

The Gospel of John

Session Twenty: The Healing of the Blind Man and the Questions of the Pharisees Commentary

John 9:1-41

9:1–2. John wanted his readers to focus on the blindness of the man described in the first five verses. The disciples, wrapped in Old Testament legalism (Exod. 34:7), concluded there were only two possible explanations for the blindness: either his parents had sinned or the man had sinned. The disciples saw neither the man nor his parents but an opportunity for theological discussion. They displayed no compassion, only curiosity.

Many Bible students are amazed to discover that the Old Testament contains no story of the giving of sight to the blind. The only New Testament example outside the Gospels is the encounter between Ananias and Saul of Tarsus in Acts 9. But when we examine the ministry of Jesus, there are more instances of the healing of blind people than any other type of miracle (Matt. 9:27–31; 12:22ff.; 15:30ff.; 21:14; Mark 8:22–26; 10:46–52; Luke 7:21ff.).

9:3. John 8:12 forms a foundation by which we understand the events of chapter 9: “When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’ ” The light of life did not fix blame but offered grace, so Jesus rejected the alternatives of the disciples. In this man’s life, hurting was the preparation for healing. Jesus’ words to the disciples in chapter 11 offer insight: “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s son may be glorified through it” (John 11:4).

Comparison of John 5 and 9 leads us to the conclusion that sin may result in sickness on some occasions, but we should never assume an essential connection. God can bring glory to himself through healing as in both of these accounts by John—or through not healing, as we learn later in the New Testament from the struggles of the apostle Paul. The focus is not on the comfort of the creature but the exaltation of the Creator.

9:4–5. The contrast between blindness and sight now moves to the contrast between night and day. Jesus was the sent one, and the disciples assisted him in his work. But this will soon end when night comes. Night probably refers to the difficult days of the passion week, particularly the cross. If we had only this text, we might conclude that the disciples could function in God’s work only so long as Jesus was with them in the world; then all would be darkness.

Interpreters tiptoe around the possible meaning of these verses. The clue may lie in the hermeneutical principle of progressive revelation. The Lord had not yet explained the role of the Holy Spirit in illuminating their future ministry. At this point he focused their attention only on him, his divine mission, and their involvement during the short period of earthly ministry. Later in this Gospel he explained that light would shine again after the resurrection and the ascension as the Holy Spirit reproduced the light of the world through them.

Carson expresses it this way, “This does not mean that Jesus stops being the light of the world once he has ascended. It means, rather, that the light shines brightly while he lives out his human life up to the moment of his glorification. Throughout that period he is the light that exposes the world, judges the world, saves the world. Those who enjoy his light will be engulfed by darkness when he is taken away (12:35)” (Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991, p. 362).

Though we must take it as application, not interpretation, it is possible to see in these verses an emphasis on the urgency and brevity of our own time of ministry. Through the Holy Spirit the light now shines on us. Darkness will soon overwhelm the world when the Lord’s people and the Holy Spirit are taken out of the world. So night is coming again as we are reminded in a familiar hymn written in 1854 by an eighteen-year-old Canadian girl, Annie Louise Walker. The hymn does not contain much gospel, but it focuses on the time limitations of service.

*Work for the night is coming, work through the morning hours;
Work while the dew is sparkling; work ’mid springing flowers.
Work when the day grows brighter, work in the glowing sun;
Work for the night is coming, when man’s work is done.*

9:6–7. A strange thing happened as the blind man experienced healing by the Lord. We know Jesus did not need physical substance to work a miracle, so what was the point of the mud on the man’s eyes? Some interpreters point out that the Jews believed clay and spittle had some medicinal value, but that would put the power in the instrument rather than the healer.

Others argue that clay often depicts creation in Scripture. But perhaps we can find here something as simple as a man who needed some physical symbol to encourage his faith, not unlike Gideon and his fleece. This healing was not remedial, since the man suffered congenital blindness. Verse 7 reminds us of the importance of obedience and also reflects the experience of the ten lepers (Luke 17). The clay did not create the healing; obedience to the word of Christ brought sight to this man.

Borchert compares the sending to Siloam with the healing of Naaman at the Jordan River (2 Kgs. 5):

The implication in both stories seems to be that the healer demanded the man in need to obey the healer’s instructions. As such the reader should not miss the close connection between obedience or effectual believing and experiencing the powerful work of God. Moreover, the name of the ancient pool was regarded as significant in this connection because the evangelist made a point of informing the reader of its meaning. According to John, the word ‘Siloam’ meant ‘sent’ (John 9:7). As such the pool’s name is indicative both of Jesus’ mission and his command to those who would receive his blessings and become identified as his followers (Borchert, Gerald L. *John*. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996, p. 315).

