



THE JESUS ESCALATOR

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Federal Way, WA
March 25, 2007*

Suppose for a minute that it's tomorrow. I wake up and decide I've had it with this whole pastor gig and I've got a new dream to go into business for myself. The problem is that I need some capital to get started. Since I know you're loaded, I call you with my business pitch. So I share my big idea with you: I say I'm going to open up a retail store. Then I tell you that my business plan is to have a shop that specializes in teacups, couches, baby dolls and cameras. It's probably at this point that you politely decline the opportunity to invest in my new company. Because it sounds like a hodge podge, like I'm all over the map. None of the products seem related. But then I tell you it's going to be an antique store, and suddenly it makes way more sense. You still might not want to sink all your money in it, but there's a bigger theme linking all those very different items together. There's a master plan into which everything fits.

Since January, we've been tracing Jesus' steps through the book of Mark. We've looked at some extremely diverse events – Jesus driving out demons. Jesus hanging out with tax collectors. Jesus creating a miracle to feed 5,000 people. Jesus glowing bright white when he was transfigured. Jesus changing the weather. Jesus forgiving sins.

All of these sound completely unrelated – isolated incidents in a hodge podge that Mark has collected, like random memories in a scrapbook. But there's a bigger picture that links them all together. The very first words we heard from Jesus' mouth were these:

Mark 1:15

“The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God is near.”

Everything Jesus has done since then – the healings, the miracles, the teaching, the parables – everything has been an attempt to show and explain the kingdom of God. What does it look like in the world when things are brought under God's authority? How does the universe operate when God's rule is brought near?

Jesus actually, physically ushered in God's kingdom – his rule – in a way that affected everything. And what we've seen is how radically different it is from our own ideas of how things should operate. If we really see what he's talking about, it is a far cry from what we would expect.

God's kingdom operates on completely opposite principles from the rest of the world, surprising us at every turn. But it isn't just different for the sake of being different. God isn't just challenging our assumptions to mess with us. I like how Karl Barth described the kingdom. He said that it **contradicts in a way that's full of promise**. There is hope precisely because God's kingdom is so different from what we know.

Sociologists talk about something called plausibility structures that each society has. It's a fancy way of saying we all have a box for understanding reality, a structure for defining what's possible. When Jesus came, he blew the lid off the box. Every encounter we've read about has left someone altered internally. Their view of reality, their plausibility structure is forever shifted and they are forced to grapple with what happens when Jesus takes ideas they've always believed to be true and turns them on their head.

That's why Dave shared a few weeks ago and said we don't really have the option of just calling Jesus a good teacher. Either he was right or he was wrong. If he was wrong, then he was way off. Nobody should listen to him. But if he was right, nobody can get around his claims. This kingdom concept is that big and radical.

We also said from the start that Mark's style is fast paced and action driven. He presents Jesus as more of a doer than a talker, teaching through his actions as much as his words.

The action continues as we reach chapter 10, but something shifts in Jesus' pace. He steps it up and begins moving deliberately in one direction. Take a look at verse 32:

Mark 10:32

They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid.

I had never really noticed that verse before, but it's unusual, isn't it? There's a sense of foreboding in the air. The crowd of disciples is picking up on the heaviness of this journey, even though they don't quite understand it. Jesus is on a determined, focused mission to reach Jerusalem. This will be his final trip there. He has already told his followers that he's going there to die, so you can just imagine what is going through their minds as they go along with him.

Jesus has chosen Jericho as the starting point of his journey to Jerusalem. He has picked a notorious stretch of road that was a difficult, windy climb through the mountains, up 3,500 feet over roughly 20 miles. The road still makes for treacherous driving even today. On top of that, in the first century, travelers along this route were vulnerable to frequent attacks by bandits. It was no accident that when Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan he used this road as the setting, because it had a reputation of being extremely dangerous.

So here is Jesus, intentionally choosing this hard climb into Jerusalem as if to symbolize what he's about to face. The crucifixion is in front of him. He knows he's going to be

attacked. He knows it's going to be difficult. But he resolves himself to it, he steels himself for it and there's no turning back.

This is where he is at mentally in the middle of chapter 10. He's zeroing in on the central act of his life, focusing his energy and attention toward what's coming. That makes all his actions in this chapter take on an added significance, because he wants to press home certain central concepts about God's kingdom while there is still time.

