

JOHN — WEEK 12

SIGHT



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is *Ecce Homo* (Behold the Man) by Caravaggio

Jesus cures a man blind from birth, and this throws the Pharisees into division and fury. They investigate and reach an impasse. The formerly blind man calls them out on some of their silly points and they lose it and kick him out

Jesus finds him and finishes the work He started, teaching him (and some Pharisees) about spiritual sight.

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1 John 9:1–12

Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him. I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

When He had said these things, He spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva; and He anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay. And He said to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which is translated, Sent). So he went and washed, and came back seeing.

Therefore the neighbors and those who previously had seen that he was blind said, “Is not this he who sat and begged?”

Some said, “This is he.” Others said, “He is like him.”

He said, “I am he.”

Therefore they said to him, “How were your eyes opened?”

He answered and said, “A Man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and said to me, ‘Go to the pool of Siloam and wash.’ So I went and washed, and I received sight.”

Then they said to him, “Where is He?”

He said, “I do not know.”

This week we will cover this healing miracle and the Pharisees’ rather curious reaction to it. Healing someone born blind is important because it’s the hardest miracle for a skeptic to explain away. Even raising someone from the dead isn’t as undeniable; people occasionally wake from very deep comas. Given the state of medicine at that time, it would have been difficult to be certain that someone was dead.

But everyone knows that being born blind is incurable. The Pharisees won’t be able to handle this.

There’s a useful lesson in how the blind man speaks. He is exact in his words—only testifying to the facts as he knows them. If he ventured into speculation, he would open himself up to all kinds of tricks. By sticking to what he is qualified to talk about, he doesn’t give anyone a counter-argument toehold.

Most importantly, when they ask him a question that he doesn’t know the answer to, he says, “*I do not know.*” Most Americans don’t realize they can do that. They’ve been taught since the first grade that “I don’t know” is a wrong answer. This is the key to a standard trick taught in Politics & Media 101.

Stupid questions can lead to stupid answers, and stupid answers make the evening news.

2 John 9:13–17

They brought him who formerly was blind to the Pharisees. Now it was a Sabbath when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also asked him again how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put clay on my eyes, and I washed, and I see.”

Therefore some of the Pharisees said, “This Man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath.”

Others said, “How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?” And there was a division among them.

They said to the blind man again, “What do you say about Him because He opened your eyes?”

He said, “He is a prophet.”

“They” at the beginning of this passage refers to the blind man’s neighbors. Why would they take him to the Pharisees?

Well, they’re the ones who have known this guy for a long time and so know that this a true stop-your-heart miracle. They’re excited and want their leaders to see the wonderful news and get excited too.

They never dreamed that some obscure, contrived Sabbath rule could overrule such a clearly supernatural sign. Making mud on the Sabbath doesn’t feel much like work and isn’t expressly prohibited in scripture.

And notice that only some of the Pharisees think the mud prohibition takes precedence. Despite a presumably perfectly uniform set of beliefs and doctrines, they don’t reach a uniform conclusion.

Some were simply more open-minded than others.

What the closed-minded Pharisees did wrong is something we all tend to do wrong.

Most people’s ability to be open-minded is affected by how much they’ve invested in their current position. A Pharisee who had merely memorized this Sabbath rule would be more open-minded than a Pharisee who was involved in writing it (or even one who had published it or defended it).

No one likes to be wrong. Some Pharisees had a lot of emotional capital invested in that rule. It isn’t easy to just let it go, even in the presence of overwhelming evidence.

Red Barber once said, in declining to make a Super Bowl prediction, “*I’ve learned that you don’t just see with your eyes.*” He understood that his prediction would influence his observations. As an old school journalist, he had been taught that neutrality doesn’t come easy. That can only be achieved (or even approximated) through the careful and diligent avoidance of all the things that can bias our judgement—even our eyesight.

They should chisel Barber’s quote over the entrance to every journalism school in America.

3 John 9:18–25

But the Jews did not believe concerning him, that he had been blind and received his sight, until they called the parents of him who had received his sight. And they asked them, saying, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?”

His parents answered them and said, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but by what means he now sees we do not know, or who opened his eyes we do not know. He is of age; ask him. He will speak for himself.” His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had agreed already that if anyone confessed that He was Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

So they again called the man who was blind, and said to him, “Give God the glory! We know that this Man is a sinner.”

He answered and said, “Whether He is a sinner or not I do not know. One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see.”

Step one—denial. The Pharisees open by denying that this is what it looks like. This is an instant crash-and-burn because the evidence is clear, simple, and testified to by many. The Pharisees can’t even intimidate the witnesses enough to change their testimony.

