



CHRISTIAN CRUSADERS

7401 UNIVERSITY AVE., CEDAR FALLS, IOWA 50613

(319) 277-0924

INFO@CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG

WWW.CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG

Following Jesus Means... Being Merciful

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Rev. Steve Kramer

TEXT: Mark 10:32-45 (ESV)

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. 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!" And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" And Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart. Get up; he is calling you." And throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. 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." 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.

I was headed towards Target Field in Minneapolis for a Twins baseball game, and there he was, sitting alongside the sidewalk with a cardboard sign that read "Homeless, please help." He was dirty and ragged. I noticed people were hurrying by and ignoring him as I drew closer. Have you ever had that kind of encounter yourself? There's a whole host of feelings that can hit you. You might feel uncomfortable or nervous or suspicious or critical, guilty, confused because you're not sure what to do. Should I look the other way and ignore him? Smile at him? Stop and give him something? Talk with him? And as a Christian, I sometimes asked myself, "What would Jesus do here?" So, what do you think I should have done? Good question.

Mark 8-10 are referred to as the “discipleship section” of Mark's Gospel. In this section, we learn what it means to follow Jesus. We've been learning that following Jesus means such things as a consecration to his cause, new ambitions, becoming like a child, correct vision. And today we finish our series with the story about an encounter with a blind beggar named Bartimaeus. Jesus is walking towards Jerusalem. And he's outside of the city of Jericho. There's a procession of some sort, I guess, it's what it looked like – lots of people coming alongside Jesus asking him questions as he walked by. And there's also a blind beggar we learned, named Bartimaeus, who's sitting alongside that road wondering what's the hubbub, what's going on? He hears that it's Jesus of Nazareth coming by. Well, he has obviously heard about Jesus and his abilities to heal and speculations about him that perhaps he was the messiah that Israel had been longing for. Bartimaeus saw this as his golden opportunity, a chance to have his eyesight restored, so he began to shout at the top of his lungs, “Jesus son of David, have mercy on me.” Calling Jesus “son of David” was to give him a royal messianic title. The Messiah would come from David's line and restore King David's kingship over Israel, just like back in the golden years of Israel.

The crowd told Bartimaeus to shut up and not be a distraction for the rest of them who were trying to take all this in and watch Jesus walk by. Must have been looking like a parade, I guess. Beggars like Bartimaeus, during that time, were marginalized and looked down upon by their society. But Bartimaeus wouldn't have it. He wouldn't be stopped. He kept yelling, “Jesus son of David, have mercy on me. Jesus have mercy on me.” The words there, “have mercy on me” is “eliason” means have mercy, kind of like our kyrie in the Lutheran liturgy, “Lord have mercy,” kyrie eliason. And do the shock of everyone, his yelling stopped Jesus in his tracks. Jesus said, “Call him.” And a couple of people stepped into the crowd and told Bartimaeus, “Take heart, get up. He's calling you. Here's your chance.” He sprang up, leaving his cloak behind and he stumbled towards Jesus feeling around, and Jesus asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” “Rabbi, let me recover my sight,” he said. And so there's some faith there in Bartimaeus. And Jesus said, “Go your way. Your faith has made you well,” and immediately Bartimaeus recovers his sight and, of all things, he followed Jesus on the way. Other people that were healed by Jesus in the past didn't do that. But Bartimaeus followed Jesus on the way.

Now you have to ask, was he a disciple? Would he go to Jerusalem and witness the passion? We don't know. We do know that after Jesus was arrested in the Garden of

Gethsemane and led away, there was a young man wearing only a linen cloth that they tried to seize and he got away. He had no cloak. As he followed Jesus, remember, Bartimaeus cast aside his cloak. When Jesus called him and left everything behind. Hmm. Was it him?

In this episode, though. We are witnesses to the mercy of our king Jesus, mercy at work. Bartimaeus asked for mercy. Jesus took the time to give it to him. Of course, if you're a follower of Jesus Christ, you personally know the mercy of Jesus yourself, so you're probably not all that surprised. You've been a recipient of his mercy. You and I know where Jesus is headed. He's headed to the cross to save helpless people like you and me from sin and death who need mercy. And he's had mercy on our sin-sick souls. His death upon the cross is the healing of our relationship with God. And as the prophet Isaiah said of him, "By his stripes, we are healed." Well, and we've experienced the mercy of his risen presence and strength and answers to prayer and his power as we've called out to him for help in our own time, when we feel overwhelmed and weak. So, the story for the day is no big surprise for us, but it was a surprise to others that day.

As we read the story, it's important that we slow down, look at the details. Who else has mentioned being with Jesus as he left Jericho? The crowd, yes, but there are some others aren't there? And Mark pointedly tells us he was leaving with his disciples. The twelve, who have been receiving training and teaching for the last three chapters on what it means to follow him as his disciples. They've most recently been told that Jesus came not to be served but to serve, and they were to emulate that as his followers. They had to have been surprised by this detour of mercy. They were headed to Jerusalem, after all, to do big things, where they believe Jesus was going to achieve something big – a victory for his people. It was important that he get there by Passover time, he had a schedule to keep. So why is he stopping for a blind beggar? He's teaching them again about the ways of the kingdom. And he's doing it without saying a word. You know, that old adage: a picture is worth a thousand words? Well, that's what they got in today's text. Jesus is teaching his disciples that following him means showing mercy, being merciful, to the hurting. Now, in other places, Jesus actually did teach that using words, he said, "Blessed are the merciful for they shall have mercy." Or he said, "Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy, not sacrifices." God says mercy is a big deal to Jesus. Therefore, it's to be a big deal to us.

It's an interesting word, that word mercy. The Hebrew word for it meant to get inside someone else's skin, to look at life from another person's perspective, to feel what another person was experienced to; like we say, "walk a mile in their shoes." But it was even more than that, as we see. Mercy moves out to cure the hurt. It acts like Jesus, for instance, the son of God. The big picture here: the son of God took on our skin, got inside our skin and became one of us to rescue us from sin and its consequences. He's mercy incarnate. And the Old Testament talks of the tender mercies of God. Which implies gentleness and sensitivity and sympathy and generosity and kindness. Mercy is kindness and compassion where it's not expected, because the person showing mercy is under no obligation to show it, or because the person suffering was somehow deserved. For instance, when you forget to do your homework and your teacher lets you turn it in the next day with no penalty, that's mercy. It's beyond the natural and normal response that you expect.

Some of you might be wondering, "Well, what does giving mercy look like? After all, I can't heal someone with divine power like Jesus did." Probably not. But you sure can pray for their healing, bringing them to the great physician, can't you? Well, being merciful begins with being interruptible, even in the midst of busyness and sometimes craziness that's going on in our lives. That's what happened that day. We see the "interruptibility" of Jesus as he stopped his own crazy parade with everyone trying to get his attention and he ministers to a needy person. You see, it's hard to show mercy when you're not open to interruptions and disruptions.

Sometimes mercy can be shown, though in the most ordinary ways. A certain nine-year-old boy who was sitting at his desk in school when all of a sudden there's a puddle between his feet and the front of his pants are wet. And he thinks his heart's going to stop because he knows when the boys find out, he'll never hear the end of it, and when the girls find out, they'll never speak to him again as long as he lives. So, he puts his head down and he prays this prayer. "Dear Jesus, this is an emergency. I need help now. Five minutes from now, I'm dead meat." He looks up from his prayer, and here comes the teacher with the look in her eyes that says he's been discovered. As the teacher's coming to snatch him up, a classmate named Susie is carrying a fish bowl filled with water. She stumbles and dumps the goldfish bowl on his lap. He pretends to be angry, but inside he's praying, "Thank you, Jesus." Now, rather than being the object of ridicule, this kid is the object of sympathy. The teacher rushes him downstairs, gives him gym shorts to put on while his pants dry. And when he comes back to the

classroom, other kids are on their hands and knees, wiping around his desk. This sympathy is wonderful. But as life would have it, the ridicule that should have been his has been transferred to Susie. She tries to help, but they tell her “Get away, you've done enough already, you klutz.” Finally, at the end of the day, they're waiting at the bus stop and the boy walks over to Susie and whispers, “Susie, did you do that on purpose?” And she whispers back, “I wet my pants once too.” That's mercy.

