

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Jesus - for the Other

(Studies of Jesus)

The Savior Who Serves

(Matthew 20:17-34)

Study #5

Introduction: Stronger than the prevailing winds...

My latest foray into the wild included a trip out west, as my brother-in-law, Bob, and I set out on February 6th of this year, to climb the four tallest peaks in Texas in one day.

As it happens, the four peaks - Guadalupe, Bush, Shumard, and Bartlett - are all bunched up together in the Guadalupe Mountains National Park. Bob and I were excited as we drove out to “get ‘er done.”

We arrived at the Park HQ, checked in and saw the weather forecast for the next day, the day of our hike. It said, “Damaging Winds” - and were appropriately sobered. But, after a good night’s sleep - a night during which Bob’s shelter blew down - we started our hike at about 5am in the windiest conditions I’ve ever experienced.

During the 3,000-foot climb to the top, the temperature dropped from 60 degrees at camp to mid-30’s at the top. It was so windy at the summit of Guadalupe Peak (8,750 feet) that I had to cling to the monument to keep from getting blown off.

Up on top, Bob and I made the sad but wise decision to hike down and to not try and bag the remaining three peaks, a hike that would have involved a lot of ridge-walking over sheer drop-offs.

When we were checking out of the park, the Rangers said that they had been a bit concerned for us because the NOAA weather instruments at the top were clocking winds at over 80mph.

So, strong winds derailed our plans. Strong winds can derail the best laid plans. And strong winds come in all forms.

In West Texas, it was air currents that defeated us. But there are winds of cultural change, political pressure, and opposition from enemies that may keep us from moving in the direction we want to go.

You can probably think of times when you have been intending to go in a certain direction and some wind blew you off course.

- Maybe you had a business plan that got battered by a stormy economy.
- You had a plan to keep to the moral high ground, but the winds of temptation proved strong.
- Your dreams of serving Jesus are being swept away by winds of distraction or by winds that lure you to lesser things.

This morning we are going to watch Jesus buck strong headwinds as He follows the trail God laid out for Him. We find, today, a Jesus who is caught in a current - the current of God’s way and will - that’s stronger than the prevailing winds that blew against Him.

Review...

Over the past four weeks we have seen that Jesus is for “the other.” He is *for* the non-Jew; *for* the not-yet-together person; *for* the least, the last, and the lost; and *for* the far, far away.

We watch now as He turns a corner to the next and final chapter of His life. He’s traveling in the direction of Jerusalem, to die.

Jesus Previews His Sacrificial Service (20:17-19)

On the Road to Jerusalem

[17] As Jesus was about to go up to Jerusalem...

At this point we place Jesus in the region of Perea and the Decapolis. He is on the east side of the Jordan River, outside of Israel.

He has been with His disciples in secluded places. The days in these places have been the last times they will have uninterrupted time together before His death.

And, at a certain point, Jesus knew that it was time. It was time to turn His face toward Jerusalem and do what He had been born to do.

From the other Gospels, we learn that this journey was different than His other travels. His demeanor on the road changed.

Usually, time on the road afforded opportunities for teaching and storytelling. It is easy to imagine Jesus telling the stories we find in the Gospels as they walked from place to place.¹

Here, there is none of that. He is fixed, focused on what's ahead.

Above all else, though, He didn't want His disciples to be surprised by His coming suffering. So, He pulled them aside and told them how it was all going to play out once they got to Jerusalem.

The Message to the Twelve (vv. 17-19)

[17] As Jesus was about to go up to Jerusalem, He took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and on the way He said to them, [18] "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, [19] and will hand Him over to the Gentiles² to mock and scourge and crucify Him, and on the third day He will be raised up."

¹ Imagine them all strolling along the seashore, where He tells them the story about finding the pearl of great price; of Him speaking of the value of the lilies of the field as they walked through an upland meadow.

² For Jesus to tell His Jewish disciples that He would be handed over to the Gentiles would have added terror. To have the Gentiles kill a Jew WAS to be crucified - that was what the Gentiles (the Romans) did when they killed a Jew.

