

Jesus and Blindness . . . p. 1

Over the past two Sundays we have talked about Jesus the healer and the relationship between Jesus and the Jewish laws pertaining to Sabbath. This week we're going to look at a fascinating story which combines those two elements, the story of Jesus healing a blind man in John 9. I love this story -- it's one of my favourite stories to read and reread and to think about.

The healing is the easy part of the chapter -- a man who was born blind, who has never seen in his life -- is healed by Jesus and is seeing by verse 7. It's the next 34 verses which describe the aftermath of that healing that we're going to be giving special attention to today.

The chapter starts with a controversial question asked by Jesus' disciples:

Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?

It's not hard to see the dilemma they were in. Despite the lessons of the book of Job, it was widely thought that human suffering was directly related to sin and some of the rabbis of the day taught that. But, it's hard to imagine a man could have sinned before he was even born, and if his parents had sinned, it's hard to see why the man should be punished with such a huge burden for his whole life. So the disciples were curious as to whose sin caused this man's lifelong condition of being blind.

This whole story is one about blindness, physical and spiritual. We've already seen two examples: the physical blindness of the man, and the spiritual blind spot that the disciples had picked up from their religious culture. They presumed to know that someone had sinned. After all, here is a man with this condition and we all know that this condition comes as a result of sin, right? This is nothing more than presumption and the disciples may have had an extra excuse to be presumptuous -- after all they were the followers of the miracle-worker from Nazareth; they were important people whose opinions should be noted. I don't know if that was in their hearts, but Jesus makes it clear that they are off base when He replies:

"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. As long as it is day, we must do the work of Him who sent Me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

"This happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life." This is a tricky verse to translate, based on a missing word that is normally understood from the context and also on where the punctuation should be placed. On the surface it sounds like God made the man blind so that He could gain glory when Jesus healed him, but that's not the only option. Some translators have phrased it like this: ""But so that the work of God might be displayed in his life, we must do this work of Him who sent Me." And that's followed up by Jesus statement that, while He is in the world, He is the light of the world.

In either case, Jesus dismisses the "current general opinion" as having nothing to say on this matter and points to either the purpose or the result of this man's

blindness as being for the glory of God.

Then Jesus spit on the ground, made some mud and put it on the man's eyes. "Go, wash in the Pool of Siloam". So the man went to the pool, washed the mud off his eyes and came back seeing. Now it gets really interesting.

His neighbours and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, "Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?" Some claimed that he was. Others said, "No, he only looks like him." But he himself insisted, "I am the man."

"How then were your eyes opened?" they demanded. "The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see."

"Where is this man?" they asked him. "I don't know."

This is a pretty straight-forward section, but it hints at the big problem we're going to encounter later on. Some of the man's neighbours and those who had seen him begging were not convinced that he was the same guy. They had seen him then, probably many times, and they surely were able to recognize him, but there was something that twisted their vision and made them doubt his identity: "No, he only looks like him. That's his double." When you are conditioned to expect to see one thing and something else presents itself before you, you may have trouble seeing what is really there.

That can happen when we read the Bible sometimes. We expect it to say something that fits with our worldview and it surprises us. Juan Carlos Ortiz once taught a group of Argentinian young people how to study their Bibles. The first step in effective Bible Study is careful observation of the text and he noticed that those who had no church background were decidedly better at seeing what the text of Scripture actually said while the ones who thought they knew it already brought their biases to their reading and didn't see as clearly.

People who *know* that a person who has been blind all their lives will never see, have no room in their minds for that person to suddenly have the gift of sight. And so they will say silly things like, "No, he only looks like him."

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath. Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. "He put mud on my eyes," the man replied, "and I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." But others asked, "How can a sinner do such miraculous signs?" So they were divided. Finally they turned again to the blind man, "What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened." The man replied, "He is a prophet." The Jews still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man's parents. "Is this your son?" they asked. "Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?" "We know he is our son," the parents answered, "and we know he was born blind. But how he

can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don't know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for already the Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue. That was why his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

You can see that this is becoming a world view problem. Does your worldview allow for something miraculous to happen? If you believe in naturalism, that everything that happens can be explained scientifically, you are in the same position as the Pharisees - you'll have to deny the evidence for the miraculous. You'll be looking for loopholes in the stories of those who have experienced God's touch.

