

Following and Going

Mark 10:46-52 (October 24, 2021)

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⁴⁶They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. ⁴⁷When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” ⁴⁸Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” ⁴⁹Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” ⁵⁰So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.” ⁵²Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Historical Context

The story of blind Bartimaeus is the last healing miracle recorded in Mark. It rounds off the set of stories which began with the healing of the possessed boy, 9:14-29. Although the healing of Bartimaeus again reveals something of Jesus' messianic credentials, the story focuses on the response of Bartimaeus himself. He tenaciously cries out for mercy and ends up following Jesus. The persistent faith of the blind man is the focus of this story, a faith that leads him on the road to Calvary.

Theme: Following and Going

In the story, Bartimaeus gains his sight, and, more importantly, he follows Jesus. Here is where the call aspect of this story becomes clear. In the other call stories in Mark, “following” Jesus is crucial — crucial both in terms of being important and being cross-oriented. Simon, Andrew, James, and John are all called to follow Jesus (1:16-20) as is Levi the tax collector (2:14). The rich man in 10:17-21 is told to sell all and follow Jesus. Regarding true disciples, Jesus is explicit in Mark 8:34, “Let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

But there are some other details in Bartimaeus' story that beg further consideration. What about the “many” who “rebuke” Bartimaeus for crying out to Jesus? (This “rebuke” is the same word — *epitimao* — used when Jesus rebukes demons and when Peter and Jesus rebuke each other in their testy exchange in 8:32-33.) Are they seeking to preserve Jesus' honor? Are they trying to control access to Jesus like the disciples did when they stopped someone casting out demons in Jesus' name? (9:38-39) Or are they embarrassed about Bartimaeus' low status as a blind beggar? Importantly, Mark reports that Jesus does not call Bartimaeus directly, but instead, he has them call Bartimaeus, which they then encouragingly do. Is this story then not just about the calling of new disciples but the formation and instruction of existing ones? How do they / we respond when Jesus assumes the embarrassingly low status of the Crucified One?

Finally, in the other call stories, Jesus tells the person to come and / or follow him. He tells Bartimaeus to “Go!” Is “going” the same as “following” when it leads to the cross? It certainly can be when “following” Jesus to the cross becomes “going” and telling others what we have seen and experienced in the one who is the merciful Son of David, Jesus the Messiah.