His words were crystal clear. And we have the benefit of history to know that, yes, in a matter of a few short days, it's all going to happen just like He said.

He will be opposed by the nation's leadership. He will be betrayed by one of His own. There will be trials - before Romans and Jewish courts - where He will be condemned. He will be beaten, crucified, and He'll die on a cross. And...He will be raised from the dead.

This is Jesus, preparing His followers for the coming storm. The winds will blow, but He'll power through whatever winds may come. And here, he is loving and serving His followers by telling them how He's going to love and serve them.

After giving this preview, He began walking again, ahead of the large group that was on the road with Him and even a little bit ahead of the twelve. Jesus was soon joined by a breakaway group of three who had something they wanted to talk about.

Jesus Teaches Sacrificial Service (20:20-28)

Jesus, Petitioned by Mom (vv. 20-21)

An approach that honored Jesus

[20] Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Jesus with her sons, bowing down and making a request of Him.

When Mark relates this incident, he doesn't mention mom. Matthew, though, tells us that James' and John's mother was the one who initiated contact and spoke to Jesus.

She came near as a subject would come near to a king. She bowed down and treated Him with great respect.

She honored Him by the way she approached, and then asked a thoroughly insulting question.

A request that insulted Jesus

[21] And He said to her, "What do you wish?" She said to Him, "Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit one on Your right and one on Your left."

Matthew wants you and me to mark the contrast between Jesus' news about His own suffering and this stunningly demanding, insensitive, and ambitious request.

Jesus spoke about a cross. Mom wants crowns for her boys.

Jesus responded. But notice, not to her. He spoke to the two who have been following Him for the last three years, two who knew better than to have been party to this request.

A Mom's Request, Denied (vv. 22-23)

The "cup"

[22] But Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" They said to Him, "We are able."

In biblical terms, drinking a "**cup**" can stand for either something delightful or something devastating.

In Psalm 23, David writes, "**my cup overflows.**" He means that his life is full of joy. In the book of Jeremiah, "**cup**" symbolizes the wrath of God.³ In short, "**cup**" stands for the whole gamut of our experience. The cup we drink is whatever life hands us.

In this context, the "**cup**" in view is not a pleasant one. Jesus will soon drink the cup of God's wrath against sin,⁴ and He questions James and John - "*Are you up to this? Think carefully about what it is you are asking.*"

The request their mother made on their behalf was arrogant and presumptuous. Their response to Jesus' question was ignorant and self-deceived.

But they have - they think - thought about it They are - they think - up to it. "**We are able.**" They are brimming with confidence.

The seating arrangements

[23] He said to them, "My cup you shall drink; but to sit on My right and on My left, this is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father."

Seating assignments in the coming kingdom are the Father's responsibility.

We don't have a clue as to who will be beside Jesus. The only people, at least in the near term, who are at Jesus' left and right hands are two criminals who are crucified next to Him.

But, yes, they will drink His cup. James became the first of the apostles to die a martyr's death when he was put to death by Herod. (Acts 12) John's life was tough, even if he wasn't martyred. Scripture tells us that he was exiled, late in life, to the Mediterranean island of Patmos for his faithful witness for Christ.⁵

And the two brothers form a "parenthesis of martyrdom" for the apostolic band, being the first (James), and the last (John) to die.

At this point, James and John don't really understand what Jesus has just told them. They are oblivious to His sober message.

But the conversation they have had with Jesus hasn't been lost on the rest of the apostles.

³ See Jeremiah 25:15.

⁴ Remember Jesus' anguished wrestling in the Garden of Gethsemane, "**Let this cup pass from Me...**"

⁵ One tradition holds that he was boiled in oil.

Feathers of Eleven Apostles, Ruffled (v. 24)

[24] And hearing this, the ten became indignant⁶ with the two brothers.

And why would the ten become indignant? What was it about James' and John's request that so upset the ten?

Were they upset at the brothers' selfishness? Were they offended that apostles could have such bad attitudes?

I don't think so...

I suspect they were upset because James and John beat them to the punch. They all wanted prominent places in Jesus' cabinet and were upset that James and John had gotten to Jesus first.

This is a very unedifying scene, and the reaction of the ten was no more noble than the request of the two.

The ten betray their own spiritual shallowness by becoming indignant at the spiritual shallowness of the two.

So, Jesus has just turned the corner to head to Jerusalem and has just told His twelve apostles that He will soon suffer and die.

And two of His disciples have tried to cut to the front of the line to receive the first spots in the kingdom while the remaining ten are ticked off at the two because they wanted the ringside seats for themselves. What a mess!

Jesus is hit by a gust of apostolic carnality that could easily have blown Him off course. His apostles are wandering around in the weeds of selfishness as He is days away from His death.

He collected Himself, steadied Himself, and called them all together for a review of what it means to follow a servant Savior.

⁶ Same word used here (indignant) that described Jesus' reaction to the harsh treatment of the children by the disciples.

Leadership, Flipped (vv. 25-28)

The way it is in the world (v. 25)

[25] But Jesus called them to Himself and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them."

The more I learn of history, the more I am convinced that history is the story of strong leaders telling others what to do.

Of course, there have always been benevolent rulers. But generally speaking, rulers rule with an iron fist. And it wouldn't take us long to develop a long list of tyrants who have lorded it over the weak, throughout history, and recently.

Maybe you could tell stories of oppression. Of a boss that cracked the whip; of someone in government who made life miserable; of someone in a church who barked orders at you.

The world works by favors, maneuvering, special privileges, politicking, and by the exploitation of the weak by the strong and the rich over the poor.

Jesus' kingdom will work differently.

The way it is to be with you (vv. 26-27)

[26] "It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, [27] and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave."

Notice. He doesn't condemn the desire for greatness or for firstness. He simply points out that there is an order to be followed in attaining greatness, influence, and power in His Kingdom.

And that order is this: Firstness in His Kingdom is established through service.

Every writer of the New Testament reminds us of the danger of leaders - elders, pastors, bishops - lording it over the church.

Those who have authority in the church don't have the right to tell others what to do.

Some see a model of greatness in the pyramid. We climb higher and higher until we can get to the top. The higher we climb, the fewer equals we have, and the more subordinates.

In Jesus' leadership scheme, we climb down the pyramid. Life in Jesus begins with ME at the top. I am what my life is all about.

Growing in Jesus involves moving down so that we serve more and more people. And God counts us great as we put others first.

And, to show that this is a principle of the first order - that this is not some peripheral, secondary thing - Jesus gives us "Exhibit A."

The way it is with Me (v. 28)

[28] "just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

In this exchange between Jesus and the Twelve, we hear a clear call to serve. He wants us to race to the end of the line and move to the bottom of the pyramid. Disciples' lives are marked by service.

But that's not the main thing I hope we'll see today.

We see, too, that Jesus moved from heaven to earth to take your place. He took the punishment for sin that was due you.

In fact, verse 28 literally says that He gave His life as a ransom *instead of* the many!⁷ His death was not a meaningless tragedy. It is the means of salvation for all who will place their trust in Him.

⁷ Greek "anti" = instead of. Jesus died and suffered the righteous wrath of God so that we, putting our trust in God, would never suffer that wrath.

Jesus redemptively served us all by self-sacrificing love when He died on the cross.

And if you have not yet come to Jesus, in simple faith, to receive what He died to give you, He's inviting you to do that now. God invites you to take His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, as your Savior.

And, as crucial as trusting Jesus for eternal life is, I want us all to see more here.

See a Jesus who is on His way to an uphill climb to Jerusalem to die a self-sacrificing death. He is days away from the cross and He now sees that the men He is leading have completely missed the whole point of His mission.

Talk about knocking the wind out of your sails. Talk about a discouraging turn.

And yet Jesus keeps moving forward. He is not deterred from the course God has for Him. His path is set to serve us all by offering Himself as a ransom.

He keeps moving forward, instructing and training His followers. He keeps moving toward a cross despite the storm of followers and friends who are busy fighting for first.

Now, we turn back to Jesus' story. He has pushed through the storm of His disciples' self-centeredness and now heads into a torturous future.

