

From Blindness to Sight
Matthew 9:27-38

In the modern world, medical miracles have become almost routine. Babies born as much as 3 months prematurely quite often survive and thrive. Cochlear implants have made it possible for children to hear even though they were born deaf. Advanced surgical techniques and prosthetics have made it possible even for the most severely injured people to resume productive lives. The Lions Club has even kept hundreds of thousands of people from losing their sight to river blindness.

And this novel coronavirus notwithstanding, we've made tremendous strides in the control of contagious diseases. After all, smallpox, yellow fever and malaria were commonplace when this area was first settled. Some of you remember the fear of polio. But because scientists from Edward Jenner to Jonas Salk discovered ways to control and even to eliminate these diseases, we expect nothing less from our modern researchers. Even though not one but at least three vaccines for COVID have been developed in record time, we are impatient to get them into our arms so we can get on with our lives.

Of course, ancient people had no such demanding expectations. They knew they were completely helpless in the face of disease. In those days, even nutritional deficiencies or slight infections could quickly become life-threatening. Injuries routinely robbed people of their ability to work, and thus to live.

So it's no wonder that Jesus' miracles of healing caused such a sensation. It's no wonder that the news of His ability to heal every kind of disease and sickness travelled throughout the land. It's no wonder that the crowds marveled, observing that no one in Israel had ever seen anything like Him.

So, why couldn't the Pharisees join in the celebration? After all, Jesus didn't just heal people's physical problems. No, He also cast out devils, demons who had come to possess and torment their hosts. Jesus was thus involved in the most unmistakable kind of spiritual warfare.

And the particular example we find in verse 32 wasn't some fake faith-healing like we see on TV, featuring a carefully-chosen victim with a counterfeit complaint. No, this particular demon had made its victim dumb, unable to speak. So when the demon was cast out and the man began to talk, his freedom was obvious to everyone, clear proof that Jesus really did perform real miracles.

So, why couldn't the Pharisees recognize that Jesus' power obviously came from God? Why did they instead come to the nonsensical conclusion that He must have used demonic force to cast out a demon? Why couldn't they see Jesus for Who He truly is?

Well, let's try to follow their logic. Of course they could not deny that Jesus possessed some sort of supernatural power. And given their understanding of the Old Testament, they knew there could only be two sources of such power – either God or the devil. They were right about that.

But they went wrong by taking their knowledge of the Scriptures too far. For in their efforts to avoid breaking the Law of Moses, they ending up constructing a supplemental set of requirements, expanding the Law far beyond its original meaning. Moreover, they had come to believe that following all of their man-made rules was essential for anyone who wanted to live in a truly holy way.

And so, because Jesus refused to go along with their legalistic interpretation of the Scriptures, and especially because He brought the blessing of healing to people on the Sabbath, something that

their elaborate interpretations considered to be law-breaking work, they came to the conclusion that Jesus couldn't be holy. And if He wasn't holy, if His miraculous power didn't come from God, then it must have come from the demons, even though as He cast them out of their victims, He stood in obvious opposition to them.

So, why couldn't the Pharisees see Jesus for Who He really is? Because they were judging Him, not according to God's Word, but according to their own man-made belief system. They refused to accept Jesus on His own terms, instead imposing their own opinions and preferences on Him.

And believe it or not, many people continue to do the same sort of thing. Perhaps you've heard someone say, "A loving God would never put such unreasonable restrictions on human relationships." Or maybe you've heard someone say, "If God really existed, He would bring an end to the poverty and injustice of the world." Or perhaps you yourself have wondered why, if God truly is all-loving and all-powerful, He would allow you to go through suffering or hardship, pain or grief.

But whenever we think or say these things, aren't we really saying that we know better than God? Whenever we allow the difficult circumstances of our lives to lead us into disappointment or even into bitterness, aren't we really saying that our understanding or our plans or our purposes are superior to His? Just like those ancient Pharisees, don't we sometimes lose sight of Who Jesus really is, the divine Son of God? Don't we sometimes refuse to accept Jesus on His terms?

Of course, the Pharisees weren't the only ones who had a hard time seeing Jesus clearly in this passage. The two blind men who followed Him, crying out for Him to help them, certainly couldn't see Him, at least not with their physical eyes. But in one way they actually understood more about Him than the Pharisees did. For in verse 27, they called Him the Son of David, thus confessing Him to be the Messiah God had promised would rule over His people. Moreover, they were confident that Jesus could restore their sight, even as they appealed to His mercy to help them.

So, when Jesus granted their request, when He proved that He was in fact the Messiah they proclaimed Him to be, why didn't they respond to His gracious power with obedience? After all, and for whatever reason, He had told them in verse 30 not to tell anyone about what He had done for them. But in the very next verse, we find out that they did exactly the opposite, spreading the news of His power and mercy all throughout the country. So, in spite of their accurate knowledge about Jesus, and in spite of their newfound ability to see Jesus with their physical eyes, why did they remain blind to His authority?

