as their King and Messiah. But then the darkness returned. Jesus was crucified, and Matthew reports that literal darkness covered the land from noon until 3:00 p.m. (27:45). What happened to these blind men whose sight Jesus restored? Mark, in his Gospel, tells us that one of these men was named Bartimaeus (10:46). Many New Testament scholars believe that Mark named him because he was well-known in the church in Jerusalem. Whether that is true or not, what is true is that when we trust Jesus and follow him, he will get us into the Promised Land. There will be a time of darkness for all of us, when our eyes close for the final time in death. Jesus will open those eyes again. He will take us home to live with him forever. All we have to do is trust him and follow him. He’ll take care of the rest. “Lord, have mercy!”