

Jesus on the Way to the Cross, III: True Insight

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John 9:1-41 NIV

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

Having said this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes. “Go,” he told him, “wash in the Pool of Siloam” (this word means Sent). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, “Isn’t this the same man who used to sit and beg?” Some claimed that he was.

Others said, “No, he only looks like him.”

But he himself insisted, “I am the man.”

“How then were your eyes opened?” they demanded.

He replied, “The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see.”

“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. Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. “He put mud on my eyes,” the man replied, “and I washed, and now I see.”

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 do such miraculous signs?” So they were divided.

Finally 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.”

The Jews 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?”

“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.” His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for already the Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue. That was why his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. “Give glory to God,” they said. “We know this man is a sinner.”

He replied, “Whether he is a sinner or not, I don’t know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!”

Then they asked him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”

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

Then they hurled insults at him and said, “You are this fellow’s disciple! We are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don’t even know where he comes from.”

The man answered, “Now that is remarkable! You don’t know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”

To this they replied, “You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!” And they threw him out.

Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

“Who is he, sir?” the man asked. “Tell me so that I may believe in him.”

Jesus said, “You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.”

Then the man said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him.

Jesus said, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.”

Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, “What? Are we blind too?”

Jesus said, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.”

For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind. . . . If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains (John 9:39, 41).

On these Lenten Sundays, we’ve been looking at Jesus on his way to the cross, through the eyes of the Apostle John. John’s Gospel has a special concern for what Jesus says about *the truth* — what’s real, what’s reliable, what can we count on? So two weeks ago we considered what Jesus says about true worship, in John chapter 4. Last week we studied what he says about *true authority* in chapter 7. Next week, on Palm Sunday, we’ll hear Jesus saying something about *true sacrifice* from chapter 12. Today, we’ll look at how Jesus brings *true insight*, in chapter 9 of John’s Gospel.

You might have thought that our Scripture reading was a bit on the long side. It *was* the entire 9th chapter of John, and there’s a good reason why Susan had to read all of it. The way John tells his story, it’s pretty hard to stop in the middle or take out excerpts. In the other Gospels, Jesus’ teachings are strung together as a series of short sections. They aren’t linked by a story line, but by similar subject matter or key words. Bible scholars call such a grouping a *catena*, or a chain of sayings. And often a preacher can find a good stopping place, and develop his message from just a few words of our Lord. Not so with John.

In John, events in the ministry of Jesus take up whole chapters. They’re like scenes in a drama. You can’t stop in the middle, or make cuts, or you might miss the point Jesus is driving at which usually comes out only at the very end. John has already made his cut, if you will. As he tells us near the end of his Gospel, “Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book” (John 20:30). John has left a lot of the story on the cutting room floor, and we have it only from the other gospels. What’s left in John can’t be cut any more, because he’s already stripped it down to a few key incidents that show us who Jesus is. “These are written,” he says, “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (20:31).

Today’s lesson from chapter 9 is a good example of how John likes to tell the story. It has many of the typical features of John’s way of writing about Jesus: words with more than one meaning; dense characters who say dumb things as foils for Jesus; the sharp contrast between Jesus and his opponents, or between light and darkness; and the “punch line” at the end where Jesus drives home his point. We encounter those same things in several chapters of this Gospel. So let’s have another look at the highlights of our story.

The story begins as Jesus meets a man who was born blind. Jesus meets blind people in the other Gospels, too, and heals them out of compassion for them. But here, Jesus performs a miracle, or a “work,” not only because he’s sorry for the blind man, but to reveal *who Jesus is*. As he tells his disciples, “This happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” Already we see that this man’s blindness is going to be a symbol of a deeper spiritual darkness — a darkness that comes over those who have no insight into what God is up to. The blind man is being set free from this darkness, but we’re about to meet some folks that haven’t begun to “see the light” — and, in fact, they *refuse* to see the light.

It just so happens it was the Sabbath when Jesus gave the man his sight. So guess who shows up? The folks that are busy promoting the Sabbath as the “be all and end all” of religious faithfulness! Now, it wasn’t that the Sabbath was a bad thing; in fact, as the Lord gave it to Moses it was a good thing. One day out of seven you don’t have to work. It’s a symbol of freedom from slavery to the economic order. The Sabbath means that human existence isn’t defined just by the dollar sign — as the Marxists claim — but by a deeper purpose, the worship of the Creator. But in the hands of the Pharisees the Sabbath had become something else: it had become the defining mark of being a Jew. The rabbis had a saying that it wasn’t the Jews that kept the Sabbath, but the Sabbath that kept the Jews. They were a tiny religious minority in the pagan world of successive empires: the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Seleucids. The Sabbath observance had held them together and given them their identity as a people. Now the Jews were under Roman domination, and the Sabbath was their spiritual rallying point. You can see why the Pharisees were threatened by any Jewish teacher who seemed to play fast and loose with their “no-work-on-the-Sabbath” policy.

