

SERMON TRANSCRIPT: “WHO NEEDS JESUS?”

The following sermon, “Who Needs Jesus?” was preached at Stanwich Congregational Church in Greenwich, CT, on Sunday, September 11, 2016.

Who Needs Jesus?

When I was nine years old I was being brought up in Holland, Michigan. And I remember one day very specifically. My dad and I drove down a couple of hours to go to the big city. The big city being Chicago. We drove into Chicago for the explicit purpose of going to the observation deck of what was then called the Sears Tower. I remember the day vividly. There was a bright blue sky and lots of sunshine. We could see Lake Michigan for miles. But there was something else I saw that day that left a deeper impression on my little nine year old soul. I saw something that day that wasn't at the heights of the tower but was down on street level, on the sidewalks of the big city. I was walking through those sidewalks with all the sea of humanity going by, walking with my dad. And I remember holding my dad's hand as we walked. And we were walking down the sidewalk and we came up towards an intersection and there on the corner of a tall building standing on the sidewalk was an old man who really captured my attention. I remember him like I saw him yesterday. He was an older man with grey hair. He was wearing old raggedy clothes. In one of his hands he held a cane. In the other hand he held a tin cup. And I could hear a little bit of loose change in the tin cup and he shook it a little bit as we walked by. And as we walked up closer to him I began looking at his face. I noticed that though it was a clear sunny day his eyes were closed. In fact, his eyelids

were sunken in a little bit. I realized that this was a blind man. And we got closer to him and I was captivated by the image of him. As we walked by him I kept taking him in. We got about halfway across the street before my emotions took over me. And I pulled on my dad's hand and I said, "Dad, we just walked right by that man. He needs our help." And my dad said, "Which man?" And I pointed to him. Then I remember my dad leaning towards me saying, "Of course, you're right. Let's go." And we walked back towards the man. I remember my dad pulling out his wallet and pulling out some dollar bills, handing them to me, and I took them. I placed them in the tin cup. The whole experience was overwhelming for me. But then what happened next was a big surprise. It's probably one of the reasons I remember it so vividly. As soon as the man felt the money go into his tin cup, he immediately responded by saying, "Hey thanks, you want a pen?" And he produced this box of like twenty pens. They were Bic pens. They were all the same. He handed me one as a thank you gesture. So I took it and we were walking away and I looked at the pen. And it had some words on it. It had the name of the man's church with an invitation to come worship there this coming Sunday. My mind was blown! As I had walked up to the man my heart was exploding with compassion. As I walked away from the man my mind was exploding because my categories were breaking. My categories of 'who needs who' in this situation. I thought he needed my material provision. He thought I needed the Lord. I needed to come to his church and meet Jesus. Who needs a savior here in this situation? Who needs Jesus?

That's the question we're going to be asking all fall in our sermons here. Who needs Jesus anyway? We're going to be journeying through the Gospel of Luke asking that question. Luke does a great job of breaking up our categories of who we think needs

Jesus. It's pretty easy for us to say, "That guy over there. He needs Jesus." Or, "This category of people. They need Jesus." It's harder to ask the question and answer it by saying, "I do. I need Jesus. I'm in need."

We meet two people in today's reading that really help us begin to ask this question and break apart our categories. Did you see them in your mind's eye like I did as we read the text? There they are, the rich ruler and the blind beggar. If you look on the page of your pew bible, you see that we have two columns right next to each other on the page and these two men are presented side by side on the one page. On the one column you have the rich ruler. On the other column right next to him you have the blind beggar. I wish we could bring them both into the room right now just so we can behold them. Can you picture the rich ruler? The text says he's extremely rich. When we hear the word "Ruler" we think in our contemporary context it's a ruler of a kingdom or a ruler of a corporation or something. But if you read the commentaries on this he's probably the ruler of a synagogue. He's a religious ruler. So this man has material wealth. He also probably considers himself quite righteous. He seems to enjoy the reputation of being righteous. We might say about this man, he has it all. He has it all together. If Facebook was invented in his time you could go to his Facebook wall and see a picture of him with his beautiful children. In front of their very expensive vacation home, holding their own personal bibles. He has riches and he has righteousness. You see him? On the other side of your page you have a man who is, in some ways of measuring things, in the exact opposite category. He has no riches. He's a blind beggar sitting on the side of the road in the hustle and bustle of a busy city. He's probably covered in the dust and dirt of all those people walking by. He's on the margins of society. This is in a time before there's

