

## **“MORE THAN ONE KIND OF BLINDNESS”**

Reverend Jim Dennis, Jr.  
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Sermon Text: John 9: 1 - 41

In one of our focus groups here at Main Street, and we have had those in all different age groups so I won't tell you who did this, but we asked, "What is the biggest problem here in Greenwood today? Ignorance, apathy or isolation?" One of our members said, "I don't know. I don't care. And leave me alone." Now that's a joke. No one said that, but it is too close to the truth to be funny. When you misunderstand the question, you will give the wrong answer, and misunderstanding the situation invariably leads to the wrong conclusion. We've all been guilty of that. Once a pastor, now a pastor, mind you, was riding the subway in New York City, and a man got on with three young children. He sat down, and he was just looking straight ahead while his children ran up and down the car. As the minutes passed, the children got more out of control. They were bumping into people. They were knocking over shopping bags. The pastor kept expecting the father to get up and do something about it, but he seemed oblivious to what the children were doing. The pastor thought to himself, as we might, typical, people today refuse to exercise any control over their children, and finally, out of frustration, he got up and he spoke to the father, to please curb his children. He looked around. He got them. Gathered them. Settled them down. He turned to the pastor and he apologized. He said, "I'm sorry. I had not noticed that they were acting out. They are usually very well behaved, but we have just come from the funeral home. They had to sit very quietly for several hours. Their mother died yesterday, and I'm afraid the children don't know how to deal with their grief." You see wrong assumptions lead to wrong conclusions.

The disciples seem to believe, in this passage today, that every evil, every bad day, every deformity, every accident was an answer from God because of sin, and that was a common belief back then. Jesus says, "No, it does not work that way." This Scripture is one of the clearest denunciations of the idea I would call "bad Karma," and God as this for that or tit for tat or judgment or blessings. Jesus says it just does not work that way. Wrong question. Wrong conclusion. The funny thing is they, the disciples, were walking around a bit like blind men thinking that they saw and understood all about God, and this healed man, blind from birth, kept saying over and over, though he had no theological training about the Son of man, no preconceived notions of how God works or who God is, all he knew was, "Once I was blind, and now I see." Compare a God of bad and good Karma, a God of exacting justice with the God that we sing about in the song, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see." The song speaks, just as the man in this reading of practical theology, which comes from experience, being touched by God in Christ, healed by God in Christ, the veil lifted, the darkness pierced, the eyes opened, not from words and words and speculation about how God might work, but practical theology comes from knowing that God has worked in your life. The man born blind did not know any of these Scriptural constructs, and he could not answer the question, "Who sinned, you or your parents?" He just said, "I know that I was blind, and now I see."

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Now it can be sort of fun in a theoretical way to ponder why evil exists or to blame this person or blame that group of people or to blame even God for things that happen, but that’s not what Jesus did. Jesus simply acknowledged two things, before Him was a man born blind, and in Him was the power to heal, and Jesus healed him. Now that might not satisfy your ponderings, but Jesus simply did what He could. You and I might not be able to make a miracle, but we can do more than ponder. We can do something, and maybe that’s the point. Jesus was so critical of the Pharisees, who pondered this and that, and they refined the law even in ways so that they would not have to stop and help a stranger in need such as in the story of good Samaritan, and they redefined the law in such ways so that they could devote money to a made up religious trust fund so they would not have to use the money to care for their own parents! That, too, is in the New Testament. Jesus did not like what the Pharisees had done with their incessant redefining of the Sabbath until it became a burden and not a day of rest and renewal that God intended for Creation, and even here, Jesus broke the Sabbath law, according to them, because he performed a miracle on the Sabbath. For shame! A miracle. It wasn’t really that the miracle was against the law, but actually, the making of the clay with spittle to put on his eyes. That was the offense. They saw Jesus heal people, and said, “Well, he must have done it by the power of Satan.” These were the folks, who had God so boxed in, that when Jesus told them in John 10, “I am the Father or one,” they took up stones again to stone Him, and Jesus answered them, with a little bit of sarcasm, I believe, in his voice, “I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these good works, do you stone me? You have thoughts and ponderings. I have good actions. I have revealed the Father in my actions, for which of these good works do you stone me?” No one is more blind than those who refuse to see, who and what stands in front of them, because they have already made up their minds. Even a healing can be turned into a bad thing. If someone should come back from the dead still they would not believe. Jesus begged and pleaded in John 14, “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? If you don’t believe the words, at least believe the works.” If you can’t buy the words, at least believe your eyes and what you have seen. The Father dwells in me, and I have come to show you God, a God of action and love and grace, not dry and dusty law and exacting punishment from on high, who makes blind those born of sinners. “Can’t you see,” he is asking, “I am teaching something new. Believe the words or believe because of the miracles, but please believe.” Their theology seemed to be don’t fix the problem, fix the blame, and I may gore everyone’s ox with my next illustration, but I think that we do this all across our culture, and I think that every institution, including the church, and every political party does this. Here’s a problem, now let’s do a study to see whose fault it is, and then after we have the study, we sit down. We’ve got the answer, but the problem doesn’t get fixed. After ten years, we know why Johnny can’t read, why drugs infect the inner cities, why marriages are falling apart. We can fix the blame now, great, meanwhile, Johnny still can’t read, drugs still infect the inner

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cities, and marriages are still falling apart. It’s not just in this Scripture, but in every newspaper today, pondering who is to blame very often gets us no where. It’s the wrong question. A professor of pastoral counseling once said to me, “If you have a husband and wife come before you, and you’re their pastor, and they have a particular incident that they are at odds with whose fault it is, and in that incident, you take ten years of investigation, your time and theirs, and through detailed questioning, through lie detector tests, through truth serum, you finally arrive with certainty who is to blame,” and my professors asks, “Would you then be any closer to healing the marriage?” No, no. Jesus simply did what Jesus could to help the man. He did not stoop to enter the argument of words and thought. He went and did and acted on the man’s behalf. And there is a lesson. Theoretical faith based on the right words and the right thought can be empty if it does not lead to right action and compassion out to others. Jesus’ attitude was one of action. They asked, “Who sinned, this man or his parents?” It’s not the question. He said, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned. He is blind though, and I am going to do something about it.” Jesus shifted attention from what caused this suffering to what God and Christ could do with it. There was an opportunity for God to act. A moment for God to be praised and for Jesus to reveal just who He was. This is important. Jesus revealed a God who is not finished creating, not finished changing things. God is not finished creating. God is not finished changing things. And by our action or inaction, we reveal ourselves as those who want to keep things, too often, just as they are.

I remember, growing up, hearing a partial misquote of Scripture that a lot of people use to explain away our duty to help the poor. It was that Scripture from Mark 14:7, Jesus said, “For you always have the poor with you.” People would stop right there, and say, “Okay, always have the poor with you so maybe we don’t really have to do anything about that.” But that Scripture continues. It says, “Whenever you will, you can do good for them.” “For you always have the poor with you, whenever you will, you can do good to them, but you will not always have me.” That is dishonest to stop at the first section of the Scripture. This is important because we are the religious and upstanding citizens who do like things pretty much as they are. We are closer in our status and this culture and this day to the Pharisees than to the blind man who begged at the temple. Stay with me, please. We are more like the Pharisees, satisfied with ourselves and sometimes blaming the fallen for falling, sometimes blaming the needy for their need, sometimes blaming the afflicted for their afflictions, yes, sometimes we do echo the questions the disciples had and the Pharisees did, too. Whose fault is it? The parents or the person? Politics or the culture? Is it TV or the school system? And on and on. And what would Jesus say to us now? I believe, “Wrong question.” Now Jesus might ask, “What are you going to do about it to reveal God’s grace in your lives?” The question is not whose fault is it, not why is there evil in the world, the question is, is there compassion in your heart? Is there

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compassion in your heart, you who call yourselves by my name? Is there compassion in your heart to do something, to do something in my name? Now Jesus spoke quite a bit about us reaching out in His name in Matthew 18, “Whoever receives one such child in my name, receives me.” And in Matthew 25, and the King will answer in the parable of the judgment there, “Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it unto me.” The least of these are not burdens to be explained away. When the least of these present themselves to us in need, they are opportunities for us, for you and me, to show our faith, to show God’s grace bubbling up from within us.

A fellow preacher told me this powerful, and it was told to me as a true story. I want to share as I conclude. A seminary student was walking one night on a bridge in a misty, early twilight of the evening, and at that moment, when it was dark enough just to see the outlines and shadows of a person, but not easy recognition, he noticed along the edge of the bridge, on the side of the bridge against the railing, a young woman, and there was a strange sense in the air, he said, of anticipation and fear, and he thought for a second, “She’s going to jump!” He looked at her standing there beside the railing, apprehensive and tentative, and she looked at him, uncertain and a little skeptical and bewildered, and he said, “I looked at her, she looked at me, and in an instant, I made a decision, and I looked away, and when I looked back, I was alone on the bridge. She had jumped.” It must have been only a split second. An infinitesimal moment in history, hardly more time than it takes us to blink, yet he was alone on the bridge, doing nothing. Doing nothing, and looking the other way by turning an opportunity to reflect God’s love to the least of these into some sort of a paralyzing debate about whether we should get involved. It kills faith. It stops grace cold until it’s too late to make a difference. Have I looked the other way, and made an opportunity for action instead an empty debate about blame, yes, I’ve done that. I am guilty as charged. It’s Lent, and in the season of Lent, it is a time for self examination, and I ask you, how about you? Have you looked the other way and made an opportunity for action among the least of these in need instead an empty debate about blame and whose fault and whether you want to get involved? Ask yourself this question during the season of Lent.