

The Gradual Healing of the Blind Man

by Alexander Maclaren

Christ's miraculous healing of the blind man is a unique and powerful example of His love and sympathy, and teaches us about the importance of faith, material helps, and the relationship between Christ's power and our faith.

Scripture: Mark 8:22

Topics: "Faith", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

Alexander Maclaren explores the unique miracle of the gradual healing of the blind man, emphasizing Christ's method of isolating the man, using tangible means, and accommodating the pace of healing to the man's faith. He highlights that Christ's miracles were not merely displays of power but expressions of His compassionate heart, aimed at fostering faith. The gradual nature of the healing serves as a metaphor for spiritual growth, where understanding and faith develop over time. Maclaren encourages believers to seek solitude with Christ to deepen their faith and experience His transformative power. Ultimately, the sermon illustrates that our expectations and desires shape our spiritual journey and the blessings we receive from God.

Transcript

THIS MIRACLE, which is only recorded by the Evangelist Mark, has about it several very peculiar features. Some of these it shares with one other of our Lord's miracles, which also is found only in this gospel, and which occurred about the same time; that miracle of healing the deaf and dumb man recorded in the previous chapter. Both of them have these points in common: that our Lord takes the sufferer away and works His miracle in privacy; that in both there is an abundant use of the same singular means—our Lord's touch, and the saliva upon His finger; and that in both there is the urgent injunction of entire secrecy laid upon the recipient of the benefit.

But this miracle had another peculiarity, in which it stands absolutely alone, and that is that the work is done in stages; that the power which at other times has but to speak and it is done, here seems to labor, and the cure comes slowly; that in the middle Christ pauses, and like a physician trying the experiment of a drug, asks the patient if any effect is produced, and getting the answer that some mitigation is realized, repeats the application, and perfect recovery is the result.

Now, how unlike that is to all the rest of Christ's miraculous working we do not need to point out; but the question may arise, what is the meaning, and what the reason, and what the lessons of this unique and

anomalous form of miraculous working? It is to that question that I wish to turn now: for I think that the answer will open up to us some very precious things in regard to that great Lord, the revelation of whose heart and character is the inmost and the loftiest meaning both of His words and of His works.

I take these three points of peculiarity to which I have referred: the privacy, the strange and abundant use of means veiling the miraculous power, and the gradual, slow nature of the cure. I see in them these three things: Christ isolating the man that He would heal; Christ stooping to the sense-bound nature by using outward means; and Christ making His power work slowly, to keep abreast of the man's slow faith.

Christ Isolates the Man Whom He Wanted to Heal

First, then, here we have Christ isolating the man whom He wanted to heal. Now, there may have been something about our Lord's circumstances and purposes at the time of this miracle which accounted for the great urgency with which at this period He impresses secrecy upon all around Him. What that was it is not necessary for us to inquire here, but this is worth noticing, that in obedience to this wish, on His own part, for privacy at the time, He covers over with a veil His miraculous working, and does it quietly, as one might almost say, in a corner. He never sought to display His miraculous working; here He absolutely tries to hide it. That fact of Christ taking pains to conceal His miracle carries in it two great truths: first, about the purpose and nature of miracles in general, and second, about His character, as to each of which a few words may be said.

This fact, of a miracle done in intended secrecy, and shrouded in deep darkness, suggests to us the true point of view from which to look at the whole subject of miracles.

People say they were meant to be attestations of His Divine mission. Yes, no doubt that is true partially; but that was never the sole nor even the main purpose for which they were wrought; and when anybody asked Jesus Christ to work a miracle for that purpose only, He rebuked the desire and refused to gratify it. He wrought the miracle, not coldly, in order to witness to His mission, but every one of them was the token, because it was the outcome, of His own sympathetic heart, brought into contact with human need. And instead of the miracles of Jesus Christ being cold, logical proofs of His mission, they were all glowing with the earnestness of a loving sympathy, and came from Him at sight of sorrow as naturally as rays from the sun.

Then, on the other hand, the same fact carries with it, too, a lesson about His character. Is not He here doing what He tells us to do; "Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth"? He dares not wrap His talent in a napkin, He would be unfaithful to His mission if He hid His light under a bushel. All goodness "does good by stealth," even if it does not "blush to find it farne"--and that universal mark of true benevolence marked His. He had to solve in His human life what we have to solve, the problem of keeping the narrow path between ostentation of powers and selfish concealment of faculty; and He solved it thus, leaving us an example that we should follow in His steps.

But that is somewhat aside from the main purpose to which I wanted to turn in these first remarks. Christ did not invest the miracle with any of its peculiarities for His own sake only. All that is singular about it, will, I think, find its best explanation in the condition and character of the subject, the man on whom it was wrought. What sort of a man was he? Well, the narrative does not tell us much, but if we use our historical imagination and our eyes we may learn something about him. First he was a Gentile; the land in which the miracle was wrought was the half-heathen country on the east side of the Sea of Galilee. In the second place, it was other people that brought him; he does not come of his own accord. Then again, it is their

prayer that is mentioned, not his--he asks nothing.

You see him standing there, hopeless, listless; not believing that this Jewish stranger is going to do anything for him; with his impassive blind face glowing with no entreaty to reinforce his companions' prayers. And suppose he is a man of that sort, with no expectation of anything from this rabbi, how is Christ to get at him? It is no use talking to him. His eyes are shut, so cannot see the sympathy beaming in His face. There is one thing possible--to lay hold of Him by the hand; and the touch, gentle, loving, firm, says this, at least: "Here is a man that has some interest in me, and whether He can do anything or not for me, He is going to try something." Would not that kindle an expectation in him? And is it not in parable just exactly what Jesus Christ does for the whole world? Is not that act of His by which He put out His hand and seized the unbelieving limp hand of the blind man that hung by his side, the very same in principle as that by which He "taketh hold of the seed of Abraham," and is made like to His brethren? Is not the mystery of the Incarnation and the meaning of it wrapped up as in a germ in that little simple incident, He put out His hand and touched him?

Is there not in it too a lesson for all you good-hearted Christian men and women, in all your work? If you want to do anything for your Master and for your brethren, there is only one way to do it--to come down to their level and get hold of their hands, and then there is some chance of doing them good. We must be content to take the hands of beggars if we are to make the blind to see.

And then, having thus drawn near to the man, and established in his heart some dim expectation of something coming, He gently draws him away out of the little village. I wonder no painter has ever painted that, instead of repeating ad nauseam two or three scenes out of the Gospels. I wonder none of them has ever seen what a parable it is--the Christ leading the blind man out into solitude before He can say to him "Behold!" How as they went, step-by-step, the poor blind eyes not telling the man where they were going, or how far away he was being taken from his friends, his conscious dependence upon this Stranger would grow! How he would feel more and more at each step, "I am at His mercy! What is He going to do with me?" And how thus there would be kindled in his heart some beginnings of an expectation, as well as some surrendering of himself to Christ's guidance! These two things, the expectation and the surrender, have in them at all events some faint beginnings and rude germs of the highest faith, to lead up to which is the purpose of all that Christ here does.

And is not that what He does for us all? Sometimes by sorrows, sometimes by sickbeds, sometimes by shutting us out from chosen spheres of activity, sometimes by striking down the dear ones at our sides, and leaving us lonely in the desert--is He not saying to us in a thousand ways. "Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place?" As Israel was led into the wilderness that God might "speak to her heart," so often Christ draws us aside, if not by outward providences such as these, yet by awaking in us that solemn sense of personal responsibility and making us feel our solitude, that He may lead us to feel His allsufficient companionship.

