

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. Gordon Kell

Christ and us as seen in the Gospel of Mark: Which way?

Jesus was asked lots of questions in the Gospels. Some of these questions were genuine and some were not.

In Luke 10:25-37, a lawyer asked Jesus, *“Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”* (Luke 10:25)

On the face of it this seemed like a heartfelt genuine question. But we are told the lawyer did not ask the question because he wanted spiritual help. Instead he asked the question in an attempt to undermine Jesus. Jesus answered the lawyer by asking him two connected questions, *“What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?”* (Luke 10:26)

The lawyer did not pause but answered straight away, *“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself”* (Luke 10:27).

The speed at which serious questions are pursued is often an indication of how seriously we are seeking an answer. Are we playing intellectual games or are we genuinely seeking important answers?

The lawyer was confident he knew the answers to the questions Jesus posed. He gave no sense of wanting or requiring spiritual help. Jesus replied, *“You have answered rightly; do this and you will live”* (Luke 10:28).

The lawyer, wanting to justify himself and not look a fool, asked, *“And who is my neighbour?”* (Luke 10:29)

This is quite extraordinary. It seems that the lawyer had no difficulty with the concept of *“loving the LORD [his] God with all his heart, soul, strength and mind”* yet had problem recognising his neighbour. Jesus responds to this foolishness by telling the wonderful story of the Good Samaritan.

I have often wondered what happened to that lawyer. He had one great opportunity to confess to Jesus that he, like all of us, was incapable of loving the Lord God with all his heart, with all his soul, with all his strength, and with all his mind and also his neighbour as himself. Jesus was the only man who had ever fulfilled those commandments. The lawyer also had one great opportunity to recognise he needed a Saviour. Sadly he failed, like so many others, to take that opportunity because he felt no need of salvation.

This morning we are going to look at the story of the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17-22) and the story of blind Bartimaeus, (Mark 10:46-52), under the title, “Which way?”

The rich young ruler (Mark 10:17-22)

The story of the rich young ruler begins in a similar way to the story of the lawyer but has important differences. Jesus was setting about on a journey with His disciples when a rich young ruler approached Him. The young man had a sense of urgency about him because we are told, in Mark 10:17, that he ran to meet Jesus. More than this we are also told he knelt before Jesus. Scripture is full of details which are worth pausing to think about. The young man was different to the lawyer. He really felt Jesus would be able to help him and answer a vital question. Unlike the lawyer and, in spite of his wealth and position (we learn in Luke 18:18 that he was a ruler), he bows down before Jesus. The lawyer never acknowledged the greatness of Jesus but the rich young man did. By the way, it is Matthew who tells us the rich ruler was a young man (see Matthew 19:20). The rich young ruler seized the moment to ask Jesus a profound question and he believed Jesus could answer it. He asked, *“Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?”* (Mark 10:17).

Notice the difference between the way this rich young man addresses the Saviour and the way the lawyer addressed Jesus. The lawyer simply addresses Jesus as, *“Teacher”* (Luke 10:25) The young man used the words, *“Good teacher”* (Mark 10:17) Teachers were not uncommon in Israel but the rich young ruler recognised that Jesus was not someone who simply understood the word of God but someone who had the character of goodness. Jesus spotted this straight away and asks, *“Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God”* (Mark 10:18)

Jesus did not say this because He was not God but to give the young man the opportunity to recognise who He really was.

Peter had recognised who Jesus was earlier in the Gospel of Mark (see Mark 8:27-29). Near Caesarea Philippi Jesus had asked his disciples, *"Who do men say that I am?"* (Mark 8:27) The disciples answered, *"John the Baptist; but some say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets"* (Mark 8:28). Then Jesus had asked, *"But who do you say that I am?"* (Mark 8:29). It was Peter who answered, *"You are the Christ"* (Mark 8:29).

When Jesus asked, *"Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God"* (Mark 10:18), He wanted the rich young ruler to understand He was indeed God.

In Matthew's account of this story (see Matthew 19:16-22) Jesus told the young man, *"But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments"* (Matthew 19:17). To which the young man asked, *"Which ones?"*

You have the sense that here was a young man who genuinely wanted to do God's will and was eager to obey His commandments. Jesus replies, *"You shall not murder,' 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not bear false witness,' 'Honour your father and your mother,' and, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'"* (Matthew 10:18)

Interesting Jesus did not challenge the young man with the verses the lawyer quoted, *"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,' and 'your neighbour as yourself'"* (Luke 10:27).

I suspect had he done so, the young man may well have hesitated in his answer. He seemed very genuine in his desire to honestly please God and was aware of what he could not do. The commandments Jesus refers to were more straightforward than those which expressed a deep personal response to love God completely.

The rich young man is able to say truthfully, *"Teacher, all these things I have kept from my youth"* (Mark 10:20). Notice the young man dropped the adjective 'good'. Did he hesitate to recognise Jesus really was God which his first response implied?

What is so remarkable is not what the young man says about himself but what is said about Jesus in Mark 10:21. *"Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him."*

There are very few occasions in the Gospels when Christ's love for an individual is so precisely expressed. Jesus observed the efforts, humility and willing spirit of the rich young ruler to respond in obedience to God. Jesus responds in love. But true love always challenges. Instead of the command, *"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,' and 'your neighbour as yourself'"* (Luke 10:27)

Jesus said, *"One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me."*

The question was, would the rich young ruler recognise who was asking for such a response of faith and sacrifice? And would he obey. Sadly, in spite of all the positive aspects of this remarkable young man's character the answer was, "No". *"But he was sad at this word, and went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions"* (Mark 10:22).

Our title this morning is, "Which way?". Jesus effectively had said to the rich young ruler, "Which way are you going to go?" The young man had asked Jesus, *"Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?"* Now he discovered there was a god in his life, his wealth, which had a greater hold over him than the Lord God he wanted to follow. Material things meant more to him than his eternal soul.

Jesus was not saying riches in themselves were bad. There are many spiritual people who are rich but who hold their wealth with a light hand. When Job lost his riches he said, *"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; Blessed be the name of the Lord"* (Job 1:21).

Jesus explained in Luke 16:13 that, *"No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."*

The rich young ruler discovered the truth of the words of Jesus.

In the early church many wealthy people gave up their possessions and since then many others have devoted their resources in service to Christ. Later in the church's history, Paul had to warn in 1 Timothy 6:10, that *"the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced*

themselves through with many sorrows."

In Mark 10:24-25 the Lord Jesus explains to His disciples, *"Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."*

The astonished disciples ask, *"Who then can be saved?"* (Mark 10:26)

Jesus explains it is only God who can bring about such changes in people's lives. God is able to do in the hearts and experiences of men what seems to us impossible to do.

In Mark 10:28, Peter says to the Lord, *"See, we have left all and followed You."* This was true and the Lord adds to this by saying, *"Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time - houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions - and in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first."*

It is interesting that in Luke 19:1-10 we read the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus. The story explains how Jesus invited Zacchaeus to come out of a sycamore tree to visit his house and lead him to salvation. The result of that meeting was that, *"Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, 'Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold.' And Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost'"*, (Luke 19:8-10).

Notice how God did the seemingly impossible in Zacchaeus. He starts in the story as a rich man who was spiritually poor. At the end of the story Zacchaeus is spiritually rich and, I suspect, with a much lower bank balance! Jesus had done in Zacchaeus' heart what he wanted to do in the heart of the rich young ruler had he not turned away from the love of Christ.

Blind Bartimaeus

Now we come to the story of blind Bartimaeus. It starts in Mark 10:46. *"Now they came to Jericho. As He went out of Jericho with His disciples and a great multitude, blind Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, sat by the road begging."*

Blind Bartimaeus was neither a lawyer nor a rich young ruler. He was blind and he was a beggar. He was not able to see Jesus or to run to and kneel before Him. But he could listen and he heard that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by.

