

Spiritual Blindness

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 March 2023

Preacher: Matt Coburn

[0 : 00] Well, good morning. In a complete departure from our normal practice, I'm simply going to shout out that the Princeton Tigers won their second round NCAA tournament game last night, which has not happened since 1967.

So if you don't know, that's my alma mater. So, and being up here, we have loved our brothers and sisters from Yale and pray that you will rejoice with us in this moment.

So, okay. As I take out my glasses, I have a confession to make.

When I started preaching here 10 years ago, I printed out my sermons in 12-point font. They now are printed out in 14- or 16-point font, depending on the day.

I can now only read meaningfully with glasses. I can't see the words otherwise. They are just blurs unless I, you know, do what my father used to do, hold the newspaper way back there so he can, yeah.

[1 : 13] So, I know that not being able to see clearly as something that has come upon me later in life. For some of you, it's been a lifelong condition.

For some of you, vision impairment has deeply impacted your life. And some of you who cannot see are no longer able to use your eyes to see the world around you.

I did some research this week. According to the World Health Organization, 2.2 billion people in the world suffer from some kind of vision impairment. And it is a tragedy that over a billion of them do not have the resources for those things to be addressed well.

Thankfully, they're working to make changes in that. But when we come to the Bible, the Bible talks of a more widespread problem than physical blindness as significant as it is.

And that is the problem of spiritual blindness. The blindness where we cannot, we do not, see God rightly. And the Bible tells us that this is an affliction that all of us, apart from his grace, are afflicted by.

[2 : 36] There may be many things, ways that this expresses itself in our hearts. We may be confused by the different ideas of God in the world and not know what is true or right.

We may see God through the lens of our own experience and only be able to accept him in the ways that he is understandable to us. We may be ruled by our hopes and fears of who God might be or could be or the expectations that we have of him.

And sometimes we pridefully say that God must be this or that for us, for us to see him as well, at all. Our passage this morning, as we continue in our series in the Gospel of Mark, addresses this very topic of spiritual blindness.

And as we look at it together, we will not only see this blindness exposed, but we will see Jesus meet us in the midst of it. So, this is where we're going this morning. Mark chapter 8.

It's page 792 in your Pew Bible. If you'd like to look along with me, I encourage you. We're going to go ahead and read this passage together. We're going to pray for God's help, and then we will look at it together for a few minutes this morning.

[3 : 50] So, Mark 8, starting in verse 11. The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, him being Jesus, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him.

And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation.

And he left them. He got into the boat again and went to the other side. Now, they, that is the disciples, had forgotten to bring bread, and they only had one loaf with them in the boat.

And he cautioned them, saying, Watch out, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod. And they began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread.

And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand?

[4 : 55] Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see? And having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the 5,000, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?

And they said to him, Twelve. And the seven for the 4,000, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up? And they said to him, Seven.

And he said to them, Do you not yet understand? And they came to Bethsaida, and some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him.

And he took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village. And when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, Do you see anything? And he looked up and said, I see men, but they look like trees walking.

Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again, and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.

[6 : 04] And he sent him to his home, saying, Do not even enter the village. Friends, this is God's word. Let's pray together. Oh, Lord Jesus, we do ask for your help this morning.

Lord, for we confess to you our weakness. Lord, that we do not see you as we ought. God, we pray that you would open our eyes to see you in the scripture, to see you as you have been revealed in your word.

Lord, to see you in your glory and majesty and power and your grace and truth. Jesus, may you be lifted up in our midst this morning through the proclamation of your word.

And may we see you and respond in worship. Lord, be my help this morning, I pray in Jesus' name. Amen. What I think we will see in this passage this morning is this, that Jesus confronts us in our spiritual blindness and comes to restore our spiritual vision.

So let's look at it together. Jesus confronts us in our spiritual blindness. This is what we see in the first two parts of this story in verses 11 through 21. And we'll look at them in sequence.

[7 : 25] The first part of the passage, verses 11 through 13, is Jesus confronting the Pharisees. And the Pharisees have a spiritual blindness that is characterized by a rebellious challenge to the person of Jesus.

Look at me at verse 11 and you'll see this so clearly. They came, they began to argue with him. They came to test him. They came to dispute with him.

They did not come to him to learn, to understand, or to hear from him, but to challenge him and to contradict him. They asked for a sign and you might be thinking like we might, that they've got, you've got to be kidding me.

This is chapter 8 of Mark and what have we seen in the first seven chapters of Mark? Jesus over and over again doing miracles, casting out demons, healing people, providing bread when people were hungry, walking on waters.

