

First Serve

Studies in the Gospel of Mark

Text

Mark 8:22-33

Topic

After Jesus spits in his eyes,
a blind man says he sees men like trees, walking

Title

"He Can't See Their Foreheads for the Trees"

Introduction

Every year in June, the Tree-Mendus Fruit Farm in Eau Clair, Michigan, hosts the International Cherry Pit-Spitting Championship. The current record is 95 feet 6½ inches.

Cricket-spitting is part of the annual Bug Bowl at Purdue University in Indiana. The record is 32 feet 5 inches.

Francisco Tomas Gomez won the 4th International Date and Olive Pit Spitting Competition in Elche, Spain. He spit the pit 118 inches.

The Spanish city hosts what they call the *Golden Lungs* competition next to the Basilica of Santa Maria, with the world's best spitters in this peculiar sport taking part.

Yes, it's considered a sport by enthusiasts. There is even a movement to bring olive pit spitting to the Olympics. It is being led by The Association of the Friends of Olive Trees.

They were denied by both Beijing and London.

As far as I can determine, a guy in India holds the world record for spitting *spit*, at 86 inches.

Jesus was a spitter. There are three *spit-tacular* miracle narratives in the Gospels:

- In the Gospel of John, a blind man was healed when Jesus "spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes" (John 9:6).
- In Mark chapter seven, a deaf man with a speech impediment was healed when "Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue" (v33).
- In our text today, Jesus will heal a blind man by "spit[ting] on his eyes, and laying His hands on him."

The unusual method of healing, coupled with the fact that, here in our text, the healing takes place in stages, clues us that something more is going on than the miracle of a man receiving his sight.

The healing is a kind of parable, for Jesus' followers, about spiritual sight in general.

I'll organize my thoughts around the following two points: #1 Jesus Opens Blind Eyes & Gives You Progressive Vision, and #2 Satan Blinds Open Eyes & Causes You Vision Regression.

#1 Jesus Opens Blind Eyes & Gives You Progressive Vision

(v22-30)

All through Scripture, physical blindness is a metaphor used to represent the spiritual inability to see God's truth.

- A man who is physically blind cannot see God's visible revelation. He can't see the trees, and the earth, and the sky.
- A man who is spiritually blind cannot see God's invisible revelation: Love, truth, holiness, forgiveness, eternal life, grace, joy, peace, etc.

Once we are saved, we are no longer spiritually blind; we can see. We forget, however, that we do not see perfectly - not this side of Heaven. Thus the healing of the blind man in two stages encourages us to follow hard after the Lord to receive progressively better spiritual sight.

Mar 8:22 Then He came to Bethsaida; and they brought a blind man to Him, and begged Him to touch him.

"They" are never identified. We can't say if "they" were friends, or family, or both. Maybe they were strangers who, upon seeing Jesus, knew that there was a blind beggar who could benefit from His healing touch.

(I say "beggar," even though the text doesn't mention it, because that was the only profession for those with handicaps).

The best thing, always and in every situation, that we can do for a person is to somehow bring them to Jesus.

They "begged Him to touch him." If the blind man was a beggar, these men now put themselves in his place, begging Jesus. It's a mark of compassion.

They had a preconceived idea of how Jesus ought to minister to the blind man.

So do we, and it can sometimes lead to disappointment. We might bring someone to Jesus, say by getting them to a service; but seemingly nothing happens. Do your part and leave the work in the Lord's capable hands.

Mar 8:23 So He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the town. And when He had spit on his eyes and put His hands on him, He asked him if he saw anything.

It's been suggested that Jesus led the blind man out of town because Bethsaida was one of three Jewish cities Jesus rebuked for their unbelief. You find His words against them in the Gospel of Matthew. He said, for example, "Woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you" (Matthew 11).

Bethsaida was under judgment for their unbelief, but even in wrath, God remembers mercy, and this blind man could be healed.

Jesus "spit on his eyes." Under the Law of Moses, anyone who was spit upon had to wash themselves and their clothes and were considered unclean until the evening (Leviticus 15:8).

