

There is a rather interesting miracle that Jesus does just before our text here in Mark 8. He heals a blind man, but He does it in stages. First, He opens the man's eyes to see. But the man does not see rightly. He sees men, but they look like trees walking. Then, Jesus touches the man's eyes again, and his sight is fully restored. The man now sees things as they are.

We begin in this way because this miracle helps to explain our text. Jesus asks His disciples who people say that He is. "*John the Baptist,*" they reply, "*Some say Elijah, and others say one of the prophets.*" They are blind, totally blind to who Jesus is. The spiritual eyes of the people are not even partially open. They are completely closed. To them, Jesus is not even a tree walking around. They do not see Him at all. They have no spiritual sight.

Then Jesus puts the same question to His disciples, and they get it right. "*You are the Christ,*" says Peter. Their eyes are open. The disciples see Jesus for who He is. And this is astounding, because a few chapters before this in Mark's Gospel, after Jesus calms a great windstorm on the sea, the disciples say to each other, "*Who is this!*" Ah, now they know. Jesus is the Christ, the Promised Messiah. Their spiritual eyesight is fully restored.

But is it really? Because Jesus then teaches His disciples that He must suffer, be rejected by the Sanhedrin, be killed, and after three days be raised to life. And upon hearing this, Peter rebukes Him. Yeah really, Peter rebukes Jesus to His face. And the other disciples agree with Peter because Jesus turns to face all of them in rebuking Peter.

Their eyes, the spiritual eyes of the disciples are not fully open. They see Jesus. But they see Him as a tree walking around. They declare Jesus to be the Christ, yet they have no spiritual sight to comprehend what that truly means. Oh, their eyes are more open than the eyes of the people. At least they see Jesus. But they are like that blind man after the first stage of his healing. They need the second stage. They need to not only see Jesus as the Christ, but to believe what the Scriptures say the Christ must endure for sinners.

Let me ask you this, how is your eyesight? Are you fully able to see? Partially able to see? Or maybe not even see at all? Let's get our eyesight examined right now. Who do you say Jesus is? Any other answer besides the one Peter gives means that you and I are totally blind. We do not see Jesus at all if we do not see Him as the Christ, the Son of God, the Promised Messiah.

Did you pass the first test? If yes, good. At the very least, you are like Peter and the others in answering Jesus' question correctly. At least you are not totally blind.

But let's continue our spiritual eyesight test. What does it mean that Jesus is the Christ? To get this question wrong is to be like that blind man after his first stage of healing. It would mean that you see Jesus, but you see Him as a tree walking around.

What, then, is your answer? Peter and the other disciples saw Jesus as the Christ, but for them it meant triumph over His enemies, yet not through suffering, rejection, and death.

Is your answer that, as the Christ, Jesus must suffer, and die on the cross, and be raised? That is the correct answer. That is what it means for Jesus that He is the Christ. But now I must ask, what does it mean for you? What does it mean for you that Jesus is that Suffering Servant who dies and rises on the Third Day? This question determines whether you have full spiritual eyesight, or whether you can only partially see.

*“If anyone would come after Me,”* says Jesus, *“let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me.”* That is what it means for you and me that Jesus is the Christ. If Jesus is not the Christ, why would we follow Him? If Jesus is only a tree walking around, why should we deny ourselves and take up our cross? But if He is the Christ, then we will. We will deny ourselves, and take up our cross and follow Him.

And if we follow Jesus, we cannot follow ourselves. We cannot be our own god if Jesus is our God. And if He is our God, the Christ we follow, then we will deny ourselves instead of denying Him. This means we will repent. We will turn away from what we want to embrace what Jesus gives us, even if that is suffering for His sake.

But if we aren't even willing to give up some of our time for Jesus, some of our money for Him, and give up our favorite sins and vices for Him, how is that being repentant? That means, rather, that we are unwilling to deny ourselves, and instead we deny Jesus; that we are unwilling to follow Him, following instead what we want in life.

This is Lent. This is the time for Jesus to fully restore our spiritual sight. In Lent, our Gradual reminds us to fix our eyes on Jesus. As we do, we see Him not as a tree walking, but as He who was nailed to a tree for us. Jesus denied Himself for you. He refused to save His life to save yours. Jesus knew well the intense suffering that He would have to endure. And yet with joy He walked the road to the cross. He did that for you. His joy was in suffering and dying in your place.

This is why He calls us to repent, to deny ourselves. Because He, the Christ you follow, has joy in forgiving you. Nothing delights Jesus more. Do not be ashamed to admit that you have failed to deny yourself, denying Jesus instead. Jesus does not deny you for this. He forgives you. Remember who you are. Your baptism marks you forever as His dear child. When you go astray, He does not reject you as He was rejected. He gently calls you back to Himself.

He is doing that right now. You and I have gone our own way in life. But Jesus' way is the way of mercy, the way of the cross where His blood was shed for you. He does forgive you, my friend, because He is the Christ, and that is what the Christ does. He suffers, He dies, He forgives. Having this before your eyes, you are fully able to see. And so, you will take up your cross and follow Him. Amen.