

Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Luke 18:31-34, 35-43
“Eyes Closed, Eyes Open”

September 15, 2014
(14th Sunday After Pentecost)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

LUKE 18:31-34, 35-43 "EYES CLOSED, EYES OPEN"

A. 18:31-34 THIRD PASSION PREDICTION IN LUKE.

Last Healing, 22:50 (Healed Ear)

No Surprises, God's Will As True Prophet // Mt. 20:17-19, Mk. 10:32-34

18:31-19:44 = Final Phase Of Jesus' Journey

And taking The Twelve aside, he said to them,

"Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem,

v.31c + For Only In Luke // 9:31, 51, 53, 13:22, 33-34, 17:11

and everything that is written of the Son of man by the prophets will be accomplished. 13:32, 22:37, 24:25-48

For he will be delivered to the Gentiles,

7 Futures, 4 Son of Man Prediction: 9:22, 9:44-45, 17:25

and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon; Is. 50:6, Jews Omitted, Humiliated

they will scourge him and kill him,

He Absorbs Hatred, Surprise: Messiah Who Suffers/Dies

and on the third day he will rise."

24:7, God's Reversal: Hosea 6:2, Acts 3:12-18

Not Grasp Suffering, THREE FOLD DESCRIPTION:

But they understood/ none of these things;

(v.34 only in Luke)

Eyes Closed, Blind, Not Understand (1)

this saying was hid from them,

(Passive Voice= by God)

Saying Hidden (2)

and they did not grasp/ what was said.

Faith = They Follow Where He Leads! Did Not Grasp (3)

Not An Easy Path! Enlightened In 24:25-27, Fulfills 8:16-17

B. 18:35-43 HEALING OF THE BLIND MAN WHO FOLLOWS JESUS.

Mark 10:35-40 Not Used

Paradigm Of Conversion // Mk. 10:46-52, Mt. 9:27-31, 20:29-34

1) v.35 Blind Man By The Roadside Begging.

Luke's Only Healing Of The Blind Story, See 7:21

Mk. 10:32a Omitted, Literal And Symbolic Of Disciples; 4:18 = Jesus' Program

As he drew near to Jericho,

Luke Omits Name Bartimaeus, Exit City (Mk. 10:46), 18 Miles To Jerusalem

a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging;

Common Sight, Pilgrims, Post As An Official Beggar, All He Could Do

Lk. outside Jericho, Mt./Mk. as Jesus leaves Jericho

2) vv.36-37 Inquiry Of The Blind Man And Answer: Q & A.

Hears Cry, Shows Mercy, Brings Healing, Makes Disciple, Evokes Praise

and hearing a multitude going by,

vv.36-37 Luke Only

he inquired what this meant.

Motion Verbs: drew near, going by, passing by

They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by."

Divine Appointment! Proclamation Of Crowd

The Sick Must Pray, In Jesus The Kingdom Is Near

3) v.38 Cry For Mercy From Messiah (Ps. 51:1).

He Adds A Messianic Title

1:27, 32-33, 72; 18:7, 20:41-44, Promise Of Vindication

And he cried, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

"Sees" Jesus' Identity

Cry For Mercy: 9:38, 18:17, 16:24, 17:13

4) v.39a Resistance To His Prayer By The Blind.

Jesus Resists Resistance

5-10% Expendables, Cultural Pyramid Of Honor/Shame

And those who were in front rebuked him,

Disciples Not Mentioned Here //18:15-17

telling him to be silent;

Lev. 21:18, 2 Sam. 5:8, He Is Expendable, Faith Faces Barriers

Epitimaos = Strong Verb, 18:15

3') v.39b Cry For Mercy From Messiah.

First Public Messianic Confession

Break Through A Barrier, Persistent Prayer

but he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

17:13, 18:13

3 Titles: Nazareth, Son of David, Lord

2') vv.40-42 Inquiry Of Jesus And Answer: Q & A.

Prayer Stopped Jesus In His Tracks

Time For Compassion! Jesus As Good Samaritan, 10:30, 14:21

And Jesus stopped, and commanded him to be brought to him;

Prayer For Mercy Stops Jesus In His Tracks

Wis. 7:17-21 Healer

and when he came near, he asked him,

Tradition: Solomon As Healer, Jos. Ant. 8.2.4-5, Para. 42-49

"What do you want me to do for you?"

Let The Man Define His Own Need/ Be Specific

He said, "Lord, let me receive my sight."

Mk. Has Master, David's Lord, Isaiah 35:5 = Sign Of Kingdom

5 Step Prayer Model, Do I See Who Jesus Is, Or Am I Blind?

And Jesus said to him,

24:31, 24:45 Eyes Opened, Bold Invitation To Validate His Messiahship

"Receive your sight;

Lit. See again! Only In Luke, Spirit Enabled Command + Blessing On Faith

your faith has made you well (sesoken se = saved you)."