It is a great insult to spit on someone or to be spit upon. Jesus was spit upon as a great insult before He was crucified. (Matthew 27:30).

I have no final solution to the "why" of Jesus spitting. It certainly wasn't medicinal, as some suggest.

It is fascinating to consider Jesus' possible reaction. He was fully God, but, during His time on the earth, He voluntarily set aside the independent use of His deity, and was fully dependent upon His Father. Spitting on this blind man must have seemed weird even to the Lord - but He obeyed.

I will say this about Jesus and spitting: It would take something ugly, something shameful, for Jesus to be able to save us. He would have to be ridiculed, beaten, spit upon, then nailed naked on the Cross, in order to save us.

The moment I think Jesus has done something ugly, in spitting on this man, I am reminded He came to do something far uglier, for me.

Christianity is bloody. The Cross is offensive to nonbelievers, declaring them sinners deserving of eternal conscious torment.

Having spit on the blind man, and having laid His hands on him, you're expecting him to be healed.

Mar 8:24 And he looked up and said, "I see men like trees, walking."

His description immediately reminds you of the Ents in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Although in that case you'd have to say you saw "trees like men, walking."

As as a side note, we infer from this that the blind man once had sight, since he knew what "trees" looked like, and could distinguish "men" from them.

The "men" were most likely the twelve.

The take-away here is that Jesus *began* to heal his blindness.

Mar 8:25 Then He put His hands on his eyes again and made him look up. And he was restored and saw everyone clearly.

Fully restored, probably better than 20-20 vision. But in two stages. We'll suggest why momentarily. First, let's finish the story.

Mar 8:26 Then He sent him away to his house, saying, "Neither go into the town, nor tell anyone in the town."

The formerly blind man must not have been from Bethsaida. Jesus didn't want him going there, and giving them a testimony, not just because they had been judged, but so they would not judge the man.

The people in the towns Jesus rebuked were far gone. They would have torn down this man, who must have been so excited to have been healed.

If you got saved later in life, did you get ridiculed by friends and family? Maybe you handled it alright, or maybe it stumbled you.

Jesus wanted this man to get a little grounded before he went up against the scoffers.

Why the progressive healing? I suggested it was a kind of parable, for Jesus' followers, about spiritual sight in general.

Salvation can certainly be compared to having been blind, then receiving sight. We are, in fact, rescued out from the kingdom of darkness, and put into the kingdom of light.

- In Acts 26:8 we read, "to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me."
- In Ephesians 5:8 we read, "you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light."

Our final salvation is secure, by what Jesus has done; but it is not complete, and won't be until we see Jesus face-to-face.

Theologians put it like this:

- We are once-for-all justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Because of the Cross, God can accept me just-as-if-I'd never sinned.
- We are being sanctified, which means set apart, day-by-day, as we walk with the Lord. He who began this good work in us will be faithful to complete it.
- We will one day be glorified, when we shed this body of flesh for our eternal bodies.

The apostle John put it this way:

1Jn 3:2 Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.

Since we are a work in progress, we do not have perfect spiritual sight. The apostle Paul said,

1Co 13:12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

Thus I believe it is accurate to say that Jesus gives us progressive spiritual vision, until such time as we see Him face-to-face.

As you age, you may need corrective lenses to see things accurately. Jesus, as He is presented in the Bible, functions as our spiritual corrective lenses.

The apostle Paul also said,

2Co 3:18 But we all... beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

The apostle James calls the Word of God our "mirror" (James 1:23-25). As we look into God's mirror, we will be changed into the same image of the Lord.

Interestingly, God's mirror is not a mirror that shows us what we look like as much as it shows us what Jesus looks like. We want to see Jesus - His attributes, His character - in order to understand the transformation God is trying to accomplish in us.

Mar 8:27 Now Jesus and His disciples went out to the towns of Caesarea Philippi; and on the road He asked His disciples, saying to them, "Who do men say that I am?"

This is an immediate application of the lesson from the healing. Jesus may as well have asked, "Who do the spiritually blind say that I am?" We see their blindness in their suggestions:

Mar 8:28 So they answered, "John the Baptist; but some say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets."

