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Seeing Jesus Clearly: A Sermon from Mark 8:22–33

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As we continue our study through the Gospel of Mark, we find ourselves face-to-face with one of the strangest stories in all of the New Testament. It is certainly one of the oddest miracles in the ministry of Jesus and the most baffling event in the Gospel of Mark. That is saying a lot considering we have already seen Jesus cast demons out of a lunatic and into pigs that run squealing head-first into the sea. The story we come to this morning is one of those moments in the life of Jesus that startles us, leaves us unsure what to think, and just hoping that no one will ask us about it. But our commitment to walking through books of the Bible forces us to deal with it and, as always, the digging required to discover the meaning produces diamonds of great value. Turn with me as I read Mark 8:22–33.

²²And they came to Bethsaida and they brought a blind man to Jesus and implored Him to touch him. ²³Taking the blind man by the hand, He brought him out of the village; and after spitting on his eyes and laying His hands on him, He asked him, “Do you see anything?” ²⁴And he looked up and said, “I see men, for I see them like trees, walking around.” ²⁵Then again He laid His hands on his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and began to see everything clearly. ²⁶And He sent him to his home, saying, “Do not even enter the village.” ²⁷Jesus went out, along with His disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way He questioned His disciples, saying to them, “Who do people say that I am?” ²⁸They told Him, saying, “John the Baptist; and others say Elijah; but others, one of the prophets.” ²⁹And He continued by questioning them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered and said to Him, “You are the Christ.” ³⁰And He warned them to tell no one about Him. ³¹And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²And He was stating the matter plainly. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke

Him. ³³But turning around and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s.” (NASB)

The story begins normally enough, but the longer it goes, the stranger it becomes. Jesus and His disciples came to Bethsaida. Someone brought a blind man to Jesus and implored Him to touch him. At this moment, Jesus did what any of us would do in this situation. Jesus takes him by the hand, leads him out of the city, spits in his face and touches him. We all know that’s exactly what to do when confronted with someone who needs to be healed. Oddly enough, this is not the first time Jesus has done this. In Mark 7 Jesus stuck his fingers in a man’s ear and then proceeded to touch his tongue with His saliva. This is also not the strangest part of Mark 8. The odd part is not that Jesus spits in the man’s face; it is what happens next.

In verse 23, Jesus says something shocking: “Do you see anything?” This is a question you do not expect Jesus to ask. We expect him to make an authoritative statement that the man has in fact been healed. Instead, Jesus asks the man, “Do you see?”—as if to say, “Did the miracle work?”

This is strange for a number of reasons. First of all, Jesus usually knows when something works, and it usually works! Miracles are not really a problem for Jesus. As we read this question, we almost wonder if Jesus was going through a bit of a slump in his miracle working. Maybe He had tried one a few days before in front of a lot of people, and it didn’t go so well. Now, He is a little bit nervous. He doubts his abilities. So, instead of taking a chance in front of a crowd of people, he leads the man out of the city, tells the man that He will try, and does it with a bit of a “here goes nothing” mentality. And after he tries, He sheepishly says, “Do you see anything?”

What is even stranger than Jesus’ question is the response of the blind man. Verse 24 tells us that the man says, “I see men, for I see . . .” Let’s stop right there. The blind man who was brought to Jesus can now see. He says twice that he can see. “I see men.” “I see.” Obviously, something miraculous just happened. Jesus touched the man and he was healed. Or was he? The man continues and says, “I see men, like trees, walking around.” Either this man has found himself in a village surrounded by very large men with extra extremities, who look like trees, or perhaps somehow the man is seeing, but he is not seeing clearly. At the end of verse 24, we find a man that has been healed—sort of. His sight is restored—partially. He can see—but not clearly.

So, Jesus goes at it again. Verse 25 tells us that Jesus looked at the man intently, “Then again He laid His hands on his eyes . . .” At the end of the verse, it says, “and he began to see everything clearly.” The second work of Jesus seemed to fully heal the man. Jesus, aware that the man had been healed, tells him not to go back to the village and not to tell anyone what happened. After two attempts, the man finally sees clearly and went away with clear instruction.

This is a strange story. What do we do with a story like this? Well, we have a few options.

Option Number One

I admit that this is not an academic option. I have never seen it in a commentary, but it seems the most obvious. Maybe the reason the man could not see is because he had spit in his eyes. After all, Jesus did just spit in his eyes and then ask if he could see. Sure, he can see, but it is a little blurry with spit in his eye. Jesus wipes it out and there you have it—perfect sight. I admit this is not a great option, but it is an option.

Option Number Two

Maybe this was a very tough case of blindness. There is Bartimaeus blindness in chapter 10, and there is Bethsaida blindness in chapter 8. Bethsaida blindness is a tougher kind of blindness, and it just takes a couple attempts—even for Jesus.

Option Number Three

Could it be that Jesus was making a statement about modern medicine? I would never have thought of this myself but someone recently sent me an article from a Christian medical journal using this text to point to a condition called agnosia. A person is able to see, but the brain is not communicating with the eyes. They see, but not clearly. This condition was just discovered recently. Maybe Jesus was letting us know that He knew about this medical condition before anyone else knew about it. It is a decent option, but it is interesting to me that Jesus might be making a point that would not be understood for 2000 years. It does not seem like the best option.

Option Number Four

Or could it be that Mark has placed this story right here in Mark 8—a story that he alone records—as an illustration of a point he is trying to make. Could it be that there is a deeper meaning to this story that *we* cannot yet see clearly?

Well, before looking at the best option, let's move on and leave this story for now. We will come back and try to answer some of these questions in a moment. As we move from the *strangest* story in the Gospel of Mark, we go on to the most *climactic* moment in the gospel of Mark. Thus far, everything in the Gospel of Mark has been leading up to this moment in Mark 8:27–30.

As we have seen over the past few months, in chapters 1–8, Mark is trying to answer one question, and one question alone: Who is this man named Jesus? In chapter 1, he answers the question four times. He answers it when John the Baptist says He is the Messiah. He answers it when the Father opens up heaven and declares Him as His Son. He answers it when Jesus says, “The time is at hand; the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the gospel.” The question is even answered when Jesus walks from

the temple and is confronted by the demons, who say, “We know exactly who You are, you Holy One of God.” Over and over, Mark is attempting to answer this question. The only problem is that no one seems to get it. No one seems to understand who Jesus is.

This is certainly clear in the third chapter of Mark. To the crowd Jesus is a fascinating man who does a lot of wonderful things. They are convinced it is worth keeping an eye on him. To the religious leaders Jesus is an infuriating man who does a lot of frustrating things. They are convinced he is demonic. To his family he is an embarrassing man. They are convinced he has gone insane. They are so convinced of his insanity that they go and try to take him back home by force. And the disciples, who of all people should understand, do not know what to think about him. They are confused. It becomes more evident with every chapter that He is the Messiah, and it seems with every chapter that the disciples are more and more clueless.

Think about chapter 4. Jesus calms the sea, gets into the boat, and the disciples look at Him and say, “Who is this man?” In chapter 6, Jesus feeds 5,000 people, walks on the water, and meets them in the boat. They are terrified by Jesus’ power over the sea because they “gained no insight from the incident of the loaves.” They did not get any closer to understanding who Jesus was, even from watching Him miraculously feed the 5,000.

Chapter 8 is an even more startling example of the disciples’ lack of understanding. Prior to this text we are considering in this message, Jesus feeds 4,000 