

“Lord, Have Mercy on Us, Son of David!” (Matt. 20:29–34)

By Jacob D. Gerber

As Jesus approaches Jerusalem, the time draws near when he will establish his kingdom. How, though, will he do this? To be sure, the thronging crowd surrounding him on his way into the capital city have the correct expectations: he will make a triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Yet, because they do not understand the true nature of his kingdom, they cannot understand the significance of what he does before entering the city by healing two blind men. In this passage, we see a radiant glimmer of the true nature of Christ’s kingdom in his compassion for those who cry out to him for mercy. In the words of Psalm 131:3, this passage teaches us to approach the Lord Jesus Christ with a bold and impudent faith: “*O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and forevermore.*”

Hope in the Lord (Matt. 20:29–30)

As we saw in Matthew 20:17, Matthew transitions into this section with the simple conjunction “and” (v. 29). The word “and” connects this passage with the previous passage, but without clearly indicating the nature of the connection. Previously, the mother of James and John had asked for places of high honor in Jesus’ kingdom for her two sons; here, we come to the story of two blind men who are at the lowest position in the society. Is there a deliberate contrast here between two men who sought for greatness and two men who knew that they needed mercy? Or, is the connection a comparison where the blindness of these two men tell us something of the blindness of James and John?¹

The location of the story, near Jericho (v. 29), is significant. As R. T. France notes, “Jericho was the last settlement the Galilean pilgrim to Jerusalem would go through after crossing the Jordan from Perea...and before setting off up the long climb to the capital, more than three thousand feet above.”² This geographic milestone indicates Jesus’ progress from Perea (Matt. 19:1), on his way toward Jerusalem (Matt. 20:17). While the crowd is also headed to Jerusalem for Passover, Matthew tells us specifically that this “great crowd followed” Jesus (v. 29). While Matthew does not tell us all of their expectations for Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem, we see from their actions in the following section that they believed that Jesus would enter the city as a triumphant king.³ This time of heady anticipation gives us important background information for understanding the response of this crowd to the pleas of the two blind men for mercy.

¹ So M. D. Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew: The Speaker’s Lectures in Biblical Studies, 1969-71* (London: SPCK, 1974), 411, cited by R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 765n8.

² France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 765.

³ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 586.

To begin, Matthew signals that something surprising happens by the word “behold” (v. 30).⁴ From the brief introduction, we are expecting (with the crowd) Jesus’ continued movement toward Jerusalem for his triumphal entry. Yet, two blind men who are near the roadside as Jesus passes by interrupt the scene by crying out, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!” (v. 30).⁵ Their words form another part of the surprise, since they directly address Jesus as not only “Lord,” but also as the “Son of David,” a messianic title that Matthew has kept in front of us since the beginning of the Gospel (Matt. 1:1). From the previous passage, we know that others (including James, John, and their mother) understood Jesus as the king who was about to come into his kingdom (Matt. 20:21), but these two men do not try to line up for themselves positions and power in that kingdom. Rather, they cry simply for mercy from the Son of David.

Beyond the surprise that these men should call Jesus the Son of David is the surprise that Jesus does not stop them from doing so. For so long in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus has stayed away from crowds, kept his distance from Jerusalem, and resisted any political speculations. In fact, in Matthew 9:30, when two other blind men had come to Jesus to be healed, also calling Jesus the “Son of David,” Jesus healed them, but then “sternly warned them, ‘See that no one knows about it’” (Matt. 9:27–30).⁶ Now, however, Jesus makes no effort to prevent his public identification. As Lenski writes, “Let the whole nation know that he goes up to Jerusalem as the Son of David—to die. There is now no danger of a political upheaval.”⁷ In fact, these two blind men may have suggest—or, at least, emboldened—the crowd to call Jesus the “Son of David” as he enters into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:9).⁸ This is a bold plea to the heir to David’s throne for his help, but without the least hint of self-serving pride. These men ask not for greatness, but for “mercy.”⁹

Hearts not Lifted Up (Matt. 20:31–32)

The crowd, however, has little time for these men: “The crowd rebuked them, telling them to be silent” (v. 31a). They are eager to see Jesus take up his throne and get to work establishing the power of his administration. With such important matters on the horizon in Jerusalem, there is no time to waste on these two valueless men! How discouraging this must have been to men who spent their

⁴ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 587.

⁵ On the reason for Matthew’s “two” blind men rather than the one man (Bartimaeus) in the parallel accounts in Mark 10:46–52 and Luke 18:35–43, see Carson: “The rather common suggestion that Matthew increases the number of blind men to two because two was the minimum number of witnesses for attesting Jesus’ messiahship is misguided. To experience the healings would not prove Jesus was the Messiah. He might simply be a prophet. On the other hand, if the miracle confirmed or promoted belief in Jesus’ messiahship, it might do so as easily for those who witnessed the miracle as for those who experienced it. The ‘large crowd’ would have provided witnesses aplenty. The ‘two,’ therefore, has no theological motivation but shows personal knowledge of the events.” (Carson, “Matthew,” 492.)

⁶ “The time has arrived when Jesus no longer forbids this public acclaim (contrast 8:4; 9:30; 17:9).” (Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 754.)

⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 797.

⁸ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 587.

⁹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 515.

lives as beggars (Mark 10:46; Luke 18:35) due to their physical disability. All they wanted was to see, and yet this crowd was so caught up in their own aspirations and pride that they sought to prevent these men from coming to Jesus to be healed. Furthermore, Jesus himself did not respond to this first round of cries for help. The language from v. 30–31 does not suggest that these men made a single call to Jesus, but that they were calling out so much that the crowd was irritated by their pleas for mercy.

Yet, though the crowd opposed them, and Jesus had not responded to them, the men are undeterred: “but they cried out all the more, ‘Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!’” (v. 31b). Is it possible that their begging had taught them that their needs could only be met by persistence in making their requests known? As Calvin writes, “Perseverance is therefore necessary to overcome every difficulty, and the more numerous the obstacles are which Satan throws in the way, the more powerfully ought we to be excited to earnestness in prayer, as we see that the *blind men* redoubled their cry.”¹⁰

It is at this point, then, that Jesus turns to answer their call: “And stopping, Jesus called them and said, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’” (v. 32). While the crowd believed that these men were preventing Jesus from doing something truly important, Jesus does not evaluate the situation that way. In this way, we find something of a parallel to the story of when Jesus is summoned urgently to heal a dying girl, but then he stops on the way to talk with the woman who touched his garment, so that she had already been healed (Matt. 9:18–26). One need seemed more urgent, since the older woman’s medical condition had not been life-threatening, and since she had already been healed. Nevertheless, Jesus does not consider her needs unimportant, so that he stops to talk with her to show that he believed that her needs were important enough to stop. In the very next passage, Jesus met the first two blind men (Matt. 9:27–31), showing that he cared for their needs as well.

Now, even on the verge of his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus considers the needs of these blind men important enough to stop. After all, he had come not to be served, but to serve (Matt. 20:28). As France writes, “That Jesus stopped among such a large, moving crowd to respond to the request of two insignificant individuals illustrates again the unconventional values of the kingdom of heaven, in which the good of a ‘little one’ takes precedence, and in which compassion triumphs over the expectations of the many.”¹¹

Help from the Lord (Matt. 20:33–34)

When the men get the opportunity to make their request, they call Jesus “Lord” for the third time and ask for their eyes to be opened (v. 33). Then, Matthew tells us that Jesus was moved by “pity” or “compassion” to touch their eyes and heal them (v. 34a). Although this story appears also in Mark and Luke, only Matthew emphasizes the compassion of Jesus in this scene.¹² As Hagner writes, “Jesus on the way to his death in Jerusalem does not cease being the Messiah who meets the needs of individuals.”¹³

¹⁰ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:431.

¹¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 766.

¹² Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 798.

¹³ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 588.

As this passage concludes, we should note again that Jesus does not (as he did to the two previous blind men) tell these blind men to remain silent (Matt. 9:30).¹⁴ Here, we learn that these men instead “followed” Jesus (v. 34b). This is the same word that appeared in v. 29 to describe the great crowd who “followed” Jesus; however, at the end of this story, we see that the crowd follows Jesus in a very different way than these blind men. The crowd followed Jesus to gain something from Jesus, but these men already have the thing they want, and they still follow Jesus. One thinks of the heart attitude of the psalmist who insists that his heart is not lifted up, but that he has “calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me” (Ps. 131:2). As a weaned child does not stay with his mother for the food she can provide, so these men stay with Jesus not for the benefits he can give, but out of contented reliance upon him.

As Jesus heals these blind men, so he also heals us from our spiritual blindness. Hagner puts this well:

The giving of sight to the blind is a dramatic miracle that points to the dawning of the era of messianic fulfillment. The Son of David is present among his people. And as he compassionately delivers them from their literal darkness, so he continues on his way to Jerusalem, where in his sacrificial death he will deliver all of humanity from an even greater darkness—that of the bondage to sin and death. Thus the cry of the blind men, “Lord, have mercy on us,” becomes in the Kyrie Eleison of the church’s liturgy the cry for deliverance from sin and its judgment. This healing pericope thus may be seen as the gospel in a microcosm.¹⁵

“O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forevermore!” (Ps. 131:3).

Discussion Questions

1. How does the transitional conjunction “and” link this story to the previous passage (v. 29a)? How do the two men in this passage compare and contrast with the two sons of Zebedee in the previous passage? What is the difference between coming to Jesus to seek greatness and coming to him to seek mercy? Where is “Jericho” on the way to Jerusalem (v. 29b)? Why do you think that the crowd is “following” Jesus (v. 29c)?

2. How many times do these blind men call Jesus “Lord”? What does the title “Son of David” signify? Where have we seen the title “Son of David” in the rest of the Gospel of Matthew? What specifically do these men ask for in vv. 30, 31? Why do they believe that they need mercy? Do you believe that you need mercy? Why or why not? How does a driving need for mercy shape the way that we approach Jesus?

¹⁴ Carson, “Matthew,” 492.

¹⁵ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 588.

3. Why do the crowds rebuke these blind men (v. 31a)? Why does Jesus stop to ask the blind men what they want from him (v. 32)? How do these responses illustrate different understandings of the kingdom that Jesus came to inaugurate? What factors do you think were involved in leading the blind men to continue crying out “all the more” (v. 31b) for Jesus’ mercy? What keeps you from the same kind of bold impudence in crying out to Jesus for mercy?

4. Why does Jesus heal the blind men (v. 34a)? Do you also sense your need for Jesus’ pity? How does your sense of a need for mercy shape the way that you approach Jesus by faith? Now that these blind men have received their sight, why do you think they then followed Jesus (v. 34b)? How does the reasons that they followed Jesus compare with the reasons that the crowd has followed Jesus (cf. v. 29)? Why do you follow Jesus?