John was dead; Elijah was a forerunner, not the Messiah; "one of the prophets" was good company to be in, unless you were God come in the flesh.

You get the same crazy answers from blind nonbelievers, and the cults, about who Jesus is. The biblical evidence is clear.

Jesus had proven Himself to be the Messiah promised to the Jews, the greater Son of David, Who would establish the kingdom of Heaven on the earth. Staring at overwhelming evidence, the people remained willfully blind to His identity.

Mar 8:29 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered and said to Him, "You are the Christ."

"Christ" means *anointed one*. It is the technical term used of the promised Messiah.

In another Gospel Jesus explains to Peter that he received this information by revelation from God. Peter received spiritual sight; he was no longer among those totally blind.

Mar 8:30 Then He strictly warned them that they should tell no one about Him.

Why the gag order? Probably for lots of reasons, but the one we will see here, in the next set of verses, is that the disciples did not understand this idea of progressive sight. Although they had declared the great truth about Who Jesus was, with Peter as their spokesman, they had a lot to learn about His mission. They did not yet "see" Jesus going to the Cross and dying for our sins.

Soon enough, Jesus would give them the Great Commission, to go into the entire world, preaching the Gospel. But not yet.

Any message they declared about Jesus, at this point, would be wrong, since they did not yet see Him going to the Cross.

The thing I want to emphasize, today, regarding our progressive vision is this: Am I beholding Jesus in the mirror, and really becoming a little more like Him each day?

That's God's simple plan until I die or hear the trumpet signal the rapture.

#2 Satan Blinds Open Eyes & Causes You Vision Regression

(v31-33)

We've come to a pivotal moment in the Gospel of Mark. For the first eight chapters, Jesus has been all about ministering to the multitudes, telling them the kingdom of Heaven is at hand. He's preached, and taught, and performed a vast quantity of miracles. Those miracles gave sufficient evidence that He was the Messiah promised in the Jewish Scriptures that we call the Old Testament.

In verse eleven, the Pharisees demanded from Him a "sign from Heaven," to prove that He was the Messiah. They were not sincere. Their request represents the national rejection of Jesus as their Messiah, and of the kingdom He was offering to establish on the earth.

From this point forward in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus will concentrate on His disciples. He will be getting them ready, not for their *positions* in the kingdom, but for their *persecutions* as they go about preaching the Gospel to establish His church on the earth as we await His Second Coming.

Instead of Jesus ruling the earth from King David's throne in Jerusalem, He says this:

Mar 8:31 And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

Talk about a spoiler alert. Nobody was ready for that.

The death of Christ on the Cross, and His resurrection from the dead, must always be at the heart of our preaching and teaching.

- Whatever else we might say about Jesus, we cannot overlook His victory, on the Cross, over Satan and sin and death.
- We must not overlook the empty tomb, which guarantees us our own resurrection from the dead to a glorified body fit for eternity in Heaven.

I like that Jesus was so straightforward. I know that may sound silly; of course He was straightforward. But, so often, when we are presenting hard truths, we tend to sugarcoat them a little.

Jesus didn't say, "Guys, things aren't going to pan-out in Jerusalem, so I'm going to a better place." No, He used the words "rejected," and "killed."

We should use plain, straightforward words, laced with compassion, when presenting the Gospel.

This was lesson number one for this new direction in ministry. It was a very short lesson; class was out early. Peter decided to have a little talk with Jesus.

Mar 8:32 He spoke this word openly. Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him.

Peter's eyes had been opened, and he had declared that Jesus was the Christ - the Messiah. Ask yourself: *Is this any way to talk to the Messiah?* If you really understood Who Jesus was, would you be trying to correct Him about God's plan of salvation?

It is definitely a case of partial sight. Peter's eyes had been opened - but we would say that he couldn't see the forrest for the trees, in that he could not perceive what Jesus was talking about.

While we are shaking our heads, and saying things about Peter like, "open mouth, insert foot," let me say this. We have a tendency to repeat his error, and we do, in fact, repeat it, some of us more than others.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying we don't acknowledge the Person and Work of Jesus, especially on the Cross. We do.

