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Mark 10

One of the ways I've found myself struggling during lockdown is that I find myself really losing my sense of perspective in daily life. It does that to you, doesn't it?

When you're stuck in the same environment, the same routine, the same company, day in, day out, things that used to be minor irritations become massive issues:

I *really care* about how we stack our bowls in the cupboard; It *matters to me* — more than it should — that the toys and books that get scattered around the living room get put back at the end of the day — in the right place; It's *absolutely essential* that daily items like pens or slippers or chargers get put back exactly right so that I know where to find them when I need them.

Anyone who's lived or worked with me in the past will know that those tendencies were probably already there, but lockdown gives just the right conditions to fan them into flame and make tiny things into issues.

But when you lose perspective — when little things become big, and big things are small, it's an outlook that affects everything: it affects my decisions about what to do next, changes my mood, and it trickles down into how I treat people. And it's really a recipe for misery and conflict. Part of my daily challenge is to keep

reminding myself that what is small really is small, and what is important really is important.

Mark 10 is a great passage to help re-orient our perspective — and not just in the frustration of lockdown, but for life outside too. We'll see that when we meet Jesus in this passage he exposes our hearts and the little things we make big. But we'll also see that Jesus is a bright ray of hope, and that getting our perspective right opens up a way to comfort and blessing.

It's a fairly long passage, so here's how it breaks down: first we're going to meet some people whose perspective on God is so skew that they basically think they can bribe Him with their religion; then we see that even the disciples get their perspective all wrong: although they know Jesus, they want to make him serve their own agendas; and at the end we'll meet a blind man who actually sees more clearly than all of them.

So let's dive into Mark 10 and see how easy it is to skew our perspective so that we think we can bribe God.

1. Bribing God (vv1-31)

I used to work as a teacher in a college, and a part of any teacher's work is to mark assignments. And I was always shocked and appalled to see how many students thought copying-and-pasting off the internet was a legitimate way to write an assignment. In one college we tried to solve the problem with a piece of software that could scan through an essay and magically cross-reference it with thousands of websites, as well as other students' work, and it would highlight all the plagiarised bits, and give the essay a percentage score for originality.

But the students tried to get around it then by copying-and-pasting, but changing the odd word here or there to make it look different. So instead of it being 100% the same as Wikipedia, it was now 80% the same. When we explained that this wasn't acceptable, they raised the

question: well, what is the limit? How much do we need to change to be able to call it our own work? What if it's 60% the same? 50%? Is that ok?

Of course, from the perspective of someone trying to *teach*, it was infuriating — the concept of actually *learning about something*, digesting it, thinking about it, applying it, and knowing it well enough to then be able to communicate it to someone else, just didn't register! Instead, they just wanted to short-cut the process, and stay *just* inside what was allowed. 49% copied-and-pasted. Well done you.

It's this type of attitude that Jesus confronts in the first episode in Mark 10 — the Pharisees (religious leaders) come up to him in verse 2 and ask, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

And when Jesus asks, "What does the law say?" they answer in verse 4: "Well, yes, actually, the law says that we *are* allowed to divorce our wives."

But Jesus has to explain to them that this isn't God's pattern for human relationships; it's not the ideal; it's not what we should be aiming for. He explains that God's pattern for marriage is permanence, and the law about divorce is a concession, where sin has made it necessary, not a convenience.

That's how we should read verses 11 and 12: Christians have got no business using these verses to pile on misery for people who have remarried after a divorce, but rather Jesus is saying that a married man can't start turning his head, taking his pick of other women, divorcing his wife, then legitimising it by saying it's legal by God's law, so it's alright.

What's going on here for the Pharisees is something which we can all actually be guilty of: *appeasing God rather than pleasing God*. Telling ourselves that our moral lifestyle can appease God and keep us in His good books — rather

than actually knowing God, relating to Him, and learning to love what He loves.

And this is illustrated again when we meet the next religious man in verse 17. Have a look at it with me:

"As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. 'Good teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'

Again, the question betrays the heart behind it: What does God want so that He lets me have eternal life? How can I appease Him? What must I do?

The man insists he has kept all God's commands, and Jesus doesn't argue with him or tell him all the ones he *hasn't* kept — but rather challenges the whole premise of what the man is trying to do. Jesus doesn't say that there's something that the man hasn't *done*; he says there 's something that the man doesn't *have*, v21. He doesn't have treasure in heaven.

