

From Blindness to Sight

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

12 January, 2025

Children's Talk: Healing the Blind

Today we are going to talk about the Lord healing a person who had been born blind. The part I want to focus on is what the Lord did to heal the person.

Because the Lord did not just snap His fingers. He went through a somewhat strange process:

Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth....
When He had said these things, He spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva; and He anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay. And He said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which is translated, Sent). So he went and washed, and came back seeing. (John 9:1, 6-7)

So Jesus spat on the ground, made clay out of the saliva and the dirt, and put that on the man's eyes; then He sent the man to go wash in a pool; and then the man could see again!

So why would the Lord do these strange things to heal the man? Everything that the Lord did tells us something. So let's think about all the parts of the story: the saliva, the soil, the clay, and the washing. To make the clay, the Lord mixed something from His mouth with something from the Earth, where people live. He took something from Himself and mixed it with something that has more to do with us. This is the first lesson: we cannot fix ourselves; we need the Lord's help. We need to learn how to be better people and to do the right thing. But those ideas need to be understandable. It doesn't help if they are far away or confusing. So the Lord makes sure they fit in with our own lives.

Now let's think about clay: clay is soft. You can make it into any shape you like. And if you don't like the shape, you can make it again. The lesson is that the Lord can always make us into new people. Even when we mess up, the Lord still reshapes us into people who are nicer and more loving.

Then lastly, the man had to go wash in a pool. He had to *do* something. He couldn't just sit back and let the Lord do all the work! The lesson is that when the Lord has taught us something new, and we have worked to understand it, and we remember that He will make us into nicer people through it, we still have something that we have to do: we need to go treat people nicely! It doesn't help if you learn how to be good but then you keep being unkind. We need to try, as hard as we can, to be better people.

In short:

- Learn from the Lord
- You can understand what He teaches
- Remember you can change
- Try your best!

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There are many stories in the Word of the Lord healing people of their physical maladies, such as paralysis, deafness, blindness, leprosy, and all kinds of sickness. Each and every one of these maladies represents some spiritual malady that afflicts our souls and spirits. The one we are looking at today is blindness. Blindness, the inability to see, represents a lack of knowledge. Someone who is spiritually blind is unable to see the truths of the Word; he cannot see right from wrong, nor can he see how to make choices based on faith in the Lord. He is ignorant of spiritual realities. We are all to one extent or another blind in this way; and so we all need to receive healing from the Lord, healing that will show us right from wrong and guide us into living a better life, a life of loving and serving our neighbours.

The story about this blind man begins with an interesting conversation about why he was blind to begin with.

Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:1-2)

So the man was blind from birth, and everyone wanted to know whose fault it was.

There's a useful reminder about our own spiritual life in this. Each and every one of us is spiritually blind, from birth. No one is born knowing good and evil, knowing who God is and what He wants for their life, knowing how to treat other people with respect and kindness. We all start with the same complete and total ignorance. And yet for some reason we still tend to look for a person to blame when we encounter that spiritual ignorance in others. We even may feel it in our frustrations with our own ignorance: I must have messed up so badly to be so incompetent at being a good

person; or else so many people must have failed me, why didn't they give me better guidance! Shame or resentment easily may arise from our recognition of ignorance.

And yet, again, *everyone* is born ignorant. No one knows how to do life well from the get-go. And in fact, this is how the Lord designed us to be, and for a reason. It is only by being born in ignorance that we can grow spiritually:

“A person is born into no knowledge that he may be capable of entering into all knowledge and progressing into intelligence, and through this into wisdom; and he is born into no love that he may be capable of entering into all love by the application of knowledges from intelligence, and into love to God through love of the neighbour, and thus of being conjoined to God, and thereby becoming a person and living forever.” (*True Christian Religion* §48)

Ignorance is the plane which is open to receive knowledge; knowledge leads to intelligence and wisdom; and through the application of these we can develop an ever-growing love to the Lord and towards the neighbour. If we were born knowing everything, we would be static. By being born in ignorance we have infinite spiritual potential to learn and to grow. This is perhaps represented in Jesus' response to the people who wanted to know who's fault it was that the man was born blind. He said,

Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him. (John 9:3)

By being born in ignorance, we too have the potential to have the works of God revealed in us. It is easy to treat ignorance with disdain. We should rather see ignorance as the presence of potential. Every encounter with ignorance, especially spiritual ignorance, ignorance of how to be good and to avoid evil, even in ourselves, is an opportunity for growth.

Of course, potential is only valuable to the extent we notice it and take advantage of it. We shouldn't be content with ignorance. Jesus followed up His explanation of the man's blindness by saying,

I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world. (John 9:4-5)

The purpose of the blindness was to reveal the works of God; but that opportunity would not remain forever. Night was coming, when Jesus would no longer be in the world, and so would be unable to heal the man. Likewise for us, although the Lord never leaves us, there do come times when we may turn away from the Lord. We need to recognize those opportunities for spiritual learning and growth before they pass us by. Ignorance should not become an excuse for not trying, or as a justification for enabling others. When we remain in ignorance we hurt people even when we have the best of intentions, and leave people stuck in their sin even if we love and care for them. It is imperative that we try to learn and to figure out how to live good lives, even knowing that our knowledge of such things will only ever be a drop in the bucket compared to perfection.