As He and His disciples keep traveling through the Decapolis, they come to the Jordan River, near where it enters the Dead Sea.

They crossed the Jordan and then walked about five miles to the ancient city of Jericho.⁸

⁸ They crossed at just about the same point that Joshua and the Jews had crossed before them, on a major ancient highway right across from the city of Jericho, some fourteen hundred years earlier. I once heard the noted theologian, S. Lewis Johnson, say, "Here is the second Joshua performing miracles in Jericho, again."

By the time we catch up to Jesus, He has passed through Jericho and is on the western side of the city. He is about to begin the ascent that will lead to Jerusalem and to the cross.

From Jericho, Jesus still has another twenty miles to go before He enters Jerusalem. That journey is going to be a tough slog.

Jericho was the last place to gas up before Jerusalem, and it was uphill all the way.⁹

At the Jericho crossing, the Jordan is about 840 feet below sea level and Jerusalem is right about 2700 feet above sea level. So, the trip from Jericho to Jerusalem was a strenuous 3,500-foot elevation gain.

Jesus Models Sacrificial Service (20:29-34)

Locating the Lord (v. 29)

[29] As they were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed Him.

As far as we know this was the first time Jesus had been to Jericho. And even here, all they were doing was passing through.¹⁰

But as they exited Jericho, everyone could see *THEM. THEY* were always there.

⁹ From the Sea of Galilee southward, the Jordan River is all below sea level. By the time it hits the Dead Sea, the inland lake with the world's lowest elevation, the water level sits at 1388 feet below sea level.

¹⁰ Today, Jericho is one of the oldest, if not the oldest, continuously inhabited cities on earth. Even by Jesus' time, Jericho was already one of the oldest cities in the world. And Jericho had had - even by the first century - a very active history, having been destroyed and rebuilt on several occasions. Archaeological discoveries tell us that the Jericho Jesus entered was actually two cities. There was the Old City, which was badly deteriorated. And then there was the New Jericho, which lay south of the old city and had been built by Herod as a magnificent winter palace. New Jericho was famous for its beauty and extravagance.

The Blind Cry Out (v. 30)

[30] And two blind men sitting by the road...¹¹

In Jesus' day, it would not have been an unusual sight to see blind beggars seated outside of a city of any size. And there were these two men, sitting right by the gates on Jericho's west side.

There wasn't much of a social safety net in the ancient world, so the disabled were cared for by family and friends.

But the disabled were responsible to provide for themselves as much as was possible, even if that was by means of begging.

We don't know anything about these men's age, general health, families, how long they had been blind - only that they are blind.

They are positioned by the side of the road. We wonder if somebody (family member? friend?) brought them there every day so that they could beg, or if they mostly stayed where they were.

Their position - "***by the road***" - speaks to their place in society as well as to their location. They are off to the side. On the margins.

On this day, as they were sitting there - per habit - they heard the buzz of an approaching crowd. They picked up on a name: Jesus.

Jesus was a common Jewish name in those days. There were lots of guys named, Jesus / Joshua / Yeshua.

But they soon realized that the Jesus who is approaching was THE Jesus they had been hearing about for months and months. This is Jesus the rabbi, Jesus the healer.

THAT Jesus has never been to Jericho. Now He's here! The blind men shouted, ***[30] "Lord have mercy on us, Son of David!"***

¹¹ Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record the miracle, but only Mark gives us the name, Bartimaeus (the only recipient of a miracle in the Gospels who is named). Matthew tells us that there were two blind men, which Mark doesn't contradict.

These guys didn't have eyesight, but they have great insight. It's not clear how they knew, but they knew that *this* Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah of Israel. So, they shouted out to Him for help.

And there were many in the crowd who didn't want them shouting at Jesus. They tried to shut the two blind men down, cold.

But the rebukes of the crowd only galvanized them to keep on crying out for mercy.

Reproved, Repeating (v. 31)

[31] The crowd sternly told them to be quiet,¹² but they cried out all the more, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!"

Those in this crowd had probably seen these men begging for years. The crowds thought of them as nuisances and nobodies.

