



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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What Do You See?

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The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart (1 Samuel 16:7).

One day, Jesus meets a man who has been blind from birth. His disciples ask what seems to them an obvious question: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” It’s a classic example of what the journalist H. L. Mencken described centuries later when he said, “For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong.”

Jesus says, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” Things are more complicated than they seem to the disciples’ untrained eyes. Jesus doesn’t mean to say that God took away the man’s sight just so that he could serve as a religious object lesson after all those years of blindness. That would be cruel. No, Jesus begins by reminding his followers that not every hardship is somebody’s fault. Bad things happen to relatively good people all the time, for all sorts of reasons that we may or may not understand. Jesus doesn’t try to explain why this man was born blind. Instead, he comes across a human being in need, and he does what he can to help—which turns out to be quite a lot.

So Jesus makes a little mud pack out of soil and saliva and puts it on the man’s eyes. Don’t ask why he does that either. There’s no more explanation for the mud than for the fact that the man is blind in the first place, and in any case those details are beside the point. The point is that when Christ encounters suffering, he brings healing and redemption in the name of God, and now, suddenly, the man can see for the first time in his life.

This particular healing happens on the Sabbath, and that gives the Pharisees an occasion to claim that Jesus is not being faithful to the law of God. Here we have another in a long line of gospel ironies. A big debate breaks out, where the Pharisees accuse the Son of God of not being godly enough, and soon the larger question becomes, who is blind after all?

That's a recurring theme in the Bible: the question of who sees what and why, and who is blind to the things that matter most. We human beings make assumptions all the time, and sometimes the things we think we know are precisely what blinds us to what's really true.

So, for example, the prophet Samuel sets out to find a new king to replace the failing King Saul, and God sends him to a man named Jesse in Bethlehem. Samuel asks to meet Jesse's sons, and not surprisingly he begins with the eldest. Samuel assumes that this is the one God has in mind, because the eldest is often the one from whom great things are expected. But God says to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

Jesse brings his sons to Samuel, one by one, working his way down the line by age and status, but God says that none of them are going to be the king. Samuel asks Jesse, "Are these all of your boys?" Jesse answers, "There's one more, but he's just the youngest, and he's out looking after the sheep." "Bring the boy here," Samuel says, and maybe it occurs to him that he's looking for one who will become the shepherd of Israel after all. Sure enough, young David soon arrives and meets the prophet who will anoint him king.

The Lord does not see as mortals see.

People look on outward appearances, and it's not hard to see why, is it? We all start out rather insecure in this world. We want to know that we're all right ourselves, and we constantly have to decide what to make of the people around us. We have powerful incentives, then, to look our best in other people's eyes, to win the approval and status and security we crave, and outward appearances are the first clues we have about all those things.

Physically attractive people are, well, attractive. They draw people to themselves, and thus we spend billions of dollars on clothes and cosmetics—what my brother used to call “Oil of Delay”—and whatever else might make us look good in other people's eyes. Beyond physical appearance, there's social standing, so outward signs of success and status are among the things people pay the most attention to as well. Fancy titles at work, big houses in nice neighborhoods, expensive cars, prestigious colleges, lots of friends and likes on Facebook—people rely on all sorts of outward appearances to satisfy our inner need for assurance and self-esteem.

The trouble is, of course, that appearances can be deceiving. Physical beauty may be a sign of health, and attractive people can be beautiful on the inside too. But sometimes good-looking people manage to get by mostly on their looks and never get around to developing the finer qualities of the soul. Sometimes there's not much beneath the beauty that's only skin deep; and that kind of beauty fades with time, while beautiful souls become more and more beautiful as time goes by.

Rich people may be really smart and capable, and their wealth might be a measure of how much we can trust them to know and do what needs to be done. On the other hand, wealth might also be mostly a reflection of greed and self-centeredness—the very opposite of the qualities that make people worthy of our trust.

Lots of people are successful in business or professions or artistry of some kind, but they're not very good at things beyond their area of expertise. Some of the most accomplished people in a profession are not very good in personal relationships, as the people who love and depend on them can report, sadly enough.

We're all inclined to judge by appearances, because appearances are the most obvious things we see, and because they're so much of what people rely on for status and acceptance and self-esteem. We're primed to focus on appearances, even when we know how badly they can mislead us. Ironically, then, one of the things that can keep us from seeing the truth is precisely the way things appear to us. We can be blinded by the very things we see, and the assumptions we make about them, because when we think we see things clearly, we may have no incentive to look more deeply.

So we're often blinded by appearances, and we can be blinded by our expectations and interests too. We see what we expect to see and what we want to see, and we tend not to see what we don't expect, or what we would rather not see.

There are all sorts of psychological experiments to demonstrate the ways in which what people see lines up with what they expect or don't expect to see. One famous,

fairly recent, experiment has a man in a gorilla suit walk across the court while people are dribbling a basketball. Viewers of a film clip are asked to count how many times the ball bounces, and though they're usually quite good at keeping track of the dribbling, most people are taken aback when asked if they saw the gorilla walking across the court. Nobody expects to see a gorilla on a basketball court, and a basic conclusion of such experiments is that all it takes is focusing on the obvious to miss something else that's completely unexpected.

We're frequently blinded by our expectations, and we can be blinded by our interests too. We tend not to see things we don't want to see, and even when we can't avoid noticing them, we're inclined to frame things in ways that are consistent with our interests. Affluent people, for example, tend to live in homogeneous, comfortable communities, so they may never really see people who are poor and struggling to get by. When they think of poor people at all, they may be tempted to imagine what the disciples assumed about the man born blind: that whatever hardship they suffer is their own fault, or maybe their parents' fault. If people are poor it must be because there's something wrong with them, they think. And of course if that's true, then it's not our responsibility to do anything about their situation.

We human beings tend to be blinded by appearances, by our expectations, and by our interests. But as God said to Samuel, the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart. And the way God helps us to see more clearly, to overcome our blindness, is by opening the eyes of our hearts.

God opens the eyes of our hearts, first of all, by teaching us humility. If we think we already know everything

we need to know, we won't be open to learning new things. As someone has said, it's the things we don't even know that we don't know that come back to bite us. Sometimes it takes a great disappointment, or some experience of having been spectacularly wrong, to teach us humility. But once we recognize that what we think we know might be mistaken, we become more open to seeing things differently, and we're less likely to be deceived by appearances and by our own assumptions.

Then again, God opens the eyes of our hearts with compassion. When we become more compassionate we stop seeing people merely as examples of some abstract category—the blind, the poor, the stranger, the foreigner—and we begin to see them as human beings like us, with the same kinds of needs and hopes that animate our own souls. There may be some cost to doing that, because if we see others as fellow human beings like ourselves, then simple compassion will cause us to care more about them, and contribute what we can towards making their lives better. That might cost more than moral blindness or indifference, but compassion sees things differently and begins to value people differently too. After a while we begin to feel that, as the old song says, “He ain't heavy; he's my brother.”

God opens the eyes of our hearts with humility and compassion, and also with grace. The grace of God creates a space where we're free to see ourselves more clearly, with all our sins and shortcomings, because now we see those faults and flaws as God sees them—not as grounds for condemnation but as a spiritual sickness to be healed. Grace shines a light that lets us see ourselves as we really are, with all our imperfections, but also as we can become, when God comes into our hearts to make as the new creation we were meant to be.

The letter to the Ephesians says, “Live as children of light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord” in all the details of everyday life. “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you,” the Bible says. And the more Christ shines on us, the more clearly we will see ourselves and the people around us, and the more fully we’ll live in the grace of God, who loves us all.



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