What I am saying is that we can ignore its implications for our lives. Look at verses thirty-four and thirty-five:

Mar 8:34 When He had called the people to Himself, with His disciples also, He said to them, "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.
Mar 8:35 For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it.

These verses, and those that follow to the end of chapter eight, will be our text next time we meet (Lord willing). For now we can say that anytime and every time we do not "deny" ourselves and "take up [our] cross and follow [Jesus]," **we are rebuking Him.**

Anytime, and every time, we "desire to save our lives," **we are rebuking Jesus.**

Anytime, and every time, I sin, or disobey God, or disagree with Him, **I am rebuking Jesus.**

Let's say I'm looking into the mirror of God's Word, beholding the beauty of the Lord. I come across information that I should not, for example, pursue a divorce from my spouse unless I have biblical grounds for it. But I say, "Lord, you want me to be happy, don't you?", and I pursue the divorce.

You've just taken the Lord aside, to rebuke Him.

Maybe I understand from the Word I am not to be committing sexual sin - which is a broad topic, but includes sex before marriage, or sex with someone who is not my spouse after marriage, or pornography, or homosexuality, and the like. But I say, "Lord, my situation is unique, and, after all, you made me this way," and I go on committing sexual sin.

You are effectively taking the Lord aside and rebuking Him.

Those are extreme examples. Anytime, and every time, we resist the Lord, or refuse to submit to Him, we are rebuking Him.

Jesus has one, standard response:

Mar 8:33 But when He had turned around and looked at His disciples, He rebuked Peter, saying, "Get behind Me, Satan! For you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men."

Don't think that this means Peter was somehow possessed by Satan. He was not.

His words would have reminded Peter of the wilderness temptation, when Satan tried to get Jesus off-task. Jesus finally said, "Away with you, Satan" (Matthew 4:10).

In other words, whenever we rebuke Jesus, we are acting like Satan - independently, by our own will, in opposition to the clearly stated will of God. It's not company we want to keep, or ever be associated with.

Peter was not being "mindful of the things of God, but of the things of men." In context, this meant that Peter was still expecting Jesus to establish the kingdom of Heaven on the earth.

Maybe Peter thought Jesus was depressed, and needed a pep talk to keep going. Maybe he thought all this talk of dying was an exaggeration of Jesus' discouragement.

For whatever reason, Peter promoted his own agenda, and his own preconceived ideas about Jesus.

Peter had a lot to learn. But learn it he would, as his vision grew progressively more accurate throughout his lifetime - especially after he received the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.

He saw through a glass dimly, but clearly enough that, at the end of his life, he requested his martyrdom be accomplished by being crucified upside down, because he did not think himself worthy to die in the same manner as his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

If you are believer, your spiritual eyes have been opened, and God is working in you to bring you to the place of perfect vision when you see His face.

You can still, however, *regress*, rather than make *progress*, in your walk with the Lord.

Perhaps another illustration that the Lord used would be helpful. The church in Laodicea had definitely regressed in their relationship with Jesus. Part of Jesus' letter to them reads,

Rev 3:17 ... you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing' - and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, **blind**, and naked...

Were the Laodiceans nonbelievers? Maybe; undoubtedly some were. Some of the language and description of them lends itself to their being spiritually dead in their trespasses and sins.

Other language in the letter from Jesus, however, points to their being saved. For example, Jesus says He will discipline them the way you discipline your own children.

I have to conclude that at least some of them were saved, even though terribly backslidden; or, as described in our context today, blinded.

The fix for a believer's blindness is for Jesus to apply an eye salve that only He can make. He says to the Laodiceans,

Rev 3:18 I counsel you to... anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.

The One Who offers this spiritual eye salve is the One Who used His spit, twice, to open blind eyes.

His eye salve, His ointment, is applied as we repent and turn back to Him. Having repented, we return to beholding His beauty, and allow Him to transform us into His image, and not some image of our own independent, and therefore selfish, thinking.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus.