

Blindsided by Jesus

Matthew 20:29-34

5 September 2021 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Idea: Jesus shows compassion to the lowly, giving them eyes to see who he is.

Big Question: Who is Jesus?

Introduction

When I was a teenager, we had a group of Bible college students come and help out at youth group one night.

At the beginning of the night, we were all blindfolded.

My brother, my OLDER brother (who was one of the youth leaders), made sure that my head was covered in so much tape that I had no hope of seeing.

In fact, I'm fairly sure it took a couple of weeks for my nose to return to its usual shape after the way he'd squashed it.

And then they drove us all around the district to complete different challenges without being able to see.

I honestly couldn't tell you what the point of the night was or if there even was one.

But I tell you what, that experience gave me huge respect for people who live with blindness every day.

It's mind-boggling to me how little being blind seems to limit those amazing people from having the ability to do so many things.

I know they have techniques that can help like counting the number of steps between things, but that's much easier said than done.

To this day, I don't know where we were taken that youth group night.

I suspect that we went to places that I knew really well over roads that I'd driven on most of my life.

But honestly, I was completely lost without my eyes.

I was actually a little amazed when we finally had our blindfolds removed and we were in the middle of the paddock at church.

Today, we're looking at a story that shows us two blind men who couldn't see with their eyes, but they could see a whole lot better than others.

Though we might think they were the least, they're the ones who can see most clearly who Jesus is.

May Jesus give us eyes to see who he is this morning.

Outline

At this point in Matthew's gospel, Jesus and his disciples are travelling towards the capital city of Jerusalem.

He's heading to Jerusalem so that he can lay down his life for his people.

He'll prove that he's king, showing his love by going to the cross so that sinners can be freed and forgiven.

King Jesus isn't your typical king though and his kingdom works differently to every other kingdom his disciples are familiar with.

So, as they make their journey, Jesus fills them in about what his kingdom is like.

Last week, two of the disciples and their mummy came to Jesus asking to be given some of the best seats in the kingdom.

Jesus explained that he doesn't have the authority to choose who'll sit in the honoured positions on his left and right, but that the path to greatness doesn't come from claiming the best spots.

Greatness in his kingdom comes through suffering and service.

Followers of Jesus don't pursue high office to rule over others, instead they look for opportunities to serve.

Jesus himself is the one who's the model and the example of that since he entered the world to serve rather than be served.

Then at the end of the chapter, Matthew slips in a story that might seem a little bit out-of-place at first.

It's a simple story, but that doesn't mean that it's unimportant or insignificant.

It's not an unusual story either because it sounds quite like the things we've seen Jesus doing earlier in the book.

In fact, it's really similar to when Jesus healed a blind man in chapter nine, which was almost certainly a different event.

For the most part though, Jesus has stopped doing those kind of miracles since he's been making his way towards Jerusalem.

Yet it's the perfect finish to the point that Jesus has been repeatedly making in this section: that the first will be last and the last will be first.

Jesus comes across two blind men who have far more spiritual insight than the crowds who can see.

The big idea is that **Jesus shows compassion to the lowly, giving them eyes to see who he is.**

- Looking to the crowd to see spiritual blindness (vv29-31)
- Looking to blind men to see spiritual sight (vv32-34)

Looking to the crowd to see spiritual blindness (vv29-31)

Jesus and his disciples left Galilee and they've been travelling through the area to the right of the Jordan River.

To get to Jerusalem, they need to go back across the Jordan River and past the city of Jericho.

That also means that they're not far from Jerusalem which's only about 24 clicks up the road and which might take about a day to travel.

Jesus is lining up his approach for his big landing in the city at the beginning of chapter 21.

There's a large crowd following him, so Jesus and his mates are far from alone.

Probably not all that surprising considering that it was getting close to the Passover festival and many people would've been making the same pilgrimage to Jerusalem for it.

The sheer number of people travelling past would make it a lucrative time for begging.

