

John 9.13-23: The Dilemma of Legacy Blindness

❖ Act 3: The Interrogation of the Pharisees

▶ Main characters:

▶ The Pharisees

▶ The missionary: the healed man

▶ The missionary's parents

▶ Theme: Legacy blindness: theological and institutional

There Has to be a Different Explanation

“Where is this man?” they asked him. “I don’t know,” he said. 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.

- ❖ Why bring the healed man to the Pharisees? Were his neighbors truly inquisitive about his healing, wanting to know more, wanting to understand this miracle? Perhaps.
- ❖ But why not search for Jesus? Now that the evidence of grace and transforming power had been revealed to them, was this their moment to respond to the missionary message and demonstrate faith just as the man had done when Jesus told him to go wash in the water? There was no celebration of this miracle in their community and no indication of faith as a result of seeing something that had never before happened.

So again I ask, does God give you His Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard? So also Abraham “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham.

The Pharisees question the healed man

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.

- ❖ Jesus called the Pharisees “blind guides” (Matthew 23.16). Here we have a classic case of the blind (community) looking to the blind (Pharisees) for insight.

“Announce this to the descendants of Jacob and proclaim it in Judah: Hear this, you foolish and senseless people, who have eyes but do not see, who have ears but do not hear: Should you not fear me?” declares the LORD. “Should you not tremble in My presence? I made the sand a boundary for the sea, an everlasting barrier it cannot cross. The waves may roll, but they cannot prevail; they may roar, but they cannot cross it.

—Jeremiah 5.20-22

- ❖ As we have seen, the Pharisees have a very narrow lens for interpretation: *“Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath. Therefore the Pharisees also asked . . .”*

The missionary recounts his healing

“He put mud on my eyes,” the man replied, “and I washed, and now I see.”

❖ Two things stand out in the missionary’s second retelling of his healing—

(1) He is selective in the details of his testimony, leaving Jesus unnamed. (*Does he already perceive the spirit and attitude of the Pharisees toward Jesus? Nevertheless, the Pharisees know who is responsible for these miracles!*)

(2) His response of faith is the emphasis of his testimony: “I washed and now I see” (*this reflects John’s purpose for his gospel*) and also reveals the spiritual transformation that has taken place within him—as well as what has *not* taken place in hearts of the Pharisees.

But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.

Theological disagreement among the Pharisees

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 perform such signs?" So they were divided.

- ❖ There were two schools of thought among Pharisees: the Hillelite Pharisees considered the facts of a matter, the Shammaite Pharisees looked at the principle involved. Thus the division here among them.
- ❖ Some Pharisees saw only their Sabbath rule violation (the principle); thus, they concluded, Jesus *cannot* be from God. Other Pharisees questioned how a man *not* from God could perform such "signs" (facts).

"signs" (semeion) – "A sign, mark, token, miracle with a spiritual end and purpose. In the plural, miracles which lead to something out of and beyond themselves; finger-marks of God, valuable not so much for what they are as for what they indicate of the grace and power of the Doer."

- ❖ Remember, John always refers to the miracles of Jesus as “signs”—evidence that he is the Messiah, the Son of God. These signs the glory of the One and Only (Prologue 14), and they reveal the transition from law to grace: *“From the fullness of his grace we have received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”* (Prologue 16-17). These signs are manifested to prompt faith in Jesus, resulting in eternal life: *“But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”* Thus one’s response to these signs determines one’s eternal destiny. This sign, Jesus said, was to display the purposes of God (9.3); the Pharisees in their blindness will fail to see *“the finger-marks of God . . . the grace and power of the Doer.”*

The spiritually enlightened responds to the theologically blind

Then 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.”

- ❖ His first identification of Jesus to the community was “the man they call Jesus.” Now to the “Learned Ones” he unequivocally declares Jesus to be a “prophet.”
- ❖ At this point in Jewish understanding, “prophet” has distinct messianic inferences. (We see this when the priests and Levites question John the Baptizer about his identity, John 1.19-26.)
- ❖ The Pharisees have interacted extensively with Jesus but are blind to his true identity—

The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.

—1 Corinthians 2.14

- ❖ Shortly, the healed man will address Jesus as “Lord,” somehow understanding when Jesus speaks to him that the “Son of Man” is the “Lord” who is to be worshipped.

Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.

—1 Corinthians 12.3

- ❖ Here is evidence of one who has truly come to saving faith in Christ: an untaught understanding of Jesus—Spirit to spirit—one who is spiritually alive, discerning spiritual truth from the Spirit who reveals Christ. This man’s simple, but profound response, exemplifies this truth—

What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. . . . The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, for, “Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.