You can just hear them, *"Jesus isn't interested in people like you!"* - and the blind men got louder. They grew more insistent.

Nothing will keep them from crying out for Jesus' help. Every attempt to silence them just fanned the flame of their desperation.

They believed that Jesus was the One who would bring God's mercy. And so, despite lots of people trying to "shush" them, they refused to back down, hoping that Jesus would take notice.

Let's pause a moment, back away from this scene, and consider what is at stake here.

Everything is on the line for the blind men.

¹² Earlier (Matthew 19:13), the disciples had told some people who were bringing children to Jesus to keep them away. Jesus rebuked them, and with that rebuke fresh in their memories, it's safe to say that it's probably not the disciples who were telling the blind men to be quiet.

They have put themselves "out there" hoping both that this Jesus CAN do something and that He WILL do something for them. All their apples are in the Jesus basket.

As for Jesus?

Well, He was surrounded by His disciples and by a large crowd of people who were following Him. The large crowd may have been caught up in the mystique of this famous Rabbi who was now marching on the royal road from Jericho to Jerusalem.

The crowd notices the blind men. And they know that kings and messiahs on the way to claim their crowns don't pay attention to blind beggars. They don't have time and they won't take time.

Kings on the road to Jerusalem hob-knob with the rich and famous. They spend time with the movers and shakers. They invest personal capital where it will provide the most "bang for the buck."

But, contrary to every custom in the first and twenty-first centuries, Jesus stopped dead in His tracks in the middle of the road when He heard cries of the powerless.

The blind men's hopes hinge on Jesus' first words.

Made Whole (vv. 32-34)

Jesus' question (v. 32)

[32] And Jesus stopped and called them, and said, "What do you want Me to do for you?"

We've heard that question before. It's really the same question He had asked James' and John's mother - **[20:21] "What do you wish?"**

But there, Jesus was exposing selfish hearts. Here, He exposes sincerity and desperate faith.

And you might wonder at the question. I mean, what does He expect blind men to want? What would a hungry man want? Food. What would a lame man want? To walk.

Of course, Jesus knew what these guys wanted. But He asked, because these two men were more than problems to be solved. They were more than projects. They were people to be pursued, engaged.

So, Jesus asked the question.

Desperate plea (v. 33)

[33] They said to Him, "Lord, we want our eyes to be opened."

And that is crystal clear communication. No hesitation at all. *"We're blind. We want to see."*

This is the response of faith. It is asking Jesus to do what only He can do. The Lord Jesus dished up an over-abundant provision.

Touched (v. 34)

[34] Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes; and immediately they regained their sight and followed Him.

This was not a dispassionate scene. He was emotionally vested in these men's fates. Compassion flowed.

Matthew records no healing words. He records something better. Touch. Jesus touched the men's eyes. What a picture of vulnerability and tenderness.

When He touched their eyes, they could see. There is healing in Jesus' touch. For however long they had been blind, they are not blind now. Now they see - trees, the road, the city - and the Man who opened their eyes.

And with eyes that see Him, they now have direction in life.

They have no idea where Jesus is going or what they are getting themselves into. They don't know that Jesus is going to embrace a cross or that following Him may mean a cross.

All they know is that wherever Jesus is going, they're going, too. They would not be deterred. Even more, Jesus would not be deterred.

Conclusion:

Ocean travelers in arctic waters write of witnessing the strange sight of icebergs moving against the wind. The winds may be howling in one direction, but the icebergs seem to have minds of their own. How is it that these islands of ice move against the wind?

The explanation lies in the fact that the icebergs, with 90% of their bulk underwater, are caught in the grip of ocean currents that carry them forward. The wind currents don't alter the course of the iceberg because the iceberg is caught in a stronger current.

Jesus was caught in the grip of a current stronger than any political or social pressure. He was caught in the grip of a passion to do God's will and a heart to seek and to save the lost and to give sight to the blind.

He never wavered from His mission to bring hope to the hopeless, peace to the suffering, and eternal life to the one who is far from God.

This is the Jesus we worship today.