And sure enough, there were two blind men sitting by the side of the road, probably hoping to benefit from the generosity of passers-by.

Being blind isn't easy today, but it was much, much harder in ancient Israel.

Day-to-day they didn't have the benefit of support dogs and other aids that are available now.

There weren't many job opportunities for people who were blind either and without the kind of social security that we're used to many would've barely scraped by.

They didn't have much of an option but to beg, generally being treated as outcasts, as people who had something wrong with them.

I actually don't think it's a coincidence that this incident happened near Jericho since the Jericho Tourism Board marketed itself as a destination for people who were blind.

The ancient historian Strabo describes the area around Jericho as the home to a shrub named balsam.¹

They used to take the milky-white sap to make a medicine that was believed to cure headaches, poor eyesight and blindness.

Because this couldn't be found anywhere else, it was exclusive and therefore quite expensive.

Just because something's exy doesn't mean that works though and there were probably lots of people who left disappointed.

Clearly these men either couldn't afford to use it or it didn't work for them.

Perhaps this day started out for them as normal as any other.

There they are, sitting by the road, hoping to receive enough gifts to be able to support themselves, when they hear that Jesus is coming.

No doubt his reputation preceded him.

Whether you liked him or loathed him, after three years of ministry it seems unlikely that there were many people in Israel who hadn't heard about this Jesus bloke.

Can't you just imagine the two blind men thinking that this's their chance?

It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Jesus is about to be walking by and so they start calling out at the top of their lungs to attract attention.

Verse 30, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!"

These are men of faith who trust that Jesus can make them well.

More than that, their theology is outstanding and they absolutely nail who Jesus is.

The fact that they call him the "Son of David" shows that they recognise Jesus as God's Messiah, his sent one.

It's not a name that we usually see Jesus using for himself, instead he called himself the "Son of Man" earlier in the chapter.

Using the title "Son of David" is pretty much the same as calling Jesus king because it picks up on a promise that God made.

King David was one of Israel's most successful and significant kings.

David was also a spectacular failure when he committed adultery with another man's wife and then killed that man in an attempt to cover up what he'd done.

Yet all the way back in 2 Samuel, God promised to always have one of David's son on the throne.

2 Samuel 7:16 NIV11 ¹⁶ Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.' "

Jesus is the descendant of David who fulfils that promise.

Even more than that, in Matthew's gospel, the title "Son of David" is usually used when Jesus heals people.²

Jesus is the king who's powerful over illness.

He's the master who's able to make people well.

He's the one who can heal the sick and restore them to health.

Even though all that's true, it's still really remarkable that they even ask Jesus for healing because when you read through the Bible, you find that blindness is a serious problem.

Of course blindness is a problem, but I mean that it's particularly problematic.

In the Old Testament, the prophets are able to do lots of things but they never heal anyone who's blind.³

Think about the New Testament.

The apostles do many amazing miracles in the name of Jesus, but they never heal anyone who's blind either.

The only person who heals someone who's blind is Jesus.

For blind people to even ask Jesus to heal them means that they recognise him as God because God alone can heal blindness:

Psalms 146:8 NIV11 ⁸ the LORD gives sight to the blind, the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down, the LORD loves the righteous.

It really does show that they were on exactly the right understanding of Jesus.

How do the crowds respond though?

You might think that the crowds would part to make a tunnel, directing Jesus to where they were seated.

Perhaps some people will come and guide them to Jesus?

You might remember the lame man in chapter nine whose friends picked him up and brought him to Jesus to be healed.

Nope, instead they rebuke the two blind men and tell them to be quiet.

We don't know exactly why they were cranky at these two blokes.

Maybe they simply thought that all the yelling was irritating and distracting, that they might actually miss something that Jesus would say.

Perhaps the crowd didn't want the blind men to get in the way, stopping Jesus from getting to Jerusalem.

It could also be that they don't think that the blind men are worthy of asking this of Jesus, that it's not their place to make this kind of request.