It’s all just too obvious.

“Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

That’s not quite right because it gives the impression that powerless people aren’t corrupt. The whole truth is that power makes corruption manifest. The corruption was there all along.

Russ Grimm, an NFL offensive lineman once said, “*There’s no greater feeling than moving a man from Point A to Point B against his will.*” Few of us have the power to do that, but we all have the attitude.

The journal *Nature* just published a report on bullying at Lund University. That case is shocking enough by itself, but the article includes links to five similar cases. The problem is anything but rare.

<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-01621-8>

The point is that even a little bit of power allows people to rule over others, revealing their corruption.

“*Academic politics is the most vicious and bitter form of politics, because the stakes are so low.*” — Sayre

One of the most useful skills a Christian can develop is to be able to look in a mirror honestly. When we are blind to our own corruption, we are less motivated towards mercy and less effective witnesses.

Russ also said, “*I’d run over my own mother to win the Super Bowl.*” Not sure everyone is **that** corrupt.

4 John 9:26–34

Then they said to him again, “What did He do to you? How did He open your eyes?”

He answered them, “I told you already, and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become His disciples?”

Then they reviled him and said, “You are His disciple, but we are Moses’ disciples. We know that God spoke to Moses; as for this fellow, we do not know where He is from.”

The man answered and said to them, “Why, this is a marvelous thing, that you do not know where He is from; yet He has opened my eyes! Now we know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does His will, He hears him. Since the world began it has been unheard of that anyone opened the eyes of one who was born blind. If this Man were not from God, He could do nothing.”

They answered and said to him, “You were completely born in sins, and are you teaching us?” And they cast him out.

If the Pharisees think they can intimidate this guy, they are sorely mistaken. He has felt the power of God in his own body and he couldn’t care less what these guys think. They don’t have any real power, and he has encountered someone who does.

Thus, he loses respect for these guys—and then loses his temper. He lights into them, mocking their point of view as, “*a marvelous thing.*” He concludes with, “*If this Man were not from God, He could do nothing.*” It’s an airtight argument.

So, they then lose their temper and kick him out. To paraphrase Jack Nicholson, “They can’t handle the truth.”

Curiously, as they kick him out, they announce their answer to the original question posed by the disciples—the one that started this whole sequence of events—“*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*” Jesus replied, “*Neither.*” The Pharisees’ answer is, “*You were completely born in sins.*”

It’s not clear whose sins they’re referring to, but their answer is about as far away from “neither” as you can get.

The Pharisees act like no one has ever stood up to them before. They’re amazed by this uneducated guy who just trashed their whole argument in a single sentence. Their response is to cancel him, using the conditions of his birth as an excuse.

He apparently doesn’t know his place.

5 John 9:35–41

Jesus heard that they had cast him out; and when He had found him, He said to him, “Do you believe in the Son of God?”

He answered and said, “Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?”

And Jesus said to him, “You have both seen Him and it is He who is talking with you.”

Then he said, “Lord, I believe!” And he worshiped Him.

And Jesus said, “For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind.”

Then some of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these words, and said to Him, “Are we blind also?”

Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, ‘We see.’ Therefore your sin remains.”

Wait. There were *Pharisees who were with Him*? Why? Were they *cast out* too?

No. This leads to an important but obscure lesson—the Pharisees weren’t all bad. Nicodemus wasn’t the only good one either. The “*division among them*” back in verse 16 was real, significant, and enduring.

We previously noted that, “You are trying to kill me,” doesn’t mean that every person is trying to kill me. Similarly, saying that the “Jews” are trying to kill Him is true even if only a tiny percentage actually are.

This collective plural concept applies to the Pharisees too. They’re not all the same. They are all notable due to their power, which spawns efforts to cling to that power. That makes their corruption most visible.

They’re not worse than everyone else, just more annoying.

All the action in this whole chapter is to set up the lesson at the end. “*For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind.*” Thus *some of the Pharisees who were with Him* ask what that’s all about. They wonder, “*Are we blind also?*”

Jesus doesn’t then say that they’re blind. He says, “*If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, ‘We see.’ Therefore your sin remains.*” Jesus is using their question to clarify His point. Their claim to see (physically) makes them without excuse (spiritually).

Jesus isn’t talking about literally swapping the blind and the seeing; He’s talking about superseding physical sight with spiritual sight.

That spiritual sight is the essence of the Christian experience.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What's the most "impossible" miracle you've seen?
2. Have you seen someone be biased by a prediction?
3. Have you observed power corrupting?
4. Have you ever seen someone stand up to power boldly?
5. What is spiritual sight?

Items for prayer: