

Mark 8:22–26
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“Clear Sight”

I. Introduction

This past week, Ligonier Ministries, released its biennial “State of Theology” report. The report gives the results of a survey of 3,000 Americans on questions related to key theological topics like the Bible, truth, Christianity’s relationship to other world religions, and more.

Participants were also asked questions about Jesus.

When asked, 52% of Americans surveyed agreed—incorrectly—with the statement, “Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God.” This does not surprise me.

What *did* surprise me is when they narrowed those surveyed to “evangelical” respondents, 30% of so-called *evangelicals* agreed with this statement saying that Jesus was not God.¹ 30% of evangelicals stand in contradiction to the Gospel of John which says, “In the beginning was the Word [referring to Jesus], and the Word was with God, and the Word *was God*.”

Similarly problematic were the responses to the question, “Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God.” More than *half of evangelicals* surveyed agreed with this statement despite the fact that the church has condemned such a view as heresy, in contradiction to the the Bible’s teaching that Jesus is the uncreated creator of all things (John 1:3). For this reason, the church has confessed in the Nicene Creed that Jesus is “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father...”²

Even if there was confusion about the question or a large margin of error, it illustrates for us that there is a lot of confusion—even *within the church*—about who Jesus is.

¹ <https://thestateoftheology.com/>

² Nicene Creed, *Trinity Hymnal*, p. 846.

In the Bible, the writers often make use of the idea of sight to speak of spiritual understanding or perception. It's like how you or I might say, "My eyes were opened to how foolish I had been acting..." or "I began to see things in a whole new way."³

One way the Bible does this is by speaking of those who are not able to discern spiritual truths as being blind. Paul, for example, says in 2 Corinthians 4:4 that Satan has "blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ..."

Every day, you and I are living among people who, as they work and shop and live and die, are blind.

The Bible also uses the language of sight with respect to Christians. In Acts 26, Paul says that God gave him a mission to the Gentiles that their eyes might be opened so that they would turn from the power of Satan to the power of God. Though not by any smarts or effort on our part, to be a Christian is to be someone who has had their eyes opened to the realities of God in Christ.

In Mark 8, this connection between physical sight and spiritual sight is the key to understanding Jesus' healing of the blindman. Mark intends for us to see Jesus' healing of this man who could not see as a parable, an illustration, of a deeper, more problematic blindness: a spiritual blindness to who Jesus, as the Suffering Messiah, really is.

Surprisingly though, it is not just the totally blind pharisees who have a vision problem. Though people who are not truly Christian do need their eyes opened and Jesus does do that work

³ Genesis 3:5–7; Psalm 119:18; Ephesians 1:17–18; Mark 4:10–12

as we see elsewhere, our story shows us that those who follow Jesus are not immune to problems with spiritual sight and so we must continue to have our spiritual sight corrected by Jesus.

In the healing of the blind man, we're meant to see how Jesus' power to open the eyes of his disciples is not something he will only do once. He is able and willing not only to bring us out of darkness in our conversion, but to bring us out of dimness and into a clearer vision of who he really is as the suffering Messiah in whose steps we're called to follow.

II. The Problem of Blindness

A. The Pharisees – Totally Blind

While our focus today is the healing of the blind man in vv. 22–26, we cannot understand clearly what God is teaching us in these verses unless we pay attention to the surrounding context.

Mark is a clever, purposeful writer. He is the only one to include this miracle story in his gospels and he's put it where he has for a reason.

If you look at Mark 8:11, we see that after Jesus had miraculously fed the 4,000, the Pharisees (the religious scholars of the day) came up to Jesus to start an argument. "Jesus," you can hear them saying, "We heard that you miraculously fed the 4,000 from seven loaves of bread and a couple fish, but we'd like some proof that your authority is from heaven..."

These Pharisees cannot see. We learn in Mark 3 that they believed Jesus was performing miracles by demonic power. So while they ask for a sign, it's a request reflective of a deep and willful unbelief.

B. The Disciples

So Jesus and his disciples get in a boat to cross the Sea of Galilee.

And a problem comes up while they're crossing the sea. The disciples realize that someone had forgotten to bring the food along. They had only one loaf of bread. This is a cause for quite some concern among the disciples.

Jesus, however, has a different concern.

He's concerned that the disciples not be influenced by the spiritual unbelief of the Pharisees and Herodians (King Herod's crew).

Jesus warns them about the faithless influence of the surrounding world. They nod. Perhaps stare out over the sea. They wait the socially appropriate time and then turn to one another... "Okay, about the bread... You said *you* had the bread... what are going to do?"

The disciples hear Jesus' warning but they don't get it. They can only think about the immediate concerns about what they were going to eat. Despite the fact that they had a front-row seat to Jesus' power to multiply loaves of bread enough for 4,000+ people, as they sat in the boat with the Son of God, they were still worried that they wouldn't have enough bread to eat.

To the disciples, all they can see are the material concerns right in front of them. How are we going to survive?

Their conversation show that they too are unable to see. Jesus asks, "Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet *perceive* or *understand*? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?" (vv. 17–18). Jesus, using these rhetorical questions, is diagnosing their problem: they can't see.

Don't miss that: you can be with Jesus in the flesh, you can be part of his “inner circle” of closest friends, you can go to church, yet you can be blind to the reality of who Jesus really is.

C. The Blindman

Having just witnessed the problem of *spiritual* blindness of the Pharisees and the disciples, Mark now brings us to a man in Bethsaida who was *physically* blind. He was only able to find Jesus because some friends led him to Jesus. These friends beg Jesus to touch him that he might heal their blind friend.

Think with me for a second: it was unlikely that this was the only person who came to Jesus at Bethsaida. Jesus often attracted crowds and often in those crowds were many sick people (c.f. Mark 2:4; 2:13; 3:9; 3:20; 4:1; 5:21–31; 6:34; 6:54–56). He may have performed other miracles. Mark records this particular healing here *because it is meant to speak to the problem of spiritual blindness that Jesus had identified in his disciples.*

Jesus is about to heal this man not simply as an act of compassion toward this suffering man (though that is true), but he is going to heal him as an illustration of his power to heal blindness of all kinds, including the spiritual myopia—spiritual blind spots—of his disciples.

III. A Healing Touch

A. The Blindman

The means that Jesus uses to heal the man are strange. He spits on the man's eyes and touches him. Bible commentators have suggested different reasons for why Jesus would spit on the

man but we don't know for certain why he does it this way. The text doesn't tell us.⁴ It just reports this is how he did it.

More importantly is the question that Jesus asks the man, "Do you see anything?"

"I see people," he answers, "but they look like trees, walking" (v. 24). There is a blurriness to his vision so that he can really only make out shapes and movements. People look like Tree Beard from *Lord of the Rings*. The man can see for the first time in a longtime, but he doesn't see clearly.

So Jesus touches him again. This time the man's sight is fully restored. The world suddenly ignites into a scene of vivid colors and movements. The man's eyes have been opened to the reality of the world around him upon Jesus' second touch. It's like he's gone from watching life happen on an old television with rabbit ears to watching it on an 85" 8K screen.

As one preacher put it, with the first touch of Jesus, the blindman has moved from darkness to dimness. Now, by a second touch, he moves from dimness to clarity.⁵

Why did Jesus touch the man twice in order to heal him?

It could not be because he lacked the power to do so the first time. In Mark's gospel, Jesus has already healed many people instantaneously, sometimes with a touch and sometimes with just a command.⁶

⁴ Some suggestions include that this was a common practice among healers in Israel at that time (c.f. Mark 7:33 and the healing of the deaf man) and that by spitting and laying hands on the man Jesus was establishing a sort of personal contact with him.

