

THE VALUE OF THE PHYSICALLY CHALLENGED,
THE NEGLECTED, THOSE WITHOUT CHRIST
(MARK 10:46-52)

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1. Introduction

From ancient to modern times, humans have displayed a tendency to view some people as more valuable than others. Using criteria ranging from appearance to heritage to education, we deem certain segments of the population to be insignificant and others to be important. While modern societies have learned to be more subtle, our attitudes, words, and actions continue to exhibit this tendency to categorize other human beings. Sadly, experience has shown that this prejudice extends also into the area of Christian missions, where the physically challenged are frequently ignored as a target group for evangelism or as potential workers for God.

At least part of the reason for this tendency is due to an aberrant “folk theology” that assumes that physical illness or hardship is an indication of divine judgment. In the Old Testament, God claims to be the One who gives both sight and blindness (Exod 4:11), and blindness is a penalty imposed by God for disobedience in Deut 28:28. But the scriptures never say that all blindness or other forms of physical infirmity are a punishment for sin.¹ At least one of the purposes of the Book of Job appears to be to counter this erroneous thinking. A number of New Testament passages reflect this popular theology as well, namely Luke 13:2 and John 9:2. Luke 13:2 reflects the assumption that the Galileans slain by Pilate were worse sinners than others “because they suffered in this way.” In John 9:2, the disciples inquire as to who is responsible for the man’s blindness from

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¹ The fact that the scriptures prohibit mistreatment for the blind and deaf (Lev 19:14) and command punishment for those who mislead the blind (Deut 27:18) suggests that there is no direct causal relationship between sin and sickness. The biblical admonitions to care for the afflicted stands in contrast to the sentiments expressed in the Middle Eastern proverb, “If you see a crippled man, kick him! Why should you be kinder than God?”

birth, the man himself or his parents. The question shows that the disciples, despite their association with Jesus, have fully embraced these “folk” beliefs. It never occurs to them that this infirmity could be caused by anything but the judgment of God for some sin.

The healing of blind Bartimaeus, recorded in Mark 10:46-52, has long been viewed as a pivotal passage emphasizing the need for spiritual perception and the need to follow Christ as his disciple. However, it is also a powerful drama reaffirming the value of the physically challenged, and demonstrating the power of Jesus Christ to transform society’s perception of certain individuals. The structure of this passage is one of the crucial means used by its author to highlight the value of all people. We will now turn to this topic before focusing on the passage.

2. Structure

Chiasm, the use of inverted parallelism, was a common feature in Semitic as well as ancient Greek and Latin literature. Its use was pervasive in antiquity in both oral and written form.² Its frequent use suggests that, “The use of chiasm infused the thought- and speech-patterns of the Semitic mind, and in this manner it found its way into the Old Testament and then into the New Testament.”³

Chiasm, alternately called chiasmus, involves inverted balancing of corresponding points. While identical terms may be paired, similar ideas are frequently used.⁴ Often the center serves as a conceptual turning point or hinge in the argument.⁵ More recently, intensification has been recognized as a common feature in chiasms. The second or corresponding point “intensifies, specifies, or completes in some essential respect the thought or feeling expressed in the first line.”⁶

² H. I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1956), p. 151 observes that, “in Roman times it was not enough to know the alphabet from alpha to omega. It had to be learned backwards, from omega to alpha and then both ways at once, alpha-omega, beta-psi, . . . mu-nu” (quoted in Augustine Stock, “Chiastic Awareness and Education in Antiquity,” *Biblical Theological Bulletin* 14:1 [1984], p. 24).

³ Ronald E. Man. “The Value of Chiasm for New Testament Interpretation,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141 (April-June 1984), pp. 146-57 (146).

⁴ Nils W. Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament: A Study in the Form and Function of Chiastic Structures* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1942, 1970), p. 32.

⁵ John Breck, *The Shape of Biblical Language* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1994), p. 33; Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament*, p. vii.