The Lord's healing of the blind man gives us a guide for how to come out of ignorance. We should note here that the Lord did not simply snap His fingers or even touch the man's eyes to heal him; He went through a process that involved participation from the man himself. Learning is not something that happens in a moment. It is a process, that includes the Lord's work, but that also takes effort on our part. The Lord's part is represented in a strange way in the story:

When He had said these things, He spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva; and He anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay. (John 9:6)

So we have ground plus spit to make clay, applied to the eyes. As with every detail in the Word there is a spiritual meaning going on here. The Teachings of the New Church indicate that the ground represents the church, the place where the Word is known and taught, the place where, hopefully, spiritual growth is happening. The saliva from the Lord's mouth represents the truth itself that the Lord teaches through

His Word. The clay then is the combination of the Lord's Word and the church, which is what can form and reform us into better people. Applying the clay to the eyes represents applying those things to our minds.

What does that mean, taken altogether? It is by participating in the church, and so learning directly from the Lord's Word, that we can come out of our spiritual ignorance. Now for all you here today, that may be a bit of a letdown. Clearly you are already doing that! You're coming to church! Why isn't everything clear? Why haven't the clouds of ignorance been fully dispersed? Some of you have been coming for decades, and are still beset by ignorance about how to live the best, most useful, Godly life. That doesn't mean you are doing something wrong. No matter how much we learn and grow, we remain in ignorance. In fact, realizing this is part of genuine wisdom. In the Teachings of the New Church an angel is recorded as saying that,

"It is genuine wisdom for a person to see from the light of heaven that what he knows, understands, and is wise in, is so little in comparison with what he does not know and understand, and in which he is not wise, as to be like a drop to the ocean, consequently as almost nothing." (*True Christian Religion* §387)

The more we learn from the Lord about how to live a good life, the more we will be aware of how far short we fall of living a perfect life, and the more we will realize just how much growing there is to do.

We can compare it to learning an instrument. Let's say you practice a piece on the violin for a week, and then proudly present it to your teacher. She picks out five or so mistakes and weaknesses that she would like you to work on. You spend the week working so hard on them, and again present the same piece. And again the teacher points out five or so mistakes or weaknesses for you to work on. Somewhat frustrated, you go home and put all your effort into those weaknesses. You come back, and low and behold, once again, the teacher has five or so more things for you

to work on. It might feel like no progress is being made! But actually a great deal of growth and learning is taking place. It's just that when one skill has been mastered, there is always something more to work on and improve. And in fact, the more skilled one becomes, the more they themselves notice how far they fall short of perfection. The musician is most likely more aware of their own imperfections than anyone listening in the audience. The same is true of spiritual life. We never "fix" our ignorance. We only learn and grow to higher and higher heights. Our job is to make sure we keep coming back to the teacher, to the Lord and to the church, admitting we have a lot to learn, and asking for help.

Now the last bit of the story is perhaps the most important. Because the clay placed on the eyes was not in itself sufficient to restore the man's sight. After that we read that,

He said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which is translated, Sent). So he went and washed, and came back seeing. (John 9:7)

A pool of water, just like the moisture in the clay, represents the truth from the Lord's Word. But this time it is truth that is used actively by the person. He does not passively receive it; he is sent to go bathe in it. This is the most important part because it stands for actually living the truth. It means taking that truth and applying it honestly to your life. What does it say about your choices and priorities? About the purpose and meaning of your life? About your relationship with God? About how you treat people socially? About how you interact with friends and family, and with strangers out in the world? About how you do your job? But not just what does the truth have to say about these very practical things; but how can you change how you live so you are more aligned with what the Lord says about what makes for a good life? We need to actually stop doing the things that cause harm, that are evil, and

start doing the things that are helpful and good. It is only then that we actually see the truth of the things we have learned from the Word.

It's interesting that the man did not regain his sight so that he could go bathe; he went and bathed, and that is how he regained his sight. The same is true in how we overcome ignorance. It feels like we first learn the truth, and understand it, and so are no longer ignorant, and then after that we can live it. And that is true on a surface level. But the reality is that until we have lived the truth we are still ignorant of it. It is only having bathed that the man could come back seeing; and it is only when we have applied truth to ourselves, as a guide for shunning evil and selfishness and fostering love and service, that we actually see the truth in the first place. Without this last step we remain blind, no matter how much truth we know about God and about His Commandments. Take for instance the very simple truth that we are to put the needs of others first. Someone encounters that truth in the Word, and gives it some thought; he realizes that he could apply it by making sure that he takes time every day to check in with another person; he has, apparently, understood the truth. But then he actually does it. And in doing it, in regularly checking in on friends and family, even on days he is rather busy, he gets exactly what it means to put other people first; he feels it in his heart; he can see how it is reshaping how he sees the world and his place in it. Now, because he has lived it, he can see the full truth, the real truth, that before he only knew intellectually.

We are born into ignorance, through no fault of our own or others. And we remain in ignorance to eternity. But in that ignorance there is infinite potential. There is potential to learn from the Lord in His Word and from the people around us in the church. The Lord calls us to willingly acknowledge our ignorance, our need to learn, the fact that we cannot do any of this on our own; and then He urges us to put it into

practice, even before we fully get it or understand it. It is only in living it that our eyes will truly be open to the truths that the Lord teaches us from His Word.