So the Pharisees get to the formerly blind man and tell him, “This guy you claim healed you couldn’t be from God, because he doesn’t keep the Sabbath. What do *you* think of him?” The man answers, “He’s a prophet.” Now, the blind man has had his physical sight restored, but he doesn’t yet have *insight* into the whole truth. Of course, Jesus is far more than a prophet like the prophets of old. But that doesn’t come out just yet. We have to follow the story to the end.

The Pharisees still don’t believe Jesus could give sight to the blind, so they go to the man’s parents. “Was he really blind when he was born? How come he can see now?” The parents answer, “Don’t ask us! Yeah, he’s our son and he was born blind. But as to how he can see — you better ask him, not us!” John explains that they tried to get out of the spotlight because otherwise the Jews would throw them out of their synagogue. It’s risky to confess that Jesus is the Christ. To me, these parents stand for people everywhere who are afraid to commit themselves to Christ, because it will cost them something.

So the Pharisees go back to the man who was healed. “Glorify God because you received your sight,” they tell him. “This Jesus is a sinner.” The man answers, “Whether or not he’s a sinner, I’ve got no clue! But I’ll tell you this — I was blind, and now I can see!”

“Then, tell us again how this Jesus healed you,” they ask. “I’ve already told you,” the man answers, “but you wouldn’t believe me. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples?”

Of course, that retort just adds fuel to their fire. “*You* must be one of his disciples! We’re disciples of Moses, but this Jesus is a nobody. We don’t even know where he comes from.”

The man answers them back, and you gotta love this guy. He’s beginning to “see the light” now, and he isn’t afraid of the Pharisees. “Give me a break! You don’t know where this Jesus comes from, and he gives me my sight. That’s unheard of! God wouldn’t listen to a sinner. If he weren’t from God he couldn’t have done anything for me!”

Well, that’s all the Pharisees can take from this upstart, and they throw him out of their assembly. Jesus hears about it, and finds him again. “Do you believe in the Son of man?” he asks him. “Tell me who he is, and I’ll believe in him,” the man replies. But we get the feeling that he sort of knows already!

Jesus answers, “You’re looking at him.” And that’s all it takes. As John tells us, “Then the man said, ‘Lord, I believe,’ and he worshiped him” (9:38) — he fell down before him, confessing his faith in Jesus the Messiah.

Now Jesus gets to the point of the whole incident. “I’ve come into this world for judgment, so the blind will see, and those who see will become blind” (9:39). Some Pharisees are standing around, and they ask the dumb question: “What? Are we blind too? Duh!” Jesus tells them, “If you were blind, you wouldn’t be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains” (9:41).

On the surface, this is the story of a healing — one of many in the Gospels, in which Jesus heals diseases, cleanses lepers, casts out demons, makes the lame to walk, and even raises the dead. In all of these wonderful works, we see the power of the kingdom of God taking hold in the lives of people. We cry out for that same evidence of the healing, restoring power of God in our own lives. But, in telling is how a blind man received his sight, John has told us how Jesus grants true insight — insight into ourselves, into others, and into himself as the Son of God.

Often we don't have much insight into ourselves. We see that problem in the behavior of the Pharisees in this chapter. They think of themselves as the true disciples of Moses, failing to see how they have distorted the intent of God's Law. What the Lord gave us to set us free from grinding, twenty-four-seven slavery, they've turned into a restrictive code that would keep a blind man from receiving his sight. At the end of the story, they ask, "Then, are we blind, too?" not realizing how truly blind they are.

Awful things can happen when we lack insight into ourselves, or an understanding of our own motives. During the last century there was a man in central Europe who loved to paint, and considered himself a sensitive artist. He wrote of himself as though his role as an artist was the clue to his true self. Yet that man was responsible for the cruel suffering and barbaric deaths of millions of people. I'm referring, of course, to Adolf Hitler.

I've experienced at first hand what lack of insight into myself can do to personal relationships. I grew up with such a sense of inferiority that I came to feel nobody cared whether I stuck around or not. I felt like I could drop through a crack in the floor and nobody would notice. I didn't realize how important I really was to others in my life. My lack of insight into myself caused me to walk away from responsibilities — even pastorates, and a marriage — in the belief I wouldn't be missed. I caused consternation and sorrow because I had no true insight into myself. I even lost jobs because I didn't understand the effect of my own actions. I still deal with unrealistic feelings about myself, but since coming to the Lord I've learned how to recognize them for what they are. Jesus has given me true insight into myself, and how what I do or say can affect other people. He has taken away my blindness to myself.

Insight into ourselves is a key to gaining true insight into others. One Christian counselor has written that the counselor's best tool for getting insight into the problems of other people is the knowledge of his own sinful heart. Jesus gives us insight into the needs of other people — and where they're "coming from" — when we're confronted with our sins and experience his forgiveness. I think the man born blind, in the story John tells, is an example of this. At the beginning of the chapter he receives his physical sight. But then, as the story develops, we get the feeling he's getting wise to the Pharisees. Some of the things he says to them sound a little naïve — "Do you want to become Jesus' disciples, too? . . . Now that's remarkable — you don't know where he comes from!" But I kind of think he's needling them, leading them on, because he's catching on to their game. Jesus has opened his eyes, in more ways than one.

When we have true insight into ourselves, we learn how to "read" people better. The Gospels tell us that Jesus understood what was in the heart of man, and through his Holy Spirit we're able to develop a similar kind of discernment. The Christian counselor learns quickly that the problem the counselee presents to him may not be the real problem at all. What seems to be a financial problem, for example, may turn out to be a much deeper problem involving a lack of responsibility for one's actions. And that lack of responsibility may be an unconscious way of reinforcing that counselee's hidden image of himself as a failure — an image that may go all the way back to early childhood as the counselee saw his parent fail time after time, and grew up modeling his responses after the parent's. What the counselee needs isn't more money, but more insight into himself, and the healing power of Christ who can break the pattern of irresponsibility and failure that has bound him. Through knowledge of the

gospel, the counselor is able to understand others and help them “get to the bottom of things” where change and new life become possible.

Jesus can also open our eyes and give us insight into situations we have to deal with, or challenges we face. That’s true in our family life, our relationships, our work. But it’s also true in the affairs of nations. Let me give just one example from current events, and I hope nobody thinks this is out of order. Since George W. Bush was elected President, he’s been pilloried in the media and throughout the entertainment industry as an idiot, a buffoon, a fanatic with a warped and simplistic view of the world and our country’s role in it. The President has told us that the best defense our nation could have against terror is to encourage the rise of democracy and human rights in other nations where the people have been under the heel of dictatorial and oppressive regimes. What nonsense, his critics have said — that will never happen! Going to war in Iraq, they claim, has been a disastrous mistake. Well, just in the last few weeks some of those media types have begun to take another look at what’s going on — the elections in Iraq, the rebuilding of Afghanistan, the agitation in Lebanon to get the Syrian troops out. And several editorials or other pieces have been published in these media, to the effect that maybe Bush is right — maybe his idea isn’t so wrong after all! In other words, maybe he had *insight* into the situation that *we* didn’t have! Where did the President get his insight? I would remind you of one simple truth: our President claims to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. But according to a well-publicized survey a few years back only a tiny percentage of people in entertainment and the media have any religious orientation at all; the vast majority are totally un-Christian. Does this say anything about the source of true insight into human relationships and human affairs? When our relationship with Jesus Christ makes us aware of the principles the Creator has built into his universe, we have insight into the problems and possibilities of life — insight that isn’t available to people who don’t know the Lord.

The man born blind received his physical sight when Jesus healed him, and as he began to use his sight and go about his life he also began to develop *insight*. Time and again he gets confronted by the Pharisees, and each time, it seems to me, he gets a little wiser to their game. And as he develops insight into where the Pharisees are coming from, he also begins to see who *Jesus* is — not only a prophet, but something more. Eventually he comes to see the truth: Jesus is “the light of the world,” the source of truth about God and his plan for human history. He comes to see that Jesus is the Son of man, the Christ, the revelation of the Father. The whole point of the ninth chapter of John is the truth about *who Jesus is*. That’s not just an interesting fact, a piece of “theological miscellany” if you will. The truth about *who Jesus is* makes the difference between a life of pointless and futile darkness and a life that’s filled with his life and glory. It’s a truth to build your life on. It’s a truth that calls forth in us the same response as that of the man born blind, who said to Jesus, “Lord, I believe,” and worshiped him.

So Jesus leaves us with a warning, the warning he gave the Pharisees who asked if they, too, were blind. “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind. . . . If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.” If we claim to *see* without the insight Jesus gives us, we may come under judgment. We might miss out on the real truth about ourselves, others and even Jesus Christ himself. I almost missed out on that truth, because with my intellectual and modernistic prejudices I thought I could see what was true more accurately than those ancient, pre-scientific people who wrote down the Scriptures. But God used the circumstances of my life to show me how blind I really was, and who Jesus Christ could be for me. And now I’m open to him, in all his power and love, and to the true insight he wants to give you and me.

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