⁶ Breck, *The Shape of Biblical Language*, p. 23.

The role of chiasm in interpretation has largely been ignored until the twentieth century.⁷ It was traditionally seen as an ancient peculiarity of style that was irrelevant to understanding the author's intended meaning. The last half-century has produced an abundance of works showing its importance in determining meaning. A "quiet revolution" has occurred in literary research as scholars have explored the use of literary structure in determining more precisely the author's intended meaning.⁸ Ronald E. Man states three exegetical significances to such structures. First it gives emphasis, indicating points of stress with specific importance given to the center of the chiasm. Second, it helps communicate the point that the author is making. Third, it helps communicate the purpose of the book and its theme through its emphases and movements.⁹ The fruit of scholarly study has shown that chiasmic structures can be crucial in precisely determining what the author intended to communicate.¹⁰

3. Mark 10:46-52 in Mark's Gospel

This passage displays a rich web of interrelationships in this Gospel. First of all, this section forms an *inclusio* with Mark 8:22-26, which contains another account of a healing of a blind man.¹¹ These passages sandwich material that shows the disciples' stubborn blindness.¹² Physical blindness is designed to represent the spiritual blindness of people. Mark 8:22-26 builds on the discussion of 8:14-21 that has the principal theme of the disciples' blindness.¹³ Jesus shows that while the disciples have the ability to see physically, they lack spiritual insight.¹⁴ The accounts of 8:22-

⁷ Lund's *Chiasmus in the New Testament* (1942) signaled the start of a new era with attention to the significance of chiasms in interpretation.

⁸ Breck, *The Shape of Biblical Language*, p. 1.

⁹ Man, "The Value of Chiasm," pp. 148-53.

¹⁰ Man, "The Value of Chiasm," p. 154 states, "...exegetes dare not be content merely to admire the aesthetics of these structures. To the biblical authors, artistry in the use of structures was not an end in itself; it was a means toward more effective communication of their messages. In the case of chiasm, this is accomplished by underlining the central emphasis or clarifying correspondences in the text."

¹¹ Breck, *The Shape of Biblical Language*, p. 169 argues that the entire second Gospel is structured around concentric parallelism, indicating that Mark is a "highly sophisticated, rather than 'primitive' or 'naïve,' literary figure, and provides as well important insight into his theology" (cf. p. 143).

¹² Robert M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991), p. 144.

¹³ Ernest Best, *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), p. 134.

¹⁴ Timothy J. Geddert, *Watchwords: Mark 13 in Markan Eschatology*

26 and 10:46-52 fit into a broader theme in this Gospel that spiritual perception is needed.¹⁵ Humankind is called to see things as God sees them.

Similarities exist between these two pericopes that are the only two records of healing from blindness in this Gospel. Statements of Jesus' arrival at specific geographical locations introduce both. Second, the blind men are identified. Finally, both end with the healing of the blind men.¹⁶

Differences between the two accounts include the fact that in the first account, people bring the blind man to Jesus (8:22), while in the second account, the crowd is clearly hostile to Bartimaeus for fear that he bother Jesus in any way (10:48). There is no record of the response of the blind man in chapter 8 to Jesus' healing, while Bartimaeus' response of following after Jesus is noted in chapter 10.

In the area of form analysis, Mark 10:46-52 has been a much debated passage. While traditionally taken as a "miracle story," Steinhauser has forcefully argued that it is a "call story," modeled after the Old Testament calls to be an ambassador for God.¹⁷ Biblical examples of this form include Moses (Exod 3:1-12) and Gideon (Judge 6:11b-17). Several elements of a miracle story are absent from this account. There is no gesture or word by Jesus associated with the healing. The healing is described briefly and omits any reaction to it by the crowd. And finally, unlike many miracle stories, Jesus' powerful healing work is not in the center of the passage but tucked in near the end.¹⁸

The healing of Bartimaeus likewise contains similarities to the account of the children being brought to Jesus in 10:13-16. In that passage, Jesus affirms not only the necessity for all people to demonstrate childlike-openness in order to enter the kingdom of God (10:15), but also declares the value that children have before God (10:14). In both passages, people are opposed to bothering Jesus with the concerns of people from these groups (10:13; 10:48).¹⁹

(Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), p. 77.

