

“He Is a Prophet”

The Thirty-First in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 9:1-23; Isaiah 35:1-10

The Feast of Booths is over. The feast of Dedication is still several months off in the future, and the Passover is now less than six months away. Although Jesus’ hour has not yet come, it is drawing near. This is why we also see a new sense of urgency in Jesus’ teaching. When Jesus performs his sixth miraculous sign—the healing of a man who has been blind from birth—Jesus uses the occasion to continue to instruct his disciples about the meaning and nature of his messianic mission as he prepares them for that hour of which he has been speaking—when he must depart and go to that place where no one else (including his disciples) may follow.

We resume our series on the Gospel of John, and we now move into John chapter 9—although we are still in the so-called “conflict phase” of Jesus’ ministry. John does not tell us where or when the events recorded in chapter 9 take place, but it is reasonable to assume that when Jesus speaks again of being the light of the world, the events recorded here occur at some point shortly after the events in John 8, yet before the Feast of the Dedication, which is mentioned in John 10 (and which occurs about three months after the Feast of Booths). However, an important change becomes noticeable in chapter 9. The pace of John’s account of Jesus’ messianic mission quickens, and the events John recounts are bringing us ever closer to the coming Passover, and to Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension.

The account of the healing of the man blind from birth, as well as Jesus’ proclamation that he is the good (and true) shepherd of Israel (in John 10), takes up the entirety of each of the next two chapters. Since these are seamless episodes it is best to preach through John 9 and 10 in one sermon. Unfortunately, time does not permit us to do justice to either passage if we go through them in one week (we could but survey them), so I have divided each of the next two chapters into two parts—that will bring us to my sabbatical.

So far in John’s Gospel, there have been five miraculous signs which Jesus performed to confirm the truth of his preaching, and which serve as his messianic credentials. If Jesus merely claimed to be the “I AM” who spoke to Moses through the burning bush (as he did in John 8:58) without anything to back up that claim, then the Jews would have every reason to doubt Jesus’ assertion. As we have seen, Jesus’ words are backed-up by a number of miraculous signs—many more than the five John has emphasized. So far Jesus has turned water into wine at Cana (John 2:1-11). He cleansed the temple (John 2:13-22), and declared it his Father’s house. He healed a nobleman’s son in John 4:46-54. In John 5, Jesus healed a man who had been lame for thirty-eight years. In John 6, Jesus fed over 5000 people from two dried fish and five barley loaves. Here, in John 9, the sixth of these miraculous signs, Jesus will heal a man who had been blind from birth. The seventh of these signs will come in John 11, when Jesus raises his friend Lazarus from the dead. As difficult as Jesus’ words have been for the people to understand and accept, his words are proven to have come from God because of the nature of his miracles.

There are several other instances recorded in the synoptic gospels in which Jesus heals the blind. In Mark 8:22-26, Jesus healed a blind man in Bethsaida. According to Matthew 9:27-31, Jesus healed two blind men in the Galilee, and in Matthew 12:22-23 he healed a demon-possessed man who was also blind and deaf. And, as recorded in all three synoptic gospels, Jesus healed two blind men near Jericho, one of them being named—Bartimaeus. Why such emphasis in Jesus’ messianic mission upon healing blindness, lameness, deafness, or diseases like leprosy and others which rendered people ceremonially unclean?

Why does Jesus not heal male-pattern baldness, the common cold, or more serious issues like heart disease and cancer? Perhaps he did, but these miracles are not mentioned. The reason why Jesus gives sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, the ability to walk to the lame, and restores ceremonial cleanliness to those who are unclean, is because all of these maladies reflect what sin does to even the healthiest of people. Our sinfulness blinds us to the truth. Our sinfulness makes us deaf to the truth of God's word. We cannot walk in the way of the Lord. Our sin renders us unclean (and therefore guilty) before God. Emphasis in the New Testament falls upon the healing of these kinds of illnesses because they visually illustrate that from which Jesus came to save us—bondage to the guilt and the power of sin.

Throughout the synoptic gospels, Jesus' giving sight to the blind is a powerful sign that Jesus is Isaiah's promised Servant of the Lord. The miracle recounted in John 9 (the healing of a man blind from birth), serves much the same function. In this sixth sign mentioned by John, Jesus openly demonstrates to the Jews that he is the Messiah foretold throughout the Old Testament, especially in the messianic prophecies of Isaiah, such as Isaiah 35:1-10, our Old Testament. In verses 4-6, the prophet proclaims: *"Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert."*

The miraculous healing of a blind man is an impressive sign that Jesus is Israel's Messiah—which means that the messianic age has dawned despite the resistance from the Sanhedrin. Given the type of miracle, John is making the case that Jesus is that messianic servant foretold by Isaiah (a point which will become especially important in John 12:38-41). There is also a very practical purpose for this miracle—it supports Jesus' claim to be the I AM who spoke to Moses from the burning bush. It is very hard to stone someone for claiming to be God, when he can miraculously heal a man who has been blind from birth.

In verse 1 of John 9, we read *"As [Jesus] passed by, he saw a man blind from birth.* John does not tell us anything more than Jesus saw the man and knew he was blind. This fact points in the direction that Jesus was still in Jerusalem at some point shortly after the Feast. John does not tell us how Jesus knew that the man was blind from birth—either Jesus had supernatural knowledge of this, or else the man's blindness was tied to an obvious birth defect. It might even be the case that the man's condition was common knowledge because he was seen often begging in public. It also helps us understand the importance of what follows if we first consider the fact that all of us have been born with spiritual blindness resulting from Adam's fall. If Jesus can restore a man's sight, he can give us the eyes of faith.

The man's pitiful condition troubles the disciples, but their response to him is improper. *"And his disciples asked [Jesus], 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'"* One of surest signs of human sinfulness is our desire to fix blame when something goes wrong. The disciples know the Old Testament well enough to know that the fall of the human race into sin is the ultimate cause of all human woes and afflictions—including this man's blindness. Yet, the disciples jump from the reality of the fallen human condition to a completely unwarranted conclusion—someone's personal sin caused this particular man to have this particular malady. What did he or his parents do which caused his blindness? Some Jews at the time actually believed in prenatal sins, and some held out the likelihood that if a pregnant woman worshiped a pagan god at a pagan shrine it could effect her fetus.¹ With these kinds of superstitions so prevalent, we can only image the shame this man and his family have endured.

¹ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 361-362.

“Your son is blind. What sin did you commit which caused this?” Nothing could be crueler.

Jesus explains to the twelve that even with the reality of the universal effects of the Fall upon the entire human race, there are times when things like this happen without being caused by a particular sinful act, and that the man’s circumstances have come about not because of a specific sin, but because of the mysterious purposes of God. In verse 3, Jesus tells the disciples, “*it was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.*” This man and his parents cannot escape the reality of this fallen world any more than we can. But for other sinners to point at these people and then ask them, “what did you do which caused this?” is to act in a sinful and self-righteous way.

There are times when we cannot explain the mysterious and sometimes stern providence of God. God has his reasons for doing things like this. Furthermore, he does not always disclose to us why such things come to pass. Learning not to pry into the mysteries of God’s providence is one of the most difficult aspects of the Christian life—but something we must all learn not to do. That said, God does promise to turn all things for good to those who love him and who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28). In this man’s case, Jesus reveals the reason to the disciples as to why he was born blind—so that God might display his works in him. This was not the answer the disciples wanted or expected.

Having answered the disciples’ question and then steered them away from their fixation on the cause of the man’s blindness, Jesus now uses the occasion to teach the disciples about the way in which God will be glorified—through the miracle about to follow. Jesus also informs the disciples of the nearness of his own hour—which until now has seemed far off in the future, but which seems to be drawing near. In verses 4-5, Jesus tells them, “*we must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.*”

There is no question that Jesus is speaking with a new sense of urgency. He tells the disciples of how it is light now (i.e., he still is present among his people), but warns them that night is coming (i.e., that Jesus is leaving them). That one who is the light of the world remains for the time being. There is much work to be done now before the hour comes. Yet, as Jesus implies, things are about to change. He must begin to prepare them for that time when his hour does come, when he will leave them.

Jesus’ comments are important especially in regard to what is about to happen when the blind man is healed. Through this miracle, we are given another powerful picture of the Messiah’s redemptive work—the man’s physical blindness is an illustration of our own spiritual blindness. Even as Jesus must restore sight to the blind man if he is to see, so too Jesus must give us spiritual sight if we are to understand the things of God. Jesus is also declaring that when he leaves, night (darkness) will fall upon the Jewish leaders. In John’s Gospel, darkness is a picture of the consequences of sin and the denial of the truth of the gospel. As for the people of God, Jesus will explain to the disciples that the Holy Spirit will come at Pentecost (the Upper Room discourse of John 13-16). After Pentecost, the Holy Spirit will continue Christ’s work as light of the world, and the disciples will be both called and equipped to preach the gospel Jesus is presently teaching them, to the distant ends of the earth.

In verses 6-7, John tells us that “*having said these things, [Jesus] spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud and said to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.*” The irony John sets out—that the one who is the light of the world now gives light (sight) to a man who had been blind from birth—should not be overlooked. The light of the world (Jesus) is giving light to the world by restoring the blind man’s sight. In Mark 7:33 and 8:23 Jesus healed using similar means—applying spittle. There is

no explanation given by John as to why Jesus used a mixture of spit and mud to heal the man.

