

Do you have eyes but fail to see?

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Date: 10 July 2016

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[0 : 00] So, the Welsh made it to the semifinals of the Euros, and that's made the news beyond just the sporting pages, headlines, this great achievement of Wales at that big football tournament.

Indeed, before they played their semifinal, where they were knocked out by Portugal, there were many who fancied their chances of getting to the finals. And some of the fans, some of the Welsh fans in particular, but others who became honorary Welsh for the occasion, were resting their hopes in Gareth Bale, the big star of the Welsh team, the big star who plays for Real Madrid. And there were great hopes resting on Gareth Bale that he would be able to unlock the Portuguese defense and almost single-handedly keep the dream alive. And as I was thinking about those really fanciful expectations that some seemed to have, an oft-used expression came to my mind, he's good, but he's not that good.

He's good, but he's not that good. And of course, that is a useful expression that can be applied aptly to many talented men and women in different spheres of human endeavor. We can say it of politicians, we can say it of artists of one kind or another. We can really apply it in so many ways. He's good, or she's good, but not that good. But I wonder if that could be said of Jesus. He's good, but he's not that good. I would imagine that for many of us, the instinctive reaction to the question would be, surely not. Surely we can't apply that expression. We can't imagine that that reality is applicable to Jesus. But the miracle that Mark records for us there in chapter 8 of his gospel might give us some cause to wonder. You see, we've read the passage. It's there in Mark chapter 8 from verse 22. We have the record of the miracle itself, and we've read the passage, but just to quickly recap, a blind man is brought to Jesus, that Jesus would touch him, that somehow Jesus would grant sight to this poor man.

And of course, the question, the expectation is whether the master so renowned for healing in an instant would restore sight to this blind man in an instant, in a moment. But he doesn't.

His miracle does not lead to the man being able to see in an instant. He isn't healed immediately. You know, how often when we're speaking about the miracles of Jesus, we lay emphasis on this, the immediate nature of the healing. But that is not the case on this occasion. I wonder if some of the witnesses there, when they heard the man answer the first question, and the man says, I see people, but they're like trees walking about. I wonder if some of them thought or concluded, well, yeah, this man can heal. He's good, but he's not that good. You know, a blind man, heal him instantly. Well, that seemingly is beyond his powers. He has amazing powers, but not quite that amazing. Now, I would imagine that most of us here would be of the view that had Jesus wanted to, he could have healed the man in an instant. He didn't, but he could have. We are persuaded,

[4 : 13] I would imagine, many of us, that he is that good. But he didn't. Why not? And it's really that question, why didn't Jesus heal the man in an instant that will occupy our attention? Why is it that Jesus, on this occasion, and on this occasion alone, in all the records that we have in the four gospels, on this occasion alone, do we find Jesus healing a man in stages? Why so? And the answer to that question really lies at the heart of all that we have to say. And the clue, as we pose the question and try and answer it, the clue is in the location, in the narrative of the miracle.

And that was why it was important for us to read from verse 17 of the chapter through to verse 30. And indeed, we could have gone beyond verse 30. This record of Jesus healing this blind man in Bethsaida in this peculiar way is sandwiched between the record that we are given, the testimony of Jesus himself concerning his disciples' spiritual blindness. And the language is explicit in verse 18. Do you have eyes but fail to see? Jesus is concerned about his disciples and their spiritual blindness, and it's very evident in that question that he poses to them. So, that's before the miracle takes place.

But then after the miracle takes place, we have this pivotal moment in Mark's gospel where we are enabled to see how from spiritual blindness there is progression to spiritual sight. And very especially in those words of Peter, in answer to that great question, who do you say I am? Peter answered, you are the Christ. So, before the miracle, we're presented with the disciples as blind. They have eyes but they don't see. But then subsequent to the miracle, Peter testifies in this powerful way and gives evidence of certainly a measure of spiritual sight. There's this progression from blindness to partial sight to sight. And that progression in the lives of the disciples is illustrated, as it were, by the miracle. The miracle, though a real miracle with a real man who was really blind and who was granted real sight. It's a real miracle, but it also serves as a kind of parable to this journey that disciples travel from blindness to sight. And very particularly from blindness to sight in the matter of knowing Jesus and who Jesus is and why He came and why He's important, there is this progression from blindness to sight. So, let's think about what goes on here. And what we're going to do is we're just going to recount the stages in the miracle in the case of the blind man and do that swiftly. It's all before us in the text. We don't need to add to what is there, but simply notice that His healing is indeed in stages. And having noticed that, move on to what is of greater interest to us in how that serves as a parable, and how we can see how the disciples too are on that journey from blindness to sight. And of course, draw lessons for ourselves as disciples of Jesus. First of all, the blind man. And we're going to notice three stages. Three stages for the blind man, and also three stages for us as disciples. First of all, the blind man, stage one. Verse 22, they came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man.