¹⁵ Interested readers are directed to consult chapter 3, "A Markan Perspective on Discernment" in Geddert, *Watchwords*.

¹⁶ Joel Williams, *Other Followers of Jesus: Minor Characters as Major Figures in Mark's Gospel* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), p. 151.

¹⁷ Michael G. Steinhauser, "The Form of the Bartimaeus Narrative (Mk. 10.46-52)," *New Testament Studies* 32:4 (October 1986), pp. 583-95 (584).

¹⁸ P. J. Achtemeier, "And He Followed Him': Miracles and Discipleship in Mark 10.46-52," *Semeia* 11 (1978), pp. 115-45 (121) notes the limited attention shown to the miracle of healing in this account, "A healing is present in the story, but in such abbreviated form that it appears to have been subordinated to some other intention." The fact that the healing act is not central is in contrast to the pattern in the accounts of the calming of the storm (4:37-41), the exorcism of the Gentile demoniac (5:1-20), and the healing of the deaf mute (7:32-37). In each of these pericopes, the chiasmic center is the miraculous moment (4:39a; 5:8; 7:34).

¹⁹ These passages reflect a peculiar focus that the traditional categories of form

4. Analysis

4.1 Chiastic Structure of Mark 10:46-52²⁰

- A *Blind Bartimaeus is sitting by the roadside* (46).
- B *He seeks healing from Jesus* (47).
- C *People rebuke him and encourage his silence* (48).
- D *Stopping, Jesus calls him* (49a).
- E *The people say, "Take heart, arise, he is calling you"* (49b).
- D' *Bartimaeus leaps up, he comes to Jesus* (50).
- C' *Jesus accepts him and encourages him to speak* (51).
- B' *Jesus assures him of healing* (52a).
- A' *Bartimaeus receives his sight and followed Jesus in the way* (52b).

4.2 The Healing of Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52)

The sequence is brief and clear. While Jesus is leaving Jericho, a blind man named Bartimaeus is seated at the side of the road (10:46). He calls out to Jesus begging for mercy (47). At this, the crowd rebukes him, commanding him to be quiet. He is not dissuaded, and intensifies his appeals (48). Jesus stops and calls him to himself (49a). The crowd picks up Jesus' call and they encourage Bartimaeus to take courage and go to him (49b). Casting aside his garments, the blind man comes to Jesus (50). After Jesus asks what he wants, Bartimaeus responds that he wants to be well (51). Jesus announces his healing, whereupon Bartimaeus follows Jesus on the road having received his sight (52).

The reader encounters a strong discipleship motif in the healing of Bartimaeus, built on the characterization, setting, and motifs established elsewhere. The reader is open to the potential virtues of minor characters since the author has built his account using them as the most consistent exemplars. These "models" of faith include Jairus (5:22-24, 35-43), the Syro-Phoenecian woman (5:25-34), in the earlier material, and the scribe (12:28-34), the widow (12:41-44), the woman who anoints Jesus (Mark 14:3-9), the centurion (15:39), and the women at the crucifixion (15:40-

criticism do not address. They may properly be described as a "redirection" form whereby one's traditional viewpoint is challenged and corrected. Much of the material in 8:31-10:52 reveals this type of focus. Alternately, they may be classified as a "value" form where divine values are communicated to mankind. "Value" accounts frequently use familial relationship terms to help express this sense of importance and belonging ("daughter" in Mark 5:34; "child, children" in 9:36, 37; "children" in 10:13, 14, 15; and "son" in 10:46, 47, 48).

