

## **The Problem of What We Think We Know**

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August 26-27, 2000

The Kingdom of God Series

John 9

Have you ever been absolutely certain about something and turned out to be totally wrong? Some of you wives are thinking, "My husband could answer 'yes' to that question 4-5 times a week. He is always absolutely convinced that he told me to do something when he never did and then he gets mad because I didn't read his mind. I know exactly what you are talking about when you talk about being absolutely certain you are right and then turn out to be totally wrong."

Back in the 1960's there was a little guy, he was 5'6" or 5'7" from the island of Cyprus who was a professional soccer player. He had never seen an American football in his life. But one day while he was playing soccer, he saw some people playing football and he decided to kick the football. Only instead of kicking the football the way Americans do, straight on with your toe, this little guy decided to kick it soccer style with the side of his foot. People laughed at him. Nobody kicks a football with the side of their foot. We know how a football is supposed to be kicked.

Well, this little guy's name was Garo Yepremian. He landed a job with the Miami Dolphins and turned out to be all All-Pro field goal kicker. Fifteen years after Garo Yepremian joined the National Football League; there was not one field goal kicker in football that continued to kick the ball straight on. Everyone converted to the little guy's method of kicking.

A Harvard professor once said that it is not so much what we don't know, but rather what we think we know; what we are certain of that keeps us from learning the truth.

Chuck Kraft, in a wonderful book called "Christianity and Power" describes the "what we think we know" problem as the basic obstacle to people learning new lessons or experiencing new things, especially experiencing new dimensions of God's power and kingdom. See, our past experiences can often be the greatest block in our lives to really seeing and learning the truth.

We observe this all the time in ourselves. A woman who has had a terrible history with men, maybe she grew up in a home where she was abused by her dad – dad was harsh and disapproving; maybe she has had a series of relationships, boyfriends, a husband, an ex-husband, who were also domineering and abusive. Well, she meets a new guy. This guy is sweet, kind and loving. This guy is supportive. He tells the truth, he is not a liar. This guy is faithful. He doesn't cheat or run around behind her back. But the woman has an incredibly difficult time believing even the possibility that there exists such a category of people as good men. That there really are good guys out

there. There are guys who don't just have a veneer of Christianity and use their faith for the purpose of initiating a sexual relationship. There are guys who tell the truth, who have honor, who are strong without being oppressive. Who you can look up to and who would be a blessing to you instead of a curse.

Like the old saying goes, the cat who has been burned sitting on a hot stove won't just sit on a hot stove anymore. They won't sit on a cold stove either.

We think we know what we are going to encounter. And that keeps us from new relationships and experiences. Can any one of you identify with what I am saying?

I was absolutely certain as a teenager that when I met Marlene, who is now my wife, I was certain that as she described her Christianity and her beliefs about God and about Jesus and about him rising from the dead – I was certain that this beautiful young woman had been dropped on her head when she was a baby. Or maybe she had eaten paint chips. But I couldn't imagine how an intelligent person living in our day and age could sincerely believe in religion. I knew that religious people had to be deluded.

Over and over again individuals and churches have been kept from experiencing more of God and his kingdom, more of his power, based on what they thought they knew. And so they limited the new thing God wanted to do in their midst.

The self-appointed guardians of the truth are always certain about the way that almighty God behaves. In Acts 15 the traditionalists, the conservative guardians of the truth, were certain that God could not be reaching out beyond the boundaries of Judaism to save Gentiles unless the Gentiles first became Jews and got circumcised. They knew what the principles were, how God always worked. They had experienced God in a certain way and in a certain setting and so they erected a little box and said, "God, you must only operate inside of that box."

It is very upsetting to the guardians of truth, the traditionalists, when God or others begin playing outside the box. You can't do that. We know you must be wrong.

In the Middle Ages the church knew that God wanted to speak to everyone through just one language – Latin. It didn't matter that people no longer spoke Latin, that Latin was a dead language for a thousand years. Latin was the holy language. So the church dug up and burned the body of a man named John Wycliffe, who had the audacity to translate the Bible into the unholy language of English. That couldn't be right. You can't read the Bible in English, can you?