[8 : 18] That's enough. That's the first stage. He's blind. He can see nothing. There's no more to add to that. But then, quickly moving on, we come to the second stage. And that's recorded for us in verses 23 and 24. He took the blind man, that is Jesus, took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village when he had spat on the man's eyes and put his hands on him. Jesus asked, do you see anything? He looked up and said, I see people. They looked like trees walking around. We could call this the second stage of the miracle. The first stage is simply the reality of his blindness. But now the second stage is a stage where we could maybe distinguish three elements or three sequential steps. We have Jesus' initiative on behalf of the blind man. We have Jesus' inquiry to the blind man, the question. And then we have the man's testimony, his answer to the question. What can we say of Jesus' initiative?

There in verse 23, he took the blind man by the hand. Very simple words, very matter-of-fact words. He's blind. That's the way you can guide the blind man is by taking him by the hand. But we notice Jesus in a very personal, a very intimate way, taking the initiative on behalf of this man who has been brought to him. And then, of course, there is the first stage of the miracle where he spits in the man's eyes and touches him, presumably his eyes. And that leads to an inquiry, a question that Jesus poses to the blind man. Do you see anything? So, there's the initiative, there's the question posed, and then you have the man's testimony. And we have that in verse 24. I see people, they look like trees walking around. He can see, but it's all a bit hazy. The partial recovery of sight is amazing. I don't know if some of you have seen sometimes on the news over the past while, there have been items about some remarkable development in the technology that allows those who are blind or with much reduced sight to be able to see in a measure. And I'm sure this isn't the technical language, but you hear of bionic eyes and what have you. Maybe you've seen one or two occasions when somebody has been granted the possibility of seeing, even if only in a small measure, and the excitement that surrounds that progress, that miracle, if you wish, that technological miracle that allows somebody who has not been able to see, perhaps from birth or for a very long time, to see at least in a small way. Well, this is what we have here. The man, he can see something, but it's partial sight. This is not 20-20 vision by a long stretch, and yet I'm sure a source of great delight for this man. Well, that's the second stage. There's a measure of recovery, but he is by no means healed. And then you have the third stage, and in the third stage, we see what Jesus does and the outcome. In verse 25, once more, Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. He simply repeats what he had done a few moments before. Whether he spat on the man's eyes as well, we don't know. This may not be a full record, but it would seem to be simply a repetition of what had gone before, of what he had done a few moments before. But the outcome is a different one. We read there in verse 25, then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. There's this threefold description of the outcome that together is this powerful affirmation of total healing. And I guess that description sealed by these very revealing words, he

saw everything clearly, everything clearly. This is the third stage where the outcome is the complete and total healing of this man. And in all of this, to be clear, if it's not already evident to us that this is all of Jesus, Jesus and Jesus alone restores sight to the blind man. So, this is the blind man. These are the stages in his restoration of sight. But we said that the miracle serves as an illustration or as a parable for the disciples and their restoration of sight, their journey from blindness to sight. And when we say it's about the disciples, we're not just talking about the twelve disciples who were present on this occasion. It's about you and me. It's about every disciple of Jesus in the course of history.

