

What Do You Want Me To Do For You? - March 28, 2021

There's a joke I heard as a teen in New Zealand. Maybe you've heard a version of it too. It goes a little like this

This Kiwi bloke (that means a guy) is walking along the beach one day and he comes across a bottle lying in the sand. It's all grimy and cloudy, so he picks it up, wipes it off, and pulls out the cork. Woosh - in a cloud of smoke a genie appears. "Thanks man," the genie says. "You've no idea how long I've been cooped up in there. I'm allowed to grant you one wish to thank you for releasing me."

"Wow" says the bloke. "One wish - anything I want?"

"Yep." Says the genie.

"Well," begins the bloke, "I've always wanted to go to Disneyland. But I'm deathly afraid of flying and sailing. I want you to build me a bridge to America!"

"A bridge - to America?" The genie yells. "Do you have any idea how far that is? Do you know how deep the Pacific ocean is? I'd have to build gas stations and hotels along the way! It can't be done - there's just no way. Ask for something else."

The bloke thinks for a minute and says, "Well, I've always had trouble with women. I've never been good with relationships. I'd like you to help me understand women better."

The genie is still for a moment, and plays with his beard. "Hmmm." He says. "Would you like two lanes or four?"

Now if you didn't get the punch line - don't worry - it'll probably come to you in a minute!

If you were that guy and the Genie offered you one wish, what would it be? I bet that many of us might ask for an end to Covid. You might ask for an end to racism. Maybe you'd ask for a loved one to be returned to you. Maybe you'd just ask to be able to see - and hug - your loved ones again. If you could ask for just one thing - what would it be? If you're watching live, type your answer in the chat

In today's passage Jesus gives his followers just that chance - not once, but twice!

"What do you want me to do for you?"

How would you respond? Would your response be different today than it was a year ago?

So let's look at this situation and this question. But I'm going to warn you - it's a trick question! This question brings together all the questions that we have explored over the last few weeks.

Remember that we have been travelling with Jesus in the Gospel of Mark as he journeys with his disciples from Galilee to Jerusalem and we are now in the final leg. Dave left us last week at the end of Chapter 9, and so we begin in Chapter 10 with Jesus teaching and interacting with the Pharisees, the public and his disciples.

He debates divorce with some Pharisees. He embraces some little children. He dialogs with a rich man who went away sad because he didn't want to pay the price necessary to follow Jesus.

And that brings us to verse 32 where we'll pick up our journey with Jesus and his Disciples. It's a bit long, so strap in. Let's read together:

They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. "We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."

"What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."

"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"

"We can," they answered.

Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."

When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (which means "son of Timaeus"), was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Jesus stopped and said, "Call him."

So they called to the blind man, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you." Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him.

The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see."

"Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.

What do you want me to do for you?

So how would you respond if Jesus were to ask you this question? This is a very deep question that looks into the heart of who we are - and the heart of our faith. This is more than a question - it is an invitation.

Now I have to admit that I really struggled with this question. I've been pondering this for weeks, and I still don't feel completely comfortable with it. I tried to write this sermon three times - and hit a wall every time. It wasn't until yesterday that it started coming together for me and, to be honest, I don't feel like this message is complete yet. I'll warn you now that not only is this challenging and uncomfortable, but it raises more questions than I have answers for. So I apologize now if this message feels different to you. I pray that the Holy Spirit will bring home what you need to receive today.

My problem with this question is that the easy answer is to treat Jesus like a cosmic vending machine. "What do you want me to do for you?" It's like the buy now button on Amazon - everything you could want, delivered to your door in under 2 days, charged to Jesus' credited card. And I feel as if that response to this question really cheapens Jesus. [Do you resonate with Peter's struggle?]

If Jesus' invitation to us is merely so that he can give us stuff, even if it's good stuff, like restored relationships, good health, well behaved kids, and thriving businesses - there's nothing wrong with any of those, and I do believe that Jesus cares about these things; but if that is all that Jesus is inviting us to then I feel that something's missing.

I think that Evangelical Christianity has an ungodly preoccupation with "getting prayers answered" - which usually means getting God to say "yes" to our requests. And I think that misses the entire point of the Gospel. It begs the question: do we see Jesus as a Genie, or as God incarnate?

