
If You Can See This, You're Blind (John 9)
3/19/2017 Sermon by Pastor Jason Liebenow



Ever notice how people who are completely incompetent never seem to know it? I enjoy playing an online computer game. It's a competitive game and there's even a ranking system so that you can compare how good you are to other players in the world.

One phenomenon that has always amazed me from that game: the people in the lowest ranks, the objectively worst players according to the official ranking system, are always the first to blame their rank on luck, or on bad teammates, or whatever else. Very few of them (including myself, I have to admit), very few of them recognize the truth: they just aren't that great at the game.

For some reason, human beings have this tendency to think we understand things, think we are capable of things, think we can see things, when we absolutely cannot. Perhaps you have heard of the Greek philosopher Socrates. He was proclaimed to be the wisest man in the world. But he was famous for saying, "One thing I know: that I know nothing." Socrates was the wisest person in the world, only because he was surrounded by people who thought they did know things, when they really didn't.

The wise people of this world have recognized for a long time that growing in any skill or learning requires this first all-important step: going from ignorance of our own incompetence to realizing the enormity of just how much we lack. Today, as we see Jesus heal a physically blind man, Jesus teaches us a very important truth about spiritual sight. Today, our Savior wants us to know: *If You Can See This, You're Probably Blind.*

This tendency in us, to think we know, think we understand, think we see, when we don't, becomes all the more dangerous when we apply it to real life. How many people have become bankrupt because they didn't understand money as well as they thought they did? How many relationships have ended in bitter hatred because neither person understood love as well as they thought they did?

Worse still, how many Christians have fallen away because they did not understand Christianity? How many Christians find themselves racked with guilt because they do not understand forgiveness? How many Christians fall deeper into sin because they do not understand repentance?

One of our theological forefathers spoke about our seminary. He basically said, "Students come to the seminary for their first year knowing everything. By the end of their second year, they've learned that there are *some* things they don't know. By the time they graduate, they are convinced they know nothing at all."

I've experienced this first hand multiple times. I went to seminary having read through the Bible twice, cover to cover, not to mention all the extra study I had done on my own or in going to

Bible studies. But I remember multiple times in classes on Christian doctrine, for example, I found myself making statements that did not fit with what the Bible said. I found myself holding to beliefs that did not fit with what God actually tells us in his Word.

Even after all my studies at Seminary, as I have tried to explain my faith to people who do not believe, or as I have tried to explain WELS teachings to people of other denominations, I often find myself struggling to explain things that I thought I knew very well. I find that I don't understand things as well as I had thought. In my own personal Bible reading, I still find statements in the Word that surprise me. I find that I do not understand God as well as I like to believe that I do. I have certainly had a wonderful Christian education, but I still find that there is so much more to learn.

Then there's the example of so many Christians who mistake knowledge of the Bible for spiritual maturity. There are Christians that can name all the books of the Bible in order, but they cannot name a single sinful habit that they have turned away from to follow God. There are Christians who can explain almost every passage and doctrine of the Bible correctly, but they cannot explain how to teach those things in a loving way. There are Christians who could beat any one of us in Bible trivia, but that's all they use that knowledge for: beating people in Bible trivia. I'm not saying that knowledge is useless, but, as with most areas of life, knowledge that we don't put into practice, really doesn't do us much good.

What about the rest of us, who haven't even gotten as far as understanding all those things in the Bible but have nevertheless felt we know enough to get by? How many of us got through Catechism class, which is again just a first step into being a mature Christian, and then we never opened a Bible again? How many of us are all too eager to learn all we can from the news, from our hunting buddies, from our careers, but when God himself decides to speak to us in the Word, nah, we've learned all we need to know?

In our reading from John 9, we see Jesus again scrapping with the Pharisees. We usually look at the Pharisees as these absolutely horrible people, saying one thing but living another way. They were hypocrites, right? But it's good for us to remember that the Pharisees were the good church-going folks of Jesus' day. These were the people that were in church all the time. These were the people who were always in Bible study. These were the ones who most others would have considered to be very good people.