This morning I'd like to look at two incidents from chapter 10. They stand side by side and at first look like as unrelated as the antiques we started out with. But they are linked, and they give us very different angles from which to see the same truth.

Mark 10:35-52

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."

Do you remember trying an approach like that with your parents when you were a kid? They walk up to you and you tell them, "Just say yes. Just promise me whatever I ask you'll say yes." Before they've even heard the question.

When James and John say that, it sounds so audacious. "Do whatever we ask you to." But I sure have been guilty of doing the same thing with God. Deep down, I don't want him to respond to my requests with anything but a yes. I don't want him to think about them. I don't want him to turn me down or correct me. I just want him to do what I ask, like he is there for my bidding. I sometimes forget who is boss and act like I'm giving God an assignment rather than appealing to him for a gift.

Jesus sees through the tactic being used on him, and he doesn't make any promises before he hears the request.

"What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."

There it is. They are calling shotgun. Or as the junior highers like to say, "Bucket!" James and John want to be wingmen for Jesus.

We can tell a lot about James and John from that one line. A single sentence shows us both the approach these brothers took and the nature of their request.

Their approach to Jesus reveals two things. First, they feel they have an "in" with Jesus. It's true that Jesus had included them in what could be considered some pretty insider moments. They along with Peter were the only ones who had been able to go up the mountain to see Jesus in his glory. They were among the very first disciples, and as you recall, they had given up their livelihood to follow Jesus. So they have begun to feel that they are entitled to answers on demand. Other people might not be able to expect special

treatment, but given their history, it only seems fitting that they are on a different level with Jesus.

Secondly, they thought they had something to offer. They thought they would make good advisers, that they knew Jesus and his agenda well enough to counsel him in his decisions.

It's convicting to realize that my approach is often the same. In my prayers I sometimes barge in and demand things from God as if he owes me something. I feel entitled to answers because I did something good for God. If I made some big sacrifice, he better come through. Or I act like he needs my advice about how to run the world. It's amazing he listens at all.

Look at what James and John were asking: To sit on either side of Jesus. Those were positions of power and prestige. The nature of their request to Jesus was really this:

Make me divine. I want a little of God's authority. I want a little of God's honor. I want people to see me and show me more respect. I want to have influence over circumstances. I want to be empowered. I want to be a bit above other people.

Their concern is not the advancement of God's kingdom – it's the advancement of themselves. It is self-centered to the core.

Which is exactly why Jesus would turn them down. We can ask him for many things, but we can't ask him to change his agenda to ours. If we're honest with ourselves, we are forced to admit that we want a throne like his, a little seat of power and prestige.

Bill Hybels once wrote, "I'd been wondering why my prayers were infrequently answered. When I took a good look at what I'd been praying for, I understood. If God had granted such patently selfish requests, I would quickly be spiritually destroyed."

In spite of how transparently off base James and John were, Jesus doesn't just shut the brothers down at this point. He exhibits grace even in the way he denies their request. Instead of blasting them, he recognizes a chance to teach all the disciples more about how God's kingdom works.

"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"

"We can," they answered.

They have no idea what they're saying. They have no comprehension of the vast gap between who Jesus is and who they are.

Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."

When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 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."

When I was a kid and my mom would take me to the store to buy my Toughskins jeans, I liked to try to go up the down escalator. It worked great unless there was actually somebody on it coming down. They always took priority and I'd be forced to conform to the rules of society.

To me, that's a metaphor for God's kingdom. It's like a big escalator. We're always trying to climb our way to the top. But we keep bumping into Jesus who's coming down. We have to give way to him. It is a kingdom that has come down to us, not one we climb up to obtain.

We can't seek to promote ourselves when Jesus didn't. We're not following Jesus if we're headed the other way. The Jesus escalator takes us in the direction we least expect.

This selflessness is perhaps one of the most unnatural aspects of God's kingdom. It's just as unnatural to us today as it was to the first disciples. We are all wired to think in terms of getting ahead and improving our lot in life -- whether it's in business, the amount of stuff we have or the level of influence we have on those around us. Personal progress is what it's all about.

Just this week somebody gave me a DVD of The Secret to see what I thought of it. Have you seen the hype about this show? In a nutshell, it's the latest and greatest self help program. All kinds of celebrities have jumped on the bandwagon to promote it. It's become extremely popular nationwide. The tagline explains why: "You can be, do or have anything with the secret." The DVD talks about how you can improve your finances, strengthen relationships and enjoy better health. The secret is about controlling your destiny. If only James and John had had a copy.

Those goals appeal to anybody. We all want financial freedom, healthy relationships and healthy bodies. Those are good things. But when self improvement becomes our focus, we become our own God. When what we want most is the secret to getting ahead or bettering our own status, we are chasing the wrong dream. According to Jesus, the secret to finding your life is in giving it away.

Matthew 6:31-33

What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with getting, so you can respond to God's giving. People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.

Jesus wanted James and John to stop focusing on their own well being and concentrate on the needs of others. He wants them to think in terms of service.

What's interesting to me though is that Jesus DOESN'T criticize their ambition. They want to be great, and Jesus doesn't knock them for it. Instead he redirects their energy and says, "You want to be great? Work on being a servant. Better yet – a slave. Treat others like they have authority over you."

We'll probably never be entirely selfless people. We're motivated by rewards, and Jesus doesn't fight that. But even if our motives are perhaps skewed as we start out, the process of serving others changes us and our goals. Our desire for greatness is reshaped. God rewards us in ways we weren't originally expecting. Several of the people from the D'Iberville mission trip spoke to that when they said God had a different reason for taking them there than they had starting out. The work changed them.

When Jesus talks about being a servant, we immediately think of Mother Theresa or some other saintly person who doesn't seem all that related to our lives. What does it mean for me to serve other people instead of myself? Practically speaking, can I be one here in NE Tacoma, and if so, what would it look like?

Service is hard because deep down, there's part of my heart that's crying for center stage. Serving others is the unnoticed effort that may never be recognized, the work that is done behind the scenes. It's stopping and really looking at your children when they're talking to you. It's folding a load of laundry because you know your wife is tired, and not getting mad when she doesn't give you a big thank you for it. Service is remembering to spend time praying for someone without rushing to tell them afterwards so they'll be sure to know. It's letting your own busy schedule be interrupted for a hurting friend.

So often even my service becomes about me, because I want people to see the good I'm contributing to the world. I try to turn it into another vehicle for promoting myself. But true service is never about advancing our personal cause – it's about demonstrating the attitude of Christ.

And that brings us to our second story. We move from a teaching moment to a living example. Christ shows his disciples what he's been talking about as he encounters a blind man.

Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (that is, the Son of Timaeus), was sitting by the

roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

While we were in Maui, we went to the little town of Lahaina several times, and each time, this street preacher was there by the park. From his appearance, I think it's safe to guess that he's homeless (although he was sporting a fanny pack that looked much like mine). He would stand there with his Bible and yell at all the cars going by. But nobody was listening. Everyone just wrote him off as that crazy homeless guy on the corner.

That's kind of the way people felt about Bartimaeus. Beggars were an accepted part of Jewish society. With no government aid, people with any kind of physical or mental disability had limited options for supporting themselves. So they'd beg. And most of the time, that wasn't too disruptive. The general population tolerated it. Until someone like Bartimaeus starts to cause a scene with his yelling. Now he's attracting too much attention and people are getting annoyed.

But look at his words: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" What a contrast with James and John saying, "We want you to do whatever we ask." No claims – just a plea for mercy. Bartimaeus knows he doesn't have any pull or clout. He's throwing himself completely on Jesus' mercy. He doesn't claim any right to help, but he asks for it anyway.

That's the way to approach Jesus – without any pretense or posturing, without acting as if we have any right to Christ's power, but asking simply because of who Christ is.

The most beautiful line of the story comes next.

Jesus stopped and said, "Call him."

In the Greek, it's "Jesus stood still." Jesus who is on a mission. Jesus who is focused on Jerusalem. Jesus who is surrounded by important people. This Jesus stands still for a blind beggar who's yelling at him. It says Bartimaeus was on the side of the road, almost like a piece of human litter, discarded by society. He was a non-contributor. Everyone else thought he wasn't worth Jesus' time, and said as much.

But Jesus always has time for everyone. He doesn't view anyone who comes to him as a nuisance.

Jesus will stand still for you. We may not have earned the right to ask anything from him, but we have the privilege. He invites us to bring him our requests. He calls us to himself.

So they called to the blind man, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you." Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him.

It's the exact same question Jesus asked James and John. The significance of that could not have been lost on the brothers. Bartimaeus had every bit as much of Christ's attention as two of his closest disciples. Once again, they were caught off guard as Jesus treated this scrap of a person with dignity. Jesus found him worthy of his time. By considering Bartimaeus worthy, Jesus infused worth into him.

This is Jesus showing true servanthood – stopping, listening, being willing to be interrupted. Putting the other person's needs ahead of his own timetable. This is the kingdom brought near.

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him.

The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see."

Now that's a bold request. I want to see. But it's different than the boldness of James and John. Instead of asking to be like God, Bartimaeus simply wants his humanity restored. He wants wholeness and vision.

Bartimaeus is my hero. He could have been practical and asked Jesus for a handout. Then he would have had a lot less to lose. But he had faith that Jesus could do more than feed him for a day. He could ask Jesus for more than he asked the other people who passed him every day. Jesus could give him vision. And Bartimaeus went all out in his asking.

I want to believe that Jesus can answer my big prayers. Forget the safe ones that are more like asking for a handout. I want to ask for wholeness and vision. Jesus, heal me up. Restore the bits of my humanity that have been eaten away by life. Jesus open my eyes. Let me see what I'm supposed to do. Let me see what you're doing.

"Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.

What incredible good came out of the fact that Jesus chose to serve the needs of a blind man. A miracle happens and a new disciple is born. The moment that could so easily have never happened turned into a permanent piece of the record, one more timeless testimony to God's power.

We have a preschool Bible story book at home that tells the story of Bartimaeus' experience. After Jesus had healed him, the story says, "All at once, Bartimaeus saw the sun. Bartimaeus saw the trees. Bartimaeus saw the houses. Bartimaeus saw the people. But best of all – Bartimaeus saw Jesus."

That was the best thing for Bartimaeus. He became one of Jesus' followers. He took his answer to prayer and turned it into discipleship. He went from being beside the road to being on the road – following Jesus on the steep climb toward the cross.

That is where the escalator turns and goes back up.

Ephesians 4:10-11

And the One who climbed down is the One who climbed back up, up to highest heaven. He handed out gifts above and below, filled heaven with his gifts, filled earth with his gifts.

Jesus meets us at the bottom, but he doesn't leave us there. The servant of all carries us up to the top, giving us more honor than we ever imagined for ourselves. When we give up our own ambitions, he replaces them with something far better.

Jesus is stopping and standing still for you. He's calling and asking, "What do you want me to do for you?" What will your answer be?

As you think about these two stories this morning, ask yourself:

What part of my heart is crying for center stage? Where in my life am I letting my own personal advancement take priority over advancing God's kingdom?

Where do I need wholeness? I remember when I was having difficulty making the decision to jump into church planting. Some of you know that for months, I was completely paralyzed. I prayed and prayed for God to show me an answer of whether or not we should do this. But I could not get to a point of resolution. This went on and on. One day I was listening to a song by Fred Hammond, that was all about this conversation between Jesus and Bartimaeus. And there was this one line where he was talking to Jesus and he said, "I know I'm broken but you can heal me." Suddenly it hit me that this mental paralysis I was experiencing was brokenness. I could see it. It was more than just waffling: My inability to make this decision was about something that was not working inside me. And for the first time I was able to not just pray for God to give me an answer but for him to heal up the part of me that couldn't receive an answer, the fears and the pride and baggage I hadn't even known was there. And he did. I was able to get unlocked and finally have freedom.

I say that just to point out that there are all kinds of ways we can be broken. Where do you need wholeness? Whether it's physical, spiritual or emotional, bring your requests to Jesus and say, "I know I'm broken, but you can heal me."

Where do I need vision? Maybe I can't see where I'm supposed to go. Maybe I can't see what God is doing in some area of my life. He's a God who wants to be seen. Ask him for clear vision. What are we really asking him for? Let's not just ask for handouts – let's ask for God-sized answers.

How can I start serving? Who is he putting on my heart? What do I need to be doing today to turn around on the escalator and head the same direction as Jesus?

Jesus is standing still for you. What do you want him to do?