

To See or Not to See...

John 9:1-41

Second Baptist Church, Memphis

March 2, 2008

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Friday I started listening to a college course on CD from “The Great Courses” series. The course I’m listening to is “The History of the English Language”. It is a series of 36 30 minute lectures given by a professor from Stanford University.

It encompasses 18 cds. Jon Densford loaned it to me. I know that listening to 36 lectures on the history of the English language does not sound too appealing to most of you. But I’m strange that way, I guess.

I also have this great book called A Dictionary of Modern American Usage. It’s a book where you can look up things like: the difference between lie and lay, farther and further, pronunciation, common grammatical mistakes, and these kinds of things.

The other day I looked up the word “till”—as in, *We will be open till 6:00*. I was trying to figure out if it is supposed to be “til” or “’til” or “till” (it’s “till” by the way).

When I told Heidi I had gotten this book and I thought it was really good, she said, *Just don’t tell anybody. That’s weird.*

I’ve been preparing for this sermon this week on John 9:1-41. It’s about Jesus healing someone of blindness and declaring that he-- Jesus-- is the light of the world. And on Friday I was kind of stuck as far as just what I was going to say this morning. I mean, Jesus healed a man born blind. Jesus is the light of the world. What else can I say?

So, I turned to my trusty Dictionary of Modern American Usage and looked up “light.” I don’t know why or what I expected to find. I found “light-year.” It pointed out that a light year is a measure of distance, not time. And I found “lighted; lit.” It said that “lighted” is an adjective like, “a lighted torch.” “Lit” is a past tense verb like, “she lit the fire.” But that’s all I got out of that book. Not much help.

So, we’re back to square one with Jesus healing a blind man and declaring himself the light of the world.

As Jesus and his disciples were walking along, they ran across a man who had been blind from birth. I don’t know how they knew that. But Jesus’ followers see this as a chance to get into a theological discussion about why people are sick and whether or not it has anything to do with sin. Why do bad things happen to good people?

So they ask Jesus, *Who sinned, this man or his parents, since he was born blind?*

It was a pretty common idea for Jews in this time to believe that if you were sick or handicapped, you must have some sin in your life that God is punishing you for. Now, the difficult question was, What if you were born that way?

They wanted Jesus to tell them if this blind man's parents had sinned, and the sins of his parents were visited upon him--causing him to be blind. Or if the man himself had sinned while in the womb.

That was what some thought. I don't know what kind of sin you could commit while in the womb. Gluttony, maybe; I don't know. Sloth?

Jesus answers their question. He says that neither the man nor his parents' sins caused him to be blind. Jesus shifts the whole thing from cause to purpose. He doesn't say what the cause of sickness or handicap is. He just says that the purpose behind the man's blindness is that this is an opportunity for God to act.

Jesus takes this situation as an opportunity to demonstrate something about himself-- that he is the light of the world. The disciples want to have a theological discussion. Jesus wants to glorify God by healing the man.

Jesus says he is the light of the world, then he spits on the ground and makes mud and spreads the mud on the man's eyes. He tells him to go wash in the pool of Siloam. The man does

that, and he comes back. The darkness of his eyes has become light. He can see.

Jesus is the light of the world.

This blind man has an encounter with Jesus and now he can see. And now he's in the middle of a big mess. I wonder if he started to wish he'd never met Jesus. Everybody was talking about it and debating what had happened.

Arguments break out between those who believe the man is healed and those who do not. There is no joy, no praise, no thanking God, no encouragement, only quarreling.

Finally, they haul the man in front of the Pharisees for a kind of impromptu court session. Because why? Because it was the Sabbath day on which he had been healed.

The Pharisees, building their case against Jesus, ask the man how he had been healed. He says, *Well, Jesus spit in the dirt and made some mud then smeared it on my eyes. When I washed it off, I could see.*

They had Jesus now. He had broken the Sabbath laws. You couldn't heal somebody on the Sabbath. You could take steps to see that someone's injury didn't become worse, but you couldn't make them better.

The other thing Jesus did was make mud. You couldn't make mud on the Sabbath because you had to knead it. And kneading was one of the thirty-nine categories of work that was forbidden on the Sabbath day.

They called in his parents to interrogate them. They asked them, *Is this your son? You say he was born blind? How does he now see?*

His parents said, *Yes, this is our son. Yes, he was born blind. Yes, he can now see. But as for how that happened or who did it, we don't know. He's a grown man, why don't you ask him?*

The parents were afraid. They knew that if you confessed Jesus to be the Messiah, you could get kicked out of the synagogue. Excommunicated.

So, the Pharisees called the man who was born blind again. They said, *Give glory to God!*-- that meant "Swear to God." *We know this man Jesus is a sinner.*

And the man said: *Look, I don't know about all that stuff. I don't know if I sinned or my parents sinned or if that had anything to do with my being born blind. I don't know if Jesus sinned by bringing me the light-- giving me my sight-- on the Sabbath. I don't know exactly who he is. But one thing I do know, I was blind; now I see.*

These Pharisees were so hung up on the rules that lost in the whole thing was the fact that here was a man who was blind. And now he could see.

