

Matthew 20:29-34

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[0 : 0 0] As we've been making our way through the book of Judges before Christmas, and then we had a wee break and we've picked it up again just two or three weeks ago, one message that repeats itself time and time again is that the flawed deliverers presented to us in the book of Judges, even this morning we met another very flawed deliverer, Samson. Samson and all who had gone before him, or all who go before him, served to highlight the pressing need for a flawless deliverer. And in doing so, they point forward in the direction of the only one who meets that description, a flawless deliverer, an unerring judge. And they point, of course, in the direction of Jesus, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. So, the judges do their job pointing us to Jesus.

But having done their job, the ball is now in our court. We've been pointed to Jesus. What we need to do is to go in the direction of the one that they point to. And how can we do that? Where do we go to meet this Jesus that the judges all point forward to? Well, we can meet Him in the pages of the Gospels.

And this evening we want to turn to one incident, one occasion that is recorded for us, the verses that we've read in Matthew chapter 20, the healing of two blind men on the outskirts of Jericho.

Now, let's just take a step back for a moment before we turn to the verses that we've read and spend some time thinking about them. And the reason we take a step back is simply to pose a question as follows. What are we to make of the miracles of Jesus? Not just this miracle, but each and every one of them. What are we to make of the miracles? And in posing that question, I'm not asking the question if we are to believe that they really happened. I'm taking that as a given. I'm working on the assumption that we accept that what is recorded here concerning the miracles did actually happen, that these are historical events that took place and that are faithfully recorded for us.

Now, no doubt there could be merit in delving into that and considering the evidence for that, but that is not for this evening. My question isn't in terms of do we believe that they really happened. Rather, my question concerns their purpose. What is the purpose of the miracles and what can we learn from them? And in this matter of having a handle, an idea of what their purpose is, there is one fundamental statement of John in his gospel that can help us. And we're just going to turn to what John says that applies really to all the miracles of Jesus in the second chapter, in John chapter 2 and verse 11.

[3 : 5 1] As I said, we're taking a step back from the actual miracle that we're going to think about in a moment to get a feel for the purpose of miracles in the first place. And with that in mind, hopefully more profitably, turn to the miracle in question. So, what does John say there in his gospel in chapter 2 and in verse 11? And we know the context. It's Jesus having performed his first miracle. And there is this very helpful explanation given in verse 11. This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory and his disciples put their faith in him.

Notice how John here speaks of the miracles as signs. They are signs that point in a given direction, that give us an insight into the one who is performing the miracles. The direction in which the miracles point principally, of course, is in the direction of Jesus. And they tell us something about who he is and about his mission. John very particularly works on that in his gospel as he, in a very careful way, introduces accounts of miracles that very clearly are intended to go beyond simply a historic record of what happened to giving us an idea of why it happened and what this miracle tells us about Jesus. Now, John does that very carefully. But in all the gospels where there is a miracle recorded, what John says here is true. It is a sign pointing to Jesus, giving us an insight into who he is and what his mission was. The language here used by John is that he thus revealed his glory. Jesus revealed something of who he was, something of who he was, something of his mission in performing or by performing the miracle. But John notices or makes clear that another purpose is served. It's not only that the miracle reveals truth concerning who Jesus is and what his mission is, they also serve to provoke and enable a response. Because what does John say there at the end of the verse? And his disciples put their faith in him. And it's very clear that John identifies here a cause and effect. They saw the miracle, the miracle revealed to them truth concerning Jesus, and that enabled them, that provoked them, being able to respond in this way, putting their trust in him. So, with that in mind, as the purpose of the miracles, let's turn to the miracle that we want to think about this evening in Matthew chapter 20.

