

December 18, 2016

Suffering Servant, Sovereign Lord *Who Do You Say That I Am?*

Mark 8:1 – 30

The text this morning brings us to the turning point in the gospel of Mark with that great confession by Peter that Jesus is the Christ. This occurs roughly in the middle of this gospel and separates essentially the two halves of this book. In the first half Jesus is traveling all over the place. We see Him moving in and out of Capernaum, visiting Nazareth, teaching among the villages, criss-crossing the Galilee several times, and moving through the Gentile lands of Gennesaret, Tyre, Sidon and the Decapolis. He was always on the move and you never knew where He would pop up next. But after Peter's declaration, we see Him headed in only one direction – Jerusalem. Throughout this latter half, Mark portrays Jesus as being 'on the way' to Jerusalem. Luke describes this change by saying 'He set His face to go to Jerusalem'.

Prior to this, Jesus is seen giving equal time teaching the crowds and teaching His disciples, but after Caesarea Philippi, He is seen devoting His remaining time to intensive time teaching His disciples. Every incident becomes a teachable moment for His disciples. In the first half, the disciples seem to be stunningly unable to understand who Jesus is. In the second half we begin to see the light beginning to dawn, but they still have trouble reconciling their expectation of a royal Messiah with this suffering Messiah, who seems determined to die. In the first half of the gospel, Jesus is always telling people not to broadcast the news of who He is, and He is casting out demons everywhere He goes. But after chapter 9, there are no more commands to be silent, nor are there any more demonic confrontations. Both sections also conclude in very similar ways – the first with Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, and the second with the Roman centurion's confession in chapter 15: *Truly this man was the Son of God!*

All the way through this gospel, Mark is continually endeavoring to show us who Jesus is and what He came to do and how we must respond to Him. And here his story reaches a climax with Peter's confession. There are many important questions we need to answer. Questions like, 'What is truth? Who is God? What is man? How should we live? What is my purpose? Who is my neighbor? But the most important question we must have a good answer for is 'Who is Jesus?' Is He just a miracle worker? Mark has spent a great deal of time showing us His miraculous powers over disease and death and demons and even nature itself. Is that what He's getting at? That Jesus came to heal our issues and make life better for us? Or is He just a great teacher? Mark gives a lot of space to His teaching moments with His disciples and the crowds that followed them, and notes at many points how His disciples and the crowd were amazed and astonished at His teaching.

But Mark never lets it rest there. He won't let us define Jesus as just a miracle worker or just a great teacher. He presses the question again and again as he takes us on this journey with Jesus and His disciples all the way to Caesarea Philippi.

And as Jesus and His disciples are in that region, Jesus presses them on the question. *"Who do people say that I am?"* And His disciples come up with miracle worker and great teacher answers: *"John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets."* And all of those had one main thing in common; they all pointed the way to Christ. But Jesus doesn't let them settle there; He then asks the really important question: *"But who do you say that I am?"* It doesn't really matter what everyone else is saying about Jesus. What really matters is what you say about Him. And Peter's answer, *"You are the Christ."* is the only answer that matters. In the account in Matthew, the writer gives us Peter's full confession: *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."*¹ In other words, You are not merely another one who is pointing the way to God – You are God.

Until we come to that realization about who Jesus is, we'll never understand the answers to all the other questions. But we all have a big problem. We can't see who Jesus really is because we all without exception, were born absolutely spiritually blind. We can't see who Jesus is because the spiritual eyes of our hearts are closed. Something has to happen for us to really see. That is the reason I believe that Mark inserts this little story about the blind man here among the stories of the feeding of the four thousand, the conflict with the Pharisees, the consternation among His disciples, and Peter's confession. In this section Mark shows us the extent of our blindness, the root of our blindness and ultimately the cure for our blindness. Because we really need to have our eyes opened to who Jesus is. Otherwise all the other great questions of life will have profoundly wrong answers.

First of all, look at how Mark shows us the extent of our blindness. What he shows us here and what he has been showing us is that everyone is spiritually blind. Nobody really understands who Jesus is and what He's come to do. In this section we have the disciples and the Pharisees who cannot see who He is. But Mark has shown us all the way through this gospel it is the friends of Jesus as well as His enemies who are blind. It is the moral people as well as the immoral; it is the insiders and the outsiders; everybody. The Bible teaches that spiritual blindness is a universal human condition. Every human being born into this world since the Fall has been born spiritually blind. And it is not a superficial blindness. It is a profound blindness, a total blindness, a complete blindness. It is living in the darkness with no light at all. That is the biblical diagnosis of the universal human condition.