It was as if they had the religious equivalent of A Dictionary of Modern American Usage. And they were checking their encounters with God against it.

It would be like if I stood here to preach this morning, and instead of an open Bible I had an open Dictionary of Modern American Usage. And in my sermon I made sure I used lie and lay properly. I chose correctly between farther and further. I clearly knew the difference between lit and lighted. I avoided all the common pronunciation mistakes, and my grammar was impeccable.

And I said absolutely nothing of significance. My sermon followed all the rules of grammar, but it communicated nothing of the gospel. It had no significance.

It was all correct. But it was all wrong.

That was the Pharisees. All correct and all wrong.

They were so caught up in the grammar of the faith they completely lost sight of the experience of the faith. They were so caught up in diagramming sentences they lost the meaning of the sentences.

The Pharisees were so hung up on having everything under their control and following their rules that, lost in the whole thing, was the fact that here was a man who was blind. And now he could see.

At our house there is nothing more dreaded than the Science Fair. We have gotten that behind us now this year. It's all over for another year, thank goodness. Between both of our kids, I figure we have done 9 science fair projects now. I was remembering back to our first one—when Sam was in first grade.

He had this kitten that we had found named Kirby, and his science project was: What's Makes my Cat Purr? or What's that Funny Sound my Cat Makes? or something like that. He and Heidi took pictures of the cat in different situations and wrote "purring" or "not purring". He actually won the school science fair with that.

The part of it I remember well is that Sam and I got one of those little tape recorders you use for dictation and set about the task of recording the sounds of Kirby the cat purring. We wanted to have the tape as part of the display so that you could press play and hear actual purring.

Well, getting him to purr on command proved difficult. We tried all the tricks—put him on Sam's lap, petted him, made him get on this blanket that he loved to sleep on.

We didn't have much luck getting a good recording. Especially when any time he would start to purr I was sticking that tape recorder in his face.

Finally, later that night, Heidi and I were able to get a pretty decent recording of Kirby purring. But we never did really get him purring as loud as we had hoped.

So that's all done. We went to bed. And wouldn't you know it, at about 3:00 am Heidi and I are awakened by the cat on our bed making the loudest purring sounds we've ever heard.

I kicked him off the bed. He got right back up and started that purring again. Same thing happened again. The cat wouldn't shut up. Finally I got up, tossed him out of our room, and shut our bedroom door so we could sleep in peace.

Pharisee that I am, I wanted Kirby to purr—but only on my terms, only at the time I wanted him to, only under my control, only under my rules. And when he purred outside of my control, I got mad and kicked him out.

The Pharisees were so caught up in controlling the faith, they completely lost sight of experiencing the faith. They wanted the Messiah on their terms.

That can happen. It can happen when the Bible is more a weapon to be wielded than it is a witness to the revelation of God. Sometimes you just have to accept things as an

explainable act of grace. The problem with dissecting everything is that to dissect something you have to kill it.

The man born blind didn't know what to think. He didn't know the proper theology. He didn't know who was in control or how to explain what had happened to him to these religious authorities.

All he knew was he was blind and now he could see. And he knew that it was an encounter with Jesus that had brought light to his darkness.

Here's the thing: What is your response to an encounter with the light of the world? What is your response to Jesus who when he encounters you wants to change you?

The Pharisees' response to is like any creature who feels cornered: they felt threatened. And so there's anger, rebuke, insults, threats, and legal maneuvering. And because of their response, they remained blind to Jesus.

What is the response of the man born blind but who now sees? Verse 38: He said to Jesus, *Lord, I believe*. And he worshiped him.

It is so much more important to receive Jesus than to control him.

It is so much more important to know God than to know about God.

It is so much more important to be in the light rather than to claim to know everything about the light.

You and I don't have to be able to answer every question. It is enough for us to just be able to say something like this man born blind,

I don't know the answers to all the questions.

I don't completely understand what has happened to me.

I don't always know the religiously correct thing to do.

But one thing I do know,

I was blind; now I see.

I was living in darkness; now I'm living in light.

Remember when your kids were small and they would always wake up so early even on Saturday mornings—and wake you up, too. We worked hard from early on to train our kids to not get up too early and, if they did, to not wake us up.

One thing we would do was tell our kids that they couldn't get up if it was still dark. If they woke up too early, we'd say, *You can't get up yet; it's still dark*. When Ivy was about her first words when she woke up about 8:30 one Saturday morning were, *Mommy, it's not dark outside no more*.

I smiled when I heard that; but I have to admit I probably also thought to myself, *It's not dark anymore-- not no more*. It was terrible grammar but a profound truth.

You don't have to know everything. You don't have to be able to explain everything about God and religion. You don't have to know why there is darkness in this world and who caused it. What you really do need to know is that it's not dark out no more.

When that miracle happened to the blind man, the Pharisees asked all kinds of questions:

Who sinned—you or your parents?

Who did this to you?

What day did he do it on?

Was it the Sabbath?

Not one of those is the right question. Those are not the crucial questions. And they remained blind.

The right one, the crucial one, is very simple, very basic:
To see, or not to see? That is the question.