9:8–12. What followed was reaction from the neighbors. Miracles were uncommon in Israel. Even his neighbors showed their amazement. Somehow this man born blind could see. His first step of faith was acceptance of the fact that his blindness had departed. He had no idea what had happened to him; he had no idea who had done it; he had no idea where Jesus had gone. The miracles of Christ work similarly in our day, whether physical or spiritual. He performed his miracles in accordance with acts of faith (not always on the part of the one healed) and in obedience to God's word. But the story goes on.

9:13–17. This portion of chapter 9 is dominated by three testimonies that reflect three attitudes toward Jesus. We begin with the first testimony of the man which reflects the prejudice of his accusers. The neighbors brought the man to the Pharisees. John raised the red flag when he pointed out in verse 14 that the day in which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath. The neighbors were still confused, but the Pharisees offered their standard legalistic condemnation: anyone who did not keep the Sabbath could not heal. But if the healer were a sinner, how could he perform miracles?

The words and works of Jesus brought division. But this time when the Pharisees turned to the healed man, he had a different answer from his previous "I don't know." In his growing faith, he indicated that the healer must have been a prophet. Since John the Baptist was the first prophet these people had seen for about four hundred years, this was quite a statement of praise. A prophet? Roaming around Israel healing blind people? Impossible.

This Sabbath business had now been going on for several chapters. John had already said, "So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jews persecuted him" (5:16). John's earlier references to the Jews in general now focused more narrowly on the Pharisees. The Sadducees are never mentioned in this book and John was not concerned about the Sanhedrin. Historically, the Sanhedrin was the controlling body and it was dominated by Sadducees. This is the picture we get from Luke in Acts. But John, as we have said repeatedly, concerned himself very little with history and very much with theology.

The liberal Sadducees had watered down their theology. They were content with political posturing until Paul's preaching of the resurrection shook up their ranks. But the Pharisees were protectors of the righteousness of the law. No violator of the Sabbath could be permitted to carry about the reputation of healer while the Pharisees represented the moral minority of Israel.

But even they were a divided house as we know from the experience of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. So the man's neighbors, getting no help from their theologians, turned back to the man who uttered the first sign of a budding faith. Morris comments with typical warmth, "If this seems to us inadequate we must remember that the man had no way of knowing that Jesus was more. His contact with the Lord had been very brief. And for him 'prophet' was probably the highest place he could assign to a man of God. His answer puts Jesus in the highest place he knew" (Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971, p. 486).

9:18–23. From the first testimony of the man that unveiled the prejudice of some of the Pharisees, we move to the testimony of the parents and the pressure of religious legalism. Obviously the man could see; no one could doubt that. But they could doubt whether he had been born blind. The Pharisees asked the parents this question and got an affirmative answer. But the parents immediately tacked on their own caveat; they obviously did not want to discuss this business of healing. Earlier the man himself had said, “I don’t know.” Now the parents said, We don’t know.

If this portion of chapter 9 ended at verse 21, we could see a normal parental reaction spoken in truth and frankness. But John wanted his readers to know there was a motivating fear—the pressure of excommunication. He also explained that already the Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue. Many interpreters suggest that since we know Christians worshiped in synagogues in the Book of Acts, John must have been reading back into the text the rulings of a later day. But that may be attributing more to the text than John intended. Remember, he was not concerned with formal rulings of the Sanhedrin but the hostility of religious leaders.

I agree with Borchert: “From my perspective, therefore, the statement as contained in 9:22 would be reflective of the hostile context in the time of Jesus. After all, Jesus was indeed regarded as an enemy by the Jewish authorities” (Borchert, p. 320).

From our modern perspective we can hardly imagine the horror of excommunication in Jesus’ time. Such a ban would curse these people forever from the religious life of their community. The defense of an unknown prophet, even one great enough to heal their blind son, hardly seemed worth such a risk. To avoid such punishment, the parents threw the burden of proof back on their son.

9:24–34. This portion of the chapter breaks clearly into three specific segments: the first testimony of the man, the testimony of the parents, and the second testimony of the man. The Pharisees’ demands seemed simple enough—give glory to God. From Joshua 7:19 we know this demanded the truth. But it was also a deliberate attempt to divide Jesus from God, the precise unity the Lord attempted to build throughout chapter 8. The we of verse 24 is emphatic in the Greek; the Pharisees were stating their theological position on the matter.

In his growing faith, the man recited his simple testimony: One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see! But the questions persisted. The man’s unwillingness to recant his story made him a victim of Pharisaic persecution not only in words (they hurled insults at him) but in the literal excommunication from the synagogue (they threw him out).