A number of the church fathers (who, in my estimation are often prone to allegorical interpretations) tie this miracle to the creation account in Genesis 2:7, when God made man from the dust of the earth. Another proposal (which I think has great plausibility) is based upon the fact that the Jews of Jesus' day believed that all bodily secretions/discharges (including spit) were ceremonially unclean, and that rubbing dirt on the discharge was the often means of removing such secretions from the body. If true, this would mean that by rubbing a mixture of spit and mud on the man's eyes that Jesus is showing little, if any, regard for Jewish tradition and superstitions by using something the Pharisees considered unclean (spit) when healing the man.

If true, this would be similar to what Jesus does in Matthew 8:1-3. *"When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. And behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.' And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, 'I will; be clean.' And immediately his leprosy was cleansed."* Lepers were considered unclean, and yet Jesus compassionately touched the man without fear of catching the man's disease or becoming ceremonially unclean—much to the horror of the Pharisees who were offended by Jesus' actions and his complete indifference to them and to their traditions.

On the interpretation I'm suggesting, Jesus uses that which was considered unclean (spittle) to demonstrate how both sin and superstition hold people in bondage. Jesus is the creator of all things. He makes the sinner whole using dirt and spit—things supposedly unclean. Furthermore, that which is supposedly unclean does not render Jesus unclean when he touches or uses these things. Jesus is making the point that it is not a bodily discharge which renders us unclean before God. Rather, uncleanness is found in every sinful human heart. This interpretation would also explain why the Pharisees are so concerned later on in John 9 with how Jesus healed the man (in terms the procedure Jesus uses).² Jesus completely ignores their taboos and rituals, and this infuriates the Pharisees, who see in this yet another opportunity to find Jesus in violation of their interpretation of the law of Moses. Such a violation would give them grounds to arrest Jesus and put him to death.

Meanwhile, the blind man was told to go wash in the Pools of Siloam, just to the southwest of Jerusalem. He does so. The word play in what follows is easy to overlook. The blind man was "sent" to Siloam by Jesus. The word "Siloam" comes from the Hebrew verb meaning "to send." What is not as obvious is another irony found in the text. John makes a point in chapter 20:21 of telling us that Jesus is the one "sent" from God who, in turn, "sends" the disciples. Jesus is the "sent" one, who "sends" the blind man to the Pool of Siloam (the pool of those who have been "sent"). The irony is based upon Isaiah 8:6, where we read of the Jews of Isaiah's day, *"this people has refused the waters of Shiloah that flow gently."* By rejecting the one whom God has "sent" (Jesus), the Jews are yet again refusing to drink the waters of Siloam (in a symbolic way), the same pool to which Jesus sends the blind man for healing. These pregnant ironies are surely intentional on John's part.³

Whatever we make of the word-play and irony, we must not lose sight of the fact (pun intended) that the blind man comes back from washing in the Pools and his eyesight has been restored. In verse 8 and

² Carson, The Gospel According to John, 363-364.

³ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 364-365.

following, John's account moves away from Jesus, to those events surrounding the blind man—now healed—and his unsatisfactory encounter with the Pharisees. According to verse 8, “*the neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar were saying, ‘Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?’*” People were blown away by what Jesus has done. They cannot imagine such a thing—a man from birth can see. “*Some said, ‘It is he.’ Others said, ‘No, but he is like him.’*” These people have no category for what they are witnessing. The man who could now see sure looked like the man who had been blind from birth, but now this man could see! How did that happen? Meanwhile, the man who had been healed kept saying “*I am the man.*” He is just as perplexed and bewildered as is everyone else. Imagine the shock of being able to see perfectly after having been blind from birth. Until now he had never seen the people talking about him, including his own parents.

The questioning shifts from identification of the man to the nature of the miracle. In verse 10, “*they said to him, ‘Then how were your eyes opened?’*” Understandably, the people want to know what has happened. The man was all too happy to tell them, recounting exactly what Jesus had said and done. “*He answered, ‘The man called Jesus made mud and anointed my eyes and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ So I went and washed and received my sight.’*” The people are completely astonished. So is the man who was formerly blind. “*The [people] said to him, ‘Where is he?’ He said, ‘I do not know.’*” Not knowing what else to do, and not knowing how the man was about to be treated, the people took him to the Pharisees who, hopefully, would have some explanation. John tells us in verse 13, “*they brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind.*”

Things quickly go south when they report this to the Pharisees. “*Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes.*” We now learn that Jesus healed again on the Sabbath, just as he had done a year earlier (recounted in John 5) with the man who had been an invalid for 38 years. This explains the callous reaction of the Pharisees—who say not a word in praise to God for this man's healing. The Pharisees considered any form of healing (or the application of medicine) on the Sabbath to be a violation of the commandment, except in cases of extreme urgency (someone's life was in danger).

