

Long before Jesus walked the Earth, long before he and his disciples wandered into Jericho, long before a blind man named Bartimaeus sought a miracle, Plato wrote about the universe. Plato figured there's a hierarchy to all things, from the heavens to the earth to kinds of animals to kinds of people. He determined within these hierarchies, some people are better than others, and philosophers were the greatest of 'em all. Figures. He arranged the senses, too, and sight was the most important. Plato's main character, of course, is the personification of all things great and good. He's the ideal, a philosopher who can see, and because he can see, he also has reason and understanding that others don't. And he knows all there is to know. That story was extremely popular. The only thing read more widely in the Greek-speaking world was Homer. It was so popular that, even if you didn't read it yourself, you still knew the story. Everyone did. It was everywhere. Silly me, I just realized I didn't tell you the name of that ideal character! His name was Timaeus.

Did you catch that? Fast-forward almost 400 years, and everyone still knows Timaeus as much as everyone now knows Romeo and Juliet. Even if you've never read it, you've at least heard of it. Romeo and Juliet's so well-known that even some modern laws bear their names. Timaeus was just as ubiquitous, maybe more. So, 400 years after Plato, Jesus and his disciples are in Jericho and a blind man's in their path. Remember his name? Bartimaeus. Let's parse that real quick. Timaeus we know already: it's the perfect Greek protagonist. The first bit, "bar," is Hebrew and means "son of." That's weird. The beggar's name's a mishmash of Hebrew and Greek meaning "Son of Timaeus." I have a hard time imagining it's a coincidence 'cause Mark redundantly introduces him as "Bartimaeus, Son of Timaeus." In other words, "This is the Son of Timaeus. The. Son. Of. Timaeus." This would make his audience perk all the way up.

Bartimaeus should be the Platonic ideal like his allegorical father, a philosopher with sight. He should top all the hierarchies. But instead, he's blind and a beggar. According to Plato's universe, because he cannot see, he cannot know. And if he cannot know, he cannot reason. And if he cannot reason, he's useless. Here's where it gets fun. Jesus heals the man and gives him sight. That's probably what Plato would suggest, miracle notwithstanding. Giving someone sight would teach them how to reason and see the truth. But Jesus makes it clear that reason isn't the be-all, end-all. When he heals him, Jesus says, "your faith has made you well." Your faith. It's not Plato and his hierarchies that hold true. It's Jesus and his great leveling. Timaeus may've attained the highest highs with his reason, but Bartimaeus gets there through God.

I don't love Plato's claim that sight is the greatest sense and you can really only succeed if you've got it. While I understand that not being able to see has massive limitations in the physical world, there's nothing about your physical abilities that should make a claim on your spirit. A blind man isn't less than just because he can't see. Jesus does give the man sight, but with the emphasis on faith he negates Plato's hierarchies, maybe he even negates the hierarchies that set different kinds of people ahead. Blindness doesn't make you bad, and sight doesn't make you good.

All that to say, I don't think Plato's entirely wrong with his observations. What he does with 'em isn't great, and that's where we need Jesus to come in. The Truth, for Jesus, isn't something we reason our way to. We get to the Truth by faith. These days, that's a beautiful and mighty scary thing. Because these days, we have a significant divide not just in faith but also in reason. What is reasonable, how do we view reason, what is true, and how do we process that truth? I worry about Plato's hierarchies because it's so easy to turn them into justifications for injustice. Blind? Deaf? Too many chromosomes? We've seen the gas chambers where hierarchies of people lead. But we've also seen what happens when we rely solely on faith. When we value what we want to believe over truth, truth loses its power. I'm not trying to say Jesus is wrong by emphasizing

faith. But I am saying we've seen the gas chambers where blind faith leads, too. So maybe Bartimeaus has something more to teach us than the simple reading that faith is greater than reason. Look at his name again. Bar (Hebrew) + Timaeus (Greek). He's a melding of Greek and Hebrew, his world was a melding of Greek and Hebrew, his influences and family and nationality and the way his synapses fire, all melding two very different worlds. And he's the better for it when both are emphasized. It's like his understanding of truth expands with a sort of spiritual system of checks and balances.

I care about Timaeus and Jesus and all the stuff we've been talking about for weeks because I see lots of supposed truths and lots of possible places those "truths" take us. I hear people say the truth of one person isn't as bad as what I've heard him say. I've lost touch with too many people I care about because of the threats they pose to so many other people I care about. I can't swallow the fear mongering and division. And it just plain stinks. We need our impulses, our opinions, our thoughts about how to treat other people, we need them to lean more towards Jesus than to Plato, but we can't get rid of reason. We need it desperately, too. One of the biggest problems we're facing now is the extreme misplaced faith in a very human person. Not faith in truth. Not faith complemented by reason. Not even faith in God. Faith in one unreasonable, unfaithful man. I shouldn't have to tell you that that's exactly the kind of thing Jesus railed against. But in our current world, I do. Do not use your reason to bully, and beware of where you place your faith. The faithless count on us getting this wrong, while the world desperately needs us to get this right. May your senses be sharp. May your reason be honed. May your faith be well-placed. And may reality be your truth.