

Outside the Church Looking In

Job 42:1-6; 101-7; Mark 10:46-52

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I've got a confession to make. This happened when I was on vacation a few years ago. It was actually a "staycation," so we were staying at home. It was Sunday morning, and I skipped church. That's not the worst part. I was working on a project at my house, and I needed something for my project from Home Depot. I had never been to Home Depot on a Sunday morning. I was thinking, "How will I ever explain my presence there if I run into someone I know?" I felt like the pastor who took a Sunday off, went golfing, and hit a hole-in-one. He couldn't tell anyone!

So I went to Home Depot, during the worship hour. There, I've got it off my chest! I slinked through the aisles until I found what I needed and then quickly checked out. When I got home, I told Kelly, "Honey, you won't believe this! There is a whole world of people out there who *don't* go to church on Sundays!" I admit my naiveté, but I was shocked! People were out jogging, biking, shopping. I'm here every Sunday! How did I know? We're here, on the inside. I was reminded that day of what I already knew, that there are a lot of people on the outside of our churches looking in at us. Do you ever wonder what they see when they look in? Do you ever wonder why they choose to stay on the outside? Why don't they come in and be a part of us or one of the other churches here in our community?

Thom Rainer is the President of LifeWay Christian Resources, formerly called the Baptist Sunday School Board in Nashville. Last year he did a study of why people choose to stay on the outside of the church. What he found is fascinating. He found that people on the outside are not necessarily turned off to the church. They don't hate sermons or Sunday School. It's not really the excuse we have always heard: "Well, there all just a bunch of hypocrites anyway!" That's not it.

Here are the top three reasons he found that people choose to stay on the outside of the church:

- Christians who treat other Christians poorly. Apparently they look in at us and wonder why we can't simply agree to disagree. Why do we have to attack each other? If there is a disagreement in the church, one group has to accuse the other of not really being Christians. They don't really believe the Bible. People on the outside see that and can't understand why we don't treat each other with greater dignity and respect.
- Holier-than-thou attitudes. It seems that those on the outside are really turned off when we act as if we are superior to them. Go figure!
- Christians talk more than they listen. Apparently we've memorized so many "gottcha formulas" that we fail to offer a sympathetic and compassionate ear. (*Surprising Insights from the Unchurched*)

It is wrong of us to assume that all those on the outside are just a bunch of sinners and unbelievers. They are sinners, but no more so than we are. They may or may not be believers. My suspicion is that many on the outside of our churches do believe in God, do believe in Christ, and do honor the Bible, but they still choose not to move inside the church. Instead, they go to Home Depot on Sunday morning, take family outings, or just use the time to recover. They choose to remain on the outside looking in, kind of like the blind man in our text named Bartimaeus. He was an outsider the day Jesus and his entourage passed on their way to Jerusalem. They were the insiders. They belonged to the movement. He didn't. But on that fateful day blind Bartimaeus move from the outside looking in to the inside. It's a great story, and it has a powerful message for our churches today.

They were leaving Jericho, Mark says. Jesus, his disciples, and a large crowd. They were making their way to the city of Jerusalem. In fact in the next chapter, Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, marking the beginning of the last week of his life. Mark says that as they left Jericho, a blind beggar called out for help. He was sitting beside the road, likely with a cloak spread in front of him. Passersby would drop coins onto the cloak. That was his income. On this day, though, the blind beggar didn't ask for coins. "Jesus, Son of David," he called, "have mercy on me!"

Now, I am troubled by the response of those who traveled with Jesus. Remember, they were the insiders. When they heard Bartimaeus call to Jesus, they chastised Bartimaeus, "sternly ordered him to be quiet," the text says. There is a bit of irony here. Bartimaeus was blind, right? But the

response of these followers of Jesus suggests that they too were blind—blind to the ways of Jesus.

I love what happened next. While they tried to hush Bartimaeus, Mark says that he cried out even louder: “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Persistent, wasn't he? It was a good thing, too. Jesus heard him the second time and called the blind beggar to come to him. Notice what happened. This little detail is important. The text says that Bartimaeus threw “off” his cloak. That could also be translated this way: he threw “aside” his cloak, that cloak spread before him onto which people dropped their coins. The cloak and the few coins he had collected that day likely were all he had. Mark says that he threw it aside and “sprang up and came to Jesus.” It is a picture of a man who left everything behind. It may not have been much, but it was all he had. Like the fishermen who left behind their nets, Bartimaeus threw aside everything and sprang up at the call of Jesus.

“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked him. Open ended. Bartimaeus could have asked for anything, right?

Not money. Not a few more coins to get him through the week. “My teacher,” he said, “let me see again.” Again. He must not have been born blind. At some point he did see, so he asked to see *again*.

I find it interesting that the miracle in this story happens so quickly. “Go,” Jesus said, “your faith has made you well.” Immediately his sight was restored, and Mark says that he followed Jesus “on the way” to Jerusalem. End of story.

A man on the outside looking in, blind to the healing works of Jesus, moved to the inside that day. It wasn't just a move to the inside of the church; it was a move inside a healing relationship of Jesus. The followers of Jesus didn't help him do it. He did it despite the followers of Jesus. He threw in all his chips that day, a cloak and a few coins. No, it wasn't much, but for him it was everything. He threw it all aside and became a follower of Jesus. He “saw” life in a whole new way.

I've got a feeling that blind Bartimaeuses are all around our church. They're not bad people. They don't necessarily hate church. They are

outside looking in because they have not found a way to get inside. Some of them believe in God, believe in Christ, honor the Bible, and some have significant needs. While no one of us would deliberately tell them to hush, as they did to Bartimaeus, we may unknowingly say and do things that make it hard for them to move inside. When they see the church's inability to agree to disagree, the lack of dignity and respect we grant each other, they choose to stay on the outside. When they perceive our holier-than-thou attitudes, they choose to stay on the outside. When they don't feel heard because we spend so much time talking, they choose to stay on the outside.

But if we will listen, we will hear their cries getting louder and louder. Some want a healing touch from Jesus so badly that they are ready to throw everything aside and spring forward. This text is directed to the followers of Jesus, you and me. It calls us to be aware of the people on the outside, to listen for them and to them. It is a reminder that our calling is to assist those on the outside to move inside, into a healing relationship with Jesus.

Several years ago I read about a small bank in a rural community. This was not like one of the big banks we might find around here. It was a tiny bank and didn't have many depositors. On any given day, they would have a handful of customers trickle in. But one day they had no one. Not one customer came in the bank all day long. They employees were all inside counting money, balancing accounts, and doing all the things that banks do. And occasionally someone would comment about what a slow day it was.

At the end of the day, the manager went to lock the door. Guess what he found? They never unlocked the door! Everyone was present and ready to do his or her job, but somebody forgot to unlock the door.

Churches must be careful that we don't inadvertently leave our doors locked. The doors of this church, and every church, must be wide open to every one every day. If not, Home Depot will get all our business.

Closing Prayer

Jesus of Nazareth, thank you for stopping for Bartimaeus. Thank you for stopping for us. Remind us now to stop for others, to stop and listen. Amen.