We also know that Jewish scholars were divided among themselves about whether or not anointing the eyes on the Sabbath (a common form of treatment for any eye problems, which were very common in the ancient world), was a violation of the Sabbath command. It may even be the case that Jesus' act of mixing spit and dirt was considered an act of “kneading” (as one would do with bread dough) and that he may have violated the Sabbath command by doing so.⁴ Add to this, Jesus' complete disregard of the oral traditions of the Pharisees, the situation quickly turns from amazement that such a thing could happen, to great anger on the part of the Pharisees, and then to fear on the part of the man and his family that they might be shunned or face some sort of retribution, when they had done nothing wrong.

The tension in Jewish theology and tradition about healing on the Sabbath explains the Pharisees' immediate reaction to figure out “how” this happened, as recounted in verse 15. “*So the Pharisees again asked him how he had received his sight.*” The poor blind man (still coming to grips with seeing) is now afraid that he might be found guilty of some violation of the Pharisaical traditions. He simply repeats what he told his family and neighbors. “*And he said to them, ‘He put mud on my eyes, and I washed, and I see.’*” It doesn't matter to the blind man how he regained his sight, only that he did. But “how” it happened really matters to the Pharisees, who have been plotting to put Jesus to death for nearly a year—a plot which began when Jesus healed on the Sabbath. This new miracle might present them with a new

⁴ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 367.

opportunity to arrest Jesus—he’s violated the Sabbath yet again.

The people at the Feast were divided about Jesus’ identity, so are the Pharisees. John reports in verse 16, that “*some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.’ But others said, ‘How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?’ And there was a division among them.*” Jesus obeyed the law of Moses perfectly, in everything he said, everything he did, and in everything he thought. But, as we have seen, Jesus has no regard for the traditions of the Pharisees. Those who see Jesus’ as someone who disrespects them and their authority want Jesus dead.

Yet, those who are trying to evaluate Jesus through the lens of Scripture are hesitant to condemn him. How could Jesus do the works he did, if God were not with him? While the Pharisees plot to kill Jesus, others call him a prophet or want to make him king based upon his miracles. Once again, Jesus has opened the ground under people’s feet. Even the Pharisees are divided and now need to jump to one side or the other of the chasm Jesus has created. Either he is the Messiah, or he is a “sinner” and a threat to the nation. No one can remain neutral about Jesus’ person and work. Jesus forces a decision.

Given the division among the Pharisees, they shift their attention back to the poor man who has been healed. “*So they said again to the blind man, ‘What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?’ He said, ‘He is a prophet.’*” Wrong answer. The Pharisees refuse to accept the man’s assessment of Jesus. In verse 18, we read, “*the Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight, until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, ‘Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?’*” The Pharisees will not believe the man who has been healed, and they will not accept his assessment that Jesus is the great prophet foretold by Moses. Instead, they interrogate the man’s parents.

This does not go very well either. As we read in verses 20-21, “*his parents answered, ‘We know that this is our son and that he was born blind. But how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.’*” The joy of having their son’s sight miraculously restored, is lost in the sudden fear of not answering the Pharisees’ questions correctly.

In fact, in verses 22-23, John tells us, the man’s parents, “*said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, ‘He is of age; ask him.’*” This poor man and his parents are at serious risk of being removed from the synagogue merely on the grounds that Jesus had healed him. He was sitting there blind and begging, when Jesus walked by, had compassion on him and healed him to show the greatness of the works of God. The man had done nothing wrong and he and his family are now facing excommunication and the social stigma that goes with it for being recipients of God’s mercy. This is a terribly sad commentary on Israel’s spiritual condition as the messianic age dawns.

What, then, do we take with from this passage? First and foremost, what transpires is utterly tragic, but this is where human sinfulness and religious legalism always takes us. Jesus performs his sixth miraculous sign proving beyond any shadow of a doubt that he is Israel’s Messiah. Yet the poor man whom he healed (as well as the man’s parents) are treated by the Pharisees as though they have committed a terrible crime. The hatred of the Pharisees toward Jesus and their efforts to stop him are graphic evidence to us how deeply sin resides in every human heart—they are as blind to truth of God as the man born blind had been to the world around. Another powerful irony.

All the miracles in the world cannot overcome this spiritual blindness. It takes Jesus’ power and the

work of the Holy Spirit to do to us what Jesus did to the blind man—restore our sight, so that we might see in Jesus' miracles the works of God, and so that we then believe Jesus to be who he claims to be: the eternal word made flesh, the very Son of God and Israel's Messiah, the I AM who spoke to Moses from the burning bush, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and who, when he is lifted up on a cross as a sacrifice for our sins, will then reveal the glory of God.

Unless Jesus grants us spiritual eyesight, we'll sit right where we are, begging, and completely indifferent to the things of God. But once Jesus has given us our sight and we behold his glory, we will then love him, trust him, and serve him with our whole hearts.