

Are We Blind Too?

by Alistair Begg

Alistair Begg's sermon explores the theme of spiritual blindness and the division created by Jesus' teachings, emphasizing the need for humility and recognition of one's own sinfulness to attain true sight.

Duration: 38:50

Scripture: Isaiah 6:9-10, Matthew 6:33, Luke 16:19-31, John 3:19-20, John 9:39, James 1:21

Topics: "Spiritual Blindness"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes that the coming of Jesus into the world brings about a division among people. He explains that encountering Jesus and his claims forces individuals to make a decision. The speaker uses the example of the Pharisees questioning their own blindness to illustrate how people view themselves and Jesus. The sermon concludes with a prayer for God to teach and reveal Himself to the listeners through the Bible.

Transcript

We turn this morning to John chapter 9, which is page 759 in the church Bibles. John 9, page 759, and we read from verse 39. John 9, page 759, verse 39.

Read these three verses, and then we'll pray and study them together. Jesus said, For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see, and those who see will become blind. Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, What, are we blind too? Jesus said, If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin.

But now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains. Father, with our Bibles open before us, we humbly ask that you will come and by the Holy Spirit teach us from the Bible, show us our Savior, and show us ourselves, Lord, and then match us up for your glory and for our good, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

In the British Parliament, when the time comes for its members to vote, they ring what is called the division bell. Now, some of you are familiar with the phrase the division bell, but that is because you have an interest in Pink Floyd, and I'm not going to get into that with you this morning. I once was removed from a significant number of radio stations for mentioning the fact that I listened to Pink Floyd, so I shouldn't even mention it at all.

Especially when I think that we're being streamed now on the internet. But that'll be me again from another group. But anyway, the division bell to which I refer is a bell that is sounded within the precincts of Parliament, calling the members to a vote.

Something similar happens in Congress, but there is no special name for it--at least, I checked yesterday, and there wasn't yesterday. And it means that the members have about eight minutes to assemble themselves in the appropriate division lobby in order to vote for or against the resolution. And so, the notion of the bell and the sounding of the bell immediately calls the question.

And folks know it is decision time. I want to suggest to you that that is the most appropriate introduction that I can find for where we are this morning in relationship to these concluding verses of John chapter 9. Because by his coming into the world, Jesus, if you like, sounds the division bell. And this division is an inevitable division, and it is an unavoidable division.

Indeed, the inevitable consequence of the coming of Jesus is just that--division. To be confronted with the claims of Jesus is to find oneself at a crossroads. At a crossroads, one has to make a decision, and the way in which we turn defines so much that follows from it.

And this division, we have learned, runs all the way through John's Gospel. Classically, in chapter 3 and in verse 18--we noted it earlier in this study in John 9--whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. So what we discover is simply this--that the inevitable consequence of the presence of Jesus in the world is a separation--a separation between those who claim to have religious insight, even though they are in fact spiritually blind, and those who, conscious of the fact that they are blinded by sin, pray that they might be given the sight of which the sin inherent in their nature has robbed them.

And this contrast is clearly seen in this chapter. We have spent, obviously, the vast majority of time looking at the incident concerning the healing of the man born blind. This man was awakened to the fact of his spiritual blindness.

He might have thought that his greatest need in life was in order to have his physical sight restored, which, of course, Jesus had done. But when all is said and done, Jesus seeks him out in order to ask him a question--the question that is found in verse 35, "'Do you believe in the Son of Man?'" And the response of the man is eager. He is genuinely interested.

"'Who is he, sir?'" the man asked. "'Tell me so that I may believe in him.'" And he stands in direct contrast to the Pharisees, who refused to see what was right before their noses. They were the ones who claimed to have the sight, but they were in fact the ones who were blind to the truth.

So I say to you again, to be confronted by the teaching of Jesus is to find oneself standing at a crossroads. And this is not a truth that is tucked away in corners of the Bible but actually simply stands, as it were, in strategic positions all the way through the Gospel records. I was talking with someone earlier this morning about a baby that was born on Friday to Tom and Catherine Kipp--a little girl, Anna.

And I was thinking of all the joy that is in that, and people taking the little girl in their arms and making pronouncements about how her little features are and who she looks like and perhaps what she will become. And over the years, we have all engaged in that and observed that, and we've heard all kinds of things said about the children held in the arms of an older person. But none of us, I would suggest, have

ever heard anybody take a child in their arms and say what Simeon said when he took the child Jesus in his arms on the occasion that Mary and Joseph brought him for dedication at the temple.

Listen to what he said when he took the child Jesus in his arms. This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. What a strange thing to say about a baby--a thing that could be said, really, about no other child, for there is no other who fulfills the role that Jesus fills.

