

Who Sinned?  
(Core text: John 9:1-41)

Lynne Gibson  
10 March 2023

In some ways, the entire ninth chapter of John reminds me of the children's game Monkey in the Middle. Remember that? A circle of people with a ball and someone in the middle of the circle. The object is for the person in the middle to try to get the ball away from the people in the surrounding circle. Here we have the blind man in the middle surrounded by the townspeople, his parents, and the Pharisees. The metaphorical ball they are all tossing around is the miracle of the man in the middle regaining his eyesight. Except in this circle, they occasionally toss the ball to the person in the middle, hoping to get a different answer from him.

The previous chapter of John has Jesus and his disciples in the temple, where the Pharisees are questioning Jesus as to who he really is. His answers do not make the Pharisees happy. At one point Jesus tells them that if they experience the truth, meaning his teachings, then that truth will set them free. In a moment of true irony, the Pharisees get all indignant and say that they have never been slaves to anyone. Um, hello? So what are the Romans doing in Jerusalem? The Pharisees get so angry—because in their minds, Jesus claims to be better than Abraham and above the law of Moses—that they take up rocks to throw at him, but he slips out of the temple.

Later, while still in Jerusalem, Jesus comes upon a man blind from birth. The disciples ask Jesus, “Who sinned? The blind man or his parents?” In Jesus's time, sin was an offense against the moral or religious law, and sin could be inherited. It was assumed that if the parents went against the laws of Moses, which the Pharisees upheld with zealous intent, that would explain a baby being born blind. In the Old Testament, “sinning” against the moral code of Moses was serious business.

Jesus responds by telling the disciples that they are looking at this all wrong. They need to stop thinking about blaming someone for what has happened and see the opportunity to act on God's behalf. Jesus makes a paste out of clay and spit, puts it on the blind man's eyes, and tells him to go and wash in the spring-fed pool of Siloam. The blind man does as Jesus says, and his sight is restored. Now the controversy starts.

The townspeople weigh in. What has happened here? They are used to seeing this blind man begging for his very sustenance, and now he is walking around and tells them, “I can see!” Is this really the man who used to sit and beg, or is it just someone who looks like him? The man assures the townspeople that, yes, he was the blind man they used to see begging, but now he can see. But they aren't satisfied, so they take the man before the Pharisees to be questioned.

The Pharisees listen to the townspeople and ask the man what he has to say for himself. The man says, “I was blind from birth, but Jesus put a paste on my eyes, told me to go and wash, and now I see.” In consternation, the Pharisees continue to question the man, because this has happened on the Sabbath. In Mosaic law, the Sabbath was a day when there was a whole host of prohibitions that the Jews needed to follow to stay on the right side of God, and making a paste and applying it to this man’s eyes was a violation of “keeping the Sabbath.” This is not the first time that Jesus has done something miraculous on the Sabbath and the Pharisees are fed up.

But the Pharisees are divided—much like the townspeople, but for different reasons. The townspeople doubt that the man was the same blind man who had been begging. The Pharisees doubt that the man had been blind at all and suspect that he is playing a big joke on them. They continue to question him over and over, and the man tells them the same story with no changes. This sways some of the Pharisees to think that a miracle has happened, and that Jesus must truly be from God. In verse 10 some ask, “How can a bad man do miraculous, God-revealing things like this?” But others are not satisfied, so they bring in the man’s parents to be questioned.

The parents identify the man as their son and affirm that he was born blind, but they say that they don’t know how he can now see. Again, the questioning happens. They don’t like the former blind man’s answers, and they tell him to say God—not Jesus—healed him. The man won’t do this; he believes Jesus must be from God or he wouldn’t have been able to restore his sight. Then the man says the absolutely wrong thing: “Why do you want me to tell you this again? So you can be his disciples?” Whoa, does that ever get their backs up! They say they are followers of Moses, and in their anger, they throw him out of the temple, calling him names because he dared to question them.

Jesus finds the man after he is cast out of the temple, and in verse 39 tells the man that he is working to heal those who have never seen, and that those who have made a great pretense of seeing will be exposed as blind. As you can imagine, some of the Pharisees overhear this and say, “Do you mean us?” And Jesus basically tells them, “If the shoe fits . . .”

Chapters 8–11 of the Gospel of John capture the time just prior to Holy Week, when it seems that Jesus was doing everything he could to make the Pharisees angry enough with him to kill him. Several times in these chapters, the Pharisees get so angry that they try to stone him, capture him, or entrap him, but he always slips away. In their anger, they aren’t organized enough to figure out what they will really do with him, and they also are afraid of the crowd of people who follow him.

So who sinned here? Under the moralistic Mosaic code, someone had to have displeased God for this man to be born blind. Some believe in original sin, that the man was born blind because of that. Remember how Job’s friends tried to get him to confess to sins, because they believed that the bad things happening to him wouldn’t have been happening if he hadn’t sinned? Don’t we still think that way sometimes? Who did what bad thing to make this other bad thing happen?

We know now that all manner of things can cause a baby to be born blind. I wasn't born blind in one eye because my parents sinned; my mother was exposed to German measles.

In the minds of the Pharisees, either the man was lying (sin), or Jesus was the sinner by not adhering to the Sabbath and by undermining their authority with the people. Jesus, to be fair, didn't strictly adhere to the Mosaic law and explained that his law was from a higher authority than Moses. Jesus saw the Pharisees as being spiritually blind and leading the people into spiritual blindness. Their blindness adheres to all the do's and don'ts of the law, but it leaves the poor and helpless uncared for. For Jesus, putting the law in front of human suffering was against God's law. How many times did Jesus say he was here to feed the hungry, find the lost, and care for the dispossessed? These were not things the Pharisees concerned themselves with. They were above all that; they were educated, and it was their job to feed rules—not bread—to people.

And so, even with the Protestant Reformation, the church continues to feed the people rules instead of bread. If you don't go to church on Sunday, you aren't a Christian. If you don't love a certain way, you aren't welcome. If you don't believe that the Bible is the word of God, you aren't a Christian. I could go on and on about the things that "Christians" say about what does or doesn't make you a Christian.

But Jesus says in Matthew 25:35–37 that to do his work means that “when I was hungry, you fed me. When I was thirsty, you gave me drink. I was homeless and you gave me a room. I was shivering and you gave me clothes. I was sick and you stopped to visit me. I was in prison, and you came to me.” And verse 40 says, “Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me.” That was me. Food, drink, shelter, health, freedom, and community—these are what the rules of the church should be. And the people who are telling you something else? Well, I just don't know.

The difference between Jesus and the Pharisees seems to be confidence and arrogance. Jesus talks confidently when questioned by the Pharisees: Love God, and love your Neighbor. The Pharisees agree that this is true in the law, but they aren't exhibiting confidence when they call the former blind man names and throw him out of the temple. In their arrogance, they refuse to believe anything but the law. And for them, I guess the law gives them comfort, because it insulates them from the needs of the poor. But it doesn't do much for the people who need more than the law for comfort. Jesus came to give us more. More grace, more forgiveness.

When Jesus was hanging on the cross and said, “Forgive them,” he wasn't talking only about the two criminals on either side of him. He was talking also about the Romans who carried out his crucifixion, the Pharisees who engineered his execution, and everyone in the crowd who cried “Free Barabbas!” He was talking about you, me, everyone, full stop, drop the mic. Amen.