And again, we have these three stages. And they parallel the stages in the miracle. Stage one in verse 18, we noted it a few moments ago. Jesus' own testimony concerning his disciples, do you have eyes but fail to see? They're blind. Just like the blind man was physically blind, at this point, at this point, the disciples are spiritually blind. We can move on quickly to the second stage. And I think the second stage is provided for us in verses 27 through to 29, where we have this dialogue or these questions posed by Jesus to the disciples. And stage two, in the case of the disciples, also has three sequential steps. And again, I think paralleling or mirroring the miracle. You have, as with the blind man, Jesus' initiative. We read in verse 27,

[14:32] Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. Jesus takes his disciples by the hand, by the hand, as it were, and brings them to the point where he can pose some searching questions to them. Of course, the initiative of Jesus doesn't begin here. It began when he first called his disciples and intervened on their behalf and began them on the journey from blindness to sight.

But that initiative continues here in the passage before us. But then it moves on to Jesus' inquiry, the questions that he poses, just as he had posed a question to the blind man, can you see anything? Do you see anything? So he poses questions to his disciples.

Now, the parallel here isn't exact because here two questions are posed by Jesus to his disciples. And the questions, though they're similar, in some ways you might say they're very similar, yet at another level they're radically different questions. I was trying to think of a way of describing what Jesus is doing here with his two questions. And we'll come and notice what they are in a moment. But I wondered whether you could maybe speak of it as Jesus playing the good cop, bad cop, but just he's both, in posing the two questions. You see, the first question is a very gentle question. It's unthreatening. But then it's followed by a second question that is the spiritual equivalent of an exocet missile. Let me just explain that as we look at the two questions.

What's the first question? Verse 27, who do people say I am? Now, that wasn't a very difficult question for the disciples to answer. The disciples were constantly hearing the people round about them expressing opinions about Jesus. They didn't need to be learned. They didn't need to be particularly intelligent. They didn't need to be particularly perceptive to pick up on the opinions of others concerning who Jesus is. It's not a difficult question. Who do people say I am? But not only is it not a particularly difficult question, nor is it a particularly personal or probing question.

Who do people say I am? You know, who do other people say that I am? And the disciples handled the question with aplomb. It's not a difficult question. They replied, some say John the Baptist. Indeed, some people were saying that. Others say Elijah. And still others, one of the prophets. A selection of opinions concerning the identity of Jesus, of who He is.

[17:36] And of course, that same question, it could be posed to us today. I could pose that question to you. You could pose that question to others. Indeed, it's a question that I think most people could give an answer to, be they Christians or not, be they religious or otherwise. Who do people say that Jesus is?

Most people could make a stab at answering that question. We might say, or we might hear people say, oh, well, Jesus, He was a very good man. He was a moral example. He was a religious leader. He was a deluded idealist. He was a savior of some description. And maybe we could go on as we canvas opinion on who Jesus is, and we could get any number of opinions being expressed. That's the first question.

But then Jesus poses a second question. It's actually a second and third, but it's effectively one question. But what about you? Who do you say I am? There we have it. Verse 29. But what about you?

Who do you say I am? And perhaps we would do well just to pause for a moment there and forget about what Peter says. We'll come to that. But let's for a moment just forget about Peter's answer to

that question and just pause for a moment and sense the probing and personal nature of this question as it's directed not only to the disciples there in the villages around Caesarea Philippi, but as it is directed to us, but as it is directed to you. But what about you? Yes, you. What about you? Who do you say Jesus is? You see, that's a much bigger question. It's a much more probing question. You might even say it's a much more challenging, and some might even say inappropriate question, probing into people's personal convictions. That's personal. But Jesus gets to the heart of the matter, and today as he did then, poses you this question, who do you say I am?

[19 : 59] And what is the answer that you give to that question? There is no bigger question. Who do you say that Jesus is? Well, let's return to the passage and the answer that is given, the disciples' testimony, their response to the question. Peter here, it would seem, is giving not only his own opinion, but I think we can reasonably present him as representing the group of disciples, and he answers. Peter answered, you are the Christ. You are the Christ. And Peter's answer is, let me suggest and argue the case, both true and partial. So, let's think of these two aspects of the answer. It's a true answer, but it's also a partial answer. First of all, we acknowledge, and readily acknowledge, and gladly acknowledge that the answer is true. The title Christ is the Greek form of the Hebrew title Messiah or Anointed One, and Peter is identifying Jesus as the promised and long-awaited King or Savior of Israel, long prophesied by God in the Old Testament. And in identifying

Jesus in this way, Peter is right. It is true, the conclusion that Peter has come to. This is spiritual sight evidenced in the words of Peter. You are the Christ. Indeed, the parallel passage in Matthew's gospel in chapter 16 reveals that Peter's insight was broader and deeper than Mark records.

In Matthew chapter 16, let's just quickly notice what is said there. Matthew 16 from verse 15. But what about you? Jesus asked. Who do you say I am? Simon Peter answered, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus replied, blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man but by my Father in heaven. There's this broader recognition of the identity of Jesus, not only as the Christ but as the Son of the living God. And what Matthew also does for us is that he explicitly identifies the source of Peter's sight. This is not being revealed to you by man, but revealed by my Father in heaven. As with the physical sight of the blind man granted to him by Jesus alone. So the spiritual sight of Peter is a gift of God. His insight into the identity of Jesus revealed by the Father. But the question I want to ask or continue probing a little here is this. In what

what Peter says here, can we conclude that Peter is seeing everything clearly? We're still comparing, we're still drawing the parallel with the miracle. And at the end of the miracle, at the end of the the whole process, we're told that the blind man could see everything clearly. Well, is this the stage we've reached with Peter? That now he can see everything clearly? Does Peter jump or is he pushed straight from stage one of blindness to stage three, seeing everything clearly? Well, I don't think that is the case. His testimony is true. His testimony is pivotal. And it occupies a pivotal place in the gospel, the very heart of the gospel, this declaration of Peter, you are the Christ. It is pivotal, but it's partial. His spiritual sight is still hazy. And the reason we can state that and declare that with confidence is that immediately in what follows, Mark, and again I think deliberately, helps us to see that though true, Peter's insight is still partial. It's still hazy. Because notice what immediately goes on to happen from verse 31. He then began to teach them, that is Jesus, he then began to teach his disciples, having heard the profession of Peter, you are the Christ, were told Jesus then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed. And after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this. And then what do we read? The very man who a few moments before had declared, you are the

Christ, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. Get behind me, Satan, he said. You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men. You see, whatever this is, it's not Peter seeing everything clearly. This is sight, yes, but it's very much partial spiritual sight that Peter enjoys.

[25 : 28] He can see Jesus as the Christ, but not as the crucified one. He can see Jesus as the Savior in some sense, but not as the suffering servant. Peter has been granted a measure of sight, but it's as if Peter could say, I see Jesus, but he's like a tree walking around. Jesus has started something in Peter, in the disciples, that will in due course lead to clarity of sight, to seeing everything clearly.

But it is a process that is continuing. It is a wonderful thing that the process has begun. It is a great blessing for Peter that he has partial sight, so much better than spiritual blindness. But there is still so much more to learn, so much more to understand. I wonder, can you relate to that? You see, there's a sense in which all of us are on this, what could we call it, this journey. We're at some point, be it at the very beginning, blind. None of us have reached that point, I would contend, that we see everything clearly. But by the grace of God, we're brought along that road to see ever more clearly and with ever greater insight who Jesus is and why it matters and what He's done for us and how we are to respond to Him. Before we go to the third stage in the experience of the disciples, maybe just a brief parenthesis. The posing and the answering of these two questions that we have here in verses 27 and 29, who do you say I am? And then that much more probing question, who do you say I am? The posing of these two questions served, in the case of the disciples, to help them to see more clearly. It challenged them to consider more seriously and more personally who Jesus is and it helped them reach greater insight and greater clarity of sight. And as it helped them, so these questions can help many today. And my little kind of tangent is really to say, well, who is going to pose these questions to men and women in Aberdeen this week? Who is going to pose these questions? Jesus isn't walking the streets of Aberdeen posing these questions. Who is going to pose these questions? Who is going to challenge men and women to think about who Jesus is? Perhaps to begin with in a somewhat unthreatening way. You know, who do people say that Jesus is? Can you ask that question of somebody this week to begin a conversation? You won't frighten them away with that unthreatening question. Well, what about Jesus? What have you heard other people say about Jesus? And then, as opportunity affords to ask this much more probing question, what about you?

[28 : 51] Who do you say that Jesus is? These are questions that God uses to help men and women come to greater clarity of sight. But we are the ones who have to pose the question. They've been posed to us.

