

“Do You Believe in the Son of Man?”

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

Texts: John 9:24-41; Isaiah 42:1-9

The people of Israel are deeply divided. Who is this man Jesus? Is he a prophet? Should he be made king of Israel? Or, is he a false teacher and a danger to the nation? The Pharisees too are divided by the same question. Some of their number have accused Jesus of being a law-breaker and are plotting to kill him. Others have called him all sorts of horrible names. Still others have witnessed the miracles which Jesus has performed, and although they are not yet ready to become his disciples, they realize that only God can do such things. As for Jesus, he has declared that he is the Messiah and one with YHWH. When Jesus heals a man blind from birth on the Sabbath, the debate among the Jews heats up yet again. But in John chapter 9, a new and remarkable irony emerges. The man born blind can now see. But the religious leaders of Israel demonstrate that they are blind to the truth.

We are continuing our series on John's Gospel, and we have come to John chapter 9, and the account of Jesus' miraculous healing of a man who was born blind. This particular chapter of John (all 41 verses) is devoted to one miracle and the events which follow, but because we cannot do the passage justice by covering it in one week, I have broken the passage into two parts. Last time, we covered the first 23 verses of the chapter, today we will work our way through the balance of this remarkable, ironic, and tragic account of Jesus' sixth miraculous sign, and the almost unbelievable events which transpire as a result.

Jesus' healing of the man born blind very likely occurs shortly after the Feast of Booths (as we saw in John 7-8), when Jesus proclaimed that he was the light of the world—an assertion he repeats in verse 5 of John 9. As we have seen, John is very fond of irony, and we saw a fair bit of it last time when Jesus proclaims himself “light of the world” before instantly restoring sight (giving light) to a blind man. We also saw such irony appear again when Jesus (the one “sent” from God) “sends” the blind man to the Pool of Siloam to wash. The name Siloam is derived from the Hebrew verb “to send,” and Siloam was the same pool from which the Jews of Isaiah's day refused to drink. The irony is that the Jews once again reject the blessings of God, which are evident when Jesus (the “sent one”) “sends” the blind man to the pool “of those sent.”

This particular miracle (the sixth of seven miraculous signs which are recorded in John's Gospel) serves several very important purposes. The first purpose is that a number of well-known messianic prophecies in Isaiah's prophecy, foretell that the coming of the Messiah will usher in an age in which sight will be restored to the blind (among other blessings). We saw this last time when we read a portion of Isaiah 35 for our Old Testament lesson. We read another of these remarkable prophecies in Isaiah 42. When Jesus restores sight (as he does throughout the synoptic gospels, and here in John) he is offering unmistakable proof that the messianic age has dawned in his person and work.

The second important purpose this miracle serves is that a blind man having his sight instantaneously restored is a graphic illustration to us of God granting his people spiritual sight when he regenerates us, and gives us faith through the work of the Holy Spirit. Since we are all born with a form of spiritual blindness (because we are all fallen in Adam) we need our spiritual sight restored every bit as much as

the blind man needed his natural eyesight restored so that he could see. Therefore, when Jesus heals the blind man and restores his sight, we are given an object lesson of what the Holy Spirit does for us when he restores our spiritual sight through the power of Gospel.

The third important purpose of this miracle is that during the Feast of Booths Jesus publically claimed to be one with YHWH, when he declared to the Pharisees that he was greater than Abraham because he was the I AM who spoke to Moses from the midst of the burning bush as recounted in Exodus 3. The Pharisees understood his claim because immediately, they picked up rocks to stone him, the penalty for blasphemy. If Jesus made such a claim to be God in human flesh without miracles to back that claim up, his words would only sound like those of a madman claiming to be Napoleon. But against the backdrop of the five miraculous signs Jesus has performed so far in the presence of those with means, motive, and opportunity to prove him false, but do not (and indeed cannot) refute his claim, Jesus' assertion that he is one with YHWH comes with the full miracle-working authority of God in human flesh.

When we left off last time (in verse 23), Jesus had applied a mixture of spittle and mud to the blind man's eyes and then sent him to the pool of Siloam to wash. The man returns with his eyesight completely restored. His parents and neighbors are blown away by the dramatic nature of the miracle, as is the man whose sight has been restored. When questioned, the man tells his parents that the man named Jesus had healed him. Struggling to figure this amazing thing out, the man's parents reported the healing to the Pharisees. But when the Pharisees learn that Jesus healed once again on the Sabbath, this news sets a whole series of remarkable events into motion. The Pharisees rudely interrogate both the man and his parents. The man and his family are perplexed and know not what to make of Jesus. When the Pharisees ask the man about his take as to Jesus' true identity, the man replied, "he is a prophet." Even a blind man can see the obvious.