But the Pharisees refused to see this, and they did not like the division that was suggested. Jesus had declared that he didn't come to condemn the world--we saw that back in chapter 3. But he came to save. This is not some kind of contradiction.

In verse 39, Jesus said, For judgment I have come into this world. Some bright spark said, Well, I thought he said that he didn't come for condemnation. That's exactly right.

He didn't come for condemnation. But judgment is an inevitable consequence of the coming of Jesus. When the light shines, when the division bell sounds, as it were, those who come to the light find it to be the light of life, while those who refuse the light turn away into deeper darkness.

Now, it is for this reason that I have said to you in the past what I remind you of again now--namely, that it is a dangerous thing to sit and listen to the preaching of the Bible in Parkside Church. And the reason it is dangerous lies in the fact that if the teaching of the Bible, if the proclaiming of the good news does not soften your heart, it will harden your heart. If the teaching does not draw you to Christ, it will inevitably drive you from Christ.

When you resist the truth, when it is made clear to you, you leave the preacher with only one option--namely, to try again, and the next time to try and say it even more plainly than before. And in doing so, the preacher then exposes the listener to the risk of a further rejection of the good news, and that listener never knows when that rejection will prove to be the point at which their heart is hardened beyond recovery. I say to you that if in listening you remain unconverted, you are in a dangerous, vulnerable position.

That's the significance, is it not, of what we read as a sort of parallel passage in our Scripture reading from Isaiah chapter 6. If you care to turn to it, I'll remind you of it. If you don't, I'll quote it for you. Most of us, when we read Isaiah 6, only go as far as verse 8--the declaration of God, the revelation of himself, the response of Isaiah in humility and in contrition and in penitence, the question of God, Who will go for us, and who will I send?--the response of Isaiah, I'll go for you.

Will I do? I will go for you. And then usually that becomes the basis of a missionary talk, and they're calling people to serve Jesus and to go out, and a very valid missionary talk it is. But it goes on to verse 9, because once Isaiah says he was prepared to go, what a strange commission he receives! And God said, Go and tell this people, be ever hearing but never understanding, be ever seeing but never perceiving, make the heart of the people calloused, make their ears dull, close their eyes, otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.

What a strange thing to say! What a bizarre commission to be given to a prophet! How are we to understand that? Well, we're helped when we look at the five or so occasions in the New Testament where Isaiah 6 is quoted. But we're also helped by considering the way in which Isaiah responded to that

commission. What did he do? Did he take that commission and say, Okay, I get it.

What I'm supposed to do is make the story so complicated that most people won't be able to get it. Make it so complex and so convoluted that folks will be going, Oh, I don't understand that at all. No, he didn't do that.

What did he do? He made a commitment to clarity and simplicity--so much so that in chapter 28 of Isaiah, the reaction of people to his prophetic ministry is to say, Why is he treating us like kids? Verse 9 of Isaiah 28. Who is he trying to teach? To whom is he explaining his message? To children weaned from their milk? To those just taken from the breast? Why are you coming and speaking so plainly, speaking as if we were children, talking to us in such ABC language? Well, you see, he understands that by teaching with this clarity and with this simplicity, the imperatives of 9 and 10 in chapter 6 become the inevitable outcome of his ministry--that if the Word of God does not shine in to soften, it will shine, and it will bake your heart and harden it. If the rain of God's Word does not irrigate your soul and soften it up to receive the seed that is planted, it will harden it and make your heart like a corrugated tin roof.

If God's Word won't save you, what will? Some people are waiting for their own personal miracle--their own personal intervention. And what John tells us in chapter 12 is that even after Jesus had done all of these miraculous signs, still they did not believe in him. And then he goes on to quote exactly Isaiah chapter 6, verses 9 and 10.

It's the same thing that you have in the story that Jesus tells of the rich man and Lazarus, remember? And the rich man dies and goes to hell and looks over and can see Lazarus--it's a picture, it's a metaphor--and he cries out that there would be intervention in the lives of his brothers. And the response is, if... There's no point in anybody going to your brothers, because if they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, then they will not listen even though someone should rise from the dead. In other words, the confidence of heaven is in the Scriptures.

That's why James says, Humbly--James 121, I think, from memory--humbly accept the word planted in you that can save you. Today, if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts. If you think for a moment that you can hold the gospel as it is preached to you, at arm's length, in some kind of intellectual, critical detachment, then your very posture reveals the blindness of your own mind.

Jesus said, For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see, and those who see will become blind. There is a division, then, that is inevitable. Then we come, in verse 40, to the question asked by the Pharisees, which is a revealing question, insofar as it reveals how they saw themselves and it reveals how they viewed Jesus.

Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, What are we blind to? You're not suggesting that we're blind, are you, Jesus? You're not actually suggesting that we need to come to you so that we might have our sight restored. It doesn't occur to these characters that they could possibly be blind. It never does to people who are blind, you see.

One of the indications of your blindness is that you don't think you're blind. The indication that you're on the way to sight is in the awareness that you're blind. The first thing that the Bible does when the light shines is shows up the darkness.

And when the light shines in and shows up our blindness, then we know, unless someone makes me see, I am to remain forever blind. But the greatest blindness is the blindness that is wrapped up in religious formalism such as represented here by these Pharisees. They regard themselves as the guides of the blind.

You can read that in Romans 2. They regard themselves as a light that shines to those in the darkness. They regard themselves as instructors of the foolish. Paul mentions all of that when he is arguing to the point in Romans 3 where he says, And so the whole world is accountable before God, whether you are a Gentile coming from that background or whether you are a Jew feeling yourself to be the custodians of all of this truth.

And so it makes their question all the more striking, doesn't it? One can almost see the sneer on their faces. What, are we blind too? Sense the smugness of their tone, catch a flavor of the derision directed at Jesus. You can just see this.

You know that horrible feeling when you're in a room somewhere, and everybody else thinks they're in the know, and they ask a question, and they just are dissing you, and they look at one another like... You know, and you just feel so small and so impoverished by it all. That's what they're doing. They're looking at one another going, So, we're blind too, are we, Jesus? Yeah.

How blind they were! So blind! They didn't know how blind they were. They're like the man in Luke 18. Remember the parable Jesus tells of a Pharisee and the tax collector? And to those confident in their own righteousness and who looked down on everybody else, Luke says in Luke 18.

Jesus told the story. Context is clear, isn't it? To those who were confident in their own righteousness, to people who were sure they could see, to people who were dead certain that they were not the blind people. To those who were confident in their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, all those poor people who can't see, Jesus told the parable.

There were two men went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The people nudging one another, Here we go! Good guy, bad guy.

The classic Jesus story. There's a good fellow and a bad fellow. I wonder what this one's about.

And the Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself. God, I thank you, I'm not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers like this tax collector here. After all, I feist twice a week, I give a tenth of all I get.

People would be going, That's pretty good. Pretty good. Giving him marks out of ten.

Jesus said, But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but he beat his breast and said, God, have mercy on me, a sinner. And then the sting in the tail.

Jesus says, I tell you that this man, the tax collector, went home justified before God, for everyone who exalts himself, like the Pharisees who think they can see, will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. Do you remember the Simeon statement now, holding the baby in his arms? What did he say? This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel. Until a man or a woman falls at the feet of Jesus and says, I am a blind man, I am a blind woman, they will never rise to see.

As long as we sit in the supercilious perspective of the religious formalists declaring, You know, I have been around church for a long time. My Uncle Jim gave me a Bible when we were married. I know that because I saw it just the other day.

I hadn't seen it for years, but I know it's somewhere. You know, all that kind of thing. And I appreciate coming here to Parkside, and I know that there must be some real bums and ne'er-do-wells coming around here, because you keep banging on the importance of people coming to trust in Jesus.

But I'm so glad that I don't need to trust in Jesus. I'm so glad that I'm like the Pharisee in this story. I'm not like other men.

And actually, I've really upped my contribution since I came here as well, although I don't expect you to know much about that. Jesus turns the whole thing on its head. Oh, you're not suggesting that we're blind, are you, Jesus? You see, our response to Jesus shows what we think of ourselves.

And our response to Jesus shows what we think of Jesus. And what they think of Jesus is just, actually, that he is deluded, that he's a madman, that he's demon-possessed. We saw that before.

It comes again in chapter 10. Why listen to him, they said? He's demon-possessed and raving mad. And that, for me, is one of the great and intriguing things--how it is that people continue to come and listen to the Bible being preached, and actually, you've already made your decision concerning Jesus.

You've decided that Jesus was either deluded or he was deceitful. Unless you move from one of those two positions to acknowledge that he is who he is, that he is the light of the world, and that those who follow him will not walk in darkness, then you walk out into a darkness that is just completely utter darkness. Now, look at how Jesus answers.

Verse 39, there's a division. Verse 40, there's a question. And verse 41, there's an answer.

The answer that he gives is a puzzling answer. It's certainly not an easy little verse, is it? They were probably expecting Jesus to say, Yes, you are a blind bunch. Or, No, of course you're not blind.

You're the Pharisees. You have all the news strapped around your wrists and fastened on your forehead. You've got all the old testaments, Scriptures right there, right at your hand.

