

Receiving Sight

Scripture Text: Mark 8:22-26, 8:27-30, 8:31-38, 9:30-37, 10:32-45

Lesson Synopsis: Students will explore the idea of progress in the walk of faith. Of special importance will be the idea that we are continually formed as we continue to follow Jesus.

Digging In

A Failed Healing?

Mark 8:22-26 contains one of the stranger healings in the gospels. As the passage opens, we are not surprised that a blind man has been brought to Jesus for healing. Nor are we surprised that Jesus takes the request for healing seriously. We *are* surprised, however, to see the healing happen in two stages. We are told that Jesus led the man outside the village and spat on the man's eyes and laid his hands on him. Then Jesus said, "Do you see anything?" Looking around, the man answered, "I see people; they look like trees walking around." It is only after Jesus lays his hands on the man again that healing is fully effective. How strange! Why didn't Jesus get it right the first time around?

In pursuing this question, we can glean from a commentator named Morna Hooker, who argues that Mark means "that his readers should understand [this healing and several others] not only as cures, but also as 'acted parables' of the miracle of faith."ⁱ Thus, a deaf man is healed after Jesus "calls on men to hear and understand his teaching" (Mark 7:32-37) and the present passage serves as a kind of commentary on what will follow.ⁱⁱ At stake is not just a blind man receiving sight. No, the passage begins a section in which the disciples begin to only partially understand the identity and ministry of Jesus. Like the blind man in 8:22-26, their sight is not immediately made clear. Instead, as they begin to comprehend Jesus, their vision is hazy and incomplete, and only continued contact with Jesus will make them see clearly.

The Disciples Fail to See

A Bold Rebuke

Following directly on the heels of the two-stage healing comes Peter's famous confession of Jesus as the Messiah. This is an important moment in the lives of the

disciples, for it is here that they begin to comprehend the true identity of Jesus. As the passage begins, Jesus asks, “Who do people say I am?” and the disciples respond by offering different theories concerning Jesus’ identity that are floating around the population at large: “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” In this we see that Jesus enjoys a high standing among the people, who view him as a prophet and maybe even as a prophet raised from the dead. High as these views are, though, they still fall short of Jesus’ true identity.

After asking what the people think, Jesus personalizes the question for his disciples. They are no longer to report on the opinions of others. The question now becomes, “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” In response, Peter leaps beyond the high opinion of the people and confesses that Jesus is not just a prophetic figure but is instead the Messiah himself! In saying this, Peter gets things just right. After all, this is the very thing that the very first verse in Mark’s gospel affirms: “The beginning of the good news about Jesus *the Messiah*...” Peter, it seems has begun to see! It is only a few verses before we find that his vision is still hazy, though. Indeed, we receive a hint in this direction when Jesus “warns” his disciples “not to tell anyone about him” (8:30). David Garland notes that the Greek word translated “warned” (*epitimao*) is better translated “rebuked” and is the same word that is used when Jesus commands demons to be silent.ⁱⁱⁱ In Mark, then, Peter’s correct confession is met with a strong command to secrecy. Why is this the case? As Garland again explains, “Either Jesus wants Peter to keep a lid on things a while longer so that he can remain incognito, or he rebukes Peter to remain silent because his understanding of what ‘Christ’ means is wrong and needs correction.”^{iv} The following verses point to the latter reason.

Directly after Peter’s confession, Jesus goes on to teach in strange ways. He tells the disciples that “the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again” (8:31). In response, Peter now rebukes Jesus (the same Greek word, *epitimao*, that was used of Jesus’ rebuke to silence the disciples is now employed as Peter rebukes Jesus), which seems strange in light of the confession that he has just made. Why does Peter feel it appropriate to rebuke the very man whom he has just named as Messiah? Garland once again proves helpful in saying, “Peter’s concept of the ‘Christ’ is too narrow, too laden with selfish, human fantasies. He thinks that the Christ will establish a reign of peace and righteousness by overthrowing the powers who hold God’s people Israel in a vise of oppression. The Christ is, by definition, a winner, destined for honor and glory.”^v With this triumphant picture of the Messiah, or Christ, in mind, Peter confidently rebukes Jesus when he hears Jesus speak of suffering and death. Peter sees correctly that Jesus is the Messiah, but he does not yet comprehend what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah. His vision of Jesus has begun to clear, but only partially. In response, Jesus confronts Peter’s lack of

sight in no uncertain terms. He says, “Get behind me Satan! You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.” Like the blind man in 8:22-26, Peter sees only partially and will need further healing if he is to see clearly.

A Squabble over Greatness

In 9:30-37, Jesus once again speaks about his impending death and resurrection, and once again he is met with partial blindness. The text tells us this time that all of the disciples “did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it” (9:32). They all with Peter know that Jesus is the Messiah, and they all with Peter fail to comprehend how this title corresponds to suffering. This time, however, their blindness extends beyond Jesus himself to their own identity as his followers.