In the 1700's the church knew that the only place a preacher could preach, where it would be blessed by God, was a church building. The church knew that. And so when a man named John Wesley came along and he was preaching outside of church buildings to farmers gathered in a field before they started working, or to coal miners at the end of the day when they came up from the mines, the church knew that God would be very upset with that. You can't have religious meetings outside the church building

in people's homes or offices or outside. The notion that Jesus did almost all of his teaching outside didn't dawn on anyone.

But all of us have a tendency to make rules for God. We experience God in a certain setting, through certain teachings, we derive certain principles and then we say, "This is the way that God must always work." We have certain experiences with men or women, with certain types of people, and we say this is the way it always must be in the future. We learn certain things in school and what we've learned and what we know becomes the greatest obstacle keeping us from discovering the truth.

How many churches today are certain that if you use spiritual gifts you must be of the devil or just involved in some sort of emotionalism? How many churches are convinced that if you are a Roman Catholic, surely you couldn't have a real relationship with Jesus? Or if you don't believe in a pre-tribulation rapture, clearly you don't know your Bible very well.

We all have worldviews. We all look at life through a set of lenses from our past experiences and teachings that we've sat under, and our relationships with people and with God. There is no sin in having a view of the world or in having a set of assumptions. The sin comes in when we get hard. When we are unwilling to allow any of our assumptions to change in the face of new facts and new evidence. When we shut ourselves off to new experiences and new people. When we just say, "This is as far as I am going to go." The cement hardens around our feet.

The question we are going to consider today is whether we are willing to change. Are we willing to change as a church? Are you willing to change as an individual? To open up. To dream new dreams. To revise your thinking and your activity when you are presented with new experiences and new evidences. Or, if instead you are the kind of person who defensively refuses to reconsider your perspectives because you just know that you couldn't be wrong.

I have been doing a series on the Kingdom of God. We have discovered that God's kingdom was the central message of Jesus. That it involves God coming to defeat the enemies of God's people and to bring in a reign of blessings, healing, prosperity and peace. And to create for himself a people who will love him and be devoted to him. Today we are going to consider one of the greatest enemies to us experiencing more of God's presence and God's kingdom: The Problem of What We Think We Know. Let's pray.

John 9:1-3

*As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," Jesus said, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life."*

So we read, *As Jesus went along, he saw a man blind from birth.* Probably the man was outside begging. In Jesus' day there really weren't any options for the blind, except to beg. And it is interesting that no where in the Old Testament do we read a story about the blind being healed. We only see it in the ministry of Jesus. And we see this particular miracle of the blind being healed more often in Jesus' healing ministry than of any other particular kind of healing. There are more stories about Jesus' encounters with the blind than about any other category of illness.

The healing of the blind was one of the things that was to accompany the coming of Messiah. If you are taking notes, you might want to jot down Isaiah 29:18 and Isaiah 35:5 because the healing of the blind was one of the signs that the Messianic kingdom, the kingdom that we have been talking about over the summer, this age of blessing and prosperity, had broken in.

So the disciples ask a question when they see him. *"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?"* Before we look at the question, I think it is interesting that the disciples do exactly what we do when it comes to someone who is disabled or handicapped. We talk about the person as if they aren't even there or as if they don't have any feelings. Here is this blind man and he is sitting there begging and the disciples just have a conversation about him to Jesus.

Talk about insensitivity. The pain of being disabled is that you are regularly treated as a lesser person. As a stupid person. That not only do you have this particular handicap, but over all you are probably handicapped. Maybe you are mentally or emotionally handicapped as well. People finish your sentences. They talk for you. They do things to you that they wouldn't do to other people.

Do you understand what I mean by treating someone as a non-person? We do this with kids all the time. You will see two adults talking about a child in the child's presence as if the child has no feelings or as if the child couldn't hear. I remember when my mother and her relatives were over, they would talk about me and rather than not hearing, my ears perked up immediately. When my name was mentioned, I knew they were talking about me or my sisters, and I was hanging on every word. Sometimes the words that go forth in a child's presence or in the presence of a disabled person are so painful, so dehumanizing.

I had a very brief experience of this during my recent hospitalization for the blood clot in my leg. When you are in the hospital, there are some people who treat you like a non-person, like you have suddenly lost your adult dignity. There were nurses who would come into the room and shove a thermometer in my ear. Not, "Excuse me, I am going to need to take your temperature now," but they would walk in and flip the plastic thing on and ram it in your ear. Where in all of society does someone ever come up to you and, without asking permission, shove something in your ear?

But you see I wasn't a person to them. And this blind man stopped being a person to the disciples. The disciples asked the question that we all ask assuming that we know

the answer. *“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?”* Certainly, it was the view of the rabbis and religious leaders in Jesus’ day that the only reason a child would be born with a handicap was because either the child sinned in the womb (yes, the rabbis actually had a doctrine which suggested that a person could sin while they were in the womb and therefore be punished for their sin at birth), or the reason a person would be born handicapped was because of their parents’ sin.

This is the general perspective of most people to difficulties or to tragedies. Most people assume that they know or secretly know the reason for suffering. When a child is born with a handicap or dies, or a mom miscarries, very often associated with the grief of this particular pain or tragedy there is also guilt. I know this. I have ministered to lots of struggling parents. One of the things that really has to be unpacked in a person’s heart is a deep-seated feeling that “God must be punishing me.” That that’s why we are encountering this suffering, this difficulty.

“I wouldn’t have had a child with this problem, or I wouldn’t have miscarried unless I did something wrong. I am sure I must have failed you, Lord.” And there is certainly no shortage of prophetic types who can assist you to discover your secret sin and why it is you are being punished by this particular form of suffering.

Certainly, we do see in the world a link between behavior and consequences. It is certainly a reasonable assumption, if you will, that certain behaviors have particular consequences. If you drive drunk, it is not a mystery that you are more likely to get into an accident, more likely to injure yourself and others. If you have sex outside of marriage, you are exposing yourself to the possibility of pregnancy or a sexually transmitted disease. If you don’t work well at your particular place of employment, there could be a consequence of firing. If you don’t turn in your homework at school, it is no surprise when you don’t do well on your report card or you are put on academic probation. There are consequences.

But part of the issue of suffering in this world must remain a mystery. And the link between our activity and either reward or punishment in this world is tenuous at best. As a result of the Fall, rewards and punishment don’t always correspond to merit and demerit. If you want to think about it, it is like what happened at the Fall. Not only did our physical planet get affected and death was introduced to the world, but it was as if an earthquake happened in the moral fabric of the universe. The plates shifted and we no longer see this wonderful alignment and correspondence of merit and reward and demerit and punishment. The truth is that even though you claim to know why people have problems and why they suffer, the Fall makes our knowledge and certainty, at best, just a guess.

We look at folks whose kids are rebelling and using drugs. They are walking away from God. We know that there were parental problems and here is what caused that behavior. But, friend, we don’t know. And so we struggle to answer the question of cause.

As a pastor I have regularly had people say to me, “Why, if it wasn’t something that I did, if it wasn’t something they did wrong, if God is not punishing me, then why?” I remember one woman with tears in her eyes asking, “Why did my 35-year old husband have to die of cancer? If God loves me, why?”

On one occasion, I was talking with a Jewish man about the resurrection. He interrupted me and said, “Well, if that’s true, if there really is a God and he raised his son from the dead, then why did my father get blown up in a boiler accident?” Why?

One woman broke down in tears and said to me, “Why did my mother commit suicide?”

Another person once asked me, “Why was I raped by my stepfather?”

I remember a grandmother asking me, “Why did my grandson die in this motorcycle accident?”

Why did those Russian sailors drown a week ago in that sub? Why? If it is not reward and punishment, if the disciples’ assumptions were faulty, then why does all this stuff happen?

Jesus doesn’t answer why. He rejects the two alternatives. It wasn’t him and it wasn’t his parents. We don’t live just in this world at this time with the Fall. We don’t live with these tight links between merit and reward and sin and punishment. We don’t. Some of the biggest scoundrels in the world win a million dollars on Survivor shows and really nice people lose and get voted off the island. Jesus doesn’t answer causation questions.

But he does answer purpose questions. He says, *“Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened in order that [so that] the work of God might be displayed in his life.”*

Listen, here is what faith is all about. Faith does not require God to answer the question of cause. Why did this happen to me? Why is this happening with my child? Why was my husband unfaithful? Why have you done this, God? Truly, in this life causation remains a mystery for us. But faith can find meaning and purpose in difficulty. Faith is all about being convinced that we don’t live in a random crazy universe. That the universe is not just a gigantic slot machine and I just pulled that lever on and lost. That my suffering, what my mother went through, what my kid went through, is not just pointless, but that there is a purpose.