⁵ R. C. Sproul, "The Blind Man and Peter's Confession"-- <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/sermons/mark-blind-man-peters-confession/>

⁶ In Mark 5, a woman is instantly healed of her discharge of blood simply because she was able to touch Jesus' clothing. He healed a man paralyzed in Mark 2 just by giving him a command. He healed a man who was both deaf and mute in an instant. Others have suggested that the two-staged healing is because there was some deficiency in the man's faith. This doesn't find explicit support in the text and I think this too misses the point that Jesus is making.

I think the reason Jesus heals the man in two stages, and the reason that Mark puts this story here, is to show that *Jesus is both the one who can heal us of our spiritual blindness, but he is also the one who must heal us of our spiritual blurriness.*

Both are necessary in the life of the disciple.

In order that we might be a disciple, we must be made to see our sin, our need for a Savior, and Jesus as being that Savior for my sin. We must be made alive to these realities.

Jesus must come to us and heal us of the spiritual blindness that plagues each and every person by nature (like 2 Corinthians 4:4 and Acts 26, cited early, make clear).

But, it is often the case in the lives of Jesus' followers, that while our eyes have been opened to see who Jesus is, he is out of focus to us. We know Jesus truly, but he is blurry. We have a general outline of who he is but we don't see who he is or what he is like with clarity.

Even though God may have graciously opened our eyes, giving us faith to see Jesus truly, we stand in need of a vision sharpened and corrected.

What, more specifically, does this mean or look like? How do we need our vision sharpened or cleared up?

Again, Mark, being a purposeful writer, shows us in the verses that follow one critical way that Jesus' disciples must have their vision healed by a second touch from Jesus.

IV. Clarity About a Suffering Savior and the Path of Discipleship

Look with me at v. 27. Jesus goes on with his disciples to Caesarea Philippi and he asks them a question: who do people say that I am? What's the word on the street?

“Well,” say the disciples, “they think you’re a great man of God, a prophet, like John or Elijah.”

And then Jesus asks them another question. He’s engaging in some catechesis, to use a word we talked about at our Sunday School conference on Thursday. He’s probing their understanding with a question.

And it’s not just any question. It is *the* question. For Mark, the question is purposefully situated at the very middle of his gospel. Mark’s gospel, which has been summarized as giving a description and defense of Christian discipleship has this question from Jesus to you: who do you say that I am?

Notice how personal the question is. It is no longer who other people say that Jesus, but it is about who you say he is. Will *you* acknowledge and receive him for who he truly is? What will *you* do with Jesus? More than any other question, this one will define your life now and for eternity.

Peter, for all his shortcomings, gives a right answer: “You are the Christ, Jesus!” You are the Messiah! The Anointed One! The Promised Hope of Israel! The One who will set us free!”

Matthew’s Gospel tells us that Peter answered Jesus, “You are the Christ, *the Son of the living God.*” And we know this is the right answer because Matthew’s gospel tells us that Jesus responds by blessing Peter and saying that Peter’s ability to confess that truth was a gift from heaven (Matthew 16:17). In other words, God has opened Peter’s eyes to see Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah.

But being a disciple Jesus does not always mean that you see Jesus *clearly*, as v. 31f make clear. Because while Peter's beautiful confession is still ringing in the reader's ear, he shows that while his eyes are open, his vision is cloudy.

Following Peter's confession, Jesus begins to teach them that he—the Son of Man—must suffer, die, and rise again (v. 31). Peter hears this and he takes Jesus by the arm and tries to set him straight. And Jesus responds, "Get behind me Satan!"

Why? Peter's vision of the Messiah isn't clear. Jesus wasn't being cagey or vague about what he was saying. Peter just couldn't see it. Peter had a vision problem. He could see Jesus the Messiah, but the nature of what that meant was blurry to him.

Okay, so let's pause for a second: why is this a problem?

We can understand why the sort of total spiritual blindness, the sort that the Pharisees had, is a problem. Jesus says that no man can come to God or be rescued from his sin apart from Jesus, so if we cannot see Jesus we can neither come to God nor be rescued from our sin. There seems an obvious motivation to address spiritual blindness of this sort.

But spiritual blurriness seems less threatening or significant. Is it ideal? No, you might think. But is it a problem? A blurry Jesus may feel more like a nuisance or an inconvenience, but perhaps it feels a bit like an abstract problem that doesn't have real-life, felt consequences.

That's not how Jesus thinks about it. Peter's dim vision of Jesus has *practical* consequences because the less clear we are about who Jesus is the less clear we'll be about what it means to follow after him.

Notice the connection in v. 34f between our understanding of who Jesus is and what we are called to do. The nature of the master shapes the calling of the disciple.

Peter, like his contemporaries, expected that the Messiah would punish the enemies of Israel, restore Israel and the temple, rule over God's people, and bring about an era of peace. There was an expectation that the Messiah would bring triumph and victory and glory at his coming. Peter was expecting a Messiah that would make the here-and-now better... A best-life-now Messiah whose triumphal hour the disciples would share in.

And Peter's not entirely mistaken: the Messiah would defeat the enemies of God's people and rule over them and bring peace. But the pathway to glory was first through suffering. Triumph had to pass through the cross first.

Christ would have to die to redeem his disciples. The disciples, following after him, would then share in his sufferings. Disciples of Jesus are called to a life of self-denial, cross-bearing, and following after Christ.

If Peter thinks that Jesus is a Messiah that is about the victorious life now, then he won't know how to follow after Jesus as his disciple.

So spiritual dimness is a practical problem. When we see Jesus out of focus, our expectations for a life of following Jesus will be blurry too.

Think about how it might play out in your own life. Christian husbands, if you have a fuzzy vision of Jesus, a vision of a Jesus of generalities, a vision of a Jesus whose sufferings are in the abstract, a vision of a Jesus who does not lay down his life for us so that we might lay down our lives for others, then you're going to be angry and bitter when you don't get your way... or when married life is not making you happy and meeting your needs... if my fuzzy picture of Jesus amounts to Jesus being my life-coach or therapist—he's just there to help me have a good life or a guilt free life—then I won't expect that following him in my marriage may mean that I say no to what I want for Jesus' sake.

Wives, same thing.

If you're not clear on what you need to do and be as a disciple of Jesus in your marriage, could it be because you're not seeing a suffering, loving, cross-bearing Jesus in high definition?

If our assumptions—even our hidden assumptions—are that discipleship in marriage or parenting or church life or work should be easy, we're going to find ourselves deeply disappointed, confused, angry. We need to trace that back to a deeper problem: we've got a fuzzy view of Jesus.

So what do we do about that?

Let me make two points of application.

V. Application

A. Realistic, patient conception of the Christian Life

First, we should have a realistic understanding of the Christian life, both with respect to ourselves and others. Mark 8 illustrates through illustration and example that our understanding of Jesus and what that means for our lives is not something we instantly download the moment we become a Christian.

God opens our eyes, but quite often his usual way of dealing with us is that we don't see clearly all at once. Like the blind man who saw men walking like trees... Like Peter, who saw a triumphalistic Messiah, as disciples of Jesus, we will still find our spiritual vision blurry and in need of correction. It's a gradual thing. Over time, by God's grace, who God is comes into greater focus and we gain greater clarity about just how great God's work of salvation toward us is. Our understanding of what it means to follow Jesus begins to sharpen.

Moving from blurriness to clarity about Jesus usually happens over time (and not a few times repeatedly) in the life of a disciple.

Knowing this doesn't give us license to sin. We cannot excuse our own sin by saying that we're all growing. Jesus never dismisses sin lightly. Nor does knowing this mean we never address sin that we see in the life of other people. Though Peter's growth as a disciple was gradual, Jesus is not afraid to rebuke him when he is in serious error.

Spiritual blindness—whether complete or partial—is not something we settle for in ourselves or others; but, having a realistic understanding that disciples still have blind spots should keep us from despair in our own walk with the Lord when we're not maybe where we'd hope to be in our Christian maturity.