I think that it's most likely that the crowds think these men are the last in the kingdom of heaven.

If you've been studying Matthew's gospel like we have, it's almost impossible not to see a connection with the people binging their rug rats to Jesus in chapter nineteen.

Remember that the disciples weren't too impressed and told the people to go away.

I think it's significant that this little section all about the kingdom starts and ends in a really similar way.

Matthew actually uses exactly the same word for the disciples' and crowds' rebuke.

Their presumption was that Jesus was too busy or too important to bless children, but Jesus says that "the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

We were told in verse 29 that the crowds were following Jesus, yet they seem to be blind to who he really is.

There's more going on here than just physical blindness.

Seeing the physical blindness is meant to prompt us to see the spiritual blindness that was going on as well.

Jesus explicitly makes this link for us.

Back in chapter six, in the middle of talking about storing up treasures in heaven, Jesus says:

Matthew 6:22–23 NIV11 ²² "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. ²³ But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

Here, we're "seeing" (literally) the effects of eyes as a window into our souls and it's the reverse of what we might otherwise expect.

Who's blind in this story?

Of course you'd be right if you said that it was the two blind men who can't see out of their eyes.

But it's also true that although the crowds have their physical sight, they're spiritually blind as bats.

They're not the only ones.

When we get to chapter 23, we'll see it reinforced when the Pharisees (who don't make an appearance at this point) get a serve from Jesus, who calls them blind four times – "blind guides" (23:16), "blind fools" (23:17), "blind men" (23:19), "blind Pharisee[s]" (23:26).

And back in chapter fifteen, Jesus advised his disciples to be wary of the leaders of Israel who were blind guides because of their misguided view of godliness.

Matthew 15:14 NIV11 ¹⁴ Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.”

The blind men, on the other hand, have a much clearer vision of who Jesus is.

As difficult as being blind is, it's taught them that they need mercy.

They aren't under any illusions that they need help and so they call out to God for mercy.

Mercy is asking not to receive what you deserve.

It's interesting, isn't it, that in our passage it appears that their blindness is what allows them to see.

Joni Eareckson Tada isn't blind, she has a different disability.

When she was seventeen years old, like many young people, she dove into some water that was too shallow and it left her a quadriplegic, paralysed from the shoulders down.

She says that one of the advantages of having a disability is that it's a constant reminder that she can't rely on herself.

She needs to rely on others all the time to do everyday task.

More importantly, she especially has to rely on the Lord to give her strength and breath.

She says:

"Maybe the truly handicapped people are the ones that don't need God as much."

It's popular today for people to be described as 'woke'.

As far as my quick research revealed, it's actually a term that goes back to the 1930s and 1940s.

It describes someone who's woken up to what's going on around them.

Being woke means to be alert to injustice in society, especially racism.

These crowds weren't woke... or to use the language of this passage, they were blind.

They were blind to who Jesus is and so they're blind to the truth that in Jesus' kingdom, the first will be last and the last will be first.

They thought that Jesus wouldn't care or didn't have time for people like the blind men.

How wrong they were.

Are you blind? Are you blind to who Jesus is?

Maybe this morning is the first time that you've even considered it as a possibility.

Perhaps you can see the world as clearly as the next person, but you're actually blind to the spiritual reality of your own soul.

Perhaps you can't really see either yourself or who Jesus is clearly.

Maybe you think that Jesus was just another nobody who was mistaken for a somebody.

Perhaps you think that Jesus had a lot of good stuff to do and say but that he can't really fix your problems.

You might even think that you're too far gone for Jesus.

That you're very much one of the last, too far back for Jesus to really be concerned about you.

Who knows you best?

It's a pretty common belief that you're the expert in you, so you do you.

But do you really know yourself as well as you think you do?

What if we don't see as clearly as we think we do.

What if we CAN'T see ourselves as clearly as we think we do?

The Bible tells us that we're all blinded by our sin, but unlike physical blindness, you mightn't even know it.

We are guilty of calling 'good' what God has called 'not good'.

Sometimes, we're actually the only person who is deceived because everyone else can see it what we can't.

Sin is deceptive and the first person that it deceives is ourselves.

2 Corinthians 4:4 NIV11 ⁴ The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

We need God to open our eyes to be able to see ourselves as we truly are and him for who he is.

The thing is that that Bible tells us that each and every one of us needs Jesus because we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Each and every one of us has failed to live to the perfect standard that God has called us to.

We have brought shame on God, others and ourselves.

The consequence is that each and every one of us needs a saviour.

We need Jesus to rescue us from our life of sin which hurts us and others.

We need to be freed from our sin which ultimately will lead us to death and an eternity apart from God.

If we think that we're just fine on our own, we've been deceived.

Those of us who think we should be first because of how great we are need to realise that we're actually the last before we can enter the kingdom of heaven.

The crowds could see plain as day, but this is the spiritual insight that they were really blind to.

Looking to blind men to see spiritual sight (vv32-34)

Secondly, we find that these two blind men actually saw both themselves and Jesus far more clearly than the able-bodied crowds.

The blind men mightn't have had 20/20 vision, but much more importantly, they had 20/20 vision of Jesus.

They saw Jesus as the one who gives mercy and healing to people who have been brought low.

Despite the discouragement they've received from the crowd who rebuked them, it seems that the two blind men refuse to be silenced.

Perhaps getting told to be quiet actually makes them even more determined to meet Jesus.

They aren't going to be turned off because they aren't just after a celebrity autograph.

They're after something much more precious and so they seem to keep on shouting.

Amongst all the other noise, Jesus notices them.

He doesn't just walk on by when he sees them, like I'm admittedly sometimes tempted to do.

Instead, Jesus stops right in front of them.

He's is happy to interrupt his journey for these men because they're not a diversion but the very reason that he left heaven.

These blind men are the kind of people Jesus came to rescue.

This gives us an important insight into what Jesus is like.

Other people can make you feel like you're an inconvenience, that you're not worth the time.

There are times when we've all failed to listen to someone's voice when they need help – sometimes on purpose and sometimes by accident.

Not Jesus.

He's not too busy on his journey to Jerusalem to stop and help them out.

Remember that at the end of his journey he's going to do the single most important thing in all of history and yet he stops to help these two blind men.

God is always listening and he cares.

He's never too busy for us.

Sometimes people call Christians "God botherers".

The assumption goes that if God is so big and we're so small, then surely God wouldn't be all that interested in us and our problems.

You're not too small or too insignificant and your genuine concerns aren't too small and silly to bring before God.

And don't get disheartened by thinking that he's not listening simply because he doesn't respond according to your demands and preferences – answering how you'd like, when you'd like.

Sometimes it mightn't sound like he's not listening because simply because we don't see the response that we're hoping for.

Jesus honours the blind men by speaking directly to them, asking, "What do you want me to do for you?"

Can you imagine being asked that by Jesus?

The contrast between these two men and the two brothers and their mother that we saw last week couldn't really be any clearer, could it?

The blind men weren't asking to be given the seats at the left and right of Jesus, in fact, I suspect that it didn't even occur to them to ask for that.

There's really only one thing they want – the very thing that otherwise seems almost impossible.

They want their sight, verse 33.

How does Jesus respond?

He certainly doesn't ask them to take out a second mortgage and pay him upfront for his services.

Unlike many faith healers today, he doesn't let them know where they can put their credit card numbers to express their thanks.

There's no request for a media release for Jesus to use them in his promotional material or a non-disclosure agreement to keep it secret.

Here we get an insight into the heart of God.

Jesus is simply driven by compassion, verse 34.

He's the one who cares about everyone who's weak, broken and hurting.

Jesus doesn't just look for influential, important and impressive people who can help him in his cause.

He doesn't just make sure that he hangs out with the great ones, the ones who look like they're going to come first.

He cares deeply for the lowly, broken and hurting when they can offer him nothing in return.

It's been a while since we've seen a miracle in the gospel and make no mistake that this really is a miracle because nothing less describes it.

We believe that God heals every day through the skills of ordinary human beings who perform operations and through the wonderful and amazing systems and process of the human body.

But this miracle's something special, something next level.

Jesus touches their eyes and IMMEDIATELY, they receive their sight.

If someone claims to have the gift of healing, then their claims need to match up with what we see in the Bible.

When people heal, whether it's prophet, apostle or Jesus himself, it's always complete and instantaneous.

If someone claims to heal my eyes, it's not enough to ask me to take off my glasses and ask whether I can see anything because I've always been able to see without my glasses.

It's not really a test if you ask whether I can see something up close when my problem is seeing in the distance.

And a Biblical healing isn't just a slight improvement for a few hours but complete and lasting – never needing to use glasses again type stuff.

When Jesus heals, he shows that he's both merciful and mighty.

These blind men received their sight.

But more importantly, they've seen Jesus for who he is.

Firstly as the one who's able to fix their eyes, but more importantly as the one who's able to save their souls.

And so they begin to follow Jesus because they mean business.

There's no sense of them traipsing off into the sunset without their encounter with Jesus making any kind of substantial impact on their lives.

This's a fitting bookend to the rich young man who came up to Jesus in chapter nineteen.

He wasn't willing to give up his own great wealth and it stopped him from entering the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus models what it means not to use your power to save yourself.

He's about to go to the cross where he'll lay down his life not just for his friends, but also for his enemies.

Jesus died so that our hearts could be healed of our rebellion against God.

When we come to Jesus repenting of our sin, he will forgive us.

Jesus responds to our cry for mercy.

He'll take our heart of stone – hard and rebellious against God – and give us a heart of flesh that desires to follow him.

In Christ, we're not just broken people healed, but also a whole new creation.

The old has gone and the new has come, allowing us to leave behind our brokenness and have hope for a new and better future.

Understanding that is true spiritual insight.

Conclusion

Jesus has been explaining that his kingdom is different.

It's a kingdom where the first will be last and the last will be first.

We'd expect that it's the clear-sighted crowds following Jesus who see him rightly for who he is.

They're the ones we expect to be first.

It's actually the blind men who really see Jesus.

They realise that they're last and it's those who see their brokenness that are the ones who receive his compassion.

John Newton is an example of someone who was profoundly blind.

Not physically, but certainly spiritually.

He's typically known for his crimes as a human-trafficker, having spent a considerable amount of time working on slave ships.

I was reading a bit about him this week and was reminded that he really was a nasty piece of work.

The reason he ended up on slaves ships was because he was too rough for even the Royal Navy to handle.

Even amongst the slave traders, he was considered too hard to handle.

Until one night, God sent a storm to help bring him to his senses.

He realised his need for God.

A man who couldn't see Jesus at all came to see himself and Jesus clearly.

And so he penned those now-famous words:

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found
Was blind, but now I see.*

Lord, have mercy on us so that we might be able to say the same.

¹ Strabo 16.2.41

² Matthew 9:27; 12:23; 15:22

³ The closest exception is in 2 Kings 6:18-20 where Elisha first asks God to blind the army before asking that their eyes be opened. It should be noted that the healing isn't done by the prophet but by God himself.

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Big Question: Who is Jesus?

Introduction

1. Why were Jesus and his disciples in Jericho?
2. What are some consequences of being blind in the ancient world?
3. What's the significance of the blind men calling Jesus "Son of David"?
4. Why do the crowd rebuke the blind men?
5. How did the blind men and the crowds differ in their understand of i) themselves and ii) Jesus?
6. What are the reasons Jesus gave them sight?
7. How does this section fit with what's come before in chapters nineteen and twenty?