Now I'm sure that in the time that Jesus spent with his followers he asked this question many times. But Mark has chosen to present this question to us twice - in sequence. When a Biblical author repeats something it's always significant. Usually it's to create a contrast, or to reinforce a point. And I think that both aspects are present here.

I've struggled with this question - not just because I don't like the way that it makes us think of Jesus as some kind of genie - but because I think that this is the question that Jesus is asking us every day!

So how should we respond to this perennial question? I've got three suggestions for you to think about.

The first is that we should **respond based on who Jesus is**

Now it's easy to write off James and John with their arrogant request - and it was, as the reaction of their peers shows. But what people often miss is the assumption that underlaid their request. They believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah and that he would soon bring God's kingdom to the world. Their request was based around who Jesus was and what he was about to do. Even though they misunderstood the how, they fully understood the who and the what.

Now I bet that if the front desk clerk at a hotel asked "What can I do for you?" you would have a certain range of possible answers. But if it was the Prime Minister of Canada asking - you would have a completely different set of requests wouldn't you. Now many of them might not be polite, so we won't go there - but the person asking should always change how we respond.

This passage is just dripping with messianic language. Remember earlier in this series Steve looked at the question “Who do you say that I am?” And he showed us how Jesus told the disciples to keep the news of who he was quiet? Well that all changes here. While Jesus rebukes James and John for their inappropriate request, he doesn’t reject their foundation - he confirms it. He says “These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.” In fact, he goes one step further - he refers to himself here as the Son of Man - a title from Daniel 7 that identified him as the divine deliverer.

And in the next section, we see blind Bartimaeus call out to “Jesus, Son of David.” A clear reference to the promised king who would rule forever on David’s throne. This was dangerous language! Especially given that they were just outside Jericho - the home of King Herod. This is probably why the crowd tried to silence him - they didn’t want the whole Roman Guard descending on them.

Remember that it is this same crowd that in a few hours will welcome Jesus into the gates of Jerusalem with cries of “Hosanna, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!” Jesus no longer asks for this to be secret - his true identity is declared - even shouted!

When Jesus heals Bartimaeus he makes it clear that it is his faith in Jesus that has healed him. Bartimaeus had faith that Jesus has the power and authority to fulfill his request. It was rooted in his identity as the Son of Man and the Son of David. Bartimaeus had no doubt who Jesus was!

So when Jesus asks you “What do you want ME to do for you” we have to start by acknowledging the true identity of the one making the invitation.

Second, when we respond, **we respond out of humility.**

The contrast between these two examples shows very clearly that the one asked out of selfish ambition was rejected, and the one asked out of humility was granted. In fact, Jesus had to correct James and John’s attitude by repeating his teaching on what true leadership looks like.

When we come to Jesus with “I want”, and “my needs” and “Bless me” we are not acting like servants. Now it is true that Bartimeaus’ request was selfish - it is our human nature. He wanted to see. It was no small request. But it was honest, and humble. But it was his next response that shows his true attitude of humility, which is my third suggestion.

When we respond, **we respond with action.**

Bartimaeus was not content with his new-found sight. He didn’t run back to Jericho yelling “Look at me, look at me, I can see, I can see.” Mark says that “Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.”

Bartimaeus knew that this was not merely a wish come true - but it came with an obligation. The one who sat on the side of the road looking for handouts, was now traveling with Jesus along the road heading for Jerusalem. He was now part of something much bigger than himself, and he left his old ways at the side of the road and joined Jesus in his mission.

Have you ever prayed The Lords’ Prayer? Do you know how dangerous that prayer is? There’s a line in there that is supposed to change your world. We usually gloss over it because we want to get the goodies - like getting our daily bread and our sins forgiven. But do you remember what comes before that?

“Your Kingdom Come, your will be done - on earth as it is in heaven”

Have you ever thought about what it means to pray “your will be done here on earth?” This is not a passive request! This is not some mere wish. This is not wishing for better times, or for the good old days when most people went to church, or when there was no covid, or when we pretended that racism didn’t exist. No. This request is to invite God to invade our reality here - and now - starting with me, and you.