Ah! brethren, here is a lesson from all this--if you want Jesus Christ to give you His highest gifts and to reveal to you His fairest beauty, you must be alone with Him. He loves to deal with single souls. Our lives, many of them, can never be outwardly alone. We are jammed up against one another in such a fashion, and the hurry and pressure of city life is so great with us all that it is often impossible for us to find the outward secrecy and solitude. But a man may be alone in a crowd; the heart may be gathered up into itself, and there may be a still atmosphere round about us in the shop and in the market, and among the busy ways of men, in which we and Christ shall be alone together. Unless there be, I do not think any of us

will see the King in His beauty or the far-off land. "I was left alone, and saw this great vision" is the law for all true beholding.

So, dear brethren, try to feel how awful this earthly life of ours is in its necessary solitude; that each of us by himself must shape out his own destiny, and make his own character; that every unit of the swarms upon our streets is a unit that has to face the solemn facts of life for and by itself that alone you live, that alone you will die; that alone you will have to give account of yourself before God, and in the solitude let the hand of your heart feel for His hand that is stretched out to grasp yours, and listen to Him saying "Lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the world." There was no dreariness in the solitude when it was Christ that "took the blind man by the hand, and led him out of the town."

Christ Stooping to a Sense-Bound Nature by the Use of Material Helps

Second, we have Christ stooping to a sense-bound nature by the use of material helps. No doubt there was something in the man, as I have said, which made it advisable that these methods should be adopted. If he were the sort of person that I have described, slow of faith, not much caring about the possibility of cure, and not having much hope that anything would come of it then we can see the fitness of the means adopted; the hand laid upon the eyes, the finger possibly moistened with saliva touching the ball, the pausing to question, the repeated application. They make a ladder by which his hope and confidence might climb to the apprehension of the blessing. And that points to a general principle of the Divine dealings. God stoops to a feeble faith, and gives to it outward things by which it may rise to an apprehension of spiritual realities.

Is not that the meaning of the whole complicated system of Old Testament revelation? Is not that the meaning of the altars, and priests, and sacrifices, and the old cumbrous apparatus of the Mosaic law? Was it not all a picture book in which the infant eyes of the race might see in a material form deep spiritual realities? Was not that the meaning and explanation of our Lord's parabolic teaching? He veils spiritual truth in common things that He may reveal it by common things-taking fishermen's boats, their nets, a sower's basket, a baker's dough, and many another homely article, and finding in them the emblems of the loftiest truth.

Is not that the meaning of His own Incarnation? It is no use talking to men about God, let them see Him; no use preaching about principles, give them the facts of His life. Revelation does not consist in the setting forth of certain propositions about God, but in the exhibition of the acts of God in a human life.

And so the Word was flesh and wrought

With human hands the creed of creeds.

And still further, may we not say that this is the inmost meaning and purpose of the whole frame of the material universe? It exists in order that, as a parable and a symbol, it may proclaim the things that are unseen and eternal. Its depths and heights, its splendors, and its energies are all in order that through them spirits may climb to the apprehension of the "Ring eternal, immortal, invisible," and the realities of His spiritual kingdom.

So in regard of all the externals of Christianity, forms of worship, ordinances, and so on-all these, in like manner, are provided in condescension to our weakness, in order that by them we may be lifted above ourselves; for the purpose of the temple is to prepare for the time and the place where the seer "saw no

temple therein." They are but the cups that carry the wine, the flowers whose chalices bear the honey, the ladders by which the soul may climb to God Himself, the rafts upon which the precious treasure may be floated into our hearts.

If Christ's touch and Christ's saliva healed, it was not because of anything in them, but because He willed it so and He Himself is the source of all the healing energy. Therefore, let us keep these externals in their proper place of subordination, and remember that in Him, not in them, lies the healing power; and that even Christ's touch may become the object of superstitious regard, as it was when that poor woman that came through the crowd to lay her finger on the hem of His garment, thinking that she could bear away a surreptitious blessing without the conscious outgoing of His power. He healed her because there was a spark of faith in her superstition, but she had to learn that it was not the hem of the garment but the loving will of Christ that cured, in order that the dross of superstitious reliance on the outward vehicle might be melted away, and the pure gold of faith in His love and power might remain.

