

# Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

## JESUS AND HIS BENEFITS

Mark 10:46-52

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

They came to Jericho. As he [Jesus] 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 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, "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.

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## DIAGNOSIS: True, But Not True Enough

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *A Blind Nobody*

In a sentence: Blind Bartimaeus regained his sight from Jesus, the Son of David.

For the writer of Mark, this story is pivotal. Jesus is leaving

Jericho (what he did there is not important) to go to Jerusalem where he will be rejected as Messiah and crucified by the Romans. By the roadside sits a nobody, a blind beggar, "Bartimaeus son of Timaeus" (*Bar-Timaeus* means 'Son of Timaeus'). To this "son" is contrasted another son, "Jesus, Son of David." Although Mark does not dwell on this title (this is Mark's only narrative use; his scriptural polemic is in 12:35-37), it is part of a constellation of royal titles that Jesus publicly yet only provisionally accepts: Messiah (*christos* in Greek, "anointed one," a sign of kingship), King of the Jews (or King of Israel), and Son of David. These titles point to the promise of a king in the royal line of David. By accepting Bartimaeus' royal address and plea for "mercy," Jesus accepted at least provisionally the popular royal title "Son of David" (used with or without an eschatological reference; see 14:49). Under these auspices, Jesus will ride into Jerusalem with shouts of "Hosanna," a shout of praise and a plea for salvation much like Bartimaeus' plea. But now on the roadside, Jesus Son of David comes face to face with Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind nobody. Jesus restores Bartimaeus' sight, not by any magical gesture but by the command of his voice. Yet for any person present at the time, a reasonable conclusion would be that, in healing Bartimaeus, Jesus was showing himself publicly, even if still provisionally, to be the promised Messiah-king. Alas for Bartimaeus, the restoration of his sight is just about all he gets. But he does take this opportunity to follow Jesus "on the way (to Jerusalem)." Perhaps there he (and we) will discover what more Jesus has to offer.

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) :** *Faith in Somebody*

In a sentence: Bartimaeus received from Jesus, as the Son of David, no more than what he could deliver.

Blind Bartimaeus asked Jesus to restore his sight, nothing more.

So when Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well," he connected Bartimaeus's erstwhile faith with his regained sight. Bartimaeus was the beneficiary-in-kind of Jesus' identity. By restoring his sight, Jesus confirmed the popular eschatological expectations for a Messiah-king, even though those expectations were largely limited to the realm of power-politics. The son of Timaeus expected that Jesus, the Son of David, was able to restore his sight. But to apprehend or to trust in Jesus as the Son of David was to limit one's self to the benefits that a Messiah-king could grant. And yet it must not escape our notice that Jesus [or Mark's Jesus], by the godlike way he healed Bartimaeus, that is, by the sheer command of his voice, hints that there is more to him than his Messiah-kingship. But that remained to be seen. For the time being, a reasonable conclusion is that Bartimaeus' faith in Jesus as the Son of David prompted Jesus to make good on that title and thus to restore his sight. Bartimaeus' limited faith in this promising somebody garnered for himself his restored sight; but no more than his restored sight.

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Not True Enough***

In a sentence: Although Bartimaeus regained his sight, he was left in his sins.

Taking Jesus as "Son of David" and hence as the expected Messiah-king, Bartimaeus regained his sight and "followed him on the way (to Jerusalem)." But if this Son of David was *only* the expected Messiah-king, then Bartimaeus, though now sighted, remained in his sins and as blind as ever to the deadliness of his sins and the insufficiency of his faith. If Jesus was *only* the Son of David, then God's great promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob remains unfulfilled.

## PROGNOSIS: God's Truth

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** : *Jesus: the Son of God*

In a sentence: By dying on the cross and thus atoning for the sins of the world, Jesus proved to be the Son of God.

What Jesus did in Jerusalem was beyond anything that Bartimaeus or anyone else could have expected. In Jerusalem, Jesus proved himself to be *more than* a Messiah-king. True, he entered Jerusalem ostensibly as the promised Messiah, symbolically cleansed and upset the Temple cultus in accordance with popular prophesy (Malachi 3), was charged with blasphemy by the Sanhedrin (14:61), and allowed himself (14:36) to be crucified as King of the Jews (14:61; 15:2, 26, 32). These events sure looked like Jesus, whoever he was, was not sent by God after all (15:34). The only reasonable conclusion was that Jesus of Nazareth was not the Son of David; hence also not the Messiah-king of Israel. But for Mark at least, this reasonable conclusion is not correct. For Mark, Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the King of Israel, but he was also more than that. For Mark, Jesus was nothing less than the Son of God, for God himself had declared it (1:11 and 9:7, these two times only). And now, upon the death of Jesus, a Roman soldier also declared it (15:39). Mark says that, upon the death of Jesus, "the curtain of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom" (15.38). This was the immediate effect of Jesus' death, and then came the centurion's quasi-confession. If we recall that the curtain or veil of the Temple separated God's actual presence on earth from sinful humanity, then we can appreciate the meaning of its being torn apart (much like the tearing apart of the heavens at Jesus' baptism). Furthermore, Mark is careful to recount that the Temple would soon be destroyed and rebuilt in three days (13:1-2; 15:29), referring of course to Jesus' resurrection which confirmed that Jesus is who God says he is.