—1 Corinthians 2.12-13, 15-16

The Pharisees interrogate the missionary's parents

They 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?"

- ❖ After all that they have seen and heard, the Pharisees "still did not believe . . ." Why are they so blind? Why can this man see but they remain unseeing?
- ❖ Spiritual blindness is supernatural— *"The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God"* (2 Corinthians 4.4)—and never is blindness more pronounced than when it comes to understanding (or misunderstanding!) the preeminence of Christ.

Oh, foolish Galatians! Who has cast an evil spell on you? For the meaning of Jesus Christ's death was made as clear to you as if you had seen a picture of his death on the cross.

—Galatians 3.1 NLT

The blindness of the healed man's parents

“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.”

❖ There are two factors at work here—

- ▶ The man’s parents could understand what was natural— “we know he is our son and we know he was born blind” —but they have no comprehension of the spiritual. Astoundingly, they do not celebrate their son’s healing or exhibit any desire to know how it happened.
- ▶ They do not want to lose their membership in the synagogue. *His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who already had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. That was why his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”* As events continue to unfold, their son will be thrown out, but they will retain their place in the synagogue. Their son, however, will gain far more than they retain.

“For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.

Missions Truth—

This threat was very real and a harbinger of what the followers of Christ would face in the years to come—and what many face today when they count the cost (Luke 14.26-33) and determine that following Christ is greater gain than losing wealth, security, and even family.

“For the renegades let there be no hope, and may the arrogant kingdom soon be rooted out in our days, and the Nazarenes [i.e., the Christians] . . . and the minim [i.e., the heretics] . . . perish in a moment and be blotted out from the book of life and with the righteous may they not be inscribed, Blessed art thou, O Lord, who humblest the arrogant.”

—THE TWELFTH BENEDICTION, AD 90

“One sells them nothing and buys nothing from them. One takes nothing from them and gives them nothing. One teaches their sons no craft and one does not allow oneself to be treated by them medically, neither by the medicinal handling of an object nor by the medicinal handling of persons.”

—THE TOSEFTA, SECOND CENTURY AD

(The Tosefta was a compilation of Jewish oral law, supplemental to the Mishnah.)

Understanding “legacy” blindness

❖ The “theological” blindness of the Pharisees

Jewish belief and life was governed by the Torah which included (1) the written Law of Moses and (2) the Oral Law, believed to also have been given to Moses during the forty days on Mt. Sinai, but forbidden to be written down. This Oral Law (with its accumulated traditions) was considered the necessary basis for interpreting the Written Law—*practices and conclusions, but not explicitly linked to scripture references*. After the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, the first major collection of rabbinic literature, the *Mishnah*, was written—the collective oral traditions of the Pharisees from 530 BC to AD 70.

So the Pharisees and teachers of religious law asked him, “Why don’t your disciples follow our age-old tradition? They eat without first performing the hand-washing ceremony.” Jesus replied, “You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you, for he wrote, ‘These people honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me. Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God.’ For you ignore God’s law and substitute your own tradition.”

—Mark 7.5-8 NLT

- ▶ By the time of Jesus, the Oral Law had accumulated almost 600 years of interpretation, application, and tradition, and had come to transcend the Written Law—an issue that Jesus addressed numerous times.

“Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”

—Mark 7.13

- ▶ The Oral Law was the basis of Peter saying to Cornelius, *“You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile”* (Acts 10.28), and the reason Peter was criticized by the believers at Jerusalem. It wasn't a violation of the Written Law, but another case of human traditions replacing God's Word—and its was obstructing the mission to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations.
- ▶ We need to consider how we are guilty of “legacy blindness”— of perpetuating rules, traditions (*“That's how we've always done it.”*), cultural norms or preferences which do not reflect grace and the life-giving work of the Spirit, have little or no basis in Scripture, and are simply a reflection of “our way.”

❖ **The “institutional” blindness of the parents**

- ▶ Belonging to the institution was more important than the evidence that God was working in a new way, apart from the institution.
- ▶ They were unwilling to pay the price to identify with the work of God that was displayed in their own son’s life. Thus they fulfilled the words of Jesus when he said—

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn “ ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law — a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.’ ”

—Matthew 10.32-35

- ▶ Going to church or having membership in a church does not fulfill the purposes of God in one’s life and yet it often replaces the hard work of obedience, sacrifice, and taking the mission of the Christ to a lost and hostile world. Institutional loyalty is never an acceptable substitute for Christlikeness, faithful discipleship, or Spirit-led living.