They say that you can learn a lot about somebody by observing what they do. And sometimes people say that and contrasting it perhaps with what you can learn about somebody from what they say. You know, we can be deceptive. We can paint a picture about ourselves with our words that doesn't actually reflect the reality, but it's much more difficult to do that with our actions. Our actions, as the saying goes, speak louder than words. I'm not saying in the case of Jesus that is true. There isn't that contradiction. But it's certainly true that the actions that we see tell us a great deal about the one who is conducting or performing those actions. So, let's see what Jesus does and also see what the blind men do. These are the two characters, if you wish, that we want to think about. We want to think about Jesus to see what Jesus does and, in the light of what he does, draw out conclusions about who he is and what he's like. But then we'll turn to the blind men and see what they do. And as we see what they do, that will also enable us to learn something about them. And not only learn about them, but learn from them as we see how they respond to Jesus and how that can be an encouragement and a challenge to us to respond likewise. Now, the way we're going to do this is by making use of the verbs in these five verses. I'm a simple fellow, and I still remember when I was in primary school, verbs being defined as doing words. Now, I'm not sure if that's a very technical definition. I'm sure there's a much more intellectual definition, but it works for me. Verbs are doing words. And so, what we want to do is to find the verbs that speak of Jesus doing what Jesus does, and then we'll turn to the blind men and look at the verbs that speak about what they do, and from there draw out what we can draw from that. So, we'll start with Jesus. And what verbs do we find in these verses that describe what Jesus is doing? Well, it's not a difficult task to just glance through the verses and find the verbs and question as Jesus and the disciples were leaving Jericho. Well, there's the first one.

They were leaving Jericho. I should say that we won't touch on every single verb, but certainly most of them. But leaving is the first one. The next one that we find in relation to Jesus, skipping by the reference there to Him going by, is, well, let's see if I can find it. You've got it in your little sheet there. I haven't got that little sheet in front of me. Leaving, stopped. He stopped and called them. He asked them. He had compassion on them. And note that in the Greek, that is a verb, and we'll come to that in a moment. And then finally, we read of how He touched their eyes. So, these are the verbs, and let's just think about each one and what it tells us, what it teaches us about Jesus.

First of all, leaving. Now, that doesn't seem a very promising one with which to start. What can we learn from this incidental detail that Jesus and His disciples were leaving Jericho? How relevant is it?

[10 : 45] It's true. It places what happened in a historical context, and that's good, makes it real, but does it really tell us anything useful? Well, I think it does. And the key in thinking about this verb that speaks of Jesus leaving Jericho is not to ask where He and His disciples were leaving or departing from, but where they were heading to. This, as we can discover as we read on into the following chapter, was their final journey to Jerusalem, very particularly Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem.

Jesus is leaving Jericho because He has fixed His eyes on Jerusalem and what awaits Him there. And when we realize that, we could say that in some regards this makes this verb seemingly the most incidental, the most significant. Here we are presented with Jesus as the one who did not flinch in the face of His upcoming death. He leaves Jericho and He heads for Jerusalem. And having that in mind also, as we move on to see what He does, I think that context enriches our appreciation of the very miracle He performs and what it says about Him and His character and His compassion. So, the first verb then, they were leaving Jericho. But then, if we're thinking about verbs that speak of Jesus, we need to jump forward somewhat to what we read there in verse 32. We'll backtrack when we turn to the blind men and see what is said about them. But as we follow through on the verbs that speak of what Jesus does, we have verse 32. Jesus stopped and called them. Now, we've read the passage, so we know why He did that. They had shouted out, seeking His attention, and we're told this is how He responds.

Jesus stopped and called them. And then, in particular, this verb, that Jesus stopped. Again, we might say, well, it's simply describing what He did. If He was going to heal them, if He was going to have any kind of even conversation with them, well, of course, He'd have to stop, wouldn't He?

And they're sitting by the roadside. It's obvious. He had to stop. And yet, there is a certain drama in this description. He stopped. Here He is. He's surrounded by crowds. They're heading to Jerusalem. There's a festive atmosphere because these crowds that we're told were following Him, it may well be that they weren't following Him in the sense of being focused entirely on Jesus.

They were part of this great crowd heading to Jerusalem for the festivities. Chapter 21 follows. We had the triumphal entry, and so the crowds were gathering. So, this great crowd, it's set on Jerusalem. And yet, in the midst of all of that, Jesus, on hearing the cries of these two blind men, He stops. He stops deliberately. He stops consciously. There is something more important for Him to do than continue His journey. We might say, what could be more important than continuing on His date with divine destiny? Well, what was more important at this moment was for Jesus to love these two blind men. He was heading to Jerusalem to die for them, and He could stop on the outskirts of Jericho to heal them. Of course, the crowd don't get it. They don't understand His priorities.