When Jesus asks you “What do you want me to do for you?” he’s not asking how he can make your life better. He’s asking you how he can equip you so that you can get up from the side of the road and join him in bringing about his kingdom here on earth.

What do you want me to do for you, James and John?

What do you want me to do for you, Bartimaeus?

What do you want me to do for you, Peter M, Peter T, Josh on the media team?

What do you want me to do for you, Laurelle, Callista, Sam, Andrew and Dave on the worship team?

What do you want me to do for you, Nate, Helen, Ada, Jim, Anna, Devon, Don, Leona, Lovelle and all those in my Bible Study?

What would you like me to do for you, Cornerstone?

There’s only one proper response: **Take Me With You - No Matter What!**

Jesus calls you to join Him in his mission of bringing heaven to earth - one life at a time. He calls you to leave your cloak at the side of the road and join him.

This week is Palm Sunday. And the next scene here is Jesus and his followers arriving in Jerusalem. Jesus knows what is before him. He knows that it’s not going to be easy. He knows that it’s going to be hard for his followers - many of them are going to turn away.

But that doesn’t change his invitation. Bartimaeus, James and John travelled with Jesus to Jerusalem. They joined him - no matter what.

Today - Palm Sunday - we’re standing outside Jericho. Jesus is facing us and asking “What do you want me to do for you?” He’s not asking us for our wish list - he’s inviting us to join him on a wild ride with him. He’s going to take us through the joy of the triumphant entry, the intimacy of the upper room, the desolation of the garden, the despair of the betrayal, arrest and rejection, and the darkness of death. But he also invites you into the new birth of the resurrection and the flame that set the world on fire. He is asking you to join him. He’s asking you “What do you need” so that you’ll get up off the ground and join him.

Benediction Segment

You may have felt that I ended my message rather abruptly. And you’d be right. If you’re already a follower of Jesus I want you to wrestle with this question - just like I have these past few weeks. It’s a soul searching question. What do you want me to do for you? How can Jesus equip you so that you can join him along the way? I don’t have an answer for you - only you can answer that! You and Jesus. I encourage you to give serious thought and prayer to this question - and to discuss it in your small groups.

Now please don’t get me wrong. I am NOT suggesting that you should not bring your daily needs before Jesus in prayer. You absolutely should. My point is that we shouldn’t treat

Jesus like a vending machine whose purpose is to make our lives happier and more comfortable. There's way more to it than that.

But I want to turn the conversation now to those who may be on the sidelines. If you haven't yet accepted who Jesus truly is, then you'll only ever see him as a feel-good genie, and you'll be disappointed. And I know that maybe I've put you off a little here. If Jesus isn't going to make my life more comfortable then what am I doing here? I get it. The heart of the Christian message is not what Jesus does - but who he is!

There's another vignette that comes at the end of the Easter story where two other men - one at his left, and one at his right - tell Jesus what they want him to do for them as they hang together dying. Luke records it in chapter 23, starting at verse 39:

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Here again we have two men. One makes a demand - out of mockery, arrogance, even anger. And Jesus ignores him! Silence! But the other acknowledges who Jesus truly is and responds in humility. He is on death's door - he has no hope now, other than the man unjustly crucified beside him. His time has run out, and his only action now is to place his eternal state in the hands of Jesus. And he makes his response to Jesus' unspoken question.

"What do you want me to do for you?"

"Take me with you" he answers. "Take me with you into your kingdom."

And Jesus' response? "Yes!" "Yes!" "Yes! I will take you with me to meet my Father in Heaven."

There is no better response to this question. If you've never responded to this question like that - I want to give you an opportunity to do so now. I'd like us all to pray - and if you're ready to accept Jesus - like that second criminal, I invite you to pray with conviction.

Jesus, I believe that you are God's son and that you came to restore us to your Father. You didn't deserve to suffer for my sake, but you chose it willingly. Thank you for making a way for me to come to know God. Jesus, I ask you to bring me with you. Into your family, into relationship with you and God our Father, and into your journey to restore all the earth. I give up my way - and I look to you to guide me and teach me through your church and your spirit. Take me with you, Jesus, to the glory of God. Amen.

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