We find a simple logic in the words of this illiterate man. God does not listen to sinners. But since it was obvious that this man had healed his blindness, the man (whoever he was) had to be from God. But we also see some reason for the growing anger of the Pharisees. This man was a blind beggar—considered the dregs of first-century society. John portrayed him with something of an “in-your-face” attitude when he declared, I have told you already and you did

not listen. Then he followed this up with, Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. The man did not understand all the theological implications of the event, but he kept a level head. His newly-found physical sight was rapidly joining forces with spiritual sight.

Carson notes, "His increasing boldness and sardonic wit stem from his most uncommon gift, common sense. What he finds remarkable is not his own belief, but the unbelief of the officials. Jesus has performed an astonishing miracle of healing, and they cannot decide where he comes from (which on the man's lips does not have metaphysical overtones) ... It is always risky to identify spiritual power with divine power. But such theological niceties do not trouble the healed man. His spiritual instincts are good, even if his theological argumentation is not entirely convincing" (Carson, pp. 374–75).

Surely the Pharisees had not heard Jesus' dialogue with the disciples recorded at the beginning of the chapter. But they offered their own answer to the disciples' question in verse 34 when they said, You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!

So far in this chapter we have seen two kinds of blindness. The physical blindness of the man was treatable by the power of God's Son. But the Pharisees, unwilling to acknowledge their blindness, placed themselves beyond the realm of his healing power.

9:35–38. As the text unfolds, there seems to be no question that this man became a believer. The great Bible scholar B. F. Westcott claimed this was the first time Jesus offered himself as a personal object of faith. Let us not miss the fact that Jesus looked for the man rather than the other way around. How common our terminology when we talk about "finding God" or "finding Christ." But neither the Father nor the Son was ever lost. We are lost ones, and God finds us. As Jesus invited the man to believe, he moved from blindness to sight, from fate to faith, and from darkness to light.

Worship is the normal response of faith. Indeed, worship without faith is not worship at all. Chris Austin once wrote of this event, "The Jews cast him out of the temple, and the Lord of the temple found him." Up until now the man had not seen Jesus, so his question in verse 36 rested not in ignorance but great vulnerability and readiness to receive the truth. His faith response of verse 38 is one of the most beautiful statements of the New Testament—Lord, I believe. The words translated sir in verse 36 and Lord in verse 38 are exactly the same (*kurie*). But the NIV correctly renders the difference in the man's response after he knew who Jesus was.

Morris observes:

This is the climax for the man of a process that has been going on throughout the chapter. His insight into the Person of Jesus has been growing, and now this final revelation puts the coping stone on what has gone before. The man sees that Jesus is the one object of a right faith and accordingly puts his trust in him. This is the only place in this Gospel where anyone is said to worship Jesus. The verb occurs several times in chapter 4 of worshiping God, and it is found in the same sense in 12:20. It can be used of paying very high respect to men, but in John it is

more natural to understand it of paying divine honors. The man has already recognized that Jesus came from God (v. 33). Now he goes a step further. He gives to Jesus that reverence that is appropriate to God (Morris, pp. 495–96).

9:39–41. Instead of faith in the Lord, the Pharisees demonstrated the futility of faith in one's self. John 9:39 is one of the most striking verses in the Bible. Jesus made himself the pivotal point of human destiny. Surely the verse emphasizes that spiritually blind people who recognize their malady will be given an opportunity to see. But those who are spiritually blind and deny it will never know the light. As Hughes points out, "Christ came to earth so that those who think they have spiritual insight may be shown to be blind, and those who do not suppose they have this spiritual insight may see. His whole argument centered around a person's sense of need. If someone felt no need, he would not see; but those who knew they were blind were the ones who could be made to see" (Hughes. *Behold the Man* (2 vols.). Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1984, p. 164).

The Pharisees asked what they thought was a rhetorical question: Are we blind too? The availability of light made them guilty of rejecting relief from their blindness. Every person who realizes his or her spiritual blindness becomes a candidate for seeing; those who refuse to recognize their spiritual blindness place themselves beyond help. We might paraphrase Jesus' final words like this: "If you would only admit your blindness, you would not be guilty of sin because I could forgive it; but because you claim your own self-righteousness, your guilt remains."

How many people enter church Sunday after Sunday thinking they must be good enough in God's eyes since they assess themselves as righteous. Yet they desperately need the light of God's truth to shine on their own wickedness so the light of the world can open their eyes and help them see his truth.)¹

¹ Gangel, Kenneth O. *Holman New Testament Commentary: John*. Edited by Max E. Anders. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2000).