I have a feeling Bartimaeus had heard of Jesus already and this was his one opportunity to meet Him. He could not see Him. He could not run to Him. But he could shout and that is what he did, *"He began to cry out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!'"* (Mark 10:47)

Blind Bartimeus recognised Jesus as the Messiah and he also recognised His power to be merciful. This poor helpless man sat outside Jericho, geographically the lowest city in the world. It was also a cursed city. At its defeat by Joshua we read in Joshua 6:26, *"Then Joshua charged them at that time, saying, 'Cursed be the man before the LORD who rises up and builds this city Jericho; he shall lay its foundation with his firstborn, and with his youngest he shall set up its gates.'"*

In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) Jesus tells the story of the man who went down from the city of blessing, Jerusalem, to Jericho, a city which had been cursed and met with disaster.

If ever there was an illustration of a man in desperate need it was Bartimaeus. To add to his problems, many of those who also crowded around wanting to see Jesus warned Bartimaeus to be quiet. But faith never gives in to opposition but rather expresses itself more loudly, *"Then many warned him to be quiet; but he cried out all the more, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!'"* (Mark 10:48).

In Hebrews 11, the great chapter in the Bible about faith, the writer explains in Hebrews 11:6, *"But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him."* Bartimaeus shows us the truth of this verse. He believed and his faith was rewarded. Bartimaeus despite his blindness, poverty and disadvantage demonstrated a wonderful faith in contrast to the trust the lawyer placed in himself and the rich young ruler's trust in his riches.

In Mark 10:49 we read, *"So Jesus stood still and commanded him to be called. Then they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Be of good cheer. Rise, He is calling you.'"*

Faith always finds a response in the heart of God. Earlier in the Gospel of Mark, in Mark 4:40 when Jesus stilled the storm He had to ask His disciples, *"How is it that you have no faith?"*

But in Mark 5:21-43 a woman, with a medical problem she had suffered for twelve years, comes near to Jesus and gently touches His cloak and is immediately healed. Jesus tells her, *"Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your affliction"*, (Mark 5:34).

This was the kind of faith Bartimaeus had. Once Jesus called him he immediately responded. *"And throwing aside his garment, he rose and came to Jesus."* (Mark 10:50).

It is interesting to note that blind Bartimaeus casts aside, what I suspect, was one of the few possessions he had. Later in Mark 12:41-44, when Jesus watched the poor widow casting into the treasury her two coins He said to His disciples, *"Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood"*, (Mark 12:43-44).

Jesus is able to measure perfectly the true cost and value of everything we possess and are prepared to sacrifice. The rich young ruler, for all his undoubted qualities, gave up none of his wealth, as far as we know, to follow Jesus. Blind Bartimaeus willing cast aside what little he had in response to the call of Jesus.

Notice too how the rich young ruler asked Jesus, *"What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?"* (Mark 10:17) He saw salvation as something he could achieve. Blind Bartimaeus had no such thoughts. He understood perfectly clearly his helplessness. And Jesus knew this and asks, *"What do you want Me to do for you?"* (Mark 10:51).

There is an utter clarity about blind Bartimaeus. He heard about Jesus, he called out to Jesus, he was called by Jesus, he came to Jesus, Jesus asked what He could do for him and he told Him, *"Rabboni, that I may receive my sight"* (Mark 10:51).

Salvation is about understanding our need and knowing we cannot do anything but look outside of ourselves to the Saviour. It is remarkable that a blind man teaches how faith gives us sight.

Jesus proved the truth of Hebrews 11:6, that *"God rewards those who seek Him,"* when in Mark 10:52 he said, *"Go your way; your faith has made you well."*

It is wonderful to think that the first person blind Bartimaeus saw when he received his sight was Jesus. Faith had taught him, in the words of our title, "Which way?" to look. He had looked to the One Who is *"the Way, the Truth and the Life"* (John 14:6). But blind Bartimaeus further answered the question, "Which way?" when he did what the rich young ruler failed to do.

We read, *"Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, 'One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me.' But he was sad at this word, and went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions"* (Mark 10:21-22).

But now we read of blind Bartimaeus that, *"Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus on the road"* (Mark 10:52). Jesus told Bartimaeus to go his way but Bartimaeus instinctively followed Jesus.

Becoming a Christian is based upon one big and once-for-all decision to choose "Which way?" and to believe in Jesus. Following Jesus is a lifelong process of making big and little "Which way?" decisions which keep us close to Him.

May God help us to make these decisions wisely.

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