²⁰ To reveal the development of ideas within a chiasmus, with corresponding points progressively contributing toward the central focus of meaning, the reader is encouraged to read the chiasm following the pattern suggested by Breck, *The Shape of Biblical Language*, pp. 57-58. The chart is modified from Breck, *The Shape of Biblical Language*, p. 155.

41), in the succeeding accounts. Significantly, as in the case of Jairus, Bartimaeus is named, a feature designed to make it easier for the audience to identify with him.²¹ As is true elsewhere, Bartimaeus as a minor character demonstrates persistence (2:3-4; 5:27; 7:27-28; 10:48) and expectant faith (2:5; 5:34, 36; 9:23-24; 10:52). However, he alone of all of the “little people” in Mark’s Gospel demonstrates the commitment to follow after Christ (10:52).

The geographical setting is likewise significant. The “way,” along with the expressions “going ahead” and “following,” becomes a functional setting in Mark’s Gospel associated with discipleship. This motif was introduced twice in the opening prophecy of the book (1:2-3). It represents moving toward the goal that God has set.²² This motif appears frequently on the journey to Jerusalem (8:27; 9:33; 10:32, 52) and is fine-tuned to describe one who follows Christ on the way to the cross. One who is “on the way” is a committed follower of Christ. In this pericope, Bartimaeus significantly moves from “sitting by the side of the way” (10:46) to “following” Jesus “on the way” (10:52).²³ The contrast is highlighted through placement at the extremes of the chiasm. The command to “go” in 10:52, while a common statement following Jesus’ healings (1:44; 2:11; 5:19, 34; 7:29) in this context implies that a new lifestyle, that of a follower of the Christ is now available to him.²⁴

This brief story actually contains three references to Bartimaeus’ posture. As was noted above, not only is he described as sitting by the side of the road initially (10:46) and moves to following Jesus in the way at the end (10:52), but his action of throwing aside his robe, jumping up, and coming to Jesus is recorded (10:50).²⁵ This also serves to underscore his responsiveness to the call to discipleship. He leaves behind his previous concerns and interests, as have other disciples (1:18, 20; 2:14).

Bartimaeus serves as a model of faith for the reader. It is as if the author is saying, “Do you want to know what a disciple should be like? Look at him!” The “miracle” for Bartimaeus is not primarily that he receives his sight, but that he is transformed into a disciple of Christ. However important the discipleship emphasis is to this passage and the Gospel of Mark as a whole, there is a second miracle that occurs which is

²¹ Williams, *The Other Followers of Jesus*, 153.

²² Mark Allen Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1990), p. 3; David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1982), pp. 64-65.

²³ The term “follow” in the Gospel of Mark consistently has metaphorical significance of allegiance to Jesus (1:18; 2:14; 8:34; 10:21, 28; 14:54; 15:41), Williams, *Other Followers of Jesus*, p. 161.

²⁴ Gundry, *Mark*, p. 595.

²⁵ Williams, *Other Followers of Jesus*, p. 152.

highlighted through the chiasmic structure. That miracle is the transformation of the crowd in their appraisal of Bartimaeus' worth.

As in the account of the children being brought to Jesus in 10:13-16, the crowd opposed those deemed unworthy and attempted to prevent them from bothering Jesus. In a "call" form, an objection is often voiced as in the words of Moses in Exod 3:11, 13; 4:1, 10, 13 and Gideon in Judges 6:15. In Mark 10, however, the audience expresses the objection. It is an "unprovoked rebuke," "a reprimand to silence" in light of their low opinion of the needs of a blind man.²⁶ Their concern for Bartimaeus is only awakened by Jesus' response in 10:49a. First of all, he stops to focus his attention, and then he speaks. However, Jesus' words are not directed to Bartimaeus; they target the hostile crowd with a command that serves as a reprimand and a correction: "Call him!"