And they probably expected either a yes or a no. But instead of doing that, he does what he does so often. That is, he just reaches in and twists their noses a little bit by responding in what is a paradoxical fashion.

Now, let me just quote to you a Phillips paraphrase of this verse, because I think it will help us get the sense of it. Phillips paraphrases verse 41, which here reads, If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin. But now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.

It's like a really bad riddle, isn't it? You can say it to yourself fifteen times in a row and still not get it. But listen to how Phillips does it. If you were blind, returned Jesus, nobody could blame you.

But as you insist, we can see, your guilt remains. If you were blind, you couldn't be held accountable for your ignorance. That's what he said.

But since you insist you can see, your guilt remains. Now, if you think about it, these folks, of all folks, knew the characteristics of the Messiah who was to come. They were the ones who searched the

Scriptures.

They were the ones who paid attention to the prophetic passages. They knew Isaiah 42. They knew that one of the characteristics of the Messiah when he came was that he would open the eyes of the blind, he would release captives, he would set people free from dungeons.

And this has happened right in front of them. Jesus, in setting the man to see physically, has revealed the fact that he is the only one who can bring spiritual sight--that he has provided, as John says, one of the signs, evidence, so that people might believe that Jesus is the Christ, i.e., that they might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, that they might believe that all of the Messianic prophecies have been fulfilled in this man, and that by believing, they might have life in his name. And this has happened in front of them.

The man has said to them, Your unbelief is more remarkable than my cure, because we know that only God can do this. There is no record of anybody doing this, he says. God does this.

And before their very eyes, Jesus has done what God alone can do. If they'd been without any understanding of spiritual things, then, of course, there wouldn't have been blameworthy. But because they have a knowledge of this stuff, they're culpable because they are unwilling to see beyond the horizon, as it were, of the Old Testament.

And their condemnation lay in the fact that although they knew what they knew and claimed to see as well as they did, they failed to recognize God's Son when he came. Fulfilling what we read in the prologue, he came to his own, and his own received him not. But to as many as received him, who believed in his name, to them he gave the power to become the sons of God.

Now, what makes this so staggeringly telling, loved ones, is this--that their sin remains because until they admit to their true blindness and come into the light, there is no hope for comfort or forgiveness. And what is true of them is true of each of us this morning. Let me say two things as we move to a close on this.

There is absolutely no hope for those of us who are wise in our own eyes. There is no hope for those of us who are wise in our own eyes. Solomon puts it in Proverbs 26, 12, Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.

That's why the prophet says, Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom. Oh, I'm a PhD. I did nuclear physics as an undergraduate, and da-da-da-da-da.

Good! Bring that gargantuan brain and all that gray matter and bow it down before the Lord of the Earth. Okay. Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, or the strong man boast in his strength.

You know, I'm X years old, and I can still do X number of push-ups and sit-ups and run forty-seven times around the block and everything else. Well, that's terrific! Bring your body as a living sacrifice to the God who made you and offer yourself in service to him. No, I don't want to do that.

Okay. Let not the strong man boast in his strength, and let not the rich man boast in his riches. You know, I've done very, very well, and I can get into most clubs, and I travel extensively, and I have a home here and a home there.

Is your home built on rock, or is it built on sand? I don't know. Should be a good time to find out. There is no hope for those of us who are wise in our own eyes, and there is no cure for people who reject the only

cure there is.

There is no cure for people who reject the only cure there is. There's an inherent logic in this, loved ones. If Jesus Christ is Lord, if Jesus is the person he claimed to be, then his exclusive claims with his expansive invitations drive us to the inevitability of a conclusion which is reacted to vociferously in contemporary America, and in the West in particular.

There is no cure. I was reading Macbeth again this week, looking for something, and for two reasons, actually. The first was this.

When I thought about the nature of a cure, my mind went immediately to Lady Macbeth in the sleepwalking scene, when she is convinced of the fact that the blood that was on the daggers is still on her hands. And if you remember, she moves in the darkness of the night, talking to herself, longing for the spots to be out of her hands, recognizing that despite all of her physical washings, she cannot get it out. All the perfumes of Arabia could not get rid of this stuff, she says.

And she's driving herself almost insane, and she's driving her king husband completely nuts along with her, and so he does exactly what you would expect him to do. He takes her to the doctor, and he says to the doctor, "Cure her of that! Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased, pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow, raise out the written troubles of the brain, and with some sweet oblivious antidote cleave the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff which weighs upon her heart?" The doctor says, "Therein the patient must minister to himself. Sorry, no can do." And then he says, "More need she the divine than the physician! More need she the divine than the physician!" I would not be at all surprised if there are not those who today, sitting listening to me on one side of this great divide, as the bell is about to ring for us in the conclusion of this sermon, are not exactly as in Lady Macbeth's position.