Look at the disciples. It is a familiar picture isn't it? Jesus and His disciples. A great crowd gathered. And nobody remembered to bring any food, again. Now just so you know, Mark is not recapitulating the feeding of the five thousand back in chapter 6. There are similarities, and those have encouraged sceptics either dismiss both miracles as wishful thinking, or to argue for one feeding miracle rather than two. But the differences in the two outweigh the similarities. In the first you have five loaves and two fish; in the second there are seven loaves and a few small fish, and the word for fish is different in each. In fact the word fish in the feeding of the four thousand is best translated *sardine*, which makes the miracle all that much more miraculous I think. The accounting for the crowd is very different. In the first we have five thousand men, not counting the women and children; in the second it is a total estimate of four thousand people.

1 Matthew 16:16 ESV

Then you have the different number of leftover baskets, as well as a completely different kind of basket. You wouldn't know that from our English translation, but it is very clear in the Greek. In the first feeding, the crowd had been with Jesus one day and here it is three days. The first feeding was in the springtime and here there is no mention of the season. In the story of the five thousand, the people were broken up into groups of hundreds and fifties. Here with the four thousand there is no mention of groups. In the first event, Jesus sees these people as sheep without a shepherd. Here His concern is for their physical welfare. In short, the many specific differences in numbers and details clearly argue for two separate events, not one.

But strangely enough, one thing is very familiar, perhaps you caught it. Here they are, thousands of people in a desolate place, no grocery stores around or Burger Kings to run to, and Jesus hands the disciples a problem: *"I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. 3 And if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way. And some of them have come from far away."* And how do His disciples respond? 'That's okay Jesus. We've seen this before. We'll take these few loaves and sardines, You'll bless them, and everybody will eat.' Is that what happens? Mark says no. That is not what happens. Here's what happens: *And his disciples answered him, "How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?"* Incidentally, this is one of the strongest arguments of critics for this story to simply be a retelling of the feeding of the five thousand.

Think about it. These guys had seen with their own eyes, and handled with their own hands, the miracle of the loaves and fishes back in chapter 6. They saw perhaps fifteen thousand or more people fed, satisfied, stuffed, with five loaves and two fish. And now they're facing thousands less with more loaves, 7, and possibly more fish, even if they are sardines, and they panic. This really illustrates the extent of our blindness. They had seen Jesus work a miracle. Actually they had seen Him work many miracles. But they had seen this exact thing not too long before. And yet they panic. And we might be tempted to make fun of these guys until it dawns on us that we are exactly the same.

How many times have we called on God to rescue us from an impossible situation and He graciously comes through? And we thank God and promise we'll never doubt Him again. And we're good. For another six months or so. Until the next crisis comes along and we panic just like we did before. Instead of remembering how magnificently God came through the last time, we act as though this has never happened before and we're crying our eyes out and we get all depressed and wonder how we are ever going to make it. Even though we may be followers of Jesus, even though we may have seen His mighty miraculous power in our lives at many points, there remain in us pockets of blindness to His power and glory that need to be healed. The extent of blindness to who Jesus is in unbelievers is profound, but it is also a very real problem in those who profess to follow Jesus.

And then we have the blindness of the religious crowd: *11 The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him. 12 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."*

Mark tells us that after He fed the four thousand, Jesus and His disciples got into a boat again and went to the district of Dalmanutha. No one's really sure exactly where that was, but it was somewhere on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. And once there, He was confronted by the Pharisees again. In the parallel account in Matthew we're told that the Sadducees were there also. In a nutshell, both groups were in the religious camp but they didn't get along with each other. The Pharisees were the legalists. Every jot and tittle of the Law had to be accounted for. They were very strict in their observance of the law. These guys were separatists. They separated themselves from the tax gatherers and sinners and the general Jewish population. They separated themselves from any kind of defilement that they thought would make them ceremonially unclean. They hated the pagans, they hated the Romans, they hated the heathen. But they were sure that they knew God.

The Sadducees on the other hand, would be considered the liberals of their day. They were very comfortable with King Herod and his politics and they were cozy with the Romans. They bought into the Greco-Roman culture of the day and much of its philosophy. They were very liberal in their theology, denying the doctrine of resurrection, rejecting anything remotely supernatural, and thought the Pharisees were a bunch of old women. Functionally, they were skeptical materialists. They were also the ones who ran the temple racket where they would judge the animals people brought as sacrifices, find something wrong with it, and make them buy one of theirs for an exorbitant price.

