



Catalog No. 1367

John 9:13-41

Twenty-ninth Message

John Hanneman

March 5th, 2006

20/20 VISION

Most are familiar with the phrase “blind as a bat.” My wife often says that of me. When I can’t find what I’m looking for in the refrigerator or in a drawer I become frustrated and exclaim, “Where is such and such?” Calmly pointing out that the thing I was searching for was right in front of my eyes all the time, she will tell me that I’m blind as a bat.

All too often we are spiritually blind, unaware that we are surrounded by darkness. We can look right at something but fail to see the activity of God or the presence of Jesus. We need our eyesight healed and our vision corrected.

Today we continue our study in John 9, the healing of the blind man. One day the disciples saw a man who had been blind from birth begging by the side of the road, and they put a question to Jesus about sin and suffering. Jesus applied clay to the man’s eyes and told him to wash in the Pool of Siloam. He responded in faith and was healed. Subsequently there was confusion on the part of his neighbors, and then an intense investigation by the religious authorities. We have already studied the healing and the connection between sin and suffering. Today we will focus more on the significance of the healing.

They brought to the Pharisees the man who was formerly blind. Now it was a Sabbath on the day when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also were asking him again how he received his sight. And he said to them, “He applied clay to my eyes, and I washed, and I see.” Therefore some of the Pharisees were saying, “This man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath.” But others were saying, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And there was a division among them. So they said to the blind man again, “What do you say about Him, since He opened your eyes?” And he said, “He is a prophet.” (John 9:13-17 NASB)

As the blind man returns from the Pool of Siloam the neighbors are amazed and confused. They wonder if it is the same man. Wanting an explanation for what had happened, they take him to the experts.

This mention of the Sabbath presents a problem, as it did with the paralytic in chapter 5. Jesus had transgressed the law at two or three points. Healing was permitted on the Sabbath, but only if a life was in danger. The making of mud might have been considered work, which was forbidden on the Sabbath, as well as the anointing of the eyes. “Fasting spittle” could be used to bring healing, but it could not be applied on the Sabbath, only on weekdays. This also might have contributed to the tension between Jesus and the authorities.

As was the case with the paralytic, the Pharisees do not rejoice in the healing; they are interested only in the “how” of the miracle. They are entrenching themselves in the old truths over which they have control. There is safety in being in control, but that control is slipping away.

As we discussed last week, Jesus revealed a new creation when he healed the blind man. As he stated in chapter 5, “My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working” (5:17). The Sabbath marked the end of the week in the first creation, but Jesus will inaugurate a new creation after the resurrection week. Sabbath is healthy and essential for our bodies but it finds its fulfillment in Jesus, in the new creation. Interestingly, there is nothing in the New Testament about keeping the Sabbath.

This new creation causes problems. Even the Pharisees are divided, just as the crowd was divided in chapter 7. One group wants to keep the old; they cannot conceive that Jesus is from God since he healed on the Sabbath. The other group cannot discount the healing. The first group has the stronger argument but they are wrong. Deuteronomy 18 warns that even a prophet can lead people away from God, and we know that miracles are not an infallible guide to spiritual authority. The second group has the weaker argument but they are right.

The blind man sides with Jesus. He tells the Pharisees that Jesus is a prophet. His eyes are coming into focus and he is beginning to see more clearly, while the Pharisees are blind.

The investigation continues now with the parents.

The Jews then did not believe it of him, that he had been blind and had received sight, until they called the parents of the very one who had received his sight, and questioned them, saying, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? Then how does he now see?” His parents answered them and said, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but how he now sees, we do not know; or who opened his eyes, we do not know. Ask him; he is of age, he will speak for himself.” His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone confessed Him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue. For this reason his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.” (9:18-23)

The Pharisees refuse to believe the man was ever blind, so they summon the parents. They want to go over the facts of the case with a fine-tooth comb. Even if the neighbors were fooled the parents will not be deceived. They ask, Was the son born blind, and if he was, what was their explanation for the healing? The Pharisees are afraid people will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, so they put the screws to the parents. They affirm that the man is their son and that indeed he had been born blind. But the threat of expulsion from the synagogue makes them afraid. This was no small matter since the synagogue was the focus of community and social relationships. The parents wimp out because they fear the Jews. They tell the authorities to talk to their son.

There is much debate about verse 22. Some scholars hold that it has something to say about John’s dealing with a local issue in Ephesus which caused tension between the church and the synagogue.

But the important point is that when faced with the risk of exclusion from community, the parents would not support their son.

This is a classic unhealthy church scene. It pictures the power behind being accepted in the church and the authority we give to church leaders to control our lives. The need for acceptance and belonging is so great that leaders use it to manipulate and control their flock. Some church leaders attack and condemn people, producing guilt to keep them in line with their agenda. They are threatened and fearful when the life of God breaks out in a new way.

The scene also pictures well those who will not risk boldly with the gospel. Once again the driving influence is fear. No one wants to be excluded from the inner circle, but oftentimes the one who brings life is made to feel outside the circle. In our culture, Christians can be nice and sophisticated and acceptable, but we have to ask whether we want the gospel or social acceptance. Would we risk expulsion to follow Jesus? Christians face this decision daily in many parts of the world.

The investigation continues:

So a 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." He then answered, "Whether He is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." So they said to him, "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? You do not want to become His disciples too, do you?" (9:24-27)

The blind man is summoned a second time and asked to give glory to God. The Pharisees want the focus on God, not on Jesus. They want the man to say that Jesus is a sinner and deny that he had anything to do with the healing. They claim to know, but just like Nicodemus in chapter 3 they do not know.

The man is a witness. He confesses he does not know about Jesus; what he does know is that he was blind and now he can see. This is a perfect illustration of how to witness. We do not need to give a theological explanation or become embroiled in a debate. We simply tell our story about what God has done. People cannot argue with one's experience.

The Pharisees go over the same ground again, looking for a way to maintain their position. The man becomes quite bold and questions their intentions. With tongue in cheek he suggests that perhaps they too want to become disciples of Jesus. This last comment really draws their ire:

They reviled him and said, "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 is from." The man answered and said to them, "Well, here is an amazing thing, that you do not know where He is from, and yet He opened my eyes. We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing and does His will, He hears him. Since the beginning of time it has never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, He could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you teaching us?" So they put him out. (9:28-34)

The incensed Pharisees insult the witness. They claim allegiance to Moses. They have made up their minds. They say they do not know, and they are right. If they had understood Moses they would grasp the fact that he wrote of Jesus.

The man uses their own logic to claim that Jesus is from God, because it is obvious that God had done something. Healing the blind was extremely rare in the Old Testament; it occurred only in extraordinary circumstances. Such was the case with Elisha's servant when his eyes were opened to see the army of the Lord in 2 Kings 6. Nowhere is there a report of a healing of a man born blind (verse 32). Jesus had just performed a great miracle, so he had to be from God.

The Pharisees opt for personal abuse instead of evenhanded evaluation. Earlier they tried to discount the fact that the man was blind; now they use the same data as the grounds for refusing to listen to his testimony. The fact that he was born blind meant that he was born a sinner and therefore his testimony was not valid. The Pharisees cast out the man – the very excommunication feared by the parents. When the light of the world comes, the darkness tries to snuff it out. But the darkness cannot overcome the light, as we see in the closing scene.

Jesus heard that they had put him out, and finding him, He said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?" Jesus said to him, "You have both seen Him, and He is the one who is talking with you." And he said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped Him. And Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind." Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things and said to Him, "We are not blind too, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains." (9:35-41)

Jesus went seeking the outcast, the lost sheep. The Pharisees are not good shepherds. They would rather destroy the sheep and maintain their own security. As Christians we should expect opposition from the world, and from the church, too. There are many false and blind shepherds in the religion business. Mature faith is often the consequence, not the condition of a decisive break.

The man confesses and Jesus leads him further, inviting him to put his trust in the one who is the revelation of God to man, the Son of Man. This phrase from Daniel 7 is the language of the truly human one over against the beasts who wage warfare on the saints.

The man wants to know the identity of the Son of Man. Jesus reveals his identity just like he did with the woman at the well in chapter 4. The man's eyesight is now completely in focus. At first he knew Jesus' name but not where he could be found; now he sees Jesus as not just a prophet, not just the one who healed him but as the light of the world. Like the woman at the well, the man prostrates himself and worships Jesus – an action taken toward someone who is regarded as a deified king.

Jesus finds the man in a public place and delivers his punch line. The light has come into the world to give sight to the blind. But the light also brings judgment in that it reveals the darkness. The ones who think they see are actually blind. Some Pharisees overhear the conversation and ask if they are blind too. Jesus tells them they remain in sin because they claim they can see.

Studying this chapter I thought of the children's game "Finding Waldo," or the game where there are several rows of scrambled letters and the object is to try and find certain words. Something is hidden, and the purpose of the game is to be able to see it. You stare and look, and when you finally see it you have a sense of delight.

The whole point of this story is that John wants us to “see.” The word occurs nine times in the chapter. John does not want us to be in darkness, but to come into the light. The significance of the healing is that there is one who can give sight to spiritually blind eyes. The Pharisees were looking at the face of God but they couldn’t see even though he was right in front of their eyes. They were blind as a bat. They thought they saw, but they were blind.

As I reflected on this text I asked myself two questions. What couldn’t the Pharisees see? What can’t I see? Let me suggest three areas of blindness.

1. The Pharisees could not see that Jesus was fulfilling Messianic expectations. Can we?

One of the signs of the dawning of the messianic age is the restoration of sight to the blind. We find this in several passages in Isaiah:

Woe to those who deeply hide their plans from the LORD,
And whose deeds are done in a dark place,
And they say, “Who sees us?” or “Who knows us?”
You turn things around!
Shall the potter be considered as equal with the clay,
That what is made would say to its maker, “He did not make me”;
Or what is formed say to him who formed it, “He has no understanding”?
Is it not yet just a little while
Before Lebanon will be turned into a fertile field,
And the fertile field will be considered as a forest?
On that day the deaf will hear words of a book,
And out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see.
The afflicted also will increase their gladness in the LORD,
And the needy of mankind will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.
(Isa 29:15-19)

Notice in Isaiah 29 the promise of sight given to the blind, but also the mention of the potter and clay. God the potter anointed the eyes of the blind man with clay in John 9 and gave him sight. Isaiah 35 makes a similar promise:

Say to those with anxious heart,
“Take courage, fear not.
Behold, your God will come with vengeance;
The recompense of God will come,
But He will save you.”
Then the eyes of the blind will be opened
And the ears of the deaf will be unstopped.
Then the lame will leap like a deer,
And the tongue of the mute will shout for joy. (Isa 35:4-6)

Isaiah 42 says that the Suffering Servant will open blind eyes:

“I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,
I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you,
And I will appoint you as a covenant to the people,
As a light to the nations,
To open blind eyes,
To bring out prisoners from the dungeon
And those who dwell in darkness from the prison. (Isa 42:6-7)

“I will lead the blind by a way they do not know,
In paths they do not know I will guide them.
I will make darkness into light before them

**And rugged places into plains.
These are the things I will do,
And I will not leave them undone.” (Isa 42:16)**

The Pharisees had read these texts over and over but they were blind to what Jesus was doing. That was because they were in sin, the sin of unbelief. “Sin” is another word that is repeated over and over here. The root word for sin (sin, sinned, sinner) occurs 15 times in John 8 and 9. The disciples asked, “Who sinned, this man or his parents?” That is the question, “Who is the sinner?” The Pharisees say it is Jesus; then they say the man is a sinner. John says that it is the Pharisees, the ones who think they see and know.

In chapter 8 Jesus tells the Pharisees they will die in their sin. But to the adulterous woman who is a “sinner,” Jesus says that she is now in the light and no longer lives in sin: “Go and sin no more.” The healing of this man is not a random story. John is weaving a very holistic account – light and life, darkness and sin. In order to receive spiritual sight one has to acknowledge spiritual blindness. The one who is blind, i.e., the one who acknowledges his blindness, has no sin. When we confess our sinful condition we step into the light. We receive new eyes and we see Jesus clearly as the one who fulfills Messianic promises and expectations.

Just like the blind man we are all born blind. We are blinded by sin. We cannot see Jesus for who he is. We stumble and bumble our way through life because we are in darkness. This is what characterized my own life before Christ opened my eyes.

T. S. Eliot describes this journey well:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.¹

Our journey takes us back to God, back to the one who created us. When our eyes are healed we know that place for the first time. Sometimes even after we are healed, after we ask Jesus into our heart, it takes time for our eyes to fully focus on him. We know his name and we know he has healed us, but it takes a while to worship him as the Son of God, the Christ, the Messiah. What might we be blind to about Jesus? Do we see clearly that we have entered the Messianic age and the new creation?

2. The Pharisees could not see what God desired them to be. Can we?

Not only could the Pharisees not see Jesus, they couldn’t see what God desired for them to be as the community of his people. They were blind to the heart and character of God. God’s character is based on his love, grace, forgiveness, compassion and righteousness. God loves the alien, the widow and the orphan.

The Pharisees were what we would call “good” people. They read the Bible. They did good deeds. They were disciples of Moses. They thought they knew God. But they loved law and religion, while God wanted them to reflect his character.

When God said in Leviticus, “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” (19:2), he was not talking about perfection, but about being “other” in the way he is “other.” The God of the Bible is set apart, different from all other gods. His people are to imitate and emulate him and to be set apart so that they can be the light of the world. God has reached out in his grace and mercy to save blind people, people caught in adultery, that they might be a fountain of grace towards others.

He has told you, O man, what is good;
 And what does the LORD require of you
 But to do justice, to love kindness,
 And to walk humbly with your God? (Mic 6:8)

My friend Pat Harrison brought an acquaintance from Colorado to our recent men's retreat. This man was scarred with years and years of sin. He was as tough as they come. Pat has just been loving him over the past several months. At the retreat I watched Pat simply be light and life to this man. I felt it would take a miracle for the man to be healed, but then I remembered, that is what God does. Each and every one of us is a miracle of his grace and healing power. And what God has done for us we offer to others who are in the darkness.

We all have blind spots; our vision is so out of focus. We don't see ourselves, our spouse or even our children clearly. And we don't see how God is working and healing all around us. We get waylaid by duty, law, religion, perfection and busyness, and we don't have the eyes to see the most important things. Frederick Beuchner describes our blindness well:

What I do instead is think about things I have been doing and things I have to do. I think about people I love and people I do not know how to love. I think about letters to write and things around the house to get fixed and old grievances and longings and regrets. I worry and dream about the future. That is to say, I get so lost in my own thoughts – and lost is just the word for it, as lost as you can get in a strange town where you don't know the way – that I have to struggle to see where I am, almost to be where I am. Much of the time I might as well be walking in the dark or sitting at home with my eyes closed, those eyes that keep me from recognizing what is happening around me.²

3. The Pharisees could not see that God often does something unexpected. Can we?

When God does something unexpected, we are surprised. Church leaders can be very resistant to what God is doing. This was the problem with the Pharisees. They were satisfied with their tradition so they rejected the light. We need to be open to seeing God do new things. We might find them strange, even foolish, but God always throws a monkey wrench into the works to keep us on our toes and challenge our preconceived notions. He does not want us to get too comfortable in our religion. As soon as we become comfortable we grow blind, we get hard and stale. A miracle will happen and we take it to the experts for their opinion. Jesus offers life, but we have to rid ourselves of our categories in order to see light and life.

Can we as a church be open to how God might want to break out in a new way? I am not talking about trying to create new life or being popular. What I am asking whether we will be able to see the Spirit at work. This is the very thing the elders are praying for these days. We are praying for the Spirit to move so that more of you can use your gifts, more of you can become involved in ministry, more of you can become connected into community. I would invite you to join our church leadership in praying for these things as well. May God keep us from being blind Pharisees.

¹ Little Gidding, *Seven Centuries of Verse* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), 677.

² Frederick Beuchner, *The Longing for Home* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 145-146.