



## DEMANDING ANOTHER WAY

October 28, 2018, Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 10:46-52

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*O Lord, Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.*

Just the other week...the women's Bible study took me back to the story of Jacob.

In the early stories of the Bible, Jacob is a scoundrel and a cheat. He might be a patriarch in Genesis, but Jacob loves breaking the rules in order to serve his own interests. Even before they're born, we can tell that something's different with the twin brothers Jacob and Esau. They fight in the womb. They fight as children. They fight as grown men. What's worse, Jacob, named at his birth "the one who usurps," draws his mom into the competition. Jacob gets his mom to help him finally succeed in one-upping Esau and stealing his birthright. Consequently, Jacob not only does his brother wrong, he deceives his saintly father, Isaac. After this, he has to leave. Jacob has disgraced his family. His brother wants to kill him, and so his mother sends him back to her family in Aram.

If you follow the narrative of the patriarch Jacob in Genesis 27 through 32, you see that, even though he had to run away, Jacob doesn't really stop his cheating ways. He might have met his match in his Uncle Laban, but Jacob still finds ways to swindle him. When Jacob leaves Laban, the people make it clear that he has to skip town. Jacob does so with full knowledge that he's got to head back and face Esau, his twin brother whom he cheated. Then...after all this running away, Jacob winds up sleeping by himself on the banks of the River Jabbok. He's managed to make enemies on both sides of his family, and he's all alone. Or is he?



Jacob wrestling with God on the banks of the Jabbok in Genesis 32 is one of the more memorable passages of Scripture. Asleep, Jacob awakes to find himself in the middle of a battle. Someone's ambushed him in the dark of night. Jacob isn't in any mood to be messed with, so they wrestle. All through the night they wrestle. And the match is exhausting, and the stranger realizes that Jacob isn't going to quit, he isn't going to give in, because that's not who Jacob is—he's stubborn, a fighter. And so, with the night worn on and the day breaking, with both of them exhausted, the stranger tells Jacob to let him go. Jacob, of course, says no. He won't let the stranger go until he gives him a blessing. In his stubbornness, Jacob demands to be blessed. As a result, the stranger tells him, "from now on your name shall be called Isra-el, for you have wrestled with God and with humans, and you have prevailed." Although Jacob wakes in the morning with a God-induced limp, Jacob has been blessed.

When we discussed this story in women's Bible study this past month, many of the participants found it uncomfortable that Jacob was so demanding of God. And it wasn't just because Jacob often comes off as selfish. It became a central question about our faith: can we be that demanding of God? Should we be that demanding of God?

Enter the story of Bartimaeus from our Gospel lesson this morning. "Well known in the community, Bartimaeus is the son of old Timaeus, [that's what "bar" in his name means]. Bartimaeus has a place in society—he is well known to others. His role is that of the blind beggar."<sup>1</sup> More than that, he's from Jericho...the dusty and used-to-be fertile city located at the lowest point on earth, 825 feet below sea level.<sup>2</sup> Even visitors today comment on how desolate Jericho appears; so it seems appropriate that a man in desperate need is crying out from on the lowest point on earth, literally and spiritually.

As a beggar, Bartimaeus has the role of reminding all passersby that there are many in need that God calls us to care for. In his time, Bartimaeus reminds those around him that they have an obligation to give alms. But Bartimaeus is getting a

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<sup>1</sup> <https://thelisteninghermit.com/2012/10/23/could-we-also-regain-our-vision-mark-1046-52-ordinary-30b/>

<sup>2</sup> Culpepper, Ryan. Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary, page 351.



little loud and obnoxious. He yells out to Jesus but is rebuked, told to be quiet. Regardless, Jesus responds to him, hears his cry, and calls him near. As he draws close, Jesus says, “What do you want me to do for you?”<sup>3</sup>

“What do you want me to do for you?” It’s interesting that Jesus would ask this question because the majority of this chapter in Mark is about what Jesus calls his disciples to do for him—not the other way around. When the rich young ruler comes to Jesus and asks how to inherit eternal life, Jesus tells him to sell all he has and follow him. When the children run into Jesus’ lap, the disciples rebuke them. Consequently, Jesus looks at the disciples and says, “let these children come to me, do not hinder them.” And then right before this story of Bartimaeus, the disciples ask Jesus to sit at his right and his left with power. Jesus turns to them and says, “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”<sup>4</sup> In leading up to the story of Bartimaeus, Jesus teaches his disciples, in multiple ways, what it means to follow him. Yet here, when Bartimaeus yells out, Jesus says to him: “What do you want me to do for you?”

