

The Sign of Unbelief – John 9 (*Part 2: The Sight of the Blind and the Blindness of the Sighted*)

Introduction – “Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him” (Prov 26:12). While Chapter 9 is a story about a real man who was blind from birth and received his sight from Jesus, John has placed this in his gospel because it is a story about spiritual blindness and the sign of unbelief. It is about the oppression one can expect from the spiritually blind. It is about the cost of discipleship and the penalties of fear and pride. And it is about the efficacious love of God and new life in Christ even for those despised and rejected by all others.

Overview – After the incident of the blind man being healed (vv1-7), the community questions him and he provides an honest and simple testimony of what happened (vv8-12). Because of this and because he mentioned that it was “a man named Jesus,” they brought him to the Pharisees to question him, where there is a strong disagreement about what to make of this (vv13-17). The Jews did not believe the miracle had occurred and so called on his parents who distanced themselves from him and his testimony because they were afraid of being kicked out of the synagogue (vv18-23). They then called back the man and demanded that he agree with them that Jesus was a sinner, and the ensuing argument ended with the Jewish authorities kicking the man out of the synagogue (vv24-34). After this, Jesus found him and remade the whole man with spiritual sight (vv35-38). And the chapter ends with Jesus explaining what the whole point was (vv39-41).

When Called Upon to Give Testimony – First of all, his neighbors, those who knew he had been born blind, ask him to tell them what happened and you can only imagine the wonder and excitement (vv8-12) and this blind-man-granted-sight simply tells his story. Amazed, they brought him to the Pharisees (and we are not sure of their motivation – but remember, there was a growing distance between what many of the people were thinking of Jesus and what the Pharisees were threatened by what the people were thinking). Already there would be great tension; a blind beggar, dirty from sitting in the streets, is brought before the ultra-clean, gnat-strangling, super-holy Pharisees who believe they see the law clearly. Again, he is questioned, and gives a simple account (vv13-15). We will return to this man’s testimony and faith later.

Fear of the Gospel – There is this short tragic interlude with the man’s parents who will not answer the question “*How then does he see?*” for fear of the Jewish authorities (v22, also 7:13). They said that anyone who confessed that Jesus was the Messiah would be kicked out of the assembly of the people of God. This would have civil, ecclesial, social, and economic ramifications. Fast forward to our day and this is the fear of the gospel, of being associated with the gospel, with Jesus, and with Christians. It is the fear of being associated with doctrines that are considered hateful, racist, offensive, non-inclusive, archaic, non-scientific, chauvinistic, misogynistic, and now homophobic, transphobic, and on and on. Today, that is the world’s (and possibly including your family’s or your employer’s) definition of what it means to be a Christian. And so, let’s be clear. It is the fear of being mocked, criticized, rejected, disowned, excluded, demoted, fired, delicensed, and on and on.

This man’s parents wouldn’t stand up for their son. Elsewhere, Jesus warns about this sharp edge of the gospel and the cost of discipleship (Matt 10:32-39). Christians are called to primary and ultimate allegiance to Jesus. John will put cowards at the top of the list of those who will be thrown in the lake of fire (Rev 21:8). We are to fear God and not man (Matt 10:28). But what we also see here is that the fear of consequences for standing and testifying to the truth leads to cruel lovelessness of others. Fear sacrifices someone else. Later, Peter will deny the Lord – and when Jesus restores him after His resurrection, He asks, “do you love me?”

Pride that Rejects the Gospel – The cure for such cowardice is not self-confidence. The self-confident Jewish authorities are as wrong as they are confident. After realizing from their time with the parents that this is not a hoax, they bring the man who was blind back in, demanding that he agree with them that Jesus is a sinner (v24), a high-handed, repeat-offending, Sabbath-breaker (v16, 5:16, see also Luke 13:14). Christ continually, openly, healed on the Sabbath. It is worth noting that the deliberate provocation of the authorities to anger by defying the authorities of an ungodly rule and law has a long and noble tradition. Jesus goes out of His way to break their laws. He wants people freed from tyrannical rule. There is something to consider here. Couldn’t Jesus have made it a lot less awkward to follow Him by healing on one of the other days of the week without compromising the gospel? But actually what we see is that such controversy creates an atmosphere that begins to sort people out, revealing the cowards and the proud-blind.

The Jewish authorities can see the man who was born blind can now see. But they cannot accept what this means about Jesus. Consider their very own scriptures (Psalm 146:8, Isaiah 29:18, 35:5, 42:6-7). After his third testimony, far more verbose and serrated at the religious elite (25-33), the man is hauled away as a sinner who cannot see (v34). The authorities want them out of their sight, they can no longer see this “sinner” and seal their own blindness (vv39-41). They don’t want a Savior like Jesus, resenting what he implied about them. They wanted to be affirmed on their own merits, not forgiven of sins through a Savior. People in their self-serving pride feel the same way today; they don’t want to admit their sins or their need for Another to take care of their sins (1 John 2:1-6).

Faith in the God of the Gospel – This man born blind avoids the blindness of fear and pride. He refuses to give in to the taunts of the proud Jewish authorities even to the point of losing his family and his kin on the very same day he receives his sight. He is despised and rejected, just as Jesus would be one day. He humbly believes and worships Jesus even after being thrown out (vv35-38). He has received a miracle and yet boasts in nothing in himself (v25). The gospel teaches us that we are worse than we thought (Rom 3:23) and worthy of far more than we have yet been given (Rom 6:23). But when we look to Christ as our Savior and only hope, eyes are opened, sins are forgiven, fears are relieved, and eternal life is ours.

Refuse to bend to the fearmongers and keep yourself far from the proud, the cool, and the self-righteous. The world will want to shame you if you say you believe this Bible and on the Lord Jesus. They will want to shame you away from standing with others they have deemed sinners and haters. Our response can and should be like the blind man – “I don’t know all the answers to all of your questions and attacks upon the Word of God, the church, Christ Jesus, or the gospel of salvation...what I do know is this: I was blind, but now I see.”

Dave Hatcher – August 7, 2022