Oh, the circumstance may not be bloody daggers, but it may be a myriad things. And all of your external washings, and all of your endeavors, and all of your perfumes, and everything that you've tried have left you absolutely hopeless. Let me tell you, there is no cure when you reject the only cure there is.

He breaks the power of canceled sin, and he sets the prisoner free. He is Jesus, sovereign Lord of the universe. He has demonstrated it in the transformation of this blind man.

He has confronted him with his need of spiritual sight. He has opened up a door of opportunity to the religious formalists, and they've sneered in their response. You're not saying, "We're blind, are you?" And so here we are, and the division bell sounds again.

The question is, will you respond by coming into the light, admitting your blindness, casting yourself on his mercy, and as a result find yourself seeing and saved? Or will you refuse to come to the light, claiming to hang on to your own personal sense of illumination? If you take the latter route, you go out into a darkness in which no light will ever shine." Who would be foolish enough to say such things to an intelligent group like this on the tenth of September? Well, of course, if I couldn't turn you to the Bible and point you to Jesus, you should just chase me completely out of town. And you are sensible people, and you need to figure this out. But here's the deal.

The division bell sounds. Go to your appropriate lobby. Where are you going? With a yes vote for Jesus or a no vote for Jesus? There's no abstentions.

An abstention is a no. A maybe is a no. I'll get back to it as a no.

Now! That's why the Bible always says, Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. Why? It is a call of God's mercy, because on another day you may not hear his voice. This may be the day you hear his voice.

Therefore, do something about it. I was in Carmel earlier last week. I was in the Santa Cruz Mountains speaking, and I went to Carmel.

In Carmel, I bought myself a knife in a knife store. More knives than I've ever seen. Tiny little knife.

Don't be alarmed by it. My wife was desperately concerned. I said, I want to buy a knife.

She said, What do you have in mind? I said, Don't worry. But it's a tiny little knife. I wanted to whittle sticks with it, as it turns out.

It's the Tom Sawyer coming out on me again. And in this store, there were so many knives that I said to the lady, The problem in here is the American problem. I said, It is the American problem, and it is the American wonder.

She said, Choice? I said, Choice. And so we got them out, one at a time, two at a time. At one point, I had five out, and then I went away and I had lunch, and then I came back and got them all out again.

And I said, You know, choice is such a difficult thing, isn't it? Just finally making a choice. Do you know what she said? Kierkegaard has a very interesting essay on that. Wow, I said! This is taking it up a notch! Kierkegaard, the existentialist from the nineteenth century.

Yes! Well, what did he say? She says, Kierkegaard said that even good choices had negative consequences. So hurry up and buy a knife! So I bought a knife. And then I said to my family, You know, Kierkegaard said, Very good choice.

And then one of the bright ones in the group said, I don't think Kierkegaard was absolutely right on that. What possible negative choice could there--what negative dimension could there be in choosing Christ as your Savior? I said, Yeah, I think that's right. So hurry up and make a choice, would you? Do you remember when Macbeth is getting ready to kill the king, King Duncan? And he's on his way, and parenthetically, the stage directions in the play say, a bell sounds.

A bell sounds. And Macbeth says, I go, and it is done. The bell invites me.

Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell that summons thee to heaven or to hell. See, Shakespeare understood the divide. There is no cure for those who reject the only cure there is.

Will you not come to Christ and say, Lord Jesus, I am a blind girl. I am a blind man, wise to my own destruction, foolish in my arrogance. Make me see.

Make me see. And he will. And when you begin to see, you will see everything differently.

Heaven above is softer blue, And earth around is sweeter green, And something lives in every hue That Christless eyes have never seen, And birds with gladder songs o'erflow, And earth with deeper beauty shine. Since I know, as now I know, I am his, and he is mine. Some of you could stand and testify, couldn't you, and say, you know, I'm so glad that I heard that message, because I used to be just completely lost.

I used to be completely blind, and even when I was blind, I thought I could see everything. Well, you may want to mention to the person next to you before you leave today. Just check.

Make sure. Just say, what side are you on of the divide here? What side are you on? Father, come now and write your Word in our hearts. Anything that is foolish or unkind or unwise or untrue may be banished from our recollection.

And what is of yourself, make it our own. I pray for many who sit as unconverted believers, that today they might hear your voice, not harden their hearts, and embrace Christ, who is the light of life. For it is in his name we pray.

Amen. That concludes this message. Thanks for listening to Truth For Life.

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