God will, through my faith, manifest something of his goodness to this world. I might not ever discover the why, but if I give this particular thing to God, I do believe that God can use even this to show kindness to someone else, to show forth his existence and his goodness. Jesus is saying God can use my problems to demonstrate his power.

When I was in the hospital I was woken up about every three hours to see how I was doing and to have blood drawn so that they could do tests on why my blood was clotting so much. Well, one particular night at about 3:30 or 4:00 in the morning, this young med tech woman came in to draw some blood. I was really, really tired. For whatever reason, she was having a terrible time drawing blood. And so she jabbed me in my left arm and dug away at my vein and couldn't draw blood there. She jabbed me again in another place in my left arm. She wasn't drawing blood there. Then she took the needle and ran it into my left hand and wasn't able to draw blood. She then repeated the process with my right arm and did it a couple of times near the elbow and then she was going to run the needle into my right hand. She said, "If I can't get blood this time, I am going to call for help."

I was really, really upset. So I said to her, "I think that would be a very good idea if you got some help." I felt this internal check. And in a moment I felt God's heart for her and his impetus to me, "Son, show her some kindness." So I said, "What's your name?" We began talking and she told me about herself and what her experiences in life had been and what she believed. I was able to share something of Jesus with her.

Why? I don't know why I am in the hospital. But purpose – that God could manifest his power through my problem – yes. That is what faith is about. That is the kingdom.

John 9:4-5

*"As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."*

Jesus is saying that the forces of opposition are growing. *So long as it is day*, that is, so long as you have a window of opportunity, *then we need to do the work of him who sent me*. In other words, while the window is open, do God's work in the world. But the window is not always open and night comes. Opposition grows. People get harder. The atmosphere changes. And sadly, we are kept from doing good. From putting our hands on someone and saying, "Can I pray for you?" From reconciling a relationship that we know must be healed. We are kept from doing good and doing God's will by the mistaken belief that we have all the time in the world. That it is always going to be day and that night will never fall.

I have seen this over and over though. That there is an opportunity, for example, to speak to someone about Jesus before all the relatives descend on the house. There is that window in the car when we are alone. Or there is an opportunity to pray in the hospital room before the nurse comes in and starts messing around with all the tubes. It is day when your co-worker is vulnerable and opens up their life. Or someone shares with you the pain of their divorce. That is when day is present.

But those divine opportunities need to be seized. We have to pray now. One of the greatest sins that followers of Christ commit is the sin of procrastination – not doing what we should do when we should do it. We don't have all the time in the world.

This came home to me so powerfully a couple of years ago when I did the funeral of a man in his 40's who died unreconciled to his son. This guy was a hard-bitten military guy, a tough guy. He had been out of relationship with his son for some time. But planned, apparently, to contact his son and try to patch things up. He was out working under his car. A few buddies were watching him. They had the car jacked up and were having a couple of beers while he worked under his car. Tragically, one of the car jacks slipped and the car fell and this man was crushed by the axle of the car. He died. His buddies went crazy trying to get him out. At his funeral I preached from Luke 12 Jesus' message where he says, *"Fool, this night your soul is required from you."*

Night is coming. And whether we are talking about our own mortality or opposition or someone moving from a place of vulnerability to a place of defensiveness, very often we don't get another bite at the apple. We know we have all the time in the world to do God's work, but we are wrong. If there is something you need to say to your children, when the impetus comes to hug them and tell them that you love them, when there is an impetus in your life where I really need to be in a small group, I need to be in a relationship; you feel the press to pick up the phone and call someone; to pray for someone, to share your faith, to do good to someone, to confess a sin to someone, to give charity to someone – do it.

The text goes on to say, *Having said this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. "Go," he told him, "wash in the pool of Siloam" (this word means Sent). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.*

Some people since the early church have seen in Jesus' mix of spit and mud, and forming out of mud fresh eyes for this man, some have seen Jesus pointing to himself as creator. Way back in the Garden of Eden, God fashioned Adam out of the dust of the earth. And so just as God fashioned Adam out of the dust of the earth, when God comes in the flesh in the person of Jesus, he fashions new eyes for this man.