Medicaid or social safety nets. So his only option in life was to sit there or stand there by the side of the road, his palms open, begging for provision from the people walking by. Two very different men who both encounter Jesus, maybe even on the same day. We can learn a lot from them and the posture of their hearts even when we look at how they greeted Jesus. The rich ruler, he sees that Jesus is right in front of him and what does he say? How does he greet Jesus? He says, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Good teacher... Do you know anybody who thinks of Jesus merely as a good teacher? Oh that Jesus, he taught some really great things: Love your enemy, turn your other cheek, do unto others. He’s a great teacher. Risen from the dead? Son of God? These are harder things for me to accept but he was a good teacher. You see what happens when we do that? When we think of Jesus merely as a good teacher. We devalue his position. We raise our own. In fact that’s what the man is doing here. He’s putting Jesus in the position of “good teacher” and he raises himself because he says to Jesus, “What must *I* do to inherit eternal life?” The man thinks it’s all about him. He thinks he’s capable. He’s elevated himself to the place of thinking he’s capable of doing something to inherit eternal life. This is an absurd question. What must I do to inherit eternal life?

Does anyone here have blue eyes? What did you do to inherit blue eyes? *Nothing*. You just received them. This man looks at Jesus, the Son of God, and says, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” It’s an absurd question. He thinks it’s all about *him*. On the other hand on the other side of your page is the blind beggar, he greets Jesus differently. What does he say? He hears a commotion going by and he says, “What’s going on?” And people say, “Jesus is walking by.” The man cries out, “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!” Son of David. That’s not a phrase we often use but in ancient Israel that was a

loaded phrase. Son of David. Everybody knew who David was. He was the anointed King of Israel, the one who sat upon the throne of the nation. But people longed for, they anticipated, they looked forward to the Son of David, the Heir of David. The one who would come and not just sit upon the throne of the nation but the one who would come and rule all nations. God's chosen Messiah. Just in his greeting, the blind beggar calls out to Jesus, recognizing him for who he was. Though he was physically blind he saw through the eyes of faith who Jesus was. Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me! Whereas the rich ruler said, "What must *I* do to inherit eternal life" the blind beggar said, "Have mercy on me." You see, the rich ruler had brought Jesus low and elevated himself but the blind beggar recognized Jesus as the one who would be the king on the throne of the nations. He viewed himself as one in need of mercy from the king. We learn all this just in the greeting.

How does Jesus respond to these two different men? What does he say in response to them? To the blind beggar he fights through the crowd and he walks up to him and he says, "What do you want me to do for you?" In other words, "You have a need? I have resources. Just name it and it's yours." Jesus, the one with all the resources of all the nations. Remember he is the king on the throne of all the nations. The one with all the resources of the whole universe at his disposal, walks up the blind beggar and he says, "What do you need? Name it. It's yours." Would you like Jesus to say that to you? What does he say to the rich ruler? Verse 22: "One thing you still lack" in other words, "Something's missing here. I see your list of accomplishments. Congratulations. But I see something missing." How would you like Jesus to say that to you?

Why does Jesus say, “One thing you still lack.”? The man had come with a boasting of all that he had gained, all that he had done in his life, Jesus says, “I’m interested in the thing that’s lacking, the thing that’s missing.” We can learn why Jesus said that by looking at the preceding dialogue. Remember the man had said, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Then Jesus names five of the Ten Commandments. He names the social ones, the visible ones: Do not commit adultery, do not lie, do not steal, or murder. Honor your father and mother. He names five of the Ten Commandments and the man stands there and looks at Jesus and he says “Yup. Done.” All these I’ve kept from my youth. If there are boxes to check, I’ve checked them all. Done.” Jesus says, “One thing you still lack.”