Christ Accommodating the Pace of His

Power to the Slowness of the Man's Faith

Lastly, we have Christ accommodating the pace of His power to the slowness of the man's faith. The whole story, as I have said, is unique, and especially that part of it "He put his hands upon him, and asked him if he saw ought." One might have expected an answer with a little more gratitude in it, with a little more wonder in it, with a little more emotion in it. Instead of these it is almost surly, or at any rate strangely reticent--a matter-of-fact answer to the question, and there an end. As our Revised Version reads it better: "I see men, for I behold them as trees walking." Curiously accurate! A dim glimmer had come into the eye, but there is not yet distinctness of outline nor sense of magnitude, which must be acquired by practice. The eye has not yet been educated, and it was only because these blurred figures were in motion that he knew they were not trees. "After that he put his hands again upon his eyes and made him look up." Or as the Revised Version has it with a better reading, "and he looked stedfastly." An eager straining of the new faculty to make sure that he had got it, and to test its limits and its perfection. "And he was restored and saw all things clearly."

Now I take it that the worthiest view of that strangely protracted process, broken up into two halves by the question that is dropped into the middle, is this, that it was determined by the man's faith, and was meant to increase it. He was healed slowly because he believed slowly. His faith was a condition of his cure, and the measure of it determined the measure of the restoration and the rate of the growth of his faith settled the rate of the perfecting of Christ's work on him. As a rule, faith in His power to heal was a condition of Christ's healing, and that mainly because our Lord would rather have men believing than sound of body. They often wanted only the outward miracle, but He wanted to make it the means of insinuating a better healing into their spirits. And so, not that there was any necessary connection between their faith and the exercise of His miraculous power, but in order that He might bless them with His best gifts, He usually worked on the principle, "According to your faith be it unto you." And here, as a nurse or a mother with her child might do, He keeps step with the little steps, and goes slowly because the man goes slowly.

Now, both the gradual process of illumination and the rate of that process as determined by faith, are true for us. How dim and partial a glimmer of light comes to many a soul at the outset of the Christian life! How little a new convert knows about God and self and the starry truths of His great revelation! Christian progress does not consist in seeing new things, but in seeing the old thing more clearly: the same Christ,

the same Cross, only more distinctly and deeply apprehended, and more closely incorporated into my very being. We do not grow away from Him, but we grow into knowledge of Him. The first lesson that we get is the last lesson that we shall learn, and He is the Alpha at the beginning, and the Omega at the end of the alphabet-the letters of which make up our knowledge for earth and heaven.

But then let me remind you that just in the measure in which you expect blessing of any kind, illumination and purifying and help of all sorts from Jesus Christ, just in that measure will you get it. You can limit the working of Almighty power, and can determine the rate at which it shall work on you. God fills the waterpots, to the brim, but not beyond the brim; and if, like the woman in the Old Testament story, we stop bringing vessels, the oil will stop flowing. It is an awful thing to think that we have the power, as it were, to turn a stopcock, and so increase or diminish, or cut off altogether the supply of God's mercy and Christ's healing and cleansing love in our hearts. You will get as much of God as you want and no more. The measure of your desire is the measure of your capacity, and the measure of your capacity is the measure of God's gift. "Open thy mouth wide and I will fill it." And if your faith is heavily shod and steps slowly, His power and His grace will step slowly along with it; keeping rank and step. According to your faith shall it be unto you.

Ah, dear friends, desire Him to help and bless you, and He will do it. Expect Him to do it, and He will do it. Go to Him like the other blind man, and say to Him--"Jesus, Thou Son of David, have mercy on me ... that I might receive my sight," and He will lay His hand upon you, and at any rate a glimmer will come, which will grow in the measure of your humble, confident desire, until at last He takes you by the hand and leads you out of this poor little village of a world, and lays His finger for a brief moment of blindness upon your eyes and asks you if you see ought. Then you look up, and the first face that you behold shall be His, whom you saw as "through a glass, darkly" with your dim eyes in this twilight world.

May that be your experience and mine, through His mercy!

Amen

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