The Pharisees are enraged that Jesus has healed again on the Sabbath. Instead of giving thanks for what God has done for this poor man and his family, they seek to use this new miracle as proof that Jesus is a law-breaker and that he should be put to death. This also explains why the Pharisees are so preoccupied with *how* Jesus healed the man (in terms of the techniques Jesus used). Meanwhile, the blind man and his parents are terrified that they will end up being excommunicated from the synagogue simply because they are the recipients of God's mercy. The man's parents knew enough not to give the Pharisees much of an answer when they asked, "*is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?*" The joy of seeing their son healed is lost to the fear of retaliation by the Pharisees.

In John 9:20 and following, we read of the parents' guarded response to the Pharisees' questions. "*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.*" John also tells us, "*(His 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.'*" If the Pharisees wanted additional evidence against Jesus, the man's parents were not going to give it to them. This brings us to where we left off last time.

In verse 24, the Pharisees questioning of the blind man and his family enters into a second phase. Things are not going well for the Pharisees who have accused Jesus of being a Samaritan (a racial slur), of being demon possessed, of being a blasphemer, and a law-breaker. With none of these accusations sticking, the Pharisees come up with a new derogatory label for Jesus. According to verse 25, "*so for the second time they called the man who had been blind and said to him, 'Give glory to God.' We know that this man is a sinner.*" Since the man who was blind from birth can now see, the Pharisees cannot pretend as though

the miracle did not happen. Jesus has left them stunned and grasping for straws. This is not supposed to happen! The Pharisees have interrogated both the man and his parents. The man thinks Jesus is a prophet. His parents have wisely said little more than to recount the events which just transpired.

The only thing left for the Pharisees to do is pressure the man to change his story. The phrase “give glory to God” does not mean “give praise to God for what he has just done” (as we might think on first hearing). Rather, this same phrase is found in Joshua 7:19, in association with Achan, who had disobeyed Joshua’s command. We read, “*then Joshua said to Achan, ‘My son, give glory to the Lord God of Israel and give praise to him. And tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me.’*”¹ The Pharisees are pressuring the man to change his story—they still think he is lying about Jesus just as Joshua thought Achan was lying about hiding plunder.

In other words, the Pharisees are not asking the blind man to lie about whether Jesus performed the miracle—that was too obvious to deny. Rather, they want the blind man to agree with them that when Jesus performed the miracle he broke the Sabbath. This would prove their contention that Jesus is a “sinner”—i.e., a law-breaker. As we have seen, what infuriates the Pharisees about Jesus is that he does not obey their traditions, which they regard as binding as the law of Moses. If they can get the man to change his story, they can arrest Jesus, try him before the Sanhedrin, and put him to death. Yet, as John has repeatedly told us, Jesus’ hour has not yet come, so the Pharisees’ plotting will not come to fruition.

The blind man—who can now see, and is therefore a huge embarrassment to the Pharisees—again refuses to give the Pharisees what they want. “*He answered, ‘Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.’*” The man born blind does not care about the division among the Pharisees as to whether or not Jesus is a sinner, or whether God is with him. The man does not care about whether or not Jesus is indifferent to the Pharisees’ oral tradition. He does not care about political intrigue, or the petty pecking order within the Sanhedrin and the Jewish religious leadership. He has been blind his whole life. He is seeing for the first time—he now sees his parents, his family, his neighbors, his town, the Pharisees who are interrogating him. All he knows is that he was blind and now he sees. The Pharisees should be rejoicing that this man’s sight has been restored as the sign that their Messiah has come—the obvious meaning behind the fact that the man standing before them can now see. Instead, the Jews are furious and plotting Jesus’ death.

The Pharisees press the man further, but he will not change his story. If, perhaps, as the man recounts exactly how Jesus healed him, then they might find some particular act on Jesus’ part which would be a violation of the Sabbath. They must find something. Anything. We read in verse 26, “*they said to him, ‘What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?’*” Did Jesus’ knead the dirt and spittle and “break” their oral traditions? Did Jesus administer medicine—an act which some believed to be a violation of the law. Did Jesus say anything which might sound like a spell or an incantation to pagan gods? The Pharisees are so humiliated and desperate, they keep going over the same ground, again and again, to the point that they have become an embarrassing spectacle.

The blind man is growing increasingly frustrated and no doubt fearful of where all of this might go. He has answered the Pharisees honestly, several times. His honest and candid answers are not accepted. He will not lie, he will not get in the middle of a theological debate, but neither does he want things to come to a point where he and his family are excommunicated—a social stigma even worse than having people

¹ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 372.

ask what he or members of his family had done which brought about his blindness. In verse 27, we see his frustration growing rapidly. *“He answered them, ‘I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?’”* This time, the man says too much. As Shakespeare once put it, “the lady doth protest too much, methinks.” The Bard was speaking of someone who denies something so frequently and ardently it becomes obvious that the opposite is truly the case. Why all of the preoccupation on the Pharisees part with how Jesus healed him? Were there men among the Pharisees secretly looking for ways to become followers of Jesus?