Because behind both the Pharisees' and this man's religious efforts is a warped perspective on God: Their questions are negotiations: what can I give to God, that He will give me what I want? What does He want? What will keep Him off my back, so that I can get on with living the life I want? They want to bribe God.

Because they both view God as a taker, not a giver; a tyrant, who makes demands, rather than a treasure to be enjoyed. Do you see their twisted perspective?

Do you recognise it?

I confess, I find it all too easy to put my agenda, my plans, my goals, my ambitions, ahead of God, and then ask myself how I can do it all *lawfully*, so as to stay on the right side of God. And the irony is there in verse 22: the man "went away sad, because he had great wealth."

He made his wealth big and God's treasure small. He saw God as a taker, who threatened

his wealth, rather than a giver of everlasting treasure. And that made him go away sad.

Even Peter, one of Jesus' closest friends, hasn't got it in verse 28 — he insists that he's given up everything for Jesus. But Jesus tells him that he's not the generous one here: verse 29 says that God can lavish on us a hundred times what we think we are giving to Him. Eternal life isn't to be negotiated — it's to be received freely! God's not withholding anything that we can bribe out of Him!

And sandwiched between these two examples of wrong perspective is a picture of the exact opposite — little children who have no agenda but to get close to Jesus. They don't negotiate for what they want, they come as they are and they come to receive from a kind giver.

But this goes against our expectations — in verse 13 the disciples want to shoo them away.

I wonder if this wrong perspective is behind much of our spiritual lethargy — it's draining to keep appeasing a demanding boss with impossible standards. And if it costs me my wealth, or my comfort or security, I'll walk away sad. But the right perspective sees God as a giver, and Jesus as a blessing — getting *close* to Him is the big thing, not keeping Him quiet in the background.

The right perspective makes our agendas small and God's treasure big, and be humble enough to receive from Him as we are, open-handed, with no negotiation.

Of course, the question for us now is, *how do we do get to that point?* Well, the whole point is that we can't do it on our own. You can't learn to receive by working, but by receiving. So Jesus says in verse 27 that it's impossible, unless God does an impossible miracle for us. Having exposed us, He drives us empty-handed and open-handed to depend on Him.

But Mark moves on to show us that even this good perspective can be skewed if we've got the wrong *posture*. There are two postures somebody can take when they depend on someone — like a master who depends on his servants, or like a servant who depends on his master. And that's what Mark shows us in the next two sections as he shows us the posture of dependence that means we *use* Jesus, and then the posture that realises we *need* Jesus.

In verses 32 to 45, we see that the disciples have their perspective all wrong because they want to *use* Jesus.

2. Using Jesus (vv32-45)

Again Jesus is asked a question, this time by James and John, two of His disciples, and I don't know about you, but doesn't it jump out as being a bit audacious? Look down at verse 35: "Teacher," they said, "We want you to do for us whatever we ask."

And that's the mistake in their perspective — we've gone from one extreme to the other: the religious man in verse 18 said, "What should *I* do to appease the taking God?" James and John ask, "What can *I* get out of the giving God?" Both are wrong because both put ourselves at the centre. Both hold self up close and imagine that I can get Jesus to serve me, either by forcing His arm by my religious works, or by exploiting His generosity.

The problem is their posture. They stand tall, hoping to be served and recognised. Their request, verse 37, is that they will have places of honour at the top table in Jesus' glory.

Jesus' reply is again not straightforward, because He's not *answering* their question, but challenging. He says that following Him isn't about *gaining* honour, but about honouring others. His own example should be enough to show that. He's told them in verses 32 to 34 that He has come to suffer and die; and when He talks in verses 38 and 39 about the "cup" He

drinks and His “baptism”, that’s another way of talking about His suffering.

In other words, Jesus rejects the idea that following Him is a way of gathering people under you to recognise your greatness. So, no, I’m not in the business of ranking your greatness and assigning places at the top table. Rather, following Him means taking His lead, learning from and copying Him when He stoops down not to gain honour, but to give honour. Not, verse 45, to *be* served, but to *serve*.

