

**Sermon for Sunday, August 9, 2009**  
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**THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD**

**John 9**

**1. The Need for Jesus**

The book Crashing Through tells the story of Mike May. Mike was near an explosion when he was three years old and lost his sight. We ordinarily think of this as a tragedy, but Mike actually had an amazingly rich life. He had a successful career, even starting up a software company. He hiked and skied in the mountains. He traveled alone, he married and had children. He even drove a car once. He found his identity as a blind man who functioned so very well in a sighted world. Then, when he was almost 50, Mike met a leading ophthalmologist and surgeon. They talked, the doctor examined Mike and delivered stunning news. His form of blindness could now be reversed.

There were enormous risks. If the surgery failed, he could lose the photosensitivity he retained which helped him as he walked. He faced almost total disruption of his busy, high-functioning life. That could cause his struggling business to fail. His sight could be partial. He might be unable to make sense of what he saw. He might be unable to decipher faces, for example. That often led to profound depression. But it could work. Would Mike take the risk?

Our text is John 9, but I really want to tell the story of John 5 and 9, of two adult men that are a little like Mike May. One was crippled for thirty-eight years, the other blind for all his life. Jesus gave both men an opportunity to be healed, body and soul. One took it and the other did not.

In John 9, Jesus restored the sight of a man who had been blind from birth. In fact, it was a complex miracle, because the Lord healed the man's eyes and mind and nervous system. The nerves of the brain fail to develop when a baby or very young child can't see. Jesus healed the man's nervous system, his brain, and gave him, at once, years of human development. So he saw colors and shapes and knew exactly what it all meant. He perfectly knew how to navigate this world – that was something Mike May never achieved, even though he had sight for several years.

Here is the context. In the Gospel of John, this is the fifth miraculous sign Jesus performed. It breaks the pattern found in other miracles. Usually, Jesus performs a miracle, then discusses it with people who may or (often) may not understand what it means. This time, before he does anything, he declares, "I am the light of the world" (8:12, 9:5). The blind man gets it and takes courageous action as a result.

But to grasp John 9, we must compare it to Jesus' third sign, in John 5. Both times Jesus healed a man who had a major disability for a long time. The man in John 5 was unable to walk for thirty-eight years. In John 9, it is a man born blind. Both involve a complex healing event. For the crippled man, bones, ligaments, muscles and balance had to be restored at once. But John 5 and 9 are different in the most vital area.

**John 5 - Jesus meets a lame sinner**

Outside Jerusalem, during a religious feast, Jesus met a man at a pool called Bethesda. The ruins are visible to this day (5:1-2). "A great number of disabled people used to lie there - the blind, lame and paralyzed" near the waters that were supposed to heal the first person who entered them after bubbles and small waves swept across the pool. All sorts of sick people gathered. But what chance did a lame man have of being the first into the water?

Without friends to help him, his very presence looks like an exercise in futility. Nonetheless, he stayed there year after year. When Jesus met him, he "had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?" (5:5-6). Notice what their dialogue was.

First, Jesus asks him a question: "Do you want to get well?" If we didn't know better, we might think this was a foolish question. Of course he wants to get well! Everyone who is sick wants to get better.

Or do they? Actually, some people don't want to get better. They've adjusted to their illness. They find their identity there. "I am a lame person. I am addicted to... alcohol or some drug." People find identity in shattered relationships - "I'm the woman who has an impossible husband." Or a bad work history. Or an illness. Sadly, the problem has become essential to their identity. They are a victim, a sufferer. People pity them, care for them, year after year. This man has been lame for thirty-eight years. He has learned to survive, to negotiate the world in his condition.

Remember Mike May - the blind guy who gets along very well through Braille and echo-location. He can ski, run his own business. "I'm fine as I am."

The same holds for the need for Jesus. Lots of people have all sorts of wounds and aches in life, but they don't want Jesus. They can take care of themselves. Life is hard, but they've adjusted, adapted, lowered expectations. They will live with the pain.

People with a long term disability don't always want to get better. Jesus knows this so he asks, "Do you want to get well?"

The man doesn't say, "Yes." He says, "I've given up." That is, "I have no one to help me." No one helps him into the healing waters. That implies "I'd like to get better." Close enough! Jesus heals him with a word: "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked" (5:8-9).

This took place on a Sabbath day. No surprise, as he walked off, religious leaders noticed that he was working on the Sabbath by carrying a reasonably heavy item and accosted him for illegal labor. He passes the buck. "The healer said to me 'Pick up your mat and walk'" (5:11).

Let's notice what's missing: The man didn't praise God. He didn't thank Jesus. He doesn't explain things to the authorities. He just says, "Don't be upset with me! It's not my fault. The healer made me do it."

"Who was that?" they ask. But he doesn't know, for Jesus had slipped away (5:12-13). But Jesus knows what's in a man, so he finds him and warns him, "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you. Go and sin no more." (5:14). On this occasion – this occasion - the illness was connected to some sin in his life. He needed to search himself and repent of his sin.

But no. Instead of searching himself, the man reported Jesus to the authorities at once (5:15-16). That may be naiveté – maybe he doesn't know about Jesus and the authorities. More likely it's treachery. He should see that the leaders don't think well of Jesus (5:10-12). They ask, "Who is this fellow?" and "Who told you to work on the Sabbath?" At any rate, he sensed that he was in trouble with the authorities and pointed them at Jesus – "He told me to work on the Sabbath."

We want to empathize with a man who was unable to walk for years. But the man did not see his need to enter a relationship with Jesus. He received the healing but, didn't take it as a sign.

The sign said Jesus is a healer. If we are honest, physical ailments are not our ultimate problem. The crippled man takes no interest in Jesus. He doesn't listen to Jesus. He simply tells the Pharisees, "Jesus made me work on Sabbath. Work it out with him," and moves on. This isn't opposition, it's indifference. He doesn't see his need of Jesus. The healing of the man born blind, Jesus' fifth sign is the opposite in almost every way.

The healing of the man born blind demonstrates that he is the light of the world. It raises a question: who will see and how much? In the end, the man born blind sees more than anyone, while those who

think they see are blinded by the light of Jesus. Jesus shines his light on his people and shepherds them (9:39-10:22).

The scene starts with a question. As the disciples walked with Jesus, they saw "a man blind from birth" and asked, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (9:2)

In Jesus' day, people over-spiritualized illness. They assumed that all tragedy and disease was a direct consequence of sin. Today, we de-spiritualize illness. We believe germs, microbes and bad genes cause all illness. We see a link between sin and illness only in obvious cases such as sexually transmitted diseases.

Scripture links sin and illness on some occasions. Jesus said, "Your sins are forgiven," then healed a paralytic (Luke 5:20). He healed the man in John 5 and said, "Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you" (John 5:14). Deuteronomy directly links sickness to the national sins of Israel. Bad harvests and sickness come when Israel rebels. But the covenant family enjoys God's blessings when it is faithful (Deuteronomy 28:58-63, Psalm 32, Proverbs 3:28-35, 13:13-23, Ezekiel 18, Corinthians 11:30, Acts 12).

So the disciples ask, "Who sinned?" Jesus answered: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life." Sin is no part of the picture. That seems to be the case most of the time: Sickness is not the result of personal sin. Job's friends were wrong. (Job 8:1ff., 22:1 ff). Job did not suffer because he sinned (9:13-21, 29:1-30:31 cf., Ecclesiastes 3:16-22, 5:12-17, 6:1-9).

When we're sick, James says we should consider the possibility of sin and examine ourselves. A time of reflection and self examination can't hurt. If sins come to mind, we should repent, confess, and know that the Lord graciously forgives all who repent.

## **2. The Work of Jesus – the healing**

Before he did anything, Jesus said "I am the light of the world" (9:5). Then he spat on the ground and "made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes." Then he told him, "Go... wash in the Pool of Siloam..." So the man went and washed, and came home seeing. Meanwhile, Jesus moved on.

Soon his neighbors noticed a healthy man who looked like the blind beggar they had long known. "Is this the same man who used to beg?" they wondered. They debated and finally he told them, "I am the man... The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes, [I washed] and then I could see." (9:9-11).

The people called in the Pharisees. To the people, the Pharisees were simply the local religious leader. This looked like it might be an act of God, so they called their leaders for comment. This is normal (9:13).

But as the Pharisees arrive, we learn that the healing occurred on the Sabbath. By their code that is sin. Their tradition, their interpretation of the law said that a physician may heal someone if their life is threatened. Otherwise healing on the Sabbath is work, therefore a sin. Since blindness isn't life-threatening, they think Jesus is a sinner and lawbreaker.

Some Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." (9:16). More than that, he is dangerous. His very power shows he could lead the people astray – (cf Deuteronomy 13).

Others disagreed, asking, "How can a sinner do such miraculous signs". That is, he must be "from God." It is so rare that the blind are healed; and, in the Old Testament, never someone born blind. This must be the power of God and he wouldn't bless a sinner to do such signs (9:16, Deuteronomy 13:1-11, 18:20-22, Revelation 11).

The irony is that this argument is technically incorrect – sinners **do** perform signs. There are evil or demonic wonders, such as Pharaoh's magicians (Exodus 7:22). But the people come to the right conclusion.

The other Pharisees are technically correct: a miracle, a mighty deed, may or may not show someone is from God. They say: he has power and he breaks the Sabbath law, therefore he is a sinner.

That is their mistake. Jesus didn't follow their view of the law, true. But Jesus says God gave the law for the good of humanity, for the sake of love and mercy, quoting: "The Sabbath was made for man/humanity, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). God's good law teaches us how to do good and show mercy every day. The purpose of the law is to promote love and mercy. (Matthew 9:13).

## Questions

The Pharisees decide to resolve their disagreement by investigating. They ask the blind man what he has to say. His reply, "He is a prophet." He is an agent of God. (9:17)

This leads the Pharisees to question the claim of a miracle. They call the parents. They say it is their son, but they also recognize a bad scene and want to get away from the controversy. So they say, "He was born blind. But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don't know? Ask him" (9:20-23).

The testimony of a miracle isn't going away, so the Pharisees press: What are you hiding? Tell us the whole truth. Their minds are made up by now and they are rough, even contemptuous with the blind man: "We know that this man is a sinner." But the blind man holds firm.

"One thing I know, I was blind, now I see" (9:24-25). That, friends, is a great confession. It is completely different from the man in John 5, who throws Jesus to the wolves. The "blind" man stands firm: "This I know. I will not be shaken." He doesn't know everything, but he knows this and he sticks to it. "I was blind, but now I see." This is the decisive testimony and personal witness that every believer should have. We don't know everything, but enough

- God created all things. It was complex, amazing, confounding, but good.
- We rebelled – humanity as a whole, you and me in particular. The result is pain brokenness, sin, rebellion. blindness, death, cowardice, lies.
- Jesus, true man and truly God, entered this world to heal, so we can see again.

Jesus' miracles are signs, pointing beyond the physical. Whatever the quality of our eyes, we all need vision. In fact, in this scene we have Pharisees with sound physical eyes laboring under spiritual blindness. None are so blind as the one who will not see – and the Pharisees refuse to see.

## Apply traits of blindness – apply to self

For them, religion is chiefly about law: What acts are legal, illegal on Sabbath? Who has religious authority? True religion is never primarily about law.

If you find yourself thinking about the law and what you must do and what you failed to do and the consequences of your failure, you're missing the point. The point is that God enters lives and gives us sight, so we see and show mercy like him. The law blesses **after** we receive mercy and see.

Another way to view the Pharisees' problem: overwhelming self-confidence that they are guardians of truth and law. They have every chance to be corrected, but they refuse, close ranks and attack those with another view. But true faith is humble. True believers repent. We learn and we are open to correction.

False religious leaders are self-serving. The Pharisees frighten the man's parents, attempt to bully the blind man and ultimately treat him with contempt. When he keeps testifying to Jesus in response to their questions, they finally lash out. "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" Then they threw him out (9:34).

Godly leaders, true leaders are different. Listen, all: We care, provide, protect. In 1 Kings 12:7, Solomon died and his son Rehoboam took the throne. The people asked for tax relief, for Solomon had steadily demanded more from the people. Rehoboam had two groups of advisors – his young friends and Solomon's wise advisors. Young men said, "Show them who is boss. Make your rule heavier." But Solomon's advisors said, "If today you will be a servant to these people and serve them and give them a favorable answer, they will always be your servants." Leaders serve their people first, then the people gladly follow.

### **Back to the story... New Life with Jesus**

The Pharisees push: "How did he open your eyes?" (9:26). Weary of their questions, knowing that their "inquiry" is a sham, the man switches to sardonic humor: "Are you asking these questions because you want to become his disciples, too?" (9:27). This prompts an explosion of abuse (9:28-29). The blind man steps in and defends Jesus.

"He opened my eyes" and "We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will." For this, they cast him out, "You were born entirely in sin. And you will lecture us!" (9:30-34). This is cruel, but revealing – so they do believe he was blind, that Jesus healed him.

The Pharisees throw the man out, but Jesus seeks him for a climactic encounter. "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" (9:35).

"Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?" (9:36). So Jesus told him. "He is speaking to you." I wonder how long they spent, Jesus explaining everything. What a marvelous conversation. Better yet, it ends in faith: "Lord, I believe" and he worshiped Jesus (9:37-38). Now he is entirely in the light. He is fully alive.

It seems obvious, but recall John 5. It's possible to encounter Jesus, see proof of his goodness, meet him personally, and turn away. Be warned!

Our newly sighted man shows the marks of true, growing faith. Can you see yourself here? Or are you on the outside looking?

Consider the formerly blind man as a picture of growth into faith. First, he washed in the pool as ordered (9:7) When healed he testified to neighbors that Jesus healed him. It began with a simple confession: "The man called Jesus made mud, anointed my eyes and told me to wash, so I did and received my sight" (9:11).

He honed it tighter. "He put mud on my eyes and I washed and I see" (9:15).

He stuck with it in a decisive personal witness "One thing I know, I was blind and now I see" (9:24).

He grew in understanding. First, "He is a prophet" (9:17). He realized Jesus gathered disciples (9:27). Finally he professed full faith. "Lord, I believe" (9:38).

He remained firm in adversity – as must we. Lesson: If you trust in Jesus, there will be conflict. The godly suffer hardship, even persecution (2 Timothy 3:12). He defended Jesus. "If this man were not from God, he could do nothing" (9:33).

Compare John 5 and 9. Jesus did not come to a world of sinner aware of their need and eager to be rid of their sin. Indeed, some had a little light and misused it. The brilliance of the true light led them to look aside and take their eyes off Jesus. Neither the cripple nor the Pharisees really saw. Our man saw physically, then spiritually when he confessed faith in Jesus.

We need to ready, too. It's not enough to invite people to church any more, to tell them how great it is saying, "You ought to come." Twenty years ago, yes. Today, you need to talk. You need to tell your friend what you know. Offer to share your life story or open the Bible with them. Tell them what Jesus did for you.

It's our responsibility to consider the works of Jesus and ask: What response is required? The lame man thought he owed nothing, the blind man, everything.

Jesus "directs spiritual longing and need to himself." <sup>1</sup>

Part of the fun in the great outdoors is the trouble. We hiked the mountains every day and most days something went wrong. We lost the trail for twenty minutes on the less-traveled way up one mountain. Some ran out of water on another. We got hungry, we needed dry clothes. We needed shelter from a sleet squall at 12,500 feet. Later, I realized Jesus said something that touches all these needs and more. He directs longings and needs to himself.

- Are you hungry? Jesus gives the bread of life.
- Are you thirsty? Jesus is the water of life.
- Do you feel left out? Jesus is the door and the way?
- Do you feel unprotected? Jesus is the good shepherd.
- Are you in the dark, seeking direction? Jesus is the light of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Burge, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospel*, page 356.