But the Pharisees, those guardians of truth, those folks with absolute certainty about the way the world works, throughout the rest of the dialogue are obsessed with the technique that Jesus used in healing. Down in v. 10 they asked the blind man: *"How then were your eyes opened?"* How did this happen? Share with us the secret, the technique.

Verse 15, *Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight.* They get the answer. *"He put mud in my eyes," the man replied, "and I washed and now I see."*

In v. 19 the same question is posed to the man's parents, *"Is this your son?" they asked. "Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?"* There must be some other explanation, some other alternative. How is it that now he can see?

Verse 26 they asked the same question again. *"What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"* These men are obsessed with technique as we are today. How does



the kingdom come? How do you do a healing? We always want to put God in a box and if we can just discover the technique and learn the formula, then we could be like McDonald's and there could be billions and billions of healings.

But there is no technique to receiving the kingdom other than to make yourself available to God and to try to follow the leadership of his Spirit. Let me tell you a story that just happened six weeks ago. We have a fellow in this church who is a sales manager and spends lots of time in his car. He suffered from chronic back pain to the point where he was under a physician's care. He was taking medication to relieve the pain.

He was driving back to Columbus from North Carolina six weeks ago. He was in excruciating pain. When he got to Athens, Ohio, he turned on the radio. He listens to my daily program (I have a radio show that broadcasts the messages I do here at church at 2:00 p.m. on 880 AM). Anyway, the signal goes out around the state and he was down near Athens and he wanted to catch the last few minutes of the show.

That particular day on the show I was apparently sharing an illustration about a man who had a terrible back problem. I mentioned that I sensed from God that this man's back problems were actually caused by an evil spirit. I prayed that the spirit would leave and it did and the man was healed. I gave that message a number of years ago and it just happened to be playing on the radio that day.

The man felt from the Lord that it was not a coincidence that he heard about this man's healing at a time when he was struggling with his back. He caught the last few moments of the program. But he decided to lay his hands on his own back as he is driving up the highway. He had one hand on the steering wheel and one hand on his back. You really didn't want to be in front of him while he was driving. And he asked the Lord to heal him.

Apparently, the Lord immediately fell on him and not only did his back pain go away, but in that moment, he received a spiritual gift of tongues. He had a doctor's appointment that afternoon, which he cancelled. When his wife came home he was lying on the living room floor. She asked him how his doctor's appointment went. He told her he cancelled it, got up and began doing these stretching things in front of his wife, bending over touching his toes. He is completely healed. He went off all of his medications. He hasn't seen the doctor since and has had absolutely no back pain since that time in the car six weeks ago.

Now, I share all of that with you to tell you the secret of healing back pains. You drive from North Carolina to Columbus, passing through Athens, Ohio. Make sure that you have your radio dial tuned to 880 AM and that I am sharing about healing backs. Then while going about 70 mph on the highway, grab the steering wheel with your left hand, put your right hand on your back and tell an evil spirit to leave.

The secret for this man was God was pressing him to do something. And in simple obedience, though feeling somewhat foolish, he said, "OK, I will give it a rip. No one is

around here anyway. I am in my car alone.” But it could have been that he was healed by someone else praying for him. Or healed while having his devotions or not healed. And that God manifested his power through this man’s continued problems.

Why don’t we change our minds? Why is it so hard for some of us to revise our opinions about the way God would work in the world? About what we are capable of? About what God wants for our lives and our relationships? For our marriages? For our children? Why do we get so locked into certain perspectives and so unwilling to change our minds?

Well, sometimes we don’t have any categories for forming a new perspective. Look at verses 8-12:

*His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, “Isn’t this the same man who used to sit and beg?” Some claimed that he was. Others said, “No, he only looks like him.” But he himself insisted, “I am the man.” “How then were your eyes opened?” they demanded. He replied, “The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see.” “Where is this man?” they asked him. “I don’t know,” he said.*

Look at this in v. 8, his neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, “Isn’t this the same man who used to sit and beg?” Some claimed that it was. Others said, “No, it only looks like him.” When you don’t have any other category, when you don’t have any other box in your mind into which something new can be put, then it doesn’t matter how close to a miracle you stand, you still won’t be able to see it or believe it.

People that watched this man grow up, who had seen his face every day – we aren’t talking about a big city, we are talking about a little community – they saw him every day begging. Now he sees, but I have no room in my mind for the possibility for this blind neighbor of mine seeing, so it couldn’t be him, no it couldn’t be. It must be someone else. Maybe it is his twin brother who was long lost and adopted out. Maybe it is an alien who was beamed down.

If the miraculous can’t happen, if you don’t have a box in your mind that says that God can literally do anything and often does break in and often does work miracles, then even when a miracle is staring you in the face, you won’t be able to see it.

I remember a young woman who had juvenile onset arthritis. Her parents took her to doctors for years. She was in excruciating pain and on all kinds of anti-inflammatory medications. Big medical expenses and lots of experts. In prayer, the kingdom came to her and God healed her. She went home so excited. She thought to herself, “This is the proof to my parents who don’t believe in Jesus. Here it is – their daughter is healed undeniably.” She went home and her parents said, “Well, you didn’t have arthritis.” She said, “What do you mean? We have been going to doctors for 8-9 years.” “No, no...you had some other kind of problem.”

No way. This could not have happened. If you don't have a category for something, if God does not work miracles, then no matter how close you are to a miracle, you won't be able to see it.

We have a fellow in our congregation, I think some of you have heard his story, Mike who had epilepsy for about 20 years. He had a number of grand mal seizures per week. At one point I think Mike was taking something like 60 pills a day – a tremendous amount of medication. But he received prayer back in 1989 and he was healed. No more grand mal seizures ever again after having them for 20 years. And in many weeks he was having 3-4 a week. He went to his physicians and he explained to them that his seizures were getting worse and worse, as they knew. And then he received prayer and what happened during the prayer and that his seizures were gone. They said, "That's wonderful. The medicine is finally beginning to take effect." He said, "Wait a minute. You know how many pills a day I have been taking. You know all my treatments to this point haven't been effective. You know that you were planning to operate on me and my brain. How can it be that you think that suddenly my medicine has begun to take effect?" They just smiled at him. Poor deluded soul...if you want to believe that it was healing prayer, fine, that's great.

No category. This happens very often when a person meets Christ. Life is revolutionized by coming into contact with Jesus Christ. Go home and talk with family and friends. They think, "Well, surely my changed life has to be evidence and proof that Christ is alive and that he still interacts with people today. That there is a Jesus and that he will change you." Go home and they say, "Look, you know me. You know how hostile I was to this religious stuff. You know the problems I used to have. You know what I was into. You know my substance abuse, divorce or the problems I had with my kids or my health problems. You know what I was like." Often family and friends will have no categories for a person meeting Jesus and being suddenly and totally changed.

We have to come up with alternate explanations, no matter how ludicrous. When I went home and told my parents that I had had an encounter with God and that I was convinced not only that God existed, but that we could have a relationship with him through Jesus Christ, their explanation was: "Well, you were always searching. You were depressed and searching." I said, "Searching? If I was searching, I was totally unaware of my search." I have met searchers after truth. I have met explorers, people looking into religion. I was never like that, ever. I was sure that religion was ludicrous. About the only thing I was searching for was a good-looking woman and maybe academic success.

You have to have a category in your mind for miracles, for healing, for change through meeting Jesus. We don't change our minds because we limit what Jesus can do and what he can't. Look at v. 13:

*They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was the Sabbath, therefore, the*

*Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. "He put mud in my eyes," the man replied, "and I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." Others asked, "How can a sinner do such miraculous signs?" So they were divided. Finally, they turned again to the blind man, "What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened." The man replied, "He is a prophet."*

No way could Jesus do this stuff. Jesus broke the Sabbath rules of the Pharisees, the guardians of truth, the definers of reality – he broke their Sabbath rules. He made mud, which was against their rules, kneading it. It was against their rules to heal someone unless it was a life threatening illness. Maybe we wouldn't accuse Jesus today of breaking the Sabbath, because the Sabbath is not of great interest to us.

But we do accuse Jesus all the time of either lacking the interest to heal us or lacking the capacity. Tell me that you haven't at some crucial point in your own life looked at Jesus and said, "No way could that man heal." No way. Can't happen. He is either not interested in doing it or he is not able to do it.

You are single or you have been through a tough divorce and you have had your life on the pause button for years. You have limited what Jesus could do – that he could push the play button in your life and say, "It is time for you to re-engage." Some of you have been on pause for so long that you can't even imagine re-engaging after a divorce, after the death of a spouse.

Tell me, where is the limit that you have placed on Jesus – what he can do and what he can't do in your life? Where have you limited the Lord Jesus Christ and what he can and can't do in your child's life? Or in your business? Or in your marriage or in your finances or in healing a long-term medical condition? Or in healing infertility? What have you written off like the Pharisees and looked at Jesus and said, "No way, this man could not do it." What have you written off as impossible for Jesus?

Is there someone in your family or at your workplace or in your friendship circle that you believe will never be converted? It is just too hard. The person is just not interested. You have tried and tried. Is there anyone who has dropped off your prayer list? Anything that has dropped out of your prayers where you just don't pray about this matter any longer? There is nothing too hard for God. On what basis do we place limits on Jesus?

This week I got a wonderful letter from a fellow in our congregation in great brokenness. He had had an affair and had blown up his life. He was on the verge of completely blowing up and destroying his marriage. But he talked about how God amazingly and miraculously remade him and restored the shattered pieces of their marriage, and how things today are better than they were even before his particular sin.

Your marriage is not too far-gone for Jesus to step in. Neither is your health. Neither is an important relationship to you. I am not telling you what Jesus will do in your

particular case. I am sure there were other blind men living in Palestine in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century who Jesus did not heal. No one can tell you what Jesus will do for you. I am just challenging you to get rid of the limits you place on him and to get rid of your assumptions about what he won't do. It is not our job to tell God what he must do in our lives. That is up to God. But it is our job to stop telling him what he can't do or what he won't do. So I say to you, stop telling Jesus what he can't do or won't do.

There is a price for changing your mind. It says in v. 18:

*The Jews still didn't believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man's parents. "Is this your son," they asked, "is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that he can now see?" "We know he is our son," the parents answered, "and we know he was born blind. But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don't know. Ask him. He's of age. He will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews for already the Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue. That's why the parents said, "He is of age, ask him."*

Fear keeps us from fully experiencing the kingdom of God. If I really get caught up in this kingdom stuff, if I really go for it in terms of following Jesus, I know I am going to pay a price. Being put out of the synagogue in Jesus' day was a lot bigger deal than any church discipline that is exercised by any church today. The church exercises discipline in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and someone says, "Big deal. I will just go down the street to XYZ Church and they will be glad to have me. Big deal. Take my name off your stupid membership rosters."

But in Jesus' day the synagogue controlled the whole of life. It controlled your relationships, how you did business, it was the court system. It was the judge of law. To be removed from the synagogue was like being an Amish person and shunned by your Amish family and friends. You couldn't eat with your neighbors. You couldn't marry your neighbors. You couldn't buy or sell. There was a price to pay.

You know, when you start opening yourself up to change, to revising former views, to having categories for things that you never had categories for, there is a synagogue that you will be put out of. Some denominations have their pet doctrines - whether it's about the role of women or pre-tribulation rapture or baptism in the Holy Spirit, spiritual gifts. You start rethinking some things and the guardians of truth come and shut you down.

If you are in one of the academic departments at Ohio State University, if you are a student or a professor, and you start calling into question some of the pet teachings or doctrines - the reigning truths in a women's study department, or in a history or law department - there is a price to pay. You are going to be put out of that particular synagogue.

A lot of people won't change because they know intuitively that "I am going to experience a loss of power, a loss of prestige, a loss of popularity from the old group."

Groups have a way of keeping people in line, making sure that you really toe the line. Groups have a way of punishing offenders. The punishment can be pretty severe. If you are Jewish, Muslim or Hindu, if your family is not religious, if your family is Roman Catholic or part of a mainline church and you go home and start talking about Jesus in a personal way, you have gotten involved with this Vineyard group, there is a price to pay from family and friends. So some think it is worthwhile to not change. It is better to just go along.

But the ultimate reason why we don't change our perspectives and open up to new things? The ultimate reason why we don't alter our perspectives is because we don't want to. Because we refuse to reconsider our prior perspectives. Because we are certain that we couldn't be wrong. Because there is just no way at all, no matter how much evidence, no matter how many the experiences are – no way at all that we could be wrong.

There are two roads we can take with our lives – two directions, two trajectories. Friends, all of us are taking a certain trajectory in life right now. As you get older, you could be getting more inflexible, less open to revising your opinions, less willing to consider new information. Or you could grow in your openness. You could become more flexible. Not every older person is inflexible. Some have gotten more and more flexible, more willing to consider alternative explanations.

I want to be a life-long learner. I may be deluding myself, but I believe that I am more flexible now in the way that I think about life and people than I was in my 20's. I am not nearly so dogmatic as I was. I am not so certain that my view is the only view. I am much more willing in this last decade to revise my opinions. I have come to the conclusion that I don't have the corner on truth and I need to keep learning, keep growing.

This blind man is a man who kept revising. Look at how he looked at Jesus. Verse 11 he called Jesus just a man. He says, *"The man they called Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes."*

Verse 17: *Finally they turned again to the blind man, "What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened." The man replied, "He is a prophet."* First he is a man, now he is a prophet.

Verse 32: *Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.* Now Jesus, he sees, came from God.

Verse 38: *"Lord, I believe" and he worshipped him.* This is the only place in the Gospel of John where anyone worships Jesus. The man is growing in spiritual insight. He is not only physically healed, he is spiritually healed. He sees more and more clearly.

I have watched people who are open to change go through this "opening the spiritual eyes" process. They start off not knowing anything about Christianity. Someone begins

talking with them and they become aware of basic Christian truths. They start to be interested. They ask questions. Then they begin to think through for themselves: “What would it mean for me, if I became a Christian?” It is not just moving from the abstract “What’s this all about?” to “What does it mean for me if I became a follower of Jesus? What would happen in my life? What would it cost?”

Sometimes they begin to try it on a bit. They project themselves into it. “Well, what would happen if I got involved in a church like this and really started to go after Christ?” Often, in that search, in that trying on mode, they see that they have a need.

Well, the truth is my life isn’t going perfectly. It is not going all that great. I have made a lot of mistakes. I don’t have all the answers. I do see in my life a desire for truth. I do see that I have a need for God.

Maybe they have kids and they want their kids to be raised with God. They don’t like what they see in the world. So they are aware of Christian truth and they begin to grasp the implications of it for themselves and they see their need. At a certain point, then, they make a decision: “Yeah, I am going to do this. I am going to jump in.”

This is the way it is with every new kingdom truth. We become aware that there is an experience, there is a gift, and there is an aspect of the Christian faith that we don’t know very much about. We start learning about it. We start trying it on – what would this mean for me? We have a hunger for that. We have a thirst and we make a decision. I am going to jump in.

Verse 38: *“Lord, I believe” and he worshipped him.*

The story closes with this: *Jesus said, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.” Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, “What? Are we blind too?” Jesus said, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.”*

Our belief that we have enough, our belief in our own success, our comfort with who we are and what we have achieved – that is the nail in the coffin that keeps us from choosing to reach out for more. One of the saddest things in the world is to watch a church or an individual who used to be very successful get blinded by their own success and their own confidence in their own success. A ministry or an individual who claims they already see everything there is to see and so they can’t learn any new lessons. They can’t or won’t come back to the place they were at the beginning – a place of dependency, a place of weakness, a place of prayer as if their life depended on it. I don’t have anything to learn from you. We don’t have to revise the way we do church. Who are you to talk to me? I have spent more money on vacations than you will ever make.

There are two trajectories we can take in life. One is to say to the Lord: Lord, make me a person who is a life-long learner. Who doesn't think that "I know it all right now." Who cries out for more and more of you and more and more of truth.

Or, we can defensively react. I have learned the principles and the techniques and all the ways that God will work. And we can become increasingly inflexible, unchangeable, and ultimately blind. Let's pray.



## **The Problem of What We Think We Know**

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**Rich Nathan**

**August 26-27, 2000**

**The Kingdom of God Series**

**John 9**

- I. What Do We Think We Know?
  - A. We Know Why Bad Things Happen (John 9:1-3)
  - B. We Know We Have All The Time In The World To Do What We Should Do (John 9:4, 5)
  - C. We Know That There Must Be Some Technique Behind All Great Spiritual Activity (John 9:6, 7)
- II. Why Don't We Change Our Minds?
  - A. We Have No Categories For A New Perspective (John 9:8-12)
  - B. We Limit What Jesus Can Do And What He Can't (John 9:13-17)
  - C. We Are Afraid Of Paying The Price Of Change (John 9:18-23)
  - D. We Don't Want To Change (John 9:35-41)