Think about that, who do you see yourself most like in the Bible? Are you one of the prostitutes or tax collectors that the rest of society looks down on, yet Jesus reached out to? Or are you more like the good, church-going Pharisees, whom society looked up to but Jesus rejected?

One of the major problems with the Pharisees was that they thought they could see, when they really were blind. They thought they had learned enough about God, they thought they were spiritually mature because of their learning of the Scriptures, but the fact was, they were not putting it into practice. And in the end, they showed that they did not understand God's Word as

well as they thought they did.

Notice how John 9 tells us that the Pharisees were divided. Some said, "How can a sinful person do a miracle?" Makes a lot of sense, right? Jesus comes around and starts doing miracles! He must be from God! Even the Old Testament prophecies that God's messiah would come and *give sight to the blind!* Seems a pretty clear indication that this Jesus is someone we need to listen to!

But not all the Pharisees were convinced. Many of them were caught up on the fact that Jesus had done this healing on the Sabbath day. If you remember from the Ten Commandments, God had given the Jewish people the Sabbath day as a day of rest, a day when they were to do no work. The pious Pharisees, in an effort to obey God's Sabbath law, laid out very specific instructions on what qualified as "work" and what didn't, so they could make sure that they did not do any kind of work on the Sabbath. They wanted to ease consciences. They wanted to make things a little more black and white, a little more clear. And that could be applaudable, I suppose.

So their additions to God's word laid how just what kinds of actions one could do without it being considered "work." They even had the exact number of steps you could walk before you were considered "working." Now, one such law said that doctors (or anyone for that matter) could do no work to heal someone unless the person's life was at stake. Notice though, this law came from humans, it did not come from God's Word. It was this *human* addition to God's word that they were so caught up on.

So many of the Pharisees could not accept Jesus as a man from God because he healed someone on the Sabbath, even though God had *not* said this was wrong. The Pharisees could not accept Jesus because Jesus did not conform to the *human* laws surrounding God's Word. Their own traditions were more important than the very Son of God right in front of their faces! If they had been working off of what the Bible says, they would have accepted Jesus right away! But they thought that they knew better. They thought they could see clearly, when they were instead totally blind.

How often do we get more caught up on our human views rather than focusing on what God's Word actually says? Sometimes it seems like I have heard more people upset about another church using a screen in their worship service or having guitars than I have heard people upset that another church teaches contrary to the Bible and then calls it God's word.

We are not above the temptation of the Pharisees. We are not beyond putting our traditions above God's word. That's probably a good conversation for us to have sometimes. What traditions are we holding to here that are hindering God's Word and each other's growth in our faith?

Jesus takes away our false sense of sight today. In our last verse from John 9, he tells us, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind."

So long as we claim sight, rather than constantly matching our knowledge up against God's Word, we will remain blind. So long as we claim to be living rightly, rather than constantly comparing our lives to God's law and repenting, we will remain in our sins. So long as we claim to know enough about God, rather than constantly learning more about him by listening to his words in the Bible, we will remain in the dark.

But when we recognize our blindness, then Christ can truly give us sight. Socrates said the one thing he knew was that he knew nothing. The one thing we know is that Christ is our Light.

Only Jesus can give us true sight. As Psalm 119 tells us, God's "word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path." Jesus himself says in our lesson, "I am the light of the world." (John 9:5)

Only Jesus can show us what right living looks like. Only Jesus can show us what it truly means to be a Christian. Only Jesus can show us what it means to be a human. He tells us, "Be perfect." He tells us, "Love each other as I have loved you." (John 15:12) But not only does Jesus tell us how we are to live, he tells us how sinful humans like us can accomplish that: Jesus tells us, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5)

Only Jesus can show us who God truly is. Jesus tells us, "I am the Way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

Only Jesus can tell us what is coming in the future. He says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." (John 14:1-3)

Dear friends, admit your blindness, so that God might give you sight. Admit your ignorance and seek true wisdom from God. Confess your sins and find true righteousness and holiness from God. For Christ came so that the blind would see. Amen.