The pericope presents a shocking chiasmic center in the encouraging words by the formerly hostile crowd directed to Bartimaeus (10:49b). Spurred on by Jesus' example, they have been transformed in their thinking. The triple repetition of the verb "call" in 10:49 underscores the crowd's yielding to Jesus' assessment.²⁷ Their words demonstrate that both their emotions and intellect have been changed. "Take courage" or "Cheer up" indicate that a compassion has blossomed in their hearts as they seek to encourage Bartimaeus. "On your feet! He is calling you" shows that they see the need and appropriateness of Jesus assisting him. Note that the change in the crowd's perception of the physically challenged man is not due to his healing. Rather, the transformation in their view of the man occurs because of Jesus' response to him. The correct assessment of the man's "wholeness" is not linked to his healing but to the value he already has before God.

Several themes are developed through Mark 10:46-52. First is the need for spiritual insight. The second is the need to respond to the call to discipleship in following the way of the cross. But third, it affirms the need to see God's assessment of the value of all people, both in coming to God and in following as a disciple of Christ.

5. Conclusion

Mark 10:45-52 presents a call to discipleship in following after Christ on the path of suffering. But beyond that, this pericope calls believers to be transformed in their views of others. The value of all people is a truth that we must embrace. We are not to "regard anyone from a worldly point of view" (2 Cor 5:17) with its prejudices and limitations.

²⁶ Steinhauser, "The Form of the Bartimaeus Narrative," p. 584.

²⁷ Robert A. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 594.

For much of my life I have enjoyed competitive running. It has been a source of great personal joy. Beyond that, as with Eric Liddell, I can say, "When I run, I feel his pleasure." Recently due to a medical condition, I faced the real possibility that I may have to give up running. As I pondered how giving up this pursuit would affect me, I realized how sad I would be. But as I was considering this scenario, I realized that I carried an attitude of condescension toward those who do not run. I realized that I viewed this nebulous group as lazy people. I admitted that such a blanket assessment was wrong and repented of the view. Whether one runs or not is not the measure of laziness or discipline. While there are many who can exercise, there are others that due to a physical infirmity are unable to do so. I had been looking down on them as well.

As I interact with a group of people who have expressed openness towards the gospel, do I gravitate to those without any obvious physical handicap? As a faculty member involved with a school committed to developing Christian leaders, are we seeking out capable potential students who are handicapped? Are we as a school making our program and our campus "user-friendly" for them?

The gospel is good news for all people. We must beware of failing to bring its message to others who may be physically challenged. We must beware of being less than enthusiastic in ministering to physically challenged people due to our unspoken and perhaps even unconscious prejudices. Instead, we should move ahead in developing programs, mission efforts, or organizations to target this needy group of society. And we dare not hold back from calling them to join the ranks of those who are disciples of Christ in full-time ministry. We must allow God to transform our hearts and to heal our thinking just as he transformed his audience before blind Bartimaeus.

A common response throughout much of the world is to turn away when one sees a handicapped person. Why? To some, it may be due to unpleasantness. The sight reminds them of the hardships of life and perhaps of the possibility that they too could be so afflicted one day. Others may turn away due to the deeply ingrained superstition that mere sight of such a person will bring bad luck. As believers, we are called to not only reject such ideas in ourselves but to also correct them in others. We must become active in pointing out this faulty attitude, attacking the belief systems that it is built upon, and confronting the errant behavior. While the handicapped may remind us of the difficulties of life and the potential for the undesirable to enter our lives as well, let us allow that realization to drive us to show concern for them. The handicapped do not bring bad luck. They are neither agents of evil nor people of limited worth. Instead, they are people of great value to be appreciated, to be encouraged to enter the kingdom of God, and to be enlisted to serve the king of kings.

The person of Jesus Christ not only brings transformational healing but also a transformation of our views of others including those who are

physically challenged. The call of Christ is to all people. The church of Jesus Christ is called to maintain a determined commitment to taking the gospel to the entire world. We are called to go to those who are physically challenged and beyond, to all those who are neglected, and to anyone who is without Christ. We must remain true to this calling and resist the tendency to limit our audience in any way.