No, the Pharisees were not about to become followers of Jesus. But the blind man had every right to be frustrated and offended by their callousness and indifference to the obvious wonder in the fact that a man who had been blind from birth (and who knew nothing but begging) can now see. In verses 28-29, we learn that the man’s fears about becoming an outcast for merely receiving the mercies of Jesus are coming true. *“And they reviled him, saying, ‘You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.’”* Because the man was miraculously healed and would not change his story, he’s now a disciple of Jesus? In the mind of a Pharisee, if the blind man will not agree with them, then he’s a follower of Jesus. The Pharisees insult and belittle him.

Once again, the Pharisees are grasping for some negative label to apply to Jesus. It didn’t work to call Jesus a Samaritan because too many people knew that he was from Nazareth in the Galilee. It didn’t work to attempt to stone Jesus or arrest him for blaspheming since he knew Scripture better than anyone they had ever seen, and because too many people supported him. Furthermore, Jesus managed to evade them every time they tried to arrest him. It didn’t work when the Pharisees called Jesus demon-possessed because the miracles he did only proved that God is with him. And it didn’t work to call Jesus a “sinner” because no one could prove that Jesus had actually broken any of the laws of Moses—although it was clear to everyone that Jesus had no regard whatsoever for the traditions of the Pharisees.

This time the Pharisees identify themselves as followers of Moses, because it was Moses, after all, who had been in the presence of YHWH. As one commentator points out, the Pharisees’ claim to be followers of Moses and not “disciples of Jesus” will characterize the unfortunate division between Jew and Gentiles for generations to come. While Christians too look to Moses and the law of God for divine instruction (the law as the teacher of sin and the rule of gratitude), and for types and shadows pointing ahead to Jesus,² the Pharisees looked to their oral tradition as the true teaching of Moses. In this, the Pharisaical tradition functions much like the magisterium of the Roman Catholic church. Their tradition stands above Scripture when it comes to any matters of controversy, and their tradition molds the meaning of Scripture to suit their own ends—in this case, Pharisaical oral tradition attempts to establish that ceremonial and external conformity to the law is to be regarded as “righteousness” before God by the entire Jewish community. As Jesus put it to them back in John 5:39-40, *“you search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.”*

So, the Pharisees are self-proclaimed “followers of Moses.” The blind man now seizes upon their collective struggle to explain away the obvious—the fact that he can now see. He may have been born blind and was certainly lacking in any kind of formal education. But even a blind man could understand the obvious—the Pharisees were all hat and no cattle. In verse 30, *“the man answered, ‘Why, this is an*

² Carson, The Gospel According to John, 373-374.

amazing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes.” The Pharisees have called Jesus every name in the book. They have opposed Jesus time and time again. Every time they debate, Jesus has bested them. The Pharisees have failed to learn that no one knows more about the proper meaning of the law of Moses than its author, that one greater than Abraham, and that one who actually spoke to both Moses and Abraham!

The Pharisees have repeatedly questioned this man who was miraculously healed, demanding that he change his story (even that he lie). They have implied that he is a secret follower of Jesus, using this implied charge as a threat to excommunicate him. Yet, they cannot explain to him the simple fact that Jesus gave him his sight. The Pharisees look so foolish that even a blind man can see it.

The blind man obviously paid attention in his Sabbath school classes and to the lectures in the synagogue. He tells the learned biblical scholars and lawyers examining him, *“we know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind.”* The man knows that throughout the Old Testament God is said to hear the prayers of the righteous. Several passages should suffice. In Job 29:7, Job asks the rhetorical question, *“will God hear his cry when distress comes upon him?”* The answer is “of course he will.” In Psalm 66:16-19, the Psalmist declares, *“Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for my soul. I cried to him with my mouth, and high praise was on my tongue. If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. But truly God has listened; he has attended to the voice of my prayer.”*

The implication is that the blind man (who as Jesus said was born blind so that the works of the Lord would be manifest) has been praying to the Lord for healing. God has heard his prayers, which is why he believes he has been healed. If Jesus were a sinner, God would have never healed him through Jesus’ ministry. In fact, the man has never heard of anyone being healed in the miraculous manner as he had been. His conclusion should be patently obvious to all—including the Pharisees. *“If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”* Several of the Pharisees had come to this conclusion as well, although those who see Jesus as a dangerous false teacher seem to be in the majority, holding the upper hand in terms of the Pharisees’ cold (and indeed cruel) response to the man and his family. John’s use of irony should jump out at us again. Even a blind man knows that Jesus does the works of God. Who else could have healed him?

His answer pushes all the Pharisees’ buttons. How dare a man with no theological training presume to instruct them. How dare this men speak so rudely to them. Of course, the man did not care about their theological debates, and he was not being rude. Because the Pharisees were unable to find anything to use against Jesus, they now turn upon the blind man and make him the target of their anger. According to verse 34, *“they answered him, ‘You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?’ And they cast him out.”* Even though they have memorized the prophecies from Isaiah in which the Messiah, when he comes, will restore sight to the blind, and are thoroughly embarrassed by the presence of a blind man who now sees, when they call him a “sinner from birth” they now blame the man for his blindness, and then scold him for attempting to teach them. Again, we miss John’s whole point if we fail to see the obvious—the blind man can now see (both in a literal and spiritual sense) while the learned theologians refuse to acknowledge what is so obvious that it cannot be ignored.

Despite the fact that the blind man did nothing but receive his sight, tell the Pharisees the truth, refuse to lie, he and his family are cast out (excommunicated) from the synagogue. This was no small thing. They were now unable to attend Sabbath services, participate in Israel’s feasts, and they were cut off from

receiving any benevolence (alms for the poor) or grain which was made available for the hungry to prepare meals. They would be shunned by their friends, family, and neighbors, and what should have been a time of great joy—the man blind from birth can now see—becomes a time of sorrow (at least at first). No doubt, his family had been all too used to public scorn (“what did you do to cause this blindness?”). Now, it seems they must endure a whole new level of public shame.

As we have seen throughout John’s Gospel (and especially in the preceding chapters) Jesus opens up the ground under people’s feet—forcing them to decide whether they will follow him, or walk away (oppose him). The Pharisees reject the light because it is they who are sinners whose deeds are evil, while the blind man embraces the light Jesus has revealed. It is the callous cruelty of the Pharisees which actually pushes the man closer to accepting the fact that Jesus is the Son of God and Israel’s Messiah.

Jesus once again takes compassion on the man and seeks him out. In verse 35, we read, “*Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’*” Knowing the family had been excommunicated, Jesus asks the man whether or not he has come to faith. Jesus asks him directly, “do you believe?” Jesus identifies himself as the “Son of Man” (the divine figure from the Book of Daniel) and Jesus’ favorite self-designation. The man is not sure that this all means. In verse 36, he answers Jesus by seeking more information about this mysterious “Son of Man”—although it appears as though the blind man has already made up his mind about Jesus and whether or not he is the Messiah. “*He answered, ‘And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?’*”

In verses 37-38, the whole point of the miracle becomes clear. “*Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you.’*” The blind man can see! Not just with his eyes . . . God has been glorified. The man’s answer is simple, profound, and a powerful climax to this whole account. “*He said, ‘Lord, I believe,’ and he worshiped him.*” The man professes faith in Jesus, and falls prostrate before Jesus, who, it should be noted, receives the man’s worship. Someday we will see this man in heaven. He is not only grateful to have his eyesight restored, he is grateful that Jesus sought him out after he had been excommunicated. He is overwhelmed by the fact that he has been given eternal life.

All of this must have occurred in a public place with the ever-present Pharisees watching the whole thing. As we read in verse 39, “*Jesus said, ‘For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.’*” Jesus now explains the meaning of his remarks made back in verse 3 of this chapter. “*It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.*” To those with the eyes of faith, the miraculous healing of the blind man is both a display of the power and glory of God, but is also great personal blessing to the man who can now see and who has come to faith—through the restoration of his eyesight and through the gift of spiritual sight which produced this man’s faith in Jesus.

Yet this miracle is also a form of God’s judgment on those who are blind to the things of God, and who love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil. Through the messianic mission of Jesus, God will give sight to the blind. Yet those, like the Pharisees, who have seen the miracle with their eyeballs, remain totally blind to the significance of it. When the blind man is given his sight and is then berated, told to lie, called a sinner, and then excommunicated, it is the Pharisees who become the object lesson—they become a graphic illustration of what human sin does to the human heart.

Hearing Jesus pronounce God’s judgment upon them, they cannot restrain themselves and chime in. “*Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, ‘Are we also blind?’*” The question is dripping with sarcasm and unbelief. They can obviously see with their eyes, so how can Jesus declare

that they are blind? They prove their spiritual blindness when they make their snide remark. Jesus pronounces judgment on them yet again. “*Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains.’*” They have seen the miracle Jesus performed, and it only hardened their hearts all the more. Their eyes work fine. But as far as faith and repentance goes, they are blind as bats. They remain in their sins, even as the man they call a “sinner” has been set free and forgiven of his.

And so the question before us is simply this. “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” Can you say, “all I know is that I was blind and now I see?”