Once again: recognise this attitude? Jesus cuts right through my outward show and exposes that I really do believe two things that can’t both be true: I want to follow Jesus, and I want people to serve me and recognise my greatness. I want to follow Jesus, and I want to be above the people around me. Jesus says those two things aren’t compatible.

Jesus wants to give us the right perspective and by taking our greatness and recognition and putting in its place — making it small. And magnifying others’ needs, showing that *others* are big, not you. Even, verse 44, making my *rights* small, my *freedoms* small, and making others big. “Whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.”

That’s what Jesus is all about. And He’s not full of empty advice — He lives this out. He *did* actually put others first when He went to Jerusalem, as He said, and was sentenced to execution, was abused, humiliated, and crucified. It was a death that, He says in verse 45, was a “ransom for many”.

It’s a paradoxical truth that we who want so desperately to put others beneath us in order to serve us, actually *do really need serving* — not because we’re great, but because we’re needy. Jesus died because on our own we are helpless to see straight; our sight is so messed up that we put ourselves on top, people beneath us, and God in the background. And we are held captive in our own blindness, until Jesus pays

the ransom to free us — His perfect servant life, His obedient servant death — all in order to do the impossible miracle we all need: to see rightly, so that we will treasure Jesus, and follow Him on the path of putting others first.

The posture I need to learn isn’t the master gathering servants to praise his greatness, but the servant who *needs*. Mark wraps up this chapter by showing us what this looks like.

3. Needing Jesus (vv46-52)

The person who sees clearly, the person who has the right view of Jesus, who is clear-sighted in recognising who Jesus truly is, and has his perspective right ... the man who has such clarity of vision ... is a blind man.

Mark wants us to see him in contrast to James and John — he told us that James and John were the sons of Zebedee, which isn’t really very important information, except it sets up the contrast with Bartimaeus, which means “son of Timaeus”. And what Jesus asked James and John in verse 36: “What do you want me to do for you?” and to which they gave a spectacularly misguided answer, is repeated to Bartimaeus in verse 51: “What do you want me to do for you?”

But Bartimaeus sees everything rightly. He calls out to Jesus, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” It’s not only the disciples who know that Jesus is the Christ — the Son of David is the promised King who would lead God’s kingdom — the Messiah, the Christ. But his posture before the Christ is to ask for mercy — He doesn’t stand tall and want his greatness acknowledged, but he bends low and acknowledges his need.

He doesn’t negotiate or bribe in order to get.

He sees himself as small and Jesus as great: “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

And when Jesus calls him near, he simply asks for what all of us would ask for if we came with a proper posture before God’s King: the miracle

we all need — to have our sight put right. Mark often uses people's outward condition as a picture of their inward condition, and here there's a glorious resolution of the tension in Bartimaeus. Because he actually *does* see all along. He sees himself as small and Jesus as big. He sees himself unworthy, but Jesus as merciful. He sees his need and Jesus as the One who can meet it. The miracle of sight is simply the outward completion of what was already true inside.

And this is really the solution to all our wonky perspectives — to come humbly and open-handed to Jesus: that glorious paradox of coming both in the humility of the dust and in the freedom of knowing Jesus accepts you; both in the misery of self, yet in the joy of finding myself in Jesus. And our request of Jesus is for Him to work in us the impossible thing — for us to see rightly. To shrink what is too big in our perspective: our love for our comfortable lifestyle, or status, ambition or greatness; and to make big what we disdain: self-giving lowly sacrifice.

And the truth is that this humble posture and right perspective is the door to great delight in true treasure and contentment, and lowering ourselves is actually the true greatness we were designed for.

This is the humble posture that caused John Newton to write in the 18th Century: "I feel like a man who has no money in his pocket, but is allowed to draw for all he wants upon one infinitely rich; I am, therefore, at once both a beggar and a rich man."

That's the call to follow Jesus here in Mark 10 — not to keep God at bay by religion but to run close; to come low as a needy beggar before the king; and finding that by coming low we are brought high; by acknowledging our need we are filled up; by serving others we are achieving greatness. That's where the treasure is found.

That's the call I want to make to you this morning — the words of verse 49: "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you." It's the same if you've been a Christian your whole life, or are tuning in unsure or sceptical this morning: we need to recover perspective, we need to know to make the little things little, and the big things big. And we need to humbly ask for God's help to do the impossible thing of opening our eyes to the smallness of self and the treasure of Jesus. Do that today.