But these two groups, often at each other's throats, made common cause when it came to Jesus. And that is the nature of spiritual blindness. If you're spiritually blind, you're comfortable with other people who are equally blind. However they define their blindness, it's still blindness. Evil company is better than righteous company even if the evil company is your enemy. So they pick a fight with Jesus. They just walked up and started a fight. Their intention was always to discredit Him before the people. And so they come up to Jesus and essentially say, 'If you are who you claim to be, give us a sign from heaven.' This is real tell. You know when you play poker, so I've been told, the really good players look for a tell in their opponents face or body language. A tell is something someone does that gives away what kind of hand they have. It could be a twitch in your face, a widening of the eyes, anything that someone notices you do if you have a good hand or a bad one.

Asking for a sign is a tell. It tells you that this person is still spiritually blind. A miracle in the sky, stop the sun like Joshua. Bring fire down from heaven like Elijah. Eclipse the moon, rearrange the constellations. Start and stop a storm. A lot of people will say "I would believe in God if He would just write it in the sky". But He has. And they still don't believe. The psalmist tells us: *The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims His handiwork. 2 Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. 3 There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. 4 Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.*² In the New Testament Paul says: *For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.*³

2 Psalm 19:1-4 ESV

3 Romans 1:19-20 ESV

They weren't asking Him for another healing or demon exorcism. They had seen plenty of miraculous things like that. Those were not considered to be signs of His legitimacy by the Pharisees. In fact they had seen His mighty works and concluded that His power was demonic. They wanted to see it written in the sky, because they believed that when the Messiah appeared and established His kingdom there would be signs in the heavens just as prophets like Joel predicted would happen on the day of the Lord. *The earth quakes before them; the heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining.*⁴ But signs to people who are blind are useless. D.A. Carson notes: "The proof that they cannot discern the 'signs' is that they ask for a sign!"

The late British agnostic Bertrand Russell, was asked what he would say if, after he died, he found out there really was a God. He replied: "I would say, 'Why did you not give me better evidence?'"⁵ The French philosopher Voltaire once said: "Even if a miracle were wrought in the open marketplace before a thousand sober witnesses, I would rather mistrust my senses than admit a miracle."⁶ Miracles, signs in the heavens, the glory of God revealed in His creation, rather than work to convince people of God, often work to confirm people in their unbelief. Pharaoh saw plenty of miraculous signs in his day and Scripture says that time after time he hardened his heart. And it is a hardened heart that is at the root of our blindness. Look at what happens when Jesus and the disciples get into the boat again.

14 Now they had forgotten to bring bread, and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. 15 And he cautioned them, saying, "Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." 16 And they began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread. It is remarkable that after this great miracle of multiplying bread and fishes that the disciples get all concerned that nobody thought to bring some of the leftover with them. After all, there were seven baskets full of food somebody left on the beach. And Jesus says, 'Watch out that you don't get fixated on the wrong thing. Watch out for the leaven.' And that is certainly a curious thing to say at this point. The disciples must be thinking, 'We're talking about bread, and You start talking about yeast'. But Jesus was diving to the heart of the matter.

17 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? Are your hearts hardened?" Here is the issue. Hardened hearts. The continued stubborn unbelief of the Pharisees and Herod, the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod, if left undealt with will lead to hardened hearts. Hearts that are permanently closed to the revelation of who Jesus is. Hardened hearts that demand a sign from heaven and yet remain blind to what is in front of them. *18 Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? 19 When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" They said to him, "Twelve." 20 "And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" And they said to him, "Seven." 21 And he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?"*

4 Joel 2:10 ESV

5 <http://www.stpaulsbangor.com/a-sure-word/>

6 <http://www.stpaulsbangor.com/a-sure-word/>

Why is it that people can readily believe that Jesus was a great teacher or a great miracle worker, but refuse to believe that He is the Savior? Why are so many content to lump Jesus in with the wise sages of the world and refuse to acknowledge His incredible uniqueness? It is because at the root of our blindness is the notion that we really don't need a Savior. We need miracles from time to time; we need good teaching on morals and wholesome living; but by and large we don't need a Savior. To admit the claims of Jesus Christ is to admit that we are by nature, sinful and guilty before a holy and righteous God and unless something is done, we are lost. The leaven of the Pharisees and Herod is a spiritual pride that will not admit the need for rescue. We're like addicts who think they can handle their addiction. But as we know, it is not until addicts admit they have a problem that they begin to see the problem.

And so Mark takes us to meet a blind man. *22 And they came to Bethsaida. And some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him. 23 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?" 24 And he looked up and said, "I see men, but they look like trees, walking." 25 Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. 26 And he sent him to his home, saying, "Do not even enter the village."* What Mark is showing us here is that our spiritual blindness is deep and profound. And I want you to notice three things here: spiritual blindness is healed in community, it is healed divinely, and it is healed progressively.

First of all, spiritual blindness is healed in community. When Jesus comes to Bethsaida, notice that this blind man's friends are bringing him to Jesus. This is significant because blind people need guides. This man would never have found Jesus on his own. He was blind. But he had friends who loved him. How do we know? They were begging Jesus to heal him. If they didn't love him they wouldn't have begged. You might say they were praying for Jesus to heal him. I don't know of anyone whose spiritual blindness has been healed simply because they determined to see. I don't have absolute empirical evidence of this, but it is my firm conviction based on my experience and the word of God that anyone who has come to Christ has come on the prayers of someone else who has been begging God to help them see.

Secondly, spiritual blindness can only be healed divinely. What we need is a touch from God. What we need is to have a personal encounter with Jesus. Here Jesus takes this man by the hand and leads him away from the crowds to deal with him personally. He spits on his eyes and lays His hands on him, not once but twice. Although spitting in someone's eyes might seem rather gross to us, many people of that day considered saliva to be a valid treatment for blindness. And Jesus uses this to communicate His intention to heal. The blind man would have no doubt interpreted Jesus' spitting as a sign that he would be healed. But the saliva cure didn't have any power in itself to heal. What this man needed was a divine touch. He needed Jesus to lead him by the hand. What we need to heal our profound spiritual blindness is the touch of His divine hand. It is not enough to acknowledge there is a God. You must be brought to Jesus. The Pharisees acknowledged God, but they refused to recognize His Son. They refused to be healed of their blindness by His touch.

Finally, spiritual blindness is healed progressively. This is the only two-stage miracle recorded in any of the gospels. And it comes hard on the heels of the story of the disciples own spiritual blindness. And what have we seen all the way through this gospel to this point? What we've seen are the disciples who have for at least two years, witnessed the incredible power of Jesus over demons, death and disease and yet remain spiritually blind. But now they are going to get a touch. Now Jesus is going to spit in their eyes and touch them. But they don't see clearly right away. Jesus spits on the blind man's eyes and touches him and says, 'Do you see anything?' That is clearly a reference to His previous question to His disciples, 'Do you not yet understand?' 'I see men, but they look like trees walking' the blind man says.

In other words, 'I see something, but it's not very clear yet'. It is very reminiscent of Peter's answer to the question, 'But who do you say that I am?' In Matthew we are told that Peter got this insight by revelation. He didn't get it on his own. He had a divine touch. But we understand from a few verses after that divine revelation that Peter only saw men like trees walking. He didn't see clearly, because when Jesus expanded on the revelation, Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke Him. In many ways it exemplifies the disciples who move from not understanding Jesus in the boat, to misunderstanding Him when He begins to talk about the cross, eventually to full understanding of who Jesus is in resurrection. I think this says a lot about how deep and profound our spiritual blindness really is. We need that divine touch of Jesus on our eyes, and we need Jesus to keep on touching us. There will never come a time when we do not need that touch.

If you are a believer, don't you find that to be true in your own life? Aren't there many areas in your faith walk where you have gone from seeing men like trees to clear sight? I think many of us wrestle with the road to Damascus syndrome. That is, we look at Saul, one moment a hostile enemy of God, and the next a great apostle, and in between one blinding light experience that opened his spiritual eyes. And what we fail to appreciate is that God in His mercy showed him how blind he really was by making him really blind for three days until he got the second touch at the hands of Ananias and then spent three years in relative obscurity in Arabia. I would submit that our spiritual site is restored by repeated touches of Jesus. The disciples were genuine, committed followers of Jesus, and there was some understanding of who He was before the cross, but it was only when He was raised from the dead that their eyes were really opened to who He was.

If you are not yet a believer in Jesus, my prayer is that you have friends who are even now praying you into His hands. You may not like to hear it, but if you have not met Jesus personally, you have a deep and profound spiritual blindness that can only be healed by His touch. You cannot discover Jesus by yourself; you cannot clear up your sight by yourself; you cannot save yourself. We read in the gospels of the complete physical darkness that fell over the land at the hour of Jesus crucifixion; but that is just a picture of the complete spiritual darkness into which Jesus went when He lost the light of the Father's love for a moment so that He could bring you into the light forever. You need a touch from the one who was willing to be plunged into spiritual darkness on the cross for your sake so that you might see who He really is.

***May the Lord bless you and keep you
and make His face shine upon you.
May the Lord be gracious unto you;
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you
and give you peace.***