Mark is saying that in Jesus' death, God himself atoned for the sins of all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, once and for all. This shows Jesus to be God's beloved Son. And the benefit to those who believe in him as *the Son of God* is the forgiveness of sins and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. For Mark, it is not enough to say that Jesus is Israel's Messiah-king, true as that is. Because only God can forgive sins (see 2:7) and pour out the Holy Spirit (1:11), and because these things are more important than any worldly kingdom, it is truer to say that Jesus is God's Son (confirmed by his resurrection from the dead) than that he is Israel's Messiah-king.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Trusting in God's Mercy***

In a sentence: By trusting in Jesus as the Son of God, our sins are forgiven and we receive the Holy Spirit.

Neither Bartimaeus nor anyone else in Mark's Gospel is privy to Jesus' Sonship except God and Jesus. Only his death and confirming resurrection open up that "secret" and its benefits to the public. Neither Bartimaeus' plea for "mercy" nor his "faith" in Jesus as the Son of David was sufficient for the forgiveness of sins. Only upon Jesus' death and its atoning effects does the centurion, a Gentile, exclaim, "Truly, this man was God's Son" (15:39). Cutting through all the literary-historical exegesis, it all boils down to this: Only God can forgive sins. Jesus' death on the cross is God's unrepeatable act of atonement. Therefore: Jesus is God's Son, confirmed and vindicated by his resurrection, through whom alone the forgiveness of sins (that is, true mercy) is obtained. Consequently, faith in Jesus as the Son of God is necessary for the forgiveness of sin and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. From Mark's point of view, this re-forming of the heart is the message, the gospel (1:1, 15), which Jesus brings.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : Following Jesus on the Way**

In a sentence: By trusting in Jesus as the Son of God, we are empowered to follow Jesus all the way to Jerusalem . . . to the cross . . . and to wherever else the Holy Spirit sends us.

Bartimaeus followed Jesus “on the way (to Jerusalem).” How far he went we do not know. But if he followed Jesus all the way to the cross, and believed in him as the Son of God, then and only then did he receive the full measure of “mercy” that he had originally, though half-heartedly, sought. We, unlike blind Bartimaeus, have received at Baptism the forgiveness of sin and the Holy Spirit. This fully prepares us to follow Jesus “on the way” to Jerusalem (the way of faith), to proclaim the gospel of forgiveness, to cleanse the Temple (re-form the Church), and to suffer loss of an easy life, even to die, on behalf of others. May we all have the heart to do so!

*Author's Notes: Readers may be surprised that Jesus as Messiah-king is here being opposed to Jesus as Son of God. In the other three Gospels, Jesus' messiahship is not incompatible with his cross, and we have long since appropriated that schema in our theology. But Mark apparently did not see it that way. For him, all royal titles, while true, are insufficient to account for Jesus' atoning crucifixion. He thus proposes “Son of God” instead and finds warrant in the scriptures to support it. We might wish that Mark was more specific about what he means by Son of God, or about Jesus' atoning death, but he wasn't. I am persuaded that Mark's Gospel was written by a Gentile for Gentiles shortly after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., and that his Gospel, the first of its kind, reflects a Spirit-filled Christianity not unlike that presupposed by Paul in Romans 1:1-5, yet theologized more like the letter to the Hebrews. Mark's purpose was singular, presupposing the atoning death of Jesus, but to show how it is that Jesus is the Son of God, so as*

*to make his appeal to Gentiles on that basis. I also take it that Mark's Gospel is truncated at both ends, and that the missing ending would likely have answered many outstanding questions about the resurrection and the apostles' faith in Jesus as the Son of God. My analysis is indebted to Jack Dean Kingsbury's *The Christology of Mark* (Fortress Press, 1983) and to N. Clayton Croy's *The Mutilation of Mark's Gospel* (Abington Press, 2003); only 'tis a pity that Croy did not consider Kingsbury's book in his own. In my judgment (please, make your own), it is a grave mistake to think that Mark's Gospel could intentionally have ended at 16:8 (16:9-20 being early redactions to smooth out the ending). Given this judgment, it is also possible, even likely, that due to Mark's truncated beginning and ending, Matthew and Luke came to be written at all. For that we may all return thanks to God.*