

## **WEEK 10**

### **CHOICES– JAMES, JOHN & BARTIMAEUS**

#### **BEFORE THE TALK**

*Welcome the course participants and suggest they take 20 minutes to work through the Study Guide section called **GROUP DISCUSSION 1** with their group.*

#### **THE TALK**

*Deliver the talk. The wording below is intended only as a general guide. The aim of the talk is to help participants wrestle with what it means to repent and believe. There is another opportunity to become a Christian after the talk and discussion.*

“We are the choices that we have made.” Last week we looked at the choices King Herod made. Tonight I’d like us to look at the choices made by some other people in Mark’s Gospel. Let’s turn to Mark chapter 10, and read verses 32–52.

*Read aloud Mark 10:32–52.*

Did you see the choices people made in that passage? Let’s look more closely at the choices James and John make, and the choice that Bartimaeus makes.

The context is there in verses 32–34. Jesus is leading the disciples and some others up to Jerusalem, and we read that they were astonished and frightened by Jesus’ actions. Why? Remember that Jesus has already told them several times that the religious authorities will kill him. And these religious authorities are based in Jerusalem. So Jesus is marching deliberately into the jaws of death.

Look at the end of verse 33 – he says it again: he tells them that he will be condemned to death by the religious authorities and handed over to the Gentiles – in other words, the Roman authorities. They will mock him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. He will be condemned in the capital city Jerusalem by the nation’s leaders.

Against that backdrop, two of his disciples – James and John – make a request that is breathtakingly inappropriate.

*You will need to have the following headings ready for display, gradually revealing each of the headings as the talk progresses.*

The disciples’ choice  
Bartimaeus’ choice

## THE DISCIPLES' CHOICE

Look at verses 35–37.

*Read aloud Mark 10:35–37.*

You see, although James and John have addressed Jesus as “teacher,” it’s obvious they haven’t understood much of what he has taught, because they choose to ask Jesus for glory: “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.”

Now, as perverse as this seems after what Jesus has just said about dying, we shouldn’t be surprised. It’s not the first time the disciples have behaved like this. Towards the end of chapter 9, Jesus tells them that he will be betrayed and killed. And what’s their response? Do they go into mourning, weeping that their beloved leader is going to be killed? No, they start arguing with each other about which one of them is the greatest!

Jesus response then is the same as in the passage we’ve just read. He teaches them.

Jesus knows that James and John are missing the point when they ask to be seated on thrones on either side of him. He takes them to task: “You don’t know what you are asking.” And he tries to correct their thinking. In verse 38 he says, “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?”

In the Old Testament, “the cup” generally referred to suffering. It also referred to the cup of God’s wrath. The baptism language has the same meaning. So what Jesus is saying to James and John is: “Can you do what I will do? Can you bear the punishment that sin deserves? Can you bear God’s judgement, and save others by doing so?” And the answer, of course, is that they can’t. Like you and me, they need to be saved themselves from God’s anger and judgement. As Jesus said, they don’t know what they’re asking.

Unfortunately, because James and John want glory, they don’t see that Jesus’ death is necessary. They anticipate that when Jesus’ kingdom is established, there will be an unholy scramble for the best seats, so they judge it prudent to get in first by making an advance reservation. They want to be singled out. They are go-getters and status-seekers, they’re very ambitious, hungry for fame and fortune. Suffering and death don’t figure in their thinking.

Many people want the best job, the best car, the best house, and these two followers of Jesus are no different.

And perhaps it’s not surprising, when we remember the sort of background James and John had. We know that their father Zebedee had a household of servants because they are referred to in connection with their fishing business. And it may be that in following Jesus, James and John have missed having servants to wait on them. Maybe they were willing to leave their home and family and the fishing business and the servants, as long as they could be compensated with a little power and prestige.

And if we look at what's going on around us, I think we can see this lust for power almost everywhere. We see it in politics and in public life; we see it in big business and industry; we see it in the medical profession, the legal profession, in sports and in the arts. Sadly, we can also see it in the church. It's easy to turn the pulpit into a throne of authority and power.

When the other disciples hear about the request of James and John, we read that they became indignant. I wonder if they were indignant at the stupidity of James and John, or just annoyed that they hadn't got in there first?

But Jesus calls us along a different path. Look again at verse 42 and following.

*Read aloud Mark 10:42–45.*

Those who are regarded as rulers in the pagan world boss people around, and their high officials exercise authority, but Jesus says: “not so with you.” Four words I think we should underline in our Bibles: “not so with you.”

James and John – like all of Christ's followers since – are not to embark on some kind of power trip, seeking prestige and status. Instead, they should follow the example their King sets. Look again at verse 45: “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.”

You see, Jesus uses his power *to serve*. That's the big contrast between James and John and Jesus. The last thing on the minds of James and John when they make their request of Jesus is *service*. They want nothing more than *to be served*, and what's worse, to be served by the very man who will save their lives.

By contrast, Jesus goes the way of the cross. He doesn't seek his own glory, but instead, in his concern for others, he walks deliberately towards pain and humiliation. He only wants to serve. As he heads deliberately toward Jerusalem, he chooses a cross, not a throne, a crown of thorns instead of a crown of gold. Jesus turns things upside down: “... whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.”

The disciples have yet to grasp the truth that Jesus knows very well as he heads toward Jerusalem: that the only way to be great in God's kingdom is to humble oneself. To serve rather than to be served. And if that is true for Jesus – a man with God's authority and God's power – it will certainly be true for us.

So we've seen that the disciples chose to ask for glory. But the blind man Bartimaeus chooses to ask for something very different.

## BARTIMAEUS' CHOICE

Bartimaeus is different from the disciples in many ways. In verse 47, he recognizes that Jesus is the “Son of David” – in other words, that he is God’s King in God’s world. In verse 51, rather than addressing Jesus as “teacher” like the disciples, Bartimaeus uses a word that means “Master” in the original language. So Bartimaeus says, “Master, I want to see.” Ironically, even though they’re not physically blind, that’s exactly the request James and John should have made, because they’re the ones who can’t see what it means to follow Jesus. Also notice that while the disciples wanted Jesus to do whatever they asked, Bartimaeus asks for mercy. In other words, he recognizes that he deserves nothing from Jesus. He cries, “have mercy on me!”

Do you see how different he is to James and John? Bartimaeus’ cry is not for power and status, but for mercy. And even when people tell him to be quiet, he keeps on asking. This blind man has seen who Jesus really is and what it means to follow him. In contrast, the disciples are blind.

So Jesus welcomes him and calls him and asks him the same question that he asked the disciples: “What do you want me to do for you?” And notice that while the disciples are rebuked by Jesus, Bartimaeus is healed: ““Go,” said Jesus, ‘your faith has healed you.’” And literally that phrase means, “Your faith has saved you.”

So, whereas James and John ask for status and receive a sharp rebuke, with Jesus insisting, “You don’t know what you are asking,” Bartimaeus asks for mercy and is saved.

How, then, should we respond to Jesus?

If you are someone who has put your trust in him already for your forgiveness, then you may need to learn the lesson that James and John learned: following Jesus is about service, not status.

But if you are someone who has not yet put your trust in Jesus for your forgiveness, then you need to do as Bartimaeus did: recognize who Jesus is, cry out to him for mercy, and follow him.

## AT THE END OF THE TALK

Let me leave you with the following questions for your groups:

*Display the following questions and read them aloud.*

- Who do you identify with most: James and John or Bartimaeus?
- What choices will *you* make based on what you’ve learned during *Christianity Explored*?

*Allow 30 minutes for groups to work together through the Study Guide section called GROUP DISCUSSION 2.*

## AT THE END OF THE DISCUSSION

As we finish the course, what choices do *you* need to make as a result of what you've learned during *Christianity Explored*? Some of you may still have questions, but some of you may have understood who Jesus is, why he came, and what it means to follow him. If that's you, then here is a prayer you can pray to begin your life following Jesus. It's the same prayer I read out in Week 7, and remember that there is also a copy of the prayer in your *Study Guide*, so you can take it home and think it through in private, if you'd prefer.

I'll read the prayer aloud once, so that you know exactly what I'll be praying. Then, if you decide it's a prayer *you* want to pray, you can echo the words silently to yourself when I read it a second time.

Here's the prayer:

Heavenly Father, I have rebelled against you. I have sinned in my thoughts, my words and my actions – sometimes unconsciously, sometimes deliberately. I am sorry for the way I have lived and ask you to forgive me. Thank you that Jesus died on the cross so that I could be forgiven. Thank you that I can now see clearly who Jesus is and why he came. Please send your Holy Spirit to help me follow him whatever the cost. Amen.

*Read the prayer again. Read slowly, giving participants time to echo it silently for themselves.*

If you did pray that prayer, do let one of your leaders know so that they can help you as you start the Christian life.

I want to thank all of you for making time to come, and for contributing so much to the group. It's been a privilege to meet you. Please use the FEEDBACK FORM to let us know how you found the last ten weeks.

*As this is the end of the course, expand upon the choices now available to participants (e.g., follow-up courses, discipleship courses, or future **Christianity Explored** courses). Having just read through one book of the Bible, you might want to suggest that they pick one of the remaining 65 and work through that!*