Now I have a question for you, congregation. This is not a trick question. How many commandments are there in the Ten Commandments? Come on! Good job! You know more than this man did. Because he proudly states, “I’ve done all these from my youth.” Well only five of the Ten Commandments were stated. One thing you still lack, something’s missing. Now if we are reading the bible carefully we have to ask, which five are still missing? Which ones couldn’t the man boastfully say he was keeping? Read the Ten Commandments, it’s right there in your Old Testament in Exodus. There are ten listed, the man proudly says he can do five. The missing ones are the first four and the tenth. The first four and the tenth. The first four have to do with worshipping God: You shall have no other Gods before me, do not make for yourself a graven image, do not take the Lord’s name in vein and remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy. If you’re following those four laws you are worshipping God. You are seeing him for who he truly is, the king upon the throne of your life. The man couldn’t say he was doing those things.

It was all about him and his social obedience to the social laws. He also misses the Tenth Commandment. You know what the Tenth Commandment is? You shall not covet your neighbor's house. I find this very interesting. Here's a rich man, a wealthy man, and as the text seems to imply, he's not truly worshipping God. He might also be coveting what his neighbor has. This makes sense if you think about it. Because in this man's mind it's all about him. It's all about what he's done to earn blessings from God. All about his accomplishments and what that will make God give him. And if you're living that way, if you're thinking, "My obedience, my goodness, is what God's going to reward with blessings." Then suddenly if you see your neighbor having something nice, you think, "What did he do to deserve that?" And you might have covetousness in your heart. I think that's what's probably going on in this man's life. He wasn't truly worshipping God and he may have been coveting what his neighbor's had.

Now what's the outcome of these two encounters with Jesus? What happens in their stories? Famously, the rich man after encountering Jesus goes home sad. He walks away disappointed and sad. But the blind beggar has a different outcome of his story. I want you to read this with me. This is pretty amazing. This is verse 43. What's the outcome of the story? The encounter between Jesus and the blind beggar. Here's what it says in verse 43, "Immediately he recovered his sight and he followed Jesus glorifying God and all the people when they saw it, gave praise to God." That's a pretty good outcome. He got healed, he followed Jesus, he glorified God, and he inspired other people to praise God.

I would love for this to be my personal mission statement. I want to experience God's healing power, I want to follow Jesus, I want to bring glory to God, and I want to

inspire a few other people to bring glory to God. Wouldn't you love for that to be said about you? Nancy and I, we looked at this text this past Wednesday. And we looked at it in light of raising our children. And we agreed, we would love for this to be true about our children as they enter into adulthood. When my boy is 18, ten years from now, when Riley is entering into college, I'd love for somebody to pull me aside and say, "I like hanging around your son Riley. He follows Jesus. He brings glory to God. And he inspires others to do the same." I'd love the same to be said about little Eva as she grows up. Now let's think about this for a second. Nancy and I as parents sat down, we looked at the story and we agreed we hope our kids lives turn out just like the blind beggar. See the wisdom of God? It's different. It's upside down from human wisdom. If I were to go to Greenwich Avenue with a microphone and I were to say, "Hey you're raising children. Would you like them to be rich rulers or blind beggars?" What are people going to say? Rich rulers. The wisdom of man doesn't necessarily lead us to the same place as the wisdom of God. My hope, our prayer for our children is that no matter how materially wealthy or poor they become; I hope to be able to say about them what was true about the blind beggar. That they get healed by him, that they follow Jesus, that they glorify God, that they inspire others to do the same. I don't want them driving home from church after meeting Jesus, sad.

I want to offer you three principles from the text; these will go by quickly. Three principles that we can draw from the story. Here's the first one: You can be materially poor but rich in faith. You can be materially poor but rich in faith like the blind beggar. He was obviously materially poor. But do you see the richness of his faith? Verse 38, he cries out "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me." As far as I can tell in the whole rest of

the gospels there are only two other kinds of beings who recognize Jesus from minute one for who he really was: Angels and demons. And there's this man, this human, though he's blind physically, has clear eyed vision in the eyes of faith. And he says, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me." He is rich in faith! Though he is materially poor. And Jesus responds to him by blessing him with healing and with even more faith.

Principle number two: This one's a little bit harder for us to hear. You can be materially rich, but have a spiritual blind spot. You can even be self-righteous but have a big spiritual blind spot. I ask you when you consider these two men, which one was really blind? You see the blind beggar, started the story blind and marginalized by society. But he ends the story with his eyes clear both physically and spiritually. And Jesus has brought him from the margins right into the family. Whereas the rich ruler begins the story probably considering himself right at the center. He's not marginalized. He's right at the center of where society would value things. But at the end of the story he has marginalized himself. He walks away from Jesus sad. Why? Because Jesus exposed his blind spot. If you're self-righteous it's all about you. You probably have a huge blind spot. I loved the opening hymn we sang this morning. Especially that line where it pictured us all going up to the throne of Jesus, the throne of the universe. Did you hear that line? "Cast your trophies at its feet and crown in lord of all." Oh you're the rich ruler? Nice trophy. When you get before the throne of God, throw it down and crown him lord of all. You got dad of the year? Congratulations. You sold your company for 100 million dollars? Awesome, nice trophy. Whatever it is bring it to the throne of Christ, the throne of the universe. We're going to just cast it down all together and crown *him* lord of all. We won't have a blind spot if we do that. Our only blind spot is if we think it's all

about us, we can accomplish it, we can do it, we can become our own saviors. It's a blind spot.

Now that leads to the third principle, the last one: If you want to be saved, you can't rely on yourself. You need a savior. You thought I skipped over the really hard verses. You thought we were just going to end the sermon without me dealing with the camel and the eye of the camel. Oh no. We're going to look at that right now because the principle is true. In order for the salvation you can't rely on yourself, you need a savior. That's what Jesus was trying to convey after the exchange with the man where he says, "One thing you still lack, go sell all of your possessions, distribute them to the poor, and follow me." Then Jesus says, it's really hard for a person with wealth to enter the kingdom of God. In fact it's harder to do that than it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. I've read lots and lots of commentaries on this phrase. I've heard lots of sermons and teachings on this phrase. I've heard teachers and preachers try to nuance this thing. But what I think Jesus is really trying to say – go ahead and picture a camel going through the eye of a needle. To me, that sounds impossible. That's exactly what Jesus is just trying to say to the guy. Remember he had asked, "What must *I* do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus says to him, "Do you want to really know what it would take for you to inherit eternal life? You would have to give up everything. You would have to sell all that you have, distribute it to the poor," But he looked inside the man's heart and he knew, it's impossible for you to do that. In fact, the people say, "Who then can be saved?" And Jesus responds, "With man, it's impossible. But with God. But with God. But with God it is possible." And Jesus was describing to the man what he would do for him as his savior. Jesus would be the rich man who gave away all that he had, who left

his throne in heaven, and came all the way to planet earth to distribute his grace to the poor. With man it's impossible. You will never earn your salvation; you will never be able to be generous enough to earn your salvation. But Jesus is generous for you as your savior. He is the one that would do it for the man.

Why am I so confident that that's what it was Jesus was really saying here? Because of those four verses that are sandwiched between the rich ruler and the blind beggar. Verses 31 through 34. There they are on your page. They hinge these two stories together. What does it say in those verses? At the beginning of the sermon I wanted you to picture the rich ruler and the blind beggar but here in these verses Jesus wants us to picture him: upon the cross, spit upon, flogged, mistreated, dying, and three days later, rising again. *This* is how Jesus would become our savior. We cannot do it on our own. This is how he would heal us from our spiritual blindness and become our salvation.

So this whole fall as we ask the question, "Who needs Jesus?" we hope that you will see in your mind's eye, Jesus your savior, dying on the cross in your place, rising again over the penalty of death, and answering the question, "Who needs Jesus?" not by saying, "That group of people over there", "That guy" but rather, "I do. I need him to do for me what was impossible for me to do for myself."

Amen.