Mercy is shown also in giving the gift of forgiveness. Remember, Jesus told a parable about a man in debt who owed millions to a king and the king forgave him of the debt. But the same guy wouldn't let a fellow servant off the hook for a mere \$30 that he owed him. The king had this rascal picked up and brought to him, and he called him wicked, and he asked him, “Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had on you?” We who have received mercy, the mercy of forgiveness from God through Christ, are therefore called to give mercy to others, Jesus taught – to others who sin against us.

We show mercy when we minister to the spiritual needs of those around us. God places many people around us to notice and to minister to spiritually, who need someone to be praying with them and for them who need someone to share a word of encouragement from scripture with them; who are lost and needing an encounter with the gospel story of Jesus so that they might repent and believe and receive God's grace. And Jesus says to us, “Won't you be the one to have mercy and go to them and show them and tell them of my mercy so that they might receive this and be saved?” Oftentimes, we're given the opportunity to glorify Jesus by showing mercy to the physical needs of others as well. You don't have to look far to see a lot of hurting and hardship around us. There are lots of opportunities out there to go and show Christ's mercy to those living right around us: lonely, sick, the widowed, the homeless, the jobless, the addicted, the grieving, the mentally ill, and the hurting families right along with them, the incarcerated and their families as well. I recently ran into two friends from my former congregation that got involved in trying to help out a mother and her two kids whose dad had just been put in prison. They were destitute, without housing and a car. It was a mess. This couple's heart was touched when they heard their story, and they mercifully jumped in to help. It wasn't easy for them by any means, but about 12 years have passed, and when I asked them about those kids, they smiled and showed me pictures, and said, “Those kids are thriving. They're now young adults in college with a promising future. And even more importantly, they're following Jesus.” And there are many new people arriving into our country these days who are refugees from

Afghanistan. They need mercy. They arrived with nothing. They'll soon be entering many of our communities. I recently attended a church who sent a busload of goods and a lot of members along with them to meet these new people and welcome them. Of course, there's the national and international scene, with natural disasters and poverty and disease. And Jesus says to his followers, "Listen to the cries, don't pass them by." We may not always be able to go to them, but we certainly can financially give in the name of Christ to show mercy, because there are plenty of good, effective organizations on the ground in these countries that are being the merciful hands and feet and voice of Jesus. Organizations like compassion, ministering to children, living in poverty in other countries.

I suppose we should ask: did these disciples pick up on that lesson? Well, look at Acts 3, Peter and John... on the way to church... the lame beggar. He said, "I have no silver or gold, but in the name of Jesus, get up and walk." And the man did, and Peter pointed the onlookers to Jesus. And it didn't end there. You read the epistles in the New Testament calling Christ followers to merciful action. Read James, read 1 John, read 1 Peter. The early church became known for their mercy in a Roman and Greek culture that saw mercy as a sign of weakness. In fact, one Roman philosopher said mercy is a disease of the soul, but mercy was the hallmark of the Christian faith and has been that through the centuries.

More importantly, though, the question to ask ourselves is not so much about the disciples, but are we picking up on this discipleship lesson as modern-day followers of Christ? Are we? It can be a mean old world out there – people after each other, trying to get ahead of each other, stepping on each other, hurting one another. This world needs a little more Jesus mercy, tender heartedness, caring and kindness. Let it begin with you and me. Let's pray.

Merciful Father, thank you for the tender mercies you've given us. May we walk in the footsteps of our king. Continue to soften our hearts and make us tender hearted followers who hear the cries of the hurting around us and stop to show your mercy.

Amen.