Jesus, straightforwardly and honestly wants to know what we need. His question begs introspection, what do we want Jesus to do for us?

Over the last year and a half, one of our members here at Brick entered into a weekly prayer with her family when her sister was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer. Her family comes from a more theologically conservative background, and they haven’t always agreed, but this member was eager for her family to come together in prayer. What she didn’t expect was the approach to prayer that her family took. As she began to pray for her sister’s freedom from pain, wisdom for those guiding her treatment, and rest—her family interrupted her. “Why aren’t you praying for her to be healed? That’s what we want, right? Then let’s ask God for it!” As a result they gathered together every week on the phone and prayed desperately to God for their sister to be healed. They knew God had the

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 10:51

<sup>4</sup> Mark 10:43-44.



power to do so, so they demanded that God act. For 18 long months, they demanded in prayer that God free their loved one from cancer.

“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus says.

If we’re honest, we know how to be demanding in certain areas of our lives. We demand that we are heard in the office. If we work hard enough, we demand the markets change, the court decisions go our way, the sale be made. Because we labor hard to make things go our way, we demand that we are rewarded for our hard work. We demand that others work as hard as we do. Why else do we work the long hours? We demand reward. Within our own families we demand to be taken seriously. We demand our kids try their best at school. We demand our children show us respect. At the end of the day, my friends, we know how to be demanding. Many of us are used to being in charge; we’re used to getting what we want when we ask for it.

Here’s the difficulty of many churches like ours when we hear stories like that of desperate, blind, Bartimaeus—churches filled with privileged people used to getting what we want. We don’t always identify with being that vulnerable—we know how to provide for what we need by ourselves. When we encounter individuals in the Bible who are demanding, it’s usually because they are the most in need. They can’t provide for themselves, and they are desperate. They know what it means to go without, to be without. They demand Jesus listen to them, and in their demanding make themselves vulnerable before God. Therefore they leave pride at the door because they desperately need for their lives to change. When Jesus asks them “What do you want me to do for you?,” they have their answer ready.

Being demanding in our faith is allowed—there are more than enough examples in scripture to show us that faith equals boldness and action, not passive apathy. Like Jacob wrestling by the riverside, faithfulness takes the strength and courage to demand a blessing from God, to demand that God fulfill God’s promises. Here’s the catch, though: we demand something from God, not because we’re in charge, not because we determine the rules, but because God is in charge. God has the power to produce change. What we see in the stories of Jacob and Bartimaeus is they demand another way from God because they know that God has the power to



deliver. Bartimaeus calls Jesus son of David and Rabbi because he knows who he is—he demands that he be healed because he knows Jesus can do it. And the way in which Bartimaeus follows Jesus afterward proves he’s ready for someone else to take the lead. When the story ends, without Jesus even asking him to, Bartimaeus follows his healer.

So God gives us permission to be demanding in our faith; Jesus asks us “What do you want me to do for you?” And we, with boldness, are called to answer. But be careful when responding to this question because I guarantee God is going to be equally demanding of us. Mark 10 teaches us about discipleship—Jesus asks us what we need and then calls us to follow.

See, that’s the flipside of being demanding in our faith. Being that forward in our faith is allowed because following Jesus leads us into a relationship with God. And because of the uniqueness of that relationship...God is just as demanding of us.

A professor of mine at Duke used to tell a story of one of the first churches he served in ministry. They held a weekly Bible study for members and friends in the neighborhood. And at the close of each of their studies they would gather in prayer—lifting up to God their joys and concerns. As folks prayed for friends suffering illness and grief, prayed for the health and future of the church, one woman from the neighborhood would repeatedly lift up her own prayers. In the midst of the group she would say aloud “God please make these people help me. I need money, food in my belly, and a good place to sleep. Make these rich church folk help me.”

Friends, Jesus asks us “What do you want me to do for you?” and he gives us the freedom to answer honestly. God wants to hear our deepest desires so that we draw closer to Jesus in an honest and vulnerable relationship. But be warned, Jesus draws us close in order that we may follow him more deeply. Jesus will be just as demanding of us. He heals so that we can follow. He teaches so that we can listen. He welcomes all so that can do the same. He died on the cross so that we can live for him. Friends, Jesus is never hesitant in hearing our demands, but fair warning—he’s going to be just as demanding of us.

*In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

