



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

The Opening of Blind Eyes

Mark 8.22-26

David Anguish

When the Bible is Misunderstood

An adaptation of several misunderstandings of basic Bible stories approaches them from the vantage point of “what happens when they are retold by young scholars around the world.” In that telling, we read such things as how Moses “went up on Mount Cyanide to get the Ten Amendments” and how he “died before he ever reached Canada.” “Solomon,” we’re told, “had 300 wives and 700 porcupines.” And Paul “preached holy acrimony, which is another name for marriage.” The piece concludes, “The things they teach in Sunday School these days!”¹

We enjoy such bloopers, all the more if we know the stories they have confused. And we excuse the children (and others) who confuse them. The Bible gives us much to master. Names and places are hard to pronounce, let alone repeat accurately. We know that, if they keep learning, our children will eventually understand most of the details.

What’s troubling is when people never seem to grasp the deeper truths the details are intended to teach. That can be frustrating for teachers who see those truths clearly and work tirelessly to communicate them. It helps to remember that Jesus also experienced these frustrations.

Disciples Who Didn’t Understand

Consider just one Greek word (συνίημι, *syniēmi*) in Mark’s record of Jesus’ ministry. The ESV translates it, “understand” in all five verses where it appears.

- In 4.12, it is found in Jesus’ quotation of Isaiah 6.9-10 as he explained why the people generally were not understanding his parables, knowledge the disciples were supposed to be getting (4.11). Unfortunately, they were not getting it (4.13).²
- In 7.14, after his exchange with Pharisees and scribes over tradition, Jesus appealed to the people to “understand” that what comes out of us is what defiles us, not the food we eat (7.15-23).
- The other three uses describe the disciples’ slowness to understand and Jesus’ frustration with them for their delay. In 6.52, failure to understand about the loaves in the feeding of the 5,000 kept them from the faith they needed in the midst of the storm. In 8.17, they failed to understand that Jesus’ warning about “the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod” (8.15) did not refer to literal bread. After reminding them of

the details in the feedings of the 5,000 and 4,000, “he said to them, ‘Do you not yet understand?’” (8.21).

Those last two uses of συνίημι are in the immediate context of our text.

A Puzzling, Yet Revealing Miracle

In 8.22, Jesus and his disciples enter Bethsaida, on the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. As had happened in the Decapolis (7.31-37), local residents “brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him” (8.22). Just as he did in the Decapolis, Jesus led the man out of the village before he began to heal him (v. 23).³

After Jesus led the man outside the village, he “spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him,” and then “asked him, ‘Do you see anything?’” (v. 23). We then expect Mark, as he has done before (see 1.42; 2.12; 5.29, 42), to say that “immediately” (εὐθύς, *euthys*) the man’s sight was completely restored. Instead, we read that the healing was only partial (v. 24) and that Jesus would lay his hands on him again before “his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly” (v. 25).

What are we to make of this? Why was the healing not instantaneous? Did Jesus fail? Was his power inadequate? Had he encountered an ailment that was harder to cure than he thought? Many have asked questions like these. As we think about them, notice three things.

- First, Mark’s account reinforces our confidence that the gospels report things that actually occurred, whatever theological point the writers might have also wanted to make with the stories they selected to tell.⁴ It is hard to imagine that someone creating a God-man or embellishing the exploits of a sage to make him appear divine would include a story that might be construed to make that being appear weak or inadequate. Mark doesn’t try to dress up this story; he simply tells what happened, although he tells it in a way that makes a point about the disciples’ growth in faith.
- Second, Mark reinforces the point that Jesus’ miracles were not just powerful displays by a wonder-worker, but were “‘acted parables’ of the miracle of faith.”⁵ The works are reported in order to show Jesus’ nature and character, as well as what is involved in coming to faith. John’s account of a similar healing of a blind man illustrates the point. The story of the healing of the man born blind is told “to show the gradual development of the healed man’s faith in Jesus in contrast to the blindness of the Pharisees” (Hooker, 197) (John 9.17-18, 24-30, 35-38, 40-41).
- Third, Mark implied what John spelled out. This is clear when we look at the wider context. The Pharisees rejected Jesus’ signs even as they asked for a more spectacular one (8.11-14). The disciples were seeing, but their sight was only partial. They were different from the Pharisees, but still Jesus asked, “Do you not yet understand?” (8.21). Even after they ventured enough faith to declare belief in Jesus as “the Christ” (8.29), they were slow to understand what that meant for Jesus’ mission and for following him (8.31-33; 9.31-32; 10.32-45). Like the blind man in 8.22-26, their faith vision was blurred.