The Pharisees had a huge reason for wanting to discredit Jesus -- He had healed the man on the Sabbath. So you can hear some of them saying, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." If Jesus is not from God, then he's just a man like any of them and they knew that they couldn't make the kind of mud that Jesus made, the kind that opened eyes that had been blind for 15, 20 years or more. So all of their conversations from this point on are looking for the loophole, looking for a way to prove that Jesus wasn't anything special. "How did you receive your sight? It was your eyes he opened - what do you say about him? Is this your son, the one you say was born blind? How is that he can see?" Blindness. So many people can't see the truth because they don't believe it, they don't want it, they have already rejected that from their world view. Scientists don't reject the idea of "Intelligent Design" because there is no evidence in the universe of a designer, but because they have already decided that there is none -- therefore the evidence must be explained away. That's what the Pharisees are doing here because they don't believe Jesus was from God.

And then there's the political blindness, the desire to protect one's own position, one's own reputation in the community that leads people into fear, an inability to stand for what they know is true. The man's parents knew that he was their son and they knew his circumstances but they were not willing to put their faith in Jesus because they knew it would cost them their place in the synagogue. "He is of age; why don't you ask him." Let's continue:

A second time they (the Pharisees) summoned the man who had been blind.

"Give glory to God," they said. "We know this man is a sinner."

He replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"

Then they asked him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"

He answered, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?"

Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from!"

The man answered, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does His will. Nobody has ever heard of opening

the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” To this they replied, “You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!” And they threw him out.

Notice the Pharisees’ parting remark to this man who is boldly speaking truth to them: “You were steeped in sin at birth, how dare you lecture us!” They could only mean that his blindness was an evidence of sin in his life, that he was born blind because he was born in sin . . . and, that they weren’t. They were born righteous. At least you have to conclude that they were thinking that based on their final statement. They didn’t know him when he was a baby. They didn’t know the sins he committed in the womb or as an infant -- they, like the disciples at the beginning of our story, simply presumed that blindness was evidence of being “steeped in sin” or “completely immersed in sin.” What a pronouncement! What cruel judges would say a thing like that?

Earlier in this section they had challenged the man by saying, “Give glory to God. We know this man is a sinner.” When Joshua confronted Achan about his sin of stealing plunder from the fall of Jericho, his initial comment was, “Give glory to God.” This statement is probably best understood in the same way: “Tell the truth, tell the whole story, don’t hide any misdeed that Jesus might have committed here.” Or, it may be intended to say, “Give all the glory for your eyesight to God on high, not to some man who made mud and stuck it on your eyes and then told you to go wash it off.”

At the heart of this encounter between the Pharisees and the healed man are the man’s ability to see things as they are and the Pharisees’, just as obvious, blindness. Even though they had some difference of opinion about Jesus earlier in the story, with some claiming that no sinner could perform such a miracle, they come now as a united front, “We know this man is a sinner.” The man replies, “I don’t know that, but what I do know is that I was blind, but now I can see.” Personal testimony still has power!

Again they come at him with insults and accusations and this statement, “We know that God spoke to Moses, but we don’t know where this Jesus is from.” And then the man who had been blind completely throws them for a loop by saying, “We know that God doesn’t listen to sinners, but only to the godly who do His will. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” And they have no answer, so they respond with power, with their authority, and they throw him out of the synagogue. Blindness + power is a fair description of the forces that rule our Western world today. Most of our leaders do not see with the eyes of faith, but through their preconceptions and their power. Like the Pharisees of old, they seek to do all they can to maintain that power and to maintain their worldview, their grid for interpreting what’s going on all around them.

Final section, starting at v. 35:

Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when He found him, He said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” “Who is he, sir? Tell me so I may believe in him.” Jesus said, “You have now seen Him; in fact, He is the one speaking

with you.” Then the man said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him. Jesus said, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.” Some Pharisees who were with Him heard Him say this and asked, “What? Are we blind, too?” Jesus said, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.”

Jesus' coming to this earth represents a kind of judgment in that those who claim that they understand, who claim that they know all about God and that those who disagree with them are doomed to hell, are, in reality, the blind ones. But those who know that they need Jesus, who know that they can't see without Him, are the ones Jesus says will not be counted guilty of sin.

Throughout history, there have been Pharisaical leaders within the church, some very prominent. When I say that they are like the Pharisees, I mean that they are totally convinced that they are right, that everyone else is wrong and that the wrong ones are under the judgment of God.

Last week, in Southern California, a prominent leader in the Christian church, a man whose biblical teaching has helped and encouraged many, many people, held a conference called “Strange Fire”. It was an outright attack on all Christians who believe that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are for today, including all Pentecostals and all who would consider themselves Charismatic. In summary, this speaker claimed at the conference that the modern charismatic movement is a work of Satan and is being used to destroy the church of Jesus Christ.

If this man had been willing to visit the work of Rolland and Heidi Bakker, who are charismatic missionaries in Mozambique, who oversee the care of many thousands of orphans, the feeding of thousands of the hungry, where thousands of churches are planted and hundreds of thousands come to Jesus, where the dead are raised, the sick are healed and the lame walk, he would have to say that they are deluded and not Christian. This is the kind of blindness that modern Pharisees, like the ancient ones, embrace and defend with passion.

So, what do we learn, how can we avoid the blindness that we see in this chapter of John's gospel?

1. We have to be careful about presumption. Just as the disciples thought they knew how God always acted and the Pharisees showed that they made the same mistake, so we can assume that everything should fit into our world view -- and we would be really wrong. We shouldn't assume, for example, that people who are suffering deserve it, or that those who are carefree and prosperous deserve that either. We shouldn't assume that because God answered our prayer one way the last time that He'll answer the same way this time. We need to be humble in our expectations and interpretations of how the purposes of God will play out in our lives.

2. We also have to be watch ourselves that we aren't molded by fear of what others think or what others might do. The man's parents were so afraid of what might

happen to them -- being thrown out of the synagogue meant an end to your right to participate in corporate worship -- that they didn't say everything they knew. They let fear control their speech and so they became a non-factor in bringing light into the situation. That's the one thing we don't want to be -- a non-factor when it comes to bringing light into the darkness!

3. You don't need to hear me say this, but we live in a politically correct world where things are said to please certain special interest groups - things which have no solid basis in fact, but which are generally accepted by the community at large because they've heard them repeated so many times. Up until the early 90's you would often read studies showing the effect of environmental conditioning on determining sexual orientation -- not so much any more. Now the mantra is, "They're born that way." There are no end of studies underway to try to prove that, but the point here is that we live in a world where "truth" is controlled. We're not so different from the Soviet Union whose news service was called *Pravda* which means truth and for whom truth was whatever the government wanted it to be. I remember sitting across the table in a restaurant from a man who had many times smuggled bibles into the Soviet Union. At one point he said, "The government agent could tell you that that black coffee is white and he would expect you to believe it." We can't just accept the statements of media and politicians as if they were based in fact. Not even the academics are concerned with truth as a value. They're all promoting a world view and to be able to hold onto our world view, we will have to be lifelong learners and seekers after truth. As we've seen several times in this series, Jesus was a master at disarming the arguments of his opponents with good questions -- we can learn to follow His example.

4. A final word. Don't be too discouraged or distracted by the debates that go on within the Christian church. There are some who don't expect God to act in certain ways in our day and so they lash out at those who experience the Lord in ways that are different. There are others who tend to extremes in their faith, and who draw attention to themselves in the process -- not always positive attention. We in the evangelical church will probably always have these kinds of problems because we've chosen not to have a pope, not to place all the responsibility for discerning God's truth in one person. Some rash and foolish and unloving things are said by those who feel most passionately about their position and they need to be corrected. Over time, after an ebb and flow of discussion, there is usually some healing, and grace flows again. For those who reject that, who cling stubbornly to their point of view above all else, there will be a frustration of trying to solve the darkness in others, while they are blind both to the truth and to the harm they are causing. Jesus says, "Now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains." We must move on.