It should also give us patience as we walk alongside of others, knowing that if they are Jesus' disciples that they—like us—will have blind spots and spiritually blurry vision at times. They have the same need that we—and everyone else—do: to have our eyes opened. To have our vision restored. To have our blindness healed.

With a patient realism and humility, our job when we encounter blindness then is to be like the blind man's friends who bring each other to the one who can heal us.

B. Come to Jesus for the “second touch” --

If you're here tonight and you're not a Christian, Jesus can open your eyes for the first time so you can see him and his love and mercy toward you. Ask him, “Jesus, open my eyes to see you as you really are: a Savior for a sinner like me.”

For believers, as disciples of Jesus, we are not immune from spiritual blindness—maybe not the blindness that we once had, but blindness all the same—and so we need to see that we can—we must!—go to Jesus for yet another healing touch.

Do you have a hazy, blurry vision of Jesus?

Does he seem indistinct and distant to you? Does his love and grace and mercy seem bland, like someone has drained all the color out of a masterpiece painting?

Are you failing to connect the dots of discipleship in your life, your relationships, your responsibilities because you're not exactly sure how he's relevant to these things or what he wants for you in these areas?

The healing of the blind man is an invitation to disciples tonight in need of a vision correction. See how gently Jesus deals with the blind man! See how, in kindness and tenderness, Jesus takes the helpless man by the hand, leads him aside, and heals him with his second touch.

And think of how Jesus deals with Peter. Sure, he gives him one of the all-time rebukes, but then what does he do? He instructs Peter. He goes about correcting Peter's vision. He teaches Peter and the disciples, teaching him about the nature of discipleship in chapter 8, showing him truth on the mount of transfiguration in chapter 9, teaching him again about his future suffering in chapter 10.

And you know what, though there were some serious bumps along the way (who can forget Peter's three-fold denial of Jesus?), we have evidence that Jesus was continually touching Peter and opening his eyes that he might see clearly. Besides Peter's preaching ministry recorded in the book of Acts, church history tells us that the Gospel of Mark was likely written in under Peter's influence (ESV Study Bible).

Mark's gospel, his discipleship manual, that presents Jesus to us so clearly as the Son of God who suffers and gives his life as a ransom for many is itself a testimony to Jesus' touch on Peter's life. That God had opened Peter's eyes to speak with such clarity and confidence: this is who Jesus is and this is what it means to follow him.

He had received the healing, vision-restoring touch of the Lord... again... and again... and again...

Jesus is ready to heal you today, friend, of your dim and dull views of who he is and what it means to follow him. We can come to him and ask a thousand times and he'll never tire of the request and he'll never lack the power to answer it.

Do you believe that?

If Jesus has the power to heal us of our blindness and the disposition/heart to heal us of our blindness, then why wouldn't you come to him to receive his healing touch.

How might you do that, you ask? How might we come to Jesus to receive that touch?

Go to where he meets us. Go to the Bible, get on your knees, and plead with him in desperation for fresh, clear sight of who he is. And plead not because you doubt his intentions but because you don't want to settle for less!

This is a prayer, brother/sister, that you can be certain that Jesus will be pleased to answer if you ask him in faith. How can I say that? Because he has told us that one day, in the climax of his plan, we'll see him clearly, without interruption, forever. What Jesus wants is that we'd be able to *see him and enjoy him clearly*.

- 1 John 3:2, "But we know that when [Christ] appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."
- John 17:24, Jesus expresses his heart's desire when he says that what he wants is that his disciples would be with him where he is, "to see [his] glory".
- Now, we see in a mirror dimly, but one day, we shall see "face to face". Now, we know in part, Paul says, but one day we shall know fully... (1 Corinthians 13:12).

In this life, we will have need because of sin and weakness to come again and again and again to the Master for his healing, vision-restoring touch. But we can ask in confidence because one day, he has promised, his plan will be complete and his desires fulfilled, and we *shall* see him as he is.

No blurriness. No fuzziness. No blindness.

Only Jesus – in all his brilliance and beauty.