What kind of a sign do you think they were looking for? But in fact, it may be that they were looking for a particular kind of sign because in the Old Testament it talks about how prophets were to be verified by a particular kind of sign and in the rabbinic tradition this sign became something like moving the stars, something so obvious, so great that it was undeniable that anyone who saw it would be compelled to believe.

[8 : 54] a sign that would overcome all of their skepticism and they asked him this to test him which means they didn't really think he could do it. They didn't come saying, hey, Jesus, if you could just show us this, we'd really want to believe in you.

They came to him saying, sure, go ahead. Show us what you can do. Reminds me of, forgive me because I refer to this a lot, the musical Jesus Christ Superstar caveat, it is not a faithful portrayal of Jesus.

It is, however, a fascinating look into how one might see Jesus through the lens of different people apart from the truth that Jesus is God. And so you see near the end of it, Jesus is brought before Herod and it's a great scene because Herod has this great swimming pool, he has like dancing girls and palm fronds, it's really a scene and so he sings this song, right?

Jesus, I am overjoyed to meet you face to face. You've been getting quite a name all around the place, healing cripples, raising from the dead and now I understand you're God, at least that's what you've said.

Prove to, so you are the Christ, you're the great Jesus Christ, prove to me that you're no fool, walk across my swimming pool. If you do that for me, then I'll let you go free.

[10:19] Come on, King of the Jews. This is the spirit of skepticism, of doubt that we see in these Pharisees as they came.

But friends, the kingdom of God does not work like this. Fascinatingly, in the parallel passage in Matthew, Jesus says more to the Pharisees when he rebukes their questioning, when he sighs at their response, discouraged by their unbelief.

Matthew says, you know, the only sign given to this generation will actually be the sign of Jonah, the one who went into the belly of the whale for three days and then came out again.

And of this, he was speaking of his death and his resurrection. The only sign that Jesus will give is this historical fact that this man who walked the earth died, was buried, and then rose again and appeared to many.

But recognize that even that sign, even the greatest sign, does not compel belief. Because the kingdom of God does not come with such power that it would say, you must believe this or you are just stupid.

[11:42] Right? The gospel comes, the kingdom of God comes to this world and God gives us many, many reasons for us to believe.

But it is not such that it is intellectually so compelling that all people will resist it or that all people will believe it. The kingdom of God comes on its own terms and gives its own evidence.

And so often, like the Pharisees here, we set up our own terms and our own, we like, as C.S. Lewis says, we put God on trial and say, prove to me according to my standards of evidence that you are who you say you are.

Jesus comes to call people to belief and faith, not irrational faith that has no basis nor is it purely rational faith that everyone who is normal thinking and logical would have to believe but a reasoned belief that involves trust and surrender.

And so Jesus challenges the Pharisees. His deep sigh and his rejection of their challenge shows that he confronts their spiritual blindness.

[13:00] and in the end he departs without responding more to them. Friends, I wonder how much we are like the Pharisees in our own hearts.

I wonder how much we think that Jesus must answer our questions and must meet our standards for us to believe and trust in him. I wonder if we put him on experiential trial.

Jesus, I'll believe in you if you'll do what I want in this circumstance in the timing that I want you to respond to this. Do we bring conditions to believing in Jesus?

Jesus, I'll believe in you if you give me this job, preserve this relationship, relationship, heal this sickness?

Do we put Jesus to the test in our hearts saying, if you do this, Jesus, then I will believe in you.

Friends, we ought not to be unthinking, but let us not be those whose hearts doubt and are full of skepticism and test the Lord over and over again.

[14:22] Jesus then turns from those outside of his circle, the Pharisees and the Herodians, to those inside his circle in the next part of this story. Verses 14 and following, 14 to 21, Jesus sets up a contrast between what Jesus is talking about and what the disciples are talking about.

So now he's talking to his own people, right? And they get in the boat and Mark sets up this contrast. He says, they got into the boat and they didn't have anything to eat. They had no bread.

And Jesus turns to them and says, I want to warn you about the leaven of the Pharisees.

Now, leaven is not the same thing as yeast, but it's similar. Leaven would have been a portion of last week's bread dough that had yeast in it that would be preserved and then mixed in with new dough to give it, I'm sure someone's a baker here could explain this far better than I could, to affect it so that it would then rise and grow just like, in the same way that we use yeast nowadays, right? It becomes activated. Anyway, this is how it works. So Jesus said, beware that the unbelief and the skepticism of the Pharisees and Herod is like a leaven.

It's going to work its way in and it's going to corrupt you like a mold or like a spiritual cancer getting into our lives, spreading unbelief and rebellious testing spirits.

[15:55] So Jesus says to his disciples, be careful of this attitude. Look out for this. And the disciples completely missed Jesus' point. Jesus mentioned leaven.

They think leaven is what you do to make bread. We don't have any bread. Oh no, we don't have any bread. I'm hungry. What did we do? They probably started pointing fingers at one another knowing the disciples.

John, why didn't you bring the bread? I thought you were going to bring the bread. Right? And so this is what then Jesus does, responds in verse 17 to when he says, what are you doing? specifically, why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? He asked him a series of questions. Some of them are rhetorical.

Some of them, all of them are poignant. Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? That was not what I was talking about at all. I was talking about the spiritual condition of your heart. Do you not yet perceive or understand?

[17:01] Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? Don't you remember what I've done? When there were 5,000 people who didn't have bread, what did I do?

I provided bread. When there were 4,000 people, what did I do? I provided bread. Do you not yet understand? Do you not yet understand who I am?

Notice the weave that Jesus brings together as he's confronting the spiritual blindness of the disciples. He says, you're distracted by practical needs.

Your hearts are hardened. And what you can't, what you're missing in all of this is that you are not looking at me and seeing me for who I really am.

If you remembered who I was, if you saw who I was, you wouldn't, one, worry about physical bread because you fed mobs, you could feed the 12 of us, but two, know that you're about something much greater than just physical food.

[18:10] You're about spiritual life. Jesus says, you don't understand what I've come to do. And in these phrases, he's almost surely picking up on a concept that we see over and over again in the Old Testament.

James read from Hebrews earlier where the writer of Hebrews refers to the nation of Israel as they're leaving Egypt in the Exodus and God does miraculous signs and wonders to provide for them, to protect them, and to deliver them.

And yet they get into the wilderness and what do they do? They grumble, they complain, they test God. Years later, after God brings his people into the promised land as they dwell in the promised land, as God provides for them and protects them, and then the people turn their hearts away from him.

Jeremiah preaches near the end of the northern kingdom and to the southern kingdom in its weakness. Jeremiah 5, 21 and following, he says this, hear this, O foolish and senseless people who have eyes but see not, who have ears but hear not.

Do you not fear me, declares the Lord? Do you not tremble before me? I placed the sand as a boundary for the sea, a perpetual barrier that it cannot pass.

[19:41] Though the waves toss, they cannot prevail. Though they roar, they cannot pass over it. But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart. They have turned aside and gone away.

They do not say in their hearts, let us fear the Lord our God who gives the rain in its season, the autumn rain and the spring rain, and keeps for us the weeks appointed for the harvest.

Your iniquities have turned these away and your sins have kept good from you. When you look at the broader context of what Jeremiah is bringing as a charge against the people of God who are not seeing God clearly, one of the things you see is that they had two things that they were regularly turning away from God to deal with their practical things.

When they were threatened politically, they would turn to military alliances rather than trusting in the Lord. And when they were looking for provision rather than looking to God, they turned to the local gods who are a bit like slot machines.

You put in your prayer, you get the harvest. You put in the prayer, you get a baby. You put in the prayer, you get rain when you need it. And rather than seeing God clearly and trusting him, they turned and met these practical needs in a different way.

[21:03] And I think this is why Jesus reminds them, don't be like these generations. Don't you see what I've done? I've fed 5,000 people.

I've fed 4,000 people. This is pure speculation, but I'm just going to throw it out there. Why 12 and why 7? I don't think we ever addressed it. Maybe because the feeding of the 5,000 was to meet the

tribes of Israel, 12 symbolizing that, and then the 7 is expanding it to all of creation. This is consistent with what we said about why Jesus, say God is going to provide for everyone in every need and every condition. and in the midst of it, the disciples don't see them. They're distracted by their physical, practical needs, and rather than turning to him in faith, they turn away. Friends, I wonder how much we are like that as well. In our personal lives, do we pursue the praise of this world, the achievement or the satisfaction that we get in the pleasures of this world more than Jesus and his kingdom? [22 : 22] In our spiritual lives, do we fall into the danger of loving, measurable success over faithfulness in the long run?

In our emotional lives, do we trust more in techniques than we do in the grace of Jesus? In our political lives, do we choose the tools of power over the gospel of grace? In our social engagement, do we trust in social engineering over prayer and mercy? Now look, friends, I set these things up as dichotomies.

They aren't dichotomies. All of them, there is common grace good in all of the things that I mentioned, but at its heart, what are we trusting in? What are we looking at? What are we really thinking makes the difference? Do we think it's these things or do we think it's the grace of God shown in the person of Jesus?

[23 : 25] Because that is what Jesus wants the disciples to see. That is what Jesus wants us to see. He calls us that our trust would be truly and ultimately in Him.

Because this is what Mark is pointing to. Mark puts these stories together. Look, the gospels are historical. They record events. But if you read them, it's not rocket science to see that they've arranged the stories at times in thematic ways.

And I believe that this is what has happened here. because we go from this spiritual blindness to Jesus healing a blind man. Jesus and His kingdom come to restore our spiritual vision.

And this is what we see in the last part of our passage this morning. 22 through 26. It's a remarkable story. Jesus comes, they bring Him a blind man and His sight is restored.

I'm not going to spend a lot of time repacking this because I would say very similar things to what Tom preached two weeks ago about Jesus healing the deaf man. Why does He touch him?

[24 : 38] Why does He do it in this particular way? One of the big questions in this is why is it a two-step process? Why does He touch him and then say, what do you see? And then He says, well, I see people but they look like trees.

And Jesus touches him again. And then you see the fullness of it in verse 25. Look with it. Look with me at it, right? Jesus laid His hands on His eyes again and He opened His eyes and His sight was restored and He saw everything clearly.

And it's most likely this man was not born blind because he wouldn't have known what a tree looked like. So He was actually being restored to sight having become blind for some reason.

Why does Jesus do it in a two-step process? Well, there's a lot of interesting speculation in the commentaries about this. But I think that the one that best explains to me is that Jesus is simply saying that even coming to full vision is a process.

That there is a progressive healing. At times Jesus provides it all at once. But at times He leads people in a progression of healing. And that it's meant to give hope to the disciples.

[25 : 53] Even though I've just rebuked you as being a blind person, there is still hope for you. Your sight can be restored just like this man's sight can be restored.

For Jesus comes as the one that the prophet Isaiah points to in Isaiah 42.6. God says this of Jesus, I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations to open the eyes that are blind to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison, those who sit in darkness.

I am the Lord and that is my name. My glory I give to no other nor my praise to carved idols.

Behold, the former things have come to pass and new things I now declare.

Before they spring forth, I tell you of them. And Isaiah was looking ahead from 600 A.D. or B.C. about looking ahead to the coming of Jesus and saying, this one will come and he will fulfill all of these promises.

He will come to restore our spiritual blindness. And friends, this is the testimony of the church throughout the ages, is it not? When Jesus comes, he opens our eyes to see him.

[27 : 13] He opens our eyes to see the reality of our sin and our need for forgiveness and our inability to do that on our own. He comes and he shows us that he is the one who is able to forgive

us and to deliver us and to save us.

This is my story. I grew up going to church, hearing of Jesus, reading the Bible passages, but it never made any sense to me. It had no meaning to me personally.

I couldn't see what the big deal was. And then in God's grace, he brought people into my life. He brought the writings of C.S. Lewis and as I, as these things came together, God graciously worked and my eyes were open and I saw Jesus for the first time.

And I can remember back to the summer of 1986 in those couple of weeks where I saw him clearly and I understood who he was and what he had come for and I knew I had a choice.

I could harden my heart and turn away from him and do it on my own or I could bow my knee and believe and become a follower of Jesus.

[28 : 28] So John Newton in his famous song about amazing grace says, I once was lost, but now am found.

Was blind, but now I see. Friends, this is the good news of the gospel that though we are afflicted by spiritual blindness and though we, even though we would want to see Jesus, we struggle to see him, yet he has come to meet us in this to heal us of our spiritual blindness and to restore our vision.

First Corinthians, Paul tells us that though we see through a glass dimly now, one day we will see him. One day we will see him in all of his glory and all of his splendor and all of his majesty.

we will see him face to face and we will have no more questions. We will just be filled with joy and we will bow down and worship.

This is what he calls us to now, to turn towards him with that hope that that day could be ours. Let's pray together. Lord, we pray this morning that you would open our eyes to see you.

[29 : 54] Come and help us. Lord, for we confess to you that our hearts are often hardened and Lord, often we hold on to things so tightly that we make them conditions on how we would come to you and when we would believe in you.

God, I pray that you would humble us before your greatness. show us our desperate need for you, Lord, to open our eyes so that we can see you.

God, I pray for us because we are so often distracted. Distracted from seeing you as you truly are.

Lord, how often our eyes are set on other things for our present day well-being.

Lord, for our salvation even. Lord, help us to see that it is in you and you alone that we find these things.

Lord, for you are God who restores sight to the blind so that we might see you and worship you. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

[31 : 06] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.