Blessing, e.g. Samaritan in 17:19, 7:50, 8:48

New Dignity/Identity/Associates, Faith Leads To Insight, To Following

1') v.43 Blind Man Healed And On The Road With Jesus As A Disciple.

Nothing To Leave Behind!

Two Healings: 1) Physical (p.v.), 2) Spiritual, Outpouring Of Praise

And immediately he received his sight and followed him,

4:16-18, 5:17, 7:22, 24:31 (Unlike Rich Ruler: 10:18-30)

glorifying God;

v.43b-d Luke Only, Sight + Insight! Disciples Receive, Follow, Praise

and all the people, when they saw it,

Public Learning = Those Who Discouraged Him Are Now Convinced

gave praise to God.

7:16, Implicit Christology, Faith = Eyesight Required To Follow/Understand Jesus

Giving Sight To A Blind Man Is Easier Than Giving Insight To The Twelve!

A Brief Treatment Of Luke 18:31-34, 35-43

With this travel report we move into the last phase of Jesus' long journey to Jerusalem (18:31-19:44). The text before us falls into two parts: 1) A final prediction of the passion (vv.31-33) with a report of the disciples' incomprehension (v.34), and 2) The healing of a blind beggar who then follows Jesus (vv.35-43). The disciples' lack of insight into the prophecy is a symbolic blindness for which Jesus' healing of the blind man is the symbolic answer. Their eyes will also be opened, but only after the momentous events of cross and resurrection (24:25-48). Synoptic parallels are Mk 10:32-34, 46-52 // Mt. 20:17-19, 29-34.

The third passion prediction is announced only to The Twelve (who have left all to follow Jesus [5:11, 28; 18:28]) and is the most detailed. The purpose is affirmed, "Behold, we are going to Jerusalem, *and everything that is written of the Son of man by the prophets will be accomplished*" (v.31b). What is in italics is Luke's addition to his Markan source; fulfillment of prophecy is a major theme in the third gospel. Jesus has a destiny, and the details are given in vv.32-33 as a series of six items: delivered, mocked, shamefully treated, spit upon, scourged, killed, and then a climactic seventh as the great reversal, "and on the third day he will rise." To bring Mark's series of six to seven Luke adds an echo of Is. 50:6, "shamefully treated." Jesus remains in control of his destiny and willingly enters injustice and suffering to await new life. He models what he asks of others. Because Jesus has spoken truly throughout the story, these things will unfold as promised. The reaction of his friends is noted in a statement found only in Luke (v.34) and stated three times for emphasis. The report *But they understood none of these things* (v.34a) is parallel to *and they did not grasp what was said* (v.34c). Between the two is a statement in the passive that God has not granted insight: *this saying was hid from them* (v.34b). They follow even if they do not understand what it means for the Son of man to suffer and be vindicated after death. Some mysteries are understood only in the obedience of following, "*We are going up to Jerusalem...*" (v.31b). He sees clearly what's ahead; they do not and trust him. This is the quest of faith seeking understanding.

While healing the blind is part of Jesus' kingdom ministry of restoration (e.g. 4:18, 7:22), this is the only narrative of such in Luke, and it has both historical and symbolic meaning. The surface structure is a 7:1 concentric pattern (1-2-3-~~4~~-3'-2'-1') with the resistance of the crowds at the center (4. v.39a). The phrases *a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging* (v.35b) and *he received his sight and followed him* (v.43a) in the outer frames (1//1') is an inclusion. In the first frame out from the center (3. v.38 // 3' 39b) we find the repeated cry, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me." In the next layer (2. vv.36-37 // 2' vv.40-42) there is a question and answer format for both the blind man (*he inquired*) and Jesus (*he asked him*). Luke's hand is apparent throughout his use of Mark 10:46-52 (noted in red type). The healing is before the arrival in Jericho, "As he *drew near* to Jericho," not on the way out as in Mark. It is the question of the blind man (v.36, not found in Mark) that brings the answer, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by" (v.37). The detail that those who rebuked the blind man were *those who were out front* is Luke's addition, as is his substitution of *Lord* (v.41) for Mark's *Master*. Luke gives Jesus' prayer of command, "Receive your sight" (v.42b) in addition to the praise of faith he shares with Mark, "your faith has made you well." Luke final edit is a notation that both the healed man and the crowds praised God, "... *glorifying God*; and all the people who saw it, *gave praise to God*" (v.43b). Miracles may spark both faith and praise. Jesus offers sight to a blind man who persists in his cry for mercy. To those who continue to follow, sight comes as our cognitive faculties are healed. Jesus does write off the blind man, and no confession of sin is required prior to healing (cf. John 9:2). He hears and stops and questions and heals and welcomes a new disciple. He lets the man name his own need, "Lord, let me receive my sight" (v.41b). In the encounter we meet the mercy of the One who sent Jesus. Can you see yet?

EYES CLOSED, EYES OPEN

“And Jesus stopped, and commanded him to be brought to him.”

Life is about to change for someone; the kingdom of God has come near!

L U K E 1 8 : 4 0

The Christian life is not a problem to be solved; like a marriage it’s a holy mystery to be savored and lived into in the fear and love of God. The Christian life is not a problem to be solved by technical means or great learning, thus there is no one magic step or secret key that unlocks every door; it’s a mystery into which we are drawn deeper-and-deeper, layer-by-layer trusting and following where we cannot yet see or understand, just like The Twelve in the story before us. Even this far into their three year pilgrimage, Luke notes how dim they were, verse 34:

“But they understood none of these things;
this saying was hid from them,
and they did not grasp what was said.”

Jesus was a blazing torch in a dark world. They were walking in his flickering shadows with enough light to keep up, but not yet enough insight to understand where he was headed. He would willingly absorb all the hate and shame the forces of religion and government could bring down on him, trusting that the Father’s promise of resurrection would be fulfilled in the power of the Spirit. His doused flame would be rekindled with fire from on high. So let’s give the dozen guys a break; a Messiah who suffered and was then raised did not compute because it had not yet happened.¹ It wasn’t in the script, but the script was about to be rewritten in a way no one but Jesus himself anticipated, even predicted!² Their following would come to a sudden, violent end on Friday afternoon around three, then be born again

¹ See N.T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was And Is* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 1999), Chapter 4, “The Crucified Messiah,” 74-95.

² The three Lucan passion predictions are 9:22, 9:44, 18:31-33.

when their dead rabbi was found to be alive again because the tomb was empty and because a grave-robbing God sent him back in a string of tangible appearances to relaunch the movement. They could now see as he opened their minds.

Beware of Christian books in whose titles you find the words *keys* or *secrets*: *Seven secrets to getting your prayers answered*, *Ten keys for having in all and Jesus too!* I've got shelves of them. Our world and its pop culture loves technological solutions and wants to reduce everything to a series of simple sequential operations that can be repeated, patented, packaged, marketed and sold as guaranteed to work, much like an assembly line; what I call *life as an app!* But to know and follow Jesus with others in the messiness and unpredictability of life is not so easily managed or mapped or processed. You may gain valuable information from such books, as I have, because some are quite thoughtful in their use of Scripture, but do not buy the overall idea that if you just master their steps or use their keys that being a believer will suddenly bring you success, peace, and a blank check for your prayers.

You do not want to substitute someone's neat little system for a real relationship with the living Lord, which- if the Gospels are our guide- was always unpredictable because they were following Jesus, not a neat little system apart from him that supposedly use his insights for life improvement. His goal is not to make our lives easy or successful by current standards but *to make us different*, a new kind of human being, because he is now the center-point of our desires, and with him is all the wisdom and power we need to fulfill our calling to represent him wherever we are.³ What we need to do his work will be supplied; beyond that I promise nothing. I don't think he's particularly interested in funding a life dream that has little to do with his purposes. That's up to you, and if you pull it off, the downside is the illusion of self-sufficiency, which is another name for *spiritual blindness*.

But when your bookshelves are full of the stuff they sell, and when you've grown tired of dead ends because you can't pull it off the way it's written in the book, and if you can't remember the steps when life falls part, then come back home to simply *following Jesus in the middle of the mess*. It's finally him we follow and mimic with the Four Gospels as the Four Complementary Scripts, and it really doesn't

³ On the challenge and privilege of discipleship, see Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus' Essential Teaching on Discipleship* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 2006); *Living In Christ's Presence: Final Words On Heaven And The Kingdom Of God* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2014).

Luke 18:31-43 6

matter which one you start with because they all open up into the loving mystery of the same person, who is alive and available and welcoming new interns.⁴ Even here, only a few days from his end, Jesus signs up a blind guy he just healed. And just before he breathed his last, he reached out to another of life's losers with a promise, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."⁵ It's never too late to begin following him from wherever you happen to be *sitting* like the blind man or *standing* like the crowds who tried to shut him up or *hanging* on a cross like the brigand when he crosses your path. Start here. Start now. Cry out for his mercy. Tell him what you most need. Let him open your eyes and change your trajectory as you follow him.

Mystery, as I understand it, is not about easy or obvious but about depth and significance. Mystery resists our control but invites us in. A five year old girl sees her parents kiss, but the depth of the bonded intimacy between them is a mystery to her. It's simply beyond her, and that's for her good at this point. She sees, but does not perceive. But one day she may say *I do* and herself enter the mystery of marriage, which the Bible often uses as a metaphor for our relationship with God since it is so deeply relational and inexhaustible.

In matters of theological mystery it's not the engineers but the saints and mystics who are our faithful guides. We do not build a life of faith with a set of blueprints but with parables and proverbs and miracle stories, with signs and sacraments and surprise of grace and with the spiritual guidance of those who've lived deeper into the things of God. It's not so much about procedures as prayer. The mystery of God is an uncomfortable reminder that in all the truly important matters of life we are not in control. We did not chose to be here; we find ourselves thrown *into life* as a mystery. The Christian life is not a problem to be solved; it is a holy mystery in which we are drawn close to Jesus Christ and find, in a deep way, that he is enough. There's always more to him than we can fathom, and when we come to him we receive more than we bargained for. Our blind friend may have wanted enough money for a good lunch, what he got was a new sight and the insight to follow Jesus. That we read his story two thousand years later is further testimony he received more than he ever bargained for. Wonder and worship, fear and fascination, awe and anticipation, surprise and silence: these are the cues that mystery is near and

⁴ See Jonathan T. Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014), Chapter 4, "The Joy and Angst of Having Four Gospels," 50-73.

⁵ 23:43.

that the depth of life is about to open under our feet and the heights swing open over our heads. It's why the disciples in their gospel portraits always look slightly out of control and why ignorance was so much a part of their life. Luke is clear, "But they understood none of these things... and they did not grasp what was said." That means it's OK for me to say, "I don't know. It hasn't been revealed yet."

Three years with Jesus, and still they are beginners. It's not that they were any less intelligent or observant than us, only that they lived in such close proximity with the one who embodied the fundamental mystery of being fully God and fully human. Living around the edges of life we may all look a bit competent in our sphere of control, but the nearer we come to Jesus competence fades and mastery vanishes. We wander around like the disciples not knowing much. We wait and watch and respond to what the Lord is doing. Independent initiative is surrendered; trying to *make something happen* is avoided. Some of us pastors may look knowledgeable to others because of our training and experience, but inside we know differently. The goal is not to master the material but to be mastered by the Lord. We are responding to the person who embodies the mystery of God, Jesus Christ: risen from the dead, unutterably alive, ever-active in the lives of his followers, leading us on.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

A. Eyes Not Yet Opened (vv. 31-34)

Jesus pulled the twelve aside and told the insiders what was ahead, but not so they could understand it before it happened. They couldn't, so God wisely hid it from them. Prophecy is like that; only when you stand on the other side of fulfillment is it clear what the prophet said. So prophecy is always more than simply prediction. It is an invitation deeper into the mystery. It's a signpost for the *not-yet-known*.

"Behold," Jesus said, "we are going up to Jerusalem...." That's much more than a travel report. For Jesus it was a statement of his mission and destiny as indicated by the rest of the sentence, "and everything that is written of the Son of man by the prophets *will be accomplished*." All God has been doing since the call of Abraham is about to come to a single focus in a single person. The most important event in all history is about to take place. God is about to personally draw into himself the pain and hatred, the sin and ignorance of the whole world. And it will be a deliberate voluntary act of Jesus, not an accident, a tragedy, or an afterthought. God the Father will send God the Son into the depths of suffering. Jesus will willingly

Luke 18:31-43 8

submit so the worst of this world’s blind passions will be revealed and recorded. Note the action verbs; there are six in verses 32 and 33 describing what will be done to Jesus by others: he will be *delivered to the Romans, mocked, shamefully treated, spit upon, scourged* and *killed*. Jesus will identify with every human injustice and every innocent victim. He will not hide himself from the gruesome side of life. He will take the worst we have to offer and die as an enemy of the state and a failed Jewish Messiah.⁶ This was not the expected job description. Messiahs are to conquer and rule and rebuild the temple, not die as helpless victims. But this one does, and never again can anyone raise an angry fist to heaven, “You don’t understand.” Jesus voluntarily experienced the full measure of human misery, and it is his innocence that makes it all the more poignant. It’s not divine child abuse, a Father beating up a Son to get out his anger and then let us off the hook. It is God the Son on a fully endorsed mission to expose the world’s darkness and offer forgiveness in return. God takes into the divine life all the anger and wrath we are due. Jesus does not change the character of God on the cross; he reveals and displays it in perfect cooperation.

Luke is clear. This is how we respond when God comes near and when love invites us out for a long walk. We rebel; we resist; we use the powers of church and state to remove the offender. God saw what we would ultimately do with the Son; the cross reveals our sin and cooperation with evil. This is what Jesus told his closest friends ahead of time, but it did not compute. Not the part about the suffering, and not the part about the resurrection either. Resurrection was for all God’s people at the end of the age; no one expected a lone man to be raised apart from all the others in the middle of time. Luke looks at their incomprehension from both sides. Twice he highlights the human component, “But they understood none of these things... they did not grasp what was said.” The words rang off their eardrums and lodged in their memories, but did not make it to their understanding. He also notes the divine component, “This saying *was hidden* from them (i.e. by God).” Something so strange and so wonderful is ahead that even when described in detail it’s beyond them, until God later opens the eyes of their understanding in Jesus’ resurrection and subsequent appearances.⁷ In Jesus God has come in person to deal with all that separates us from the divine life: our sin, our evil, our fear, our ignorance and our spiritual blindness.

⁶ On the history of failed Messiahs, see N.T. Wright, *Simply Jesus* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2011), Chapter 9, “The Kingdom Present and Future,” 105-117.

⁷ Luke 24:25-27.

But that was not just then; it's now. Many people know the facts about Jesus and do not yet trust him. They're not yet followers; there's been no encounter. It's possible to know the content of the gospels and not to know Jesus as anything but a now-famous first century Jew, possible to know all *about the faith* and not know the *living center* of it. You remain a window-shopper, an outsider looking in. God must lift the veil of ignorance and open the eyes of understanding for faith to come about and a new relationship be established.⁸ It is as much a gift of God as the sight Jesus gave to the blind beggar outside Jericho. You can seek it and pray for it as he did, but when it comes as a slow dawning or a lightning swift flash, you know it's God. You see differently. New desires rise up in your heart to press against old habits. This is what it means to be *converted* or to experience a fresh *spiritual awakening*. You see and understand something previously hidden. The facts you knew are now filled with significance. Life changes from the inside out. You enter a new world amidst the old; you've changed even if nothing around you has changed, which is why conversions can be so disruptive to marriages and families and former religious commitments. Just ask a Muslim follower of Jesus in Pakistan or Iraq.⁹

B. More Than One Kind Of Sight (vv.35-43)

⁸ On conversion, see Scot McKnight, *Turning to Jesus: The Sociology of Conversion in the Gospels* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002); Scot McKnight & Hauna Ondrey, *Finding Faith, Losing Faith* (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2008). In a blog post (Jan. 31, 2013: www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2013/01/31/understanding-conversion), McKnight writes, "Our studies conclude everyone's conversion - whether through nurture, sacraments, or personal decision (i.e. the three basic paths) - involves six dimensions: converts emerge out of a (1) context because of (2) a crisis of some sort. This crisis prompts (3) a quest to solve the crisis. The quest leads to (4) an encounter and interaction with someone or something that advocates conversion. That encounter prompts (5) a commitment and (6) consequences." The healing of the blind beggar fits this pattern: 1) Context: a first century Jewish beggar, one of the expendables (v.35); 2) Crisis: the news that "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by" (vv.36-37); 3) Quest to solve the crisis: multiple desperate prayers, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me" (vv.38, 39b); 4) Encounter and Interaction: Jesus stops, calls, questions, and heals with a command (vv.40-42); 5) Commitment: "and followed him" (v.43a); 6) Consequences: praise to God from the healed man and the crowds (v.43b). Being alert to the biblical and sociological patterns helps us understand the complex process of coming to find a new center of life in Jesus Christ. Within limits, it can also function in pastoral diagnosis.

⁹ J. Cumming, "Muslim Followers of Jesus," *Christianity Today*, Nov. 20, 2009.

Something is happening on the spiritual landscape of America. Whereas forty years ago skepticism about things like miracles and encounters with angels dominated, now there's a openness to the unusual and unexpected across the land. Major works are being published on the credibility of miracles and the emptiness of old-fashioned scepticism.¹⁰ There's more to life than what can be measured and predicted in a laboratory. We live surrounded by mystery.

Forty years ago it was hard to preach on the miracles of Jesus, so many preachers simply avoided them. Not so today; it's easy to preach on the miracles because the populace at large is fascinated with the supernatural, and the simple fact is that, according to Luke, miracles can be a doorway to faith for the recipient and those around them, as we see in the story of the blind beggar Jesus healed outside Jericho.¹¹ Miracles of healing are a display of divine mercy that is tangible and hard to ignore. When an act of divine power occurs, we stand at the edge of divine mystery with the promise that one day all disease and pain will be gone in a world made new. A miracle of healing is a blessing in the present and a window into the future of God's kingdom. They remain rare, at least in our slice of the world, but the reports I read from people I trust on other grounds are astounding.¹² They also raise almost as many questions as they answer. Why them and not me? Why there and not here? Why so few? Why not more? Does God play favorites? The best answer is that the kingdom of God is not yet here in fullness to transform the whole creation; we see it only in previews and signs, in occasional glimpses and tantalizing hints, enough to keep us yearning and praying for its full revelation, "Thy kingdom come,