Of course, this sort of blindness wasn't unique to them. For what about us? Whenever we repeat the Apostles' Creed, we confess that Jesus is the Son of God. We claim that He is our Lord. We say we believe that He rose from the dead and ascended into Heaven, where He is seated at the right hand of the Father, holding all power in His hands. Oh yes, we say all the right things about Jesus.

And we know all these things because, in a very real sense, Jesus has opened our eyes to see Him. For He has not only provided us Mississippi Presbyterians a long legacy of faithful preaching and sound teaching. He has poured out His Holy Spirit on all those who trust in Him. And as we read responsively this morning, it is the Holy Spirit who helps us understand God's Word and God's will, teaching us spiritual things and filling us with the very mind of Christ.

And hasn't Jesus blessed all of us in material ways as well? Even during this past year of hurricanes and ice storms, of pandemics and political upheaval, hasn't God protected us in so many ways? In fact, can't we all give examples of how God has brought healing into our lives and the lives of our loved ones? In one way or another, can't we all relate to the experience of these blind men who were blessed in such an amazing way?

But how many of us are any more obedient than they were? Oh, we may not know everything in the Bible, but do we follow the parts that we do know? Do we really love the Lord our God with all we are and all we have? Or do we turn our attention away from the Giver to focus on all the gifts He has given us? Do we really love our neighbors just as much and in the same way that we love ourselves? Or do we catch ourselves giving others at best the leftovers of our time and attention, our talents and treasure?

Worse yet, instead of letting the Holy Spirit fill us with the wisdom of God, do we decide for ourselves what is right and wrong, based on our own reason or experience, on what makes sense or feels right to us? Like those ancient Pharisees and like those men who had miraculously recovered their sight, do we ever catch ourselves thinking that we know better than Jesus?

But there's a third kind of blindness that we find in today's passage. For yes, the Pharisees were blind to Jesus' identity. And yes, the men who had recovered their sight were blind to Jesus' authority. But it is also possible to be just as blind to Jesus' mission.

For let's face it – it's easy for us church-going types to look down on people like those men whose sight was restored, people who openly and willfully disobey God in spite of their blessings. It's easy for us to despise our modern Pharisees, those who try to force everyone else to live by their man-made rules about everything from plastic drinking straws to letting boys play in girls' sports leagues. It's easy for us to stay in our holy huddles and let the increasingly vile and violent culture go to hell.

But when Jesus looked out on the crowds who constantly surrounded Him, what did He see? Not just people who were sick or demon possessed, or even people who were trapped in their own legalism. No, Jesus saw that they fainted. He saw that they were harassed and distressed, deeply troubled by all the brokenness and misery within themselves and in the world around them. In other words, Jesus saw the disastrous, devastating effects of sin everywhere He looked.

And the world is no different today. Because sin blinds people to Christ and His truth, those who refuse to follow His perfect law of love, those who have fallen prey to temptation, those who have become the victims of their own or other people's selfish choices live lives of brokenness and pain. Because sin promises happiness but delivers only grief, there are lost and hurting people all around us.

And one of the reasons that sin causes so much misery is because sin divides people from one another and from God. Sin leaves people scattered abroad, lonely and isolated, cut off not only from the saving grace of God but also from the love and comfort we so desperately need from one another.

So, yes there are those all around us like the Pharisees who blaspheme, who consciously reject Christ. There are those all around us like those two formerly blind men, those who are living in radical disobedience, regardless of their outward profession of faith. But at root they all have the same problem – they're sheep without a shepherd. And when Jesus saw them, when He still sees those who are scattered from one another, when Jesus sees those who have been thrown down and broken by sin,

those who are downcast and hopeless, instead of despising them He is moved with compassion. In fact, it was because He was so determined to help sinners like them, sinners like us, that He went to the cross.

So, what do we see when we look at the increasingly sinful culture all around us? Do we have the same sort of compassion as Jesus has? Do we have the same desire to do whatever it takes to help them see Jesus more clearly? Do we see our mission to a lost and broken world as clearly as Jesus did? If not, we need to pray that Jesus would open our eyes, just as He did for those 2 blind men. We need to pray that Jesus would let us see the lost as He sees them.

But most of all, we need to pray that God would send out workers into His harvest, that God would send messengers who will be able to reach those who are lost and hurting all around us. And as we see their suffering and pain as Jesus did, and as we pray for each of them to come to see Christ more clearly, and as we show as well as share the love that Christ has extended to us, well, maybe we'll find that we ourselves are the laborers we are praying for. Maybe as God opens our eyes to see His harvest, and as God opens our hearts to love His lost sheep, God will allow everyone around us to see Jesus more clearly – in us.