We thank God for it. But now we also have to pose those same questions to others. But let's move on and just notice as we draw to a close that the third stage in the disciples' journey, if you wish, from blindness to sight. And again, you have the parallel with the blind man.

In the case of the blind man, we saw the actions of Jesus in healing, and we saw the outcome, full sight granted to the blind man. And when we look to draw that parallel with the disciples, we need to look beyond our immediate passage, but not too far ahead, because we need to look beyond to what the immediately following verses foretell concerning what Jesus would do. In verse 31, Jesus looks ahead to what awaits him, to what he will do. And what does he say about what he will do, about what will happen to him? He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed, and after three days rise again. Jesus looks forward, points forward to his death and resurrection.

And what Jesus is saying is, you won't really understand who I am. You won't see everything clearly until you see me hanging from the cross, until you see me risen from the grave. In the absence of the cross and the resurrection, you cannot know who Jesus is. You cannot understand why he came. You cannot begin to grasp what he has done and why that is important for you. His death and resurrection are at the heart of a clarity of sight concerning who he is. It is only in the light of his death and resurrection. Then his disciples will be able to see everything clearly, at least in much greater measure.

And it's true for us. We see Jesus clearly, his identity and his mission, his holy resolve and incomparable love at the cross. We see Jesus clearly, his victory and vindication as the Father raises him from the grave. And this is evident in the experience of the disciples who were around him here in our passage. It is in the light of the cross and the resurrection that they see who Jesus is and the implications of who he is for their lives. You remember Thomas following the resurrection. He hadn't seen Jesus the first time that he appeared to the disciples and he doubted. And then what happens when he comes face to face with Jesus? Then Jesus said to Thomas, recorded for us in John's Gospel, put your finger here, see my hands, reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.

[32 : 09] Thomas said to him, my Lord and my God. Never have we encountered greater clarity of sight concerning who Jesus is than in these words of Thomas, my Lord and my God. The cross and the resurrection bring Thomas to the place of worship. Remember the disciples at the ascension, as

that's recorded for us in Mark's Gospel, at the end of Mark's Gospel. It's in the light of the cross, in the light of the resurrection. What do we read then? The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him. But some doubted. And Jesus came to them and said, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations.

And he goes on. You see, here the disciples are beginning to see clearly the implications of the death and resurrection of Jesus. And the implications are worship and witness with Thomas. The eleven worship Jesus. But not only do they worship Jesus, they respond to the command to witness to Jesus, to tell others concerning Jesus. In fact, if you're looking for evidence as to how clearly you see Jesus, you can pose these questions to yourself. Do I see, if you don't worship Jesus, it's because you don't see Jesus. Or pose this question to yourself. Do I witness concerning Jesus?

Because the answer to that question will give you insight into how clearly you see Jesus. Well, let me close by bringing to your attention what perhaps we could call the Bethsaida warning. Well, what's all that about? Well, in Mark's gospel, there in verse 22, we just passed over as a detail of little significance where the miracle took place. We're told there in verse 22 that it was in Bethsaida that this miracle took place.

[34 : 28] Now, why am I suggesting that this is significant or can serve as a warning to us, even with the millennium having passed?

Well, notice what Jesus says about Bethsaida as it's recorded for us in Luke chapter 10 in verse 13. This is the intriguing warning. There in Bethsaida, Jesus heals this blind man.

But those who witnessed that healing, did they come to see Jesus for who he truly is? Did they come to the point of worshipping Jesus and witnessing to Jesus?

Or did many of them fall under this woe, woe to you Bethsaida? Be careful.

In the light of all that you know, in the light of all that you have seen and heard concerning Jesus even this morning, Jesus poses to you this question. What about you?

[35 : 53] Not your granny, not your mom, not your dad, not your husband, not your wife, not your friend. What about you? What about you?

Who do you say I am? Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for the manner in which your word opens up to us and reveals to us who you are, and very particularly in the person of your Son, Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One.

We thank you that you're the one who opens our eyes, and we pray that you would ever open our eyes more widely, that we would see more clearly, that we would be captivated more dramatically as we see Jesus, and as we bow down before him and worship him, and as we go out into the world to tell others about him.

And all of these things we pray in his name. Amen. Amen.