¹⁰ On miracles and their philosophical defense, the standard work is now Craig Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility Of The New Testament Accounts, Volumes 1 and 2* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011) who dismantles the long tradition of skepticism flowing from David Hume. On a more popular level, see Eric Metaxas' soon to be released *Miracles: What They Are, Why They Happen, How They Can Change Your Life* (New York, NY: Dutton Adult, 2014). An introductory essay is Barry Blackburn, "The miracles of Jesus," in Graham Twelftree, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Miracles* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011), 113-130. On healing within Jesus' kingdom vision, see N.T. Wright, *Simply Jesus*, "Celebration, Healing, and Forgiveness," 68-73.

¹¹ For an analysis of ancient and contemporary accounts of sight restored to the blind, see Keener, *Miracles*, 508-523.

¹² For a sample, see Heidi Baker, *Birthing the Miraculous* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2014)

thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” I have no doubts about the miracles of Jesus then or that they have continued across church history to the present; the evidence is clear. What I do know is that they are not under our control, and that while we are always to pray for the sick and be open to all the gifts and powers of the Holy Spirit, the outcomes are unpredictable and we are not to promise people what only God can deliver. Frankly, every time something unusual happens, I’m always surprised as if it were the first time. Maybe that’s how it’s supposed to be.

Mark tells us his name was *Bartimaeus*, a detail Luke omits in his rewrite of the story, perhaps because he wanted to generalize the story’s symbolic image beyond one man.¹³ The ancient near East was full of blind people.¹⁴ Michael Harper writes, “Flies were everywhere, and it was the commonest thing to see the matter encrusted eyes of a blind person covered by them.”¹⁵ The prophet Isaiah once promised that one of the signs of the Messiah was that he would open the eyes of the blind.¹⁶ The blind were often reduced to begging; they became part of a permanent underclass, and their cries of distress were found at the gates to every town. “Shut up,” “Leave us alone,” and “Go away,” were the words they most often heard. Occasionally a kind word and a coin, but most often rejection. They were the expendables.¹⁷ “What sin did he or his parents commit?” was a question he often heard as crowds scurried by his begging post.¹⁸ This was his life just outside the northern gates of Jericho as one of the earth’s wretched.

¹³ For a defense of the historicity of Luke’s source (Mk. 10:46-52), see Graham Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 1999), 301-302; John Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Vol. 2*, (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1994), 686-690; Blackburn, “The miracles of Jesus,” 118-119.

¹⁴ Rene Latourelle, *The Miracles of Jesus and the Theology of Miracles* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 160.

¹⁵ Michael Harper, *The Healings of Jesus* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: Inter-Varsity, 1986), 74.

¹⁶ Isaiah 30:5.

¹⁷ See the chart on ancient agrarian societies in Joel Green, *Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 60. Jesus was from very near the bottom of the status ladder.

¹⁸ See John 9:1-2 for an example of this mind set.

Luke 18:31-43 12

This is also a vivid picture of the human condition apart from Jesus Christ. Spiritually blind, groping around from one philosophy to another, driven by survival needs. Some do it in poverty and others in wealth, but they are not so different from one another when the exterior of life is stripped away. Without the light of Christ the heart is dark, which is the way Satan wants to keep it. If we could only see the immense numbers of people who are groping their way blindly through life, feeling around for a handle, it would break our hearts and make us much bolder in our witness for Christ. We love to sing with John Newton, “I once was lost but now I’m found, *was blind but now I see,*” but do we believe it?

“And hearing a multitude going by, he inquired what this meant. They told him, ‘Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.’” When you’re a blind beggar, you listen keenly and become street savvy. Jericho’s only eighteen miles from Jerusalem; it’s the last town before the upward climb to the holy city. All pilgrims from Galilee to passed through Jericho on their way to the required festivals. A blind man hears a lot of news near the gate of the city. As a preacher I could spend a lot of time with the simple phrase, “Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.” A black preacher could do an even better job; preach for a least ten minutes on that one phrase till all the goody was squeezed out because to have Jesus pass by is so rich an opportunity. There are times it seems, when the Lord is nearer than others and we must act quickly or lose our chance. Times when we are receptive and times when we are resistant, times of preparation and times of opportunity. You are sitting there in church when a phrase from a hymn or an image from Scripture rivets your heart’s attention; your consciousness shifts and you see things differently. The Holy Spirit is offering a graced moment of opportunity, a chance to pray, a change to say Yes to some call, a chance to repent of some sin that’s become so habitual that it no longer registers on your consciousness. You must act while the Spirit is wooing you, else you will grieve the Holy Spirit who will then back up a step from your resistant heart to see if you notice. If you have ever seen a lost person come within a hair’s breadth of faith and then withdraw back into their old life, you’ve seen this truth in operation. Years of continued blindness may go by before their conscience is sensitized again.

For centuries the church has sung the prayer of the blind beggar, *Kyrie Eleison* in Greek, *Lord, have mercy* in English. Next to the Lord’s Prayer it’s the best prayer I know. When I wake in the night its on my lips. It’s a cry that pierces the heart of God because it’s an appeal to God’s deepest nature. It’s a brief, humble prayer; it does not bargain or try to impress; it’s a bold prayer for God to do what only God can do, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” The blind beggar cries out in his

moment of opportunity. He shouts above the noise of the crowd. Already God is giving inward light. This is the Messiah, the *Son of David*. It is already a confession of faith, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.”

Because this is such a potent prayer, the Easter Orthodox tradition has developed a rich teaching around what is called *The Jesus Prayer*, which in its longer form goes as follows: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” It is often synchronized with the breathing, the two titles as one breathes in, and the petition, “have mercy on me a sinner,” as one breathes out. It is a form of mental prayer, which when repeated may move from the mind down into the heart and there pray itself over and over without conscious effort like a recording.¹⁹ It’s not a form of prayer we Protestants have been taught, but I can testify that for the past twenty years it has helped sustained my soul. Often, while listening to someone pour out their problems, my heart is praying on its own, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” And so, when wisdom comes for that person, I know it did not come from me but only through me, like a postman delivering a card. A name, a messianic title, and a petition, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” Pray it a thousand times with your lips, then watch what happens when it drops into your heart.

One of the things that will happen if you take up *The Jesus Prayer* is that you will meet resistance. A voice will say, “This is stupid,” and another, “God is not listening to you.” Wandering thoughts will plague you. Your dreams will be dark and disturbing as God excavates the crud from the depths of your unconscious and displays it on the nightly screen of your dreams. This should not surprise you. At the very center of our story the blind man’s prayer meets the same struggle, “And those who were in front *rebuked him*, telling him to be silent.” There was strong resistance. This is why perseverance, especially in some new form of prayer or spiritual discipline, is so important. It is a discipline that requires the development of a certain toughness, a willingness to be misunderstood by others because you have made seeking the Lord the core of your life, “but he cried out *all the more*, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’” The more they tried to silence him, the more he called out. And when they got louder, he got louder still. It was a test. Many of our prayers are much too polite. We must cry out above the crowd, “Son of David, have mercy *on me*.”

Though not spoken of explicitly in this passage, we see the drawing work of

¹⁹ *The Art of Prayer: An Orthodox Anthology*, (Boston, MA: Faber and Faber, 1997), especially Chapter 2, “The Jesus Prayer,” 63-123.

the Holy Spirit in the tenacious prayer of the blind man. It is the Spirit who plants in us the hope for help from God and the willingness to cry into the dark, “Jesus, have mercy on me.” Often, at the end of a counseling session, and especially if a person has just confessed some life-destroying sin to God, I have them pray out loud simply, “Lord Jesus, have mercy on me.” “Pray it again and again,” I say, “until the reality of forgiveness dawns in your heart.”

“And Jesus stopped.” That is another one of those phrases preachers love to camp out on for a while. His was a Jesus-stopping prayer. Have you ever considered the fact that our prayers arrest the attention of the Lord? He was passing by, but now he stopped cold. To this point we may assume the beggar was asking for money. It’s what beggars want. His cry is not yet for sight but for compassion. The crowd commanded him to be silent, but Jesus commanded him to be brought near. On his way to the most important appointment in his life, Jesus stopped for a blind beggar. He is never too busy for one person. His eye was on Jerusalem, “Behold we are going up to Jerusalem,” but his heart was open to the prayers of the desperate. It is a lie from the pit of hell that God is so busy he does not have time for you. And when you encounter some desperate person, someone whose only hope is the mercy of God, do not pass them by. Turn aside, listen to their story, help them any way you can, and above all, pray not only *for them* but *with them*. It is the peculiar ministry of the church to listen to the cries of the desperate and downtrodden, the mentally ill and the addicted. And if you are too important to do this, you are too important and have lost a sense of God’s mercy. There are people in this town today who are contemplating suicide, wondering whether to leave their spouse; there are lonely people and forgotten people, people struggling with mental illness and spiritual torment. And if you hear their cry or whimper, turn aside. It’s a call from God to stop as Jesus did. Risk being an answer to someone’s prayer. Risk getting involved in the life of someone at the margins. Help them find their way to Jesus Christ; let them walk towards him over the footbridge of your compassion.

“What do you want me to do for you?” No one listened to this man or took him seriously; Jesus did, and let the man define his own need. His blindness was apparent, but Jesus did not assume the obvious need was the deep need, so he had the courtesy to ask a simple question the Holy Spirit gave him at the moment, “What do you want *me* to do *for you*?” How would you answer that question?

“Oh, Lord, bless the children, save the heathen and bring peace in the world. It is selfish for me to ask for myself, so Lord I pray for others. Aren’t I noble?” Such

general prayers are nearly useless. I often wonder if God says, “Why do they bring me all this vague drivel; do they not think I can answer specifics?” There’s nothing selfish about being specific and detailed with God about your needs and wants. The real problem is not that our requests are too large but too small. “What do you want *me* to do *for you*?” Better one specific prayer than a thousand vague ones.

Something marvelous is happening here. The blind beggar’s faith is about to take a great leap forward. Anyone could give him money; maybe Jesus could give him something more, the thing he really wanted. Before he could form the words it was already out of his mouth, “Lord, let me receive my sight.” That’s how it sometimes is when the Spirit is at work; you speak your heart before you know it. The Holy Spirit pulls up the soul’s deepest desire for presentation to the Lord.

Jesus did not, in fact could not, heal on his own. In a strange way he was as helpless as the blind man. In front of him was a blind beggar in whom the Holy Spirit was clearly already at work building prayer and faith, but what did the Father want to do? Was this to be accomplished by a touch, by spittle on the eyes, by a prayer, or simply a word of command? There was no standard method with Jesus; each case was unique. He obeyed what the Father spoke or what the Father showed him.²⁰ This is the hidden Trinitarian dimension to the ministry of Jesus. He was the visible party, but Jesus was radically dependent on the guidance of the Father and the power of the Spirit in every case. And where healing happens today, the same dynamic is repeated. Those God uses are keenly aware they are being led and of themselves have nothing to offer. It’s not about technique but dependence and trust and listening and obeying.

“Receive your sight,” said Jesus before anything happened, “your faith has made you well.” There’s no need to pray if you know what God is about to do, so Jesus simply announces the divine gift, “Receive your sight,” then speaks a blessing on the man, “your faith has saved you.” At that moment the blind beggar was installed by Jesus in heaven’s hall of fame for heroes of faith. You see, friends,

it took faith to wait and survive for long years by begging,
faith to hear stories about Jesus long before he came by,
faith to make inquiry,
faith to cry out for mercy with a bold Messianic title,
faith to resist the resistance of the naysayers,

²⁰ John 5:19, 30.

faith to cry out again and again,
and faith to come when Jesus called;
it took faith to ask for the impossible desire welling up in his heart, and
faith to see what would happen. It was all one big risk.

And with the words of Jesus came power invading his eyes. It was a creative miracle of restoration, involving the eye, the nerves and the parts of the brain that process sight. The first face he saw was Jesus, perhaps with a big grin. The mercy of God is what makes a difference, and if we cry for it we will see more of it in the lives of people. “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on Preacher Phil with his dreams. Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on Main Street Church with our struggles. Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on this great, wicked city of Greenwood.” And when people complain it’s not polite to pray that way, we just get louder and more insistent. Would you rather have the approval of people or an audience with Jesus who might ask, “What do you want me to do for you, or for your church, for your city?”

The story began with him *sitting and begging*; it ends with him *following and praising* along with the people who discounted him only minutes before. This is a conversion story. The crowd who once tried to silence him now lets him lead them in praise, “and all the people, when they saw it, *gave praise to God.*” So it’s also a testimony meeting. Miracles, says Luke, can be a catalyst for faith and also for widespread revival. Because of Jesus’ actions the crowds gave praise *to God*. That’s on way Luke asserts the *divinity* of Jesus. Jesus opened the eyes of a blind man, and before long he will open the eyes of his disciples in his cross and resurrection. He’s still opening eyes today. Every conversion is an opening of the eyes of the blind, and every genuine miracle of healing is a glimmer of what’s ahead in resurrection.

CONCLUSION

So I return to where I started. The Christian life is not a problem to be solved; it’s a holy mystery to be savored in the fear and love of God. We cry for mercy, follow Jesus in the middle of the mess, and look for surprises. If this sermon has stirred in you an awareness of your need for God’s mercy, and if it’s brought to mind the name of someone to whom you can show mercy, then I know the Spirit who was at work in the healing itself and in the preservation of this story has been at work today, and for that I am grateful. God’s mercy in Jesus is for all of us.