What Must We Do?

It’s evident that Jesus would not want us to follow the example of the Pharisees. It should also be apparent that he would want us to grow beyond the kind of faith the disciples exhibited during his ministry. Whether or not we will do these things depends on whether we learn what

the disciples eventually learned about truth and how to accept it. They showed that and declared it after his resurrection. A more thorough elaboration of that understanding must be left for another time, but we can at least begin to evaluate whether we are on the right path.

- We are called to know (John 8.32) and love (2 Thess. 2.10) the truth and leave “the world” (Rom 12.1-2; 1 John 2.15-17). Are we serious about submission (Jas 4.6-7)?
- Peter told his readers that to cope with their troubles and grow in the faith, they should be “like newborn infants, [who] long for the pure spiritual milk” (1 Pet 2.2). Do we desire to know God and his will that much?
- The psalmist said that he loved God’s law so much that it was his “meditation all the day.” Consequently, he said, “I hold back my feet from every evil way, in order to keep your word. I do not turn aside from your rules, for you have taught me. . . . Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way” (Psa 119.97, 101-102, 104). Are we as obedient to God’s word as he was?

D. L. Moody once said, “The Bible was not given to increase our knowledge but to change our lives.”⁶ Whether it will succeed in changing us depends on whether we are so open to hearing its truth that we will follow wherever it takes us and obey it whatever the cost.

www.davidanguish.com

Notes

¹ Roger Moberg, in Edward K. Rowell and Bonnie L. Steffen, *Humor for Preaching and Teaching: From Leadership Journal and Christian Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 23. Much of the same material, and similar bloopers, were collected by Richard Lederer, *Anguished English* (New York, NY: Laurel, 1989).

² ESV uses “understand” twice in v. 13, for two words generally translated, “to know” (οἶδα, *oída*; γινώσκω, *ginōskō*).

³ Why did he do that? William Lane suggests that the reason may have been to establish a personal relationship with the man and better enter into his thought world (he emphasizes the latter idea relative to Jesus’ spitting on the man’s eyes and the laying on of hands). Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans’ Publishing Company, 1974), 285.

Larry Hurtado finds a solution in the tension between Jesus and the Pharisees. Separating the man from the group made it easier to deal with him without interruption. He also suggests that, by highlighting this feature in this story and its parallel in chapter 7, Mark may have intended to symbolically suggest a separation from their pasts that had application to the mission to Gentiles. Hurtado, *Mark*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1983, 1989), 134.

Since Mark does not tell Jesus’ reason, we can only speculate.

⁴ The writers tell us their reports were selective. See Luke 1.1-4; John 20.30-31; 21.25. But selectivity does not mean inaccuracy or fabrication. The week I write this, PBS is airing Ken Burns’s documentary on the Roosevelt family, focusing on Theodore, Franklin, and Eleanor. Through narrative and pictures, Burns intends to show something of the lives they led and the impact they had on American history. He had more material available than the final edit includes. He arranged the material to most effectively tell the story he wanted to tell. That does not mean he was inaccurate or fabricating events. The gospel writers wrote their accounts essentially the same way.

⁵ Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 197-198.

⁶ Edward K. Rowell, ed., *Quotes and Idea Starters for Preaching and Teaching from Leadership Journal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 14.