Upon arriving at Capernaum, Jesus asks his disciples, “What were you arguing about on the road?” and is met with silence. Like children caught fighting, the disciples are too embarrassed to describe their argument, which was about which of them was the greatest. Though it will not be explicitly stated until 10:45, Jesus understands his own vocation as one of service that will come to its fullest expression on the cross, where he will “give his life as a ransom for many.” The irony is thick, then, in chapter 9 as the disciples squabble over greatness just after Jesus has spoken of his suffering.

Aware of the disconnect between his own self understanding and that of his followers, Jesus redefines greatness in saying, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the last, and the servant of all” (9:35). He then offers a tangible example of what this concept might mean by referring to a child. As 9:36b-37 tells us, “Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me’” (9:37). It is important to note here that childhood was not romanticized in the ancient world. Instead, “a child in antiquity was a non-person.”^{vi} In identifying himself with a child, Jesus identifies himself with the least in his society and calls his disciples to radical service of those who would normally be beneath their notice. As this teaching progresses, we see once again that the disciples’ vision is not yet clear. They follow the Messiah, but they misunderstand both his and their own roles of service.

An Inappropriate Request

Moving to chapter 10, we see Jesus speaking of his impending death a third time. “We are going to Jerusalem,” he says, “and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise” (10:33-34). Once again, Jesus is offering a challenging view of what it means to be Messiah, and once again the disciples will prove themselves to be partially blind.

This time, James and John are the culprits of misunderstanding, for they approach Jesus to make an inappropriate request. “Teacher,” they say, “we want you to do for us whatever we ask ... Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory” (10:35 & 37). As Garland notes, “They still misinterpret what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah and assume that when he ushers in a new age, they as his friends will receive special privileges.”^{vii} As with the squabble over greatness, the irony is thick in this passage as the followers of the one who will serve even unto death jockey for positions of glory.

In response, Jesus names their misconception in saying, “You don’t know what you ask” and then asking, “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” In speaking of cups and baptism, Jesus is alluding to suffering (see 14:36). Perhaps without understanding Jesus’ question, James and John brazenly answer in the affirmative, and Jesus agrees that they will indeed eventually suffer as he will. At the same time, the seats at his right and left are not for him to give. Having spoken with James and John, Jesus then moves to address the disciples in general, who have become indignant upon hearing of James’ and John’s question.

As he turns to the disciples in general, Jesus once again picks up the thread of service. He says, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” In these words, we see Jesus become clear about how suffering connects to the title of Messiah. He has been appointed to serve, and he his service will reach its height when he gives his life as a ransom for all. Importantly, the calling of service is also extended to the disciples. Just as the Son of Man is a servant, so should be his followers. Thus, in jockeying for positions of glory, we see that James and John missed the mark of service, for glory in the kingdom is reserved for those who bow in service.

Application

Receiving Sight

Perhaps the place to begin in seeking application from the passages is with the strange two-stage healing in 8:22-26. As was shown above, Mark wants us to see beyond the physical healing to a kind of parable about the miracle of faith. Just as the blind man did not see clearly immediately, neither did the disciples when it came to the identity of Jesus. While the disciples affirmed that Jesus was the Messiah, they time and again failed to see clearly what this meant for both Jesus and themselves. In

this we see that full sight is not automatic in the walk of faith and that we do not come fully formed into the family of God. Instead, we continue to learn and receive sight as we continue to follow Jesus. In the end, discipleship is not so much a matter of knowing everything perfectly as it is choosing to stick with Jesus. We learn from these stories to continue following Jesus even with our warts and flaws and to allow him over time to address them all as he makes us like himself.

What It Means to Follow

For the first disciples of Jesus, it was scandalous to think of a Messiah who would suffer. As David Garland has said, “The Christ [was], by definition, a winner, destined for honor and glory.” Thus, Jesus’ talk of suffering and death did not compute for Peter and the rest. The same is not true today. After two thousand years, we have gotten used to the concept of a suffering Messiah, even to the point of modeling our jewelry to look like crosses. With the advantage of hindsight, we can understand what the disciples did not. This does not mean, however, that their experience is completely foreign from our own. After all, the blindness in these passages was two-fold; they misunderstood the meaning of discipleship for both Jesus *and themselves*. Thus, they argued over who was greatest and jockeyed for the best seats in the kingdom instead of embracing the call to service that would be exemplified in Jesus’ giving of his life.

As we consider the Church today, we don’t have to look far to find similar blind spots. Rather than embracing service, we sometimes jockey for position and seek to be celebrated as the greatest. If we are to take Christ seriously, though, we face the difficult task of allowing Jesus to define greatness, and he does so in terms of service. Though we appropriately applaud and give thanks for Jesus’ service on our behalf (in this we see rightly), it may be that we, like the disciples, have not understood how his example comes to bear on our own lives (in this we need a further healing touch in order that we might see clearly). If we are to see clearly, we must embrace the service of the Messiah on our behalves while at the same time emulating him by serving those God places in our paths.

Teaching Helps

Icebreaker: To get people talking, begin with the following question, “Who is your favorite singer or band?” Go around the room, allowing everyone to answer who wishes to do so.

Time for Sharing: Ask class members if there is anything from last week’s readings in the Gospel of Mark that they would like to share with the class. Did they have any

important insights? How about questions? If a person asks a question, open it up for class discussion. If needed, write it down and make a note to do further research or ask the pastor about it during the coming week.

Lesson Introduction: Let the class know that today's lesson will focus on themes of discipleship drawn from chapters 8, 9, and 10 of Mark.

A Failed Healing

- **Scripture Reading:** Have someone read Mark 8:22-25.
 - **Question:** Ask participants to sum up what happened in this passage.
 - **Question:** Does anything seem strange about this passage?
 - If no one mentions it, be ready to point to the need for Jesus to try twice in healing the man.
 - **Question:** Why do you think Jesus healed the man in two stages?
 - **Explain:** Explain that Mark sometimes uses healing stories as 'acted parables' and that this story acts as a kind of commentary on what follows. (Don't explain yet how this story relates to the upcoming passages.)

A Bold Rebuke

- **Scripture Reading:** Have someone read Mark 8:27-30.
 - **Question:** Ask participants to sum up this passage.
 - **Question:** Who do the people say that Jesus is?
 - **Question:** Who does Peter say that Jesus is?
 - **Question:** Is Peter right?
 - Be ready to point to 1:1.
 - **Question:** Why do you think Jesus warned his disciples to keep his identity secret? (See "A Bold Rebuke" section above for more on this.)
- **Scripture Reading:** Have someone read Mark 8:31-33.
 - **Question:** Ask participants to sum up this passage.
 - **Question:** Why do you think Peter rebuked Jesus? (See "A Bold Rebuke" section above for more on this.)
 - **Question:** How might this story relate to the two-stage healing of the blind man?

A Squabble over Greatness

- **Scripture Reading:** Have someone read Mark 9:30-34.
 - **Question:** Ask participants to sum up this passage.
 - **Question:** How is this passage similar to Peter's rebuke of Jesus?
 - **Question:** Why is the squabble over greatness inappropriate? (See "A Squabble over Greatness" section above for more on this.)

- **Explain:** Explain that Jesus will now address the inappropriateness of the disciples' argument.
- **Scripture Reading:** Have someone read Mark 9:35-37.
 - **Question:** What is Jesus saying in this passage?
 - **Question:** Why is it significant that Jesus calls the disciples to welcome little children? (See "A Squabble over Greatness" section above for more on this.)
 - **Explain:** Explain that the disciples are once again displaying blindness. While they know that Jesus is the Messiah, they still don't understand what this means, this time in regard to their own callings.

An Inappropriate Request

- **Scripture Reading:** Have someone read Mark 10:32-41.
 - **Question:** Ask participants to sum up this passage.
 - **Question:** How is this passage similar to Peter's rebuke and the argument over greatness?
 - **Question:** Why is James' and John's question inappropriate? (See "An Inappropriate Request" section above for more on this.)
- **Scripture Reading:** Have someone read Mark 10:42-45.
 - **Question:** How does Jesus understand his role as Messiah according to these verses?
 - **Question:** How does Jesus' own role of service apply to the disciples?

Continuing to Follow

- **Explain:** Remind participants that in each of the three stories about Jesus and the disciples in this lesson, the disciples have been much like the blind man at the beginning of the lesson. They see partially but do not understand fully what it means for Jesus to be Messiah.
- **Question:** What is the cure for the disciples' blindness?
 - If no one mentions it, be ready to point out that they will eventually receive sight as they continue to follow Jesus. Sticking with Jesus is the key.
- **Question:** Ask if anyone would like to share a time when they came to "see more clearly" in their faith journey. (It may be good here to have a story of your own ready to tell.)
- **Explain:** Explain that, like the disciples, we don't come into the faith knowing or understanding everything. Instead, as we continue to follow Jesus, he teaches us along the way. Discipleship is less a matter of perfect understanding than a continual follow. As we continue to follow, understanding is added.

The Call to Service

- **Explain:** Remind participants that the disciples were blind on two counts in these passages. First, they were blind about Jesus calling (they couldn't understand that he would suffer). Second, they were blind about their own callings (they were called to serve).
- **Question:** How did Jesus redefine greatness in these passages?
- **Question:** Can anyone tell a story of someone who was great because of their servant's heart?
- **Question:** How can we be intentional about serving others today?

ⁱ Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark* (Hendrickson Publishers, Incorporated, 2009), 197–198.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 198.

ⁱⁱⁱ David E. Garland, *Mark* (Zondervan, 2011), 324.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 324–325.

^v *Ibid.*, 325–326.

^{vi} Pheme Perkins, "The Gosepl of Mark: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 637. See also Garland, *Mark*, 367 (Garland speaks of the romanticization of childhood); Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, 228.

^{vii} Garland, *Mark*, 411.