[14 : 56] The crowd seemed to already have some sense of the messianic identity of Jesus, some conception as to His identity. Maybe not a very clear one, but in some measure. We know what follows in chapter 21, when the crowd, no doubt many of the very same people who are following Him out of Jericho, we know how they address Him, how they cry out, Hosanna to the Son of David. So, there already is some conception as to who He is, and their notion is that anyone who is a Messiah figure must have better things to do with their time than trifle it away with blind beggars. Now, we call them blind beggars, though in Matthew's account there isn't any explicit reference to their begging. But in the parallel account, certainly in Mark's gospel, where one of them is named, indeed in Mark's gospel, only one is mentioned.

We'll come back to that. But there, it does mention very explicitly that they, or in Mark's case, his record, he, Bartimaeus, was begging. And the crowd say, well, what a waste of time for somebody of the importance of Jesus, somebody with the significance that He has, that He would waste His time, that He would trifle it away with these worthless, blind beggars. But what does this tell us about Jesus, that Jesus stopped, that Jesus stopped? What does it tell us? Well, it tells us about His priorities. It tells us about the value that He assigns to every human life, each and every one of us here this evening. But of course, beyond those of us here this morning, every man, woman, and child, however seemingly worthless, however broken, however flawed, Jesus stopped for these blind men. But Jesus doesn't only stop.

We're told that He stopped and called them. And His call is in the form of a question, which takes us to our next verb. Verse 32, Jesus stopped and called them, what do you want me to do for you? He asked.

He asks a question. That's the content of His call, a question. What do you want me to do for you? What do we make of that question that Jesus poses to the two blind men? At one level, it might seem a little odd. What do you want me to do for you? Would it not be obvious to everybody what the blind men wanted? Is it not a superfluous question to ask? And if not everybody was clear as to what they wanted, some might have had different ideas. Some might have considered that all they wanted were a few coins.

That's normally what they were looking for when they cried out for mercy to others who passed by. And so maybe there were different notions as to what they wanted. Not that the crowd were spending much time thinking about what they did or did not want. But certainly for Jesus, there could be no doubt as to what they wanted. And hence, we say, is it not a little odd that He would even pose a question that He evidently knows the answer to? But of course, the question is not about Jesus procuring information that He did not have. The question's purpose is to encourage the blind men to consider and to clearly state what their greatest need is. The question is to help them think about this big question. What is it that you want? You're crying out to me. You're crying out for mercy, but what do you actually want? Have you thought about that? What is it that you want? And so the question is to help them think about that. What do we want? What is our greatest need? Jesus wanted them to very clearly and explicitly identify and declare what their great need is. The blind men could, as we've just suggested, could have used this language of asking for mercy. No doubt they had used it often before.

[19 : 36] It's the language they would, I imagine, have used when they were simply looking for a small coin to buy a piece of bread. Have mercy on me. I'm blind. I'm poor. I don't have anybody to help me. Have mercy on me.

And they could have said that, of course, to any passerby in the hope for some crumb of comfort or of help. Is that what they need from Jesus? Somebody who can give them a piece of bread that would stave their hunger for the day? Is that what they're looking for? Is that their need? Is that their big problem that they don't have enough money to satisfy their basic needs? Their poverty, and they are poor, is a symptom of a deeper problem of their blindness. The blind men need to know that what they really need and what they should really want is what they go on to declare, having been encouraged to give thought to it by Jesus. What they need is their sight. And of course, the question achieves the desired result because they answered. We're going to come to that when we're thinking about them specifically, but we can note it just now also. Lord, they answered, we want our sight. Well, what does this tell us about

Jesus, this question that he asks of the blind men? Well, I think it tells us about Jesus' concern for our deepest needs and his encouragement and challenge to us to consider and discover what our greatest needs are. What about you here this evening? What do you want from Jesus? If Jesus were to pose that question to you, what do you want? How would you answer that question? He does pose you that question through his word. Well, what's your answer? In your own mind, just for a moment, pause and think about that. What do you answer to Jesus when he comes to you and he says, what do you want? What do you want? You're here? You're gathered to worship God? You're gathered to think about God's word. What do you want? What do you want? Jesus wants you to think about that and to come to an understanding of what your greatest need is. But the question also implicitly, it not only tells us about Jesus' concerns, for us to give thought to this great matter, but the question also, what do you want? It also tells us about the power and authority of Jesus. And I say that because in posing the question, there is the implicit declaration that Jesus can grant the blind men what they want.

Can you imagine Jesus responding? You know, he's addressed them and he said, what do you want? And they respond, as we've noticed, we want our sight. Can you imagine Jesus saying, ah, your sight, sorry, you know, that's beyond me. Yes, I've asked you what you want, but your sight, no, that's too much.

I'm not able to grant you that. Of course, it's ridiculous. Him posing the question, what do you want, implies? It implies his power and his authority to grant the request that they subsequently verbalize.

[23 : 13] We want our sight. And of course, what does that tell us about Jesus? Well, it reminds us that Jesus has the power and the authority to respond to our deepest and greatest needs, whatever that might be for you. Be assured that Jesus has the power. When he comes to you and he asks, what do you want?

He's asking that question because he has the power to respond to that which you would ask of him as you're enabled to identify what your greatest need is. He has divine power and divine authority.

Here again, when we think about the judges that we've been presented to over these past weeks, the contrast is striking. One of the things we've noticed about the judges is that they deal with consequences, but they can't deal with the cause, the root problems. They can alleviate in some measure the consequences, but the cause is left undealt with, so different to Jesus. Jesus deals not with the consequences, their poverty, their misery. He deals with the cause, which is their blindness.

What else do we read of Jesus? Well, we're told also there in verse 34, Jesus had compassion. He had compassion on them. I mentioned just in passing as we were going through looking for the verbs, that this is a verb. It's not translated as a verb because English doesn't allow us to create a verb out of the noun compassion, but in the original this is a verb, and it's revealing that it is a verb because for Jesus, compassion isn't something you just feel. Compassion isn't just an emotion.

We often use the word in that sense. You know, when we think of that description of Jesus having compassion on them, and we think of ourselves, we could maybe imagine ourselves in that situation, and we're presented face to face with two blind beggars, and there might well be a response, an emotional response from us of compassion. As we see their need, as we see their misery, as we see their poverty, we might feel compassion. We might feel pity towards them, but we could quite easily, having experienced that emotion, then walked on. Maybe feeling a little guilty about it, who knows, but walk on and do nothing. And so for us, there is that capacity. It's nothing to be proud of, but that capacity of feeling something and yet doing nothing. Well, that's inconceivable for Jesus.

[26 : 09] Indeed, the very word He uses, or the word that is used to describe Him is a word that requires action. Compassion is action. He had compassion, but that compassion necessarily implies and results in action on behalf of those who are suffering. So, it's possibly significant that the verb here is only used in the New Testament of or by Jesus, suggesting, and I don't think we could say more than that, but suggesting that what we are being told is that the compassion shown by Jesus goes beyond merely human compassion, commendable, though that would be, to divine compassion, reflecting the very heart of God for the suffering. It is this very compassion that explains why Jesus is on this dusty road from Jericho to Jerusalem at all. It is that very compassion that is taking Him and guiding Him to the cross to die for suffering as sinners. Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. His compassions never fail. He has moved to compassion, compassionate action by your pain and your suffering. Be assured that as you cry out to Him for help, He will not be indifferent. Jesus doesn't do indifference. He does compassion. The final verb that speaks of what Jesus does. Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. What can Jesus do for these poor men? Well, He can give them their sight. His touch is a touch not only of compassion, but of authority and power. It's not only a healing touch, but a creative touch, restoring and recreating all that was amiss or destroyed in the organ of sight of these blind men.

We don't know the exact nature of their condition, but whatever it was, there is this powerful healing, recreating touch from Jesus. And that remains true of Jesus. His touch remains a touch of compassion, power and authority. There is in the language here used of Him touching their eyes. An additional detail that is intriguing that we wouldn't immediately draw from reading the verse there, verse 34. And the intriguing detail is that the word used for eyes, the word translated eyes, is not the usual word that would be used to speak of eyes. But rather, those who know about these things assured us it was more a poetic word that meant eyes, but would be used more ordinarily in the context of poetry or in the context of an expression like, for example, the eyes of your soul. Now, we'd have to be careful about not drawing too much from that, but it's possible that Matthew uses this word deliberately to suggest suggest that Jesus, in addition to dealing with their physical blindness, which assuredly He does, this is what we're told, they were blind, they were healed, they could see. There may be a suggestion that beyond that physical blindness, there is also a concern, not only a concern, but action on the part of

Jesus to deal with their spiritual blindness. And in a moment when we look at what the blind men do, we might find reason to have that confirmed. Well, let's much more briefly move on to notice the blind men. What do they do? Well, what verb do we find? Well, the first one that we find, again, doesn't seem very promising. In verse 30, the blind men were sitting by the roadside. What does that tell us about them?

Well, it speaks certainly of their helplessness. They were sitting and they were begging. Again, that isn't stated in Matthew's gospel, but in Mark's gospel it is. That's all they could do. All they could do was sit and beg. While others could follow Jesus, while others could join in the festive throng making its way to Jerusalem, all that they could do was sit and beg. Their condition was of a nature that they could do nothing to seek, much less secure a solution to their problem. And so they sit. That's all they can do.

They can sit. I wonder if that in any way echoes with you. Or can you sympathize with that? I'm not talking about their actual condition of physical blindness, but being in that helpless place where you can do nothing and all you can do is sit. There's nothing you can do in the face of whatever difficulty that is surrounding you and you're drowning it. Well, here are these men. They're sitting.

[31 : 29] That's all they can do. But then what else are we told about them? Well, we're told that they heard. When they heard that Jesus was going by and their hearing opens the door, albeit just a little ajar to a spark of hope. These men, we imagine, had heard about Jesus. This is the end of his public ministry. Three years have passed. And though here we're further south from where Jesus had concentrated his activities, nonetheless, the stories would have circulated about this man and about his powers and about his miracles. And no doubt these men had heard about Jesus. And now he's within touching distance of them. And so there's this spark of hope. Might Jesus be able to help them? They heard. They heard about Jesus. They heard something about him and there was the possibility that maybe he could help them.

I wonder, again, if that's something we can relate to. We've heard about Jesus. We've heard about what he can do to bring wholeness and forgiveness and new life. We've heard about it. Might it be true? Could it be true for me? What then? Well, we're told that they shouted. They shouted. When they heard that Jesus was going by, they shouted, Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us. They were rebuked by the crowd and were told that they shouted all the louder. What does the shouting tell us about the blind man? Well, it tells us a lot when we think about what they shout, but also about the manner in which they cry to Jesus. What about the content? And we have to do this very fleetingly. What does it tell us about their understanding of who Jesus was? Well, the call is there before us. Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us. To address Jesus as Lord probably doesn't carry great weight. It probably would simply be used, the word as a term of respect. But then when they address Him as the Son of David, there we have language that has undoubted messianic content. In some sense, these blind men recognize Jesus as a

Messiah figure. What their understanding of what that meant was is another matter altogether. But there's a measure of understanding and discernment. Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us. Have compassion on us.

Help us. This is what they shout. But as well as the content, of course, there is the manner. They do shout. This is their opportunity. Indeed, they shout all the louder when people try to shut them up.

This is an urgent cry of those who realize that this is their opportunity. Jesus is passing by. Indeed, we know that He would never pass by that place again. For these men, as far as they can possibly know, it's now or never. And so they shout. I wonder if that is a place where we are, perhaps where you are, even this evening. This is your opportunity to shout out and ask for the help that only Jesus can give. They shouted. But again, what follows? Well, the next verb that applies to them is in verse 33, Lord, they answered. Jesus, as we've already noticed a moment ago, poses this question, what do you want me to do for you? And then we read, Lord, they answered. We want our sight.

[35 : 19] We want our sight. The door of opportunity is no longer only a jar. It is wide open. And the blind men dive in. And with growing faith, I think we can detect that, with growing faith, they declare what they most want and what they most need. We want our sight. And how important it is for us to see that open door of opportunity and shout out, this is what I need. This is what I cannot provide and procure for myself. I want my sight. I need to be forgiven. I need to be restored.

I need to be made whole. Lord, they answered. We want our sight. But then there's a final verb that relates to the blind man. Jesus had compassion on them, touched their eyes, and then we read immediately, they received their sight and followed Him. Well, there's two verbs there. First of all, they received their sight. Now, what does this tell us? Well, in this, of course, they were completely passive. They received their sight. They don't do anything. They've shouted. But now that they've shouted, their healing, the restoration of their sight, is a matter in which they are entirely passive. And of course, that in itself is a lesson for us. Ultimately, we are wholly dependent on the Lord to do that, which we cannot do. In the matter of our spiritual need, we can shout for help. Indeed, we know that even that shout for help is of grace. But even as we shout for help, we must then passively receive that which only God can grant. God, have mercy on me, a sinner. And as we cry out, seeking that forgiveness,

He is the one who grants it to us. And all we do is receive gratefully that which only He can give. They receive, they receive. But they do not remain passive, having received. Because then comes the final verb. They received their sight and followed Him. And this final verb gives us, I think, reason and good cause to believe that these men did not only receive physical healing, but they were also granted a spiritual sight and understanding. You know, we can't declare that with absolute certainty. The word followed could, of course, could, of course, be used in different ways. The weight that we can give to it isn't something we can declare with complete certainty. But here, certainly, the impression given, the language used by Matthew is one that allows us to see this as a spiritual matter, that they follow Jesus, as disciples would follow Jesus. Here it's interesting maybe to compare with Mark's account.

Now, there are differences, differences that have caused people some difficulties in trying to reconcile the differences. And, of course, often there's no point really in trying to reconcile differences in parallel accounts. They're simply different accounts. And different authors have chosen to emphasize different points. But Mark only speaks of one man, and he gives him a name, Bartimaeus. But that in itself is interesting. It would suggest the fact that Mark focuses on one of the blind men, and the fact that he gives him a name would, as I say, suggest that possibly he was known to those who would read the gospel. And if that's the case, it would be reasonable to conclude that he may well have been part of the believing community. Now, again, we can't state that with complete certainty, but it doesn't seem an unreasonable conclusion to come to. Now, what does that mean?

Does it mean that one of them followed and continued and persevered and the other didn't? Well, that would be, I think, an unfair conclusion. Who's to say why one is mentioned and the other isn't? The point is they actively follow Jesus.

[39 : 27] When we think of ourselves, when we think of the opportunity that we have to cry out to Jesus for help, to seek from him what is our greatest need, to be forgiven and restored and welcomed into God's family, and we cry out, forgive me, restore me, cleanse me, as we receive the forgiveness and the cleansing and the new life that he is able and willing to grant. We receive passively in a sense, but having received, it is necessary, and indeed it is evidence of having received, that we then actively respond by following Jesus, dedicating our lives to Jesus and to his service, to sharing with others the good news that we have discovered in him as the one who has compassion on suffering sinners such as we are. And so we follow, and we continue to follow day by day throughout our lives as disciples and followers of this Jesus, of this Jesus who has compassion on us. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your Son. We thank you for Jesus. We thank you that as we meet Jesus, and as we discover what he is like, we discover what you are like, for he is the Word of God. He is the one who reveals to us what you are like. As Jesus himself said to his disciples, if you have seen me, you have seen the Father. And so we thank you that even this evening as we have turned to this occasion when Jesus granted healing to these two blind men. And as we've been confronted with Jesus in something of his wonder and his glory and his beauty, and so we see him and we see the one that he proceeds from. We see his Father. We see you, and we thank you for that. We thank you for that insight into who you are and what you are like. But also we recognize the challenge that is laid upon us with the blind men to respond to Jesus, to respond to his compassion and his help and his healing in our lives. Help us to be those who joyously and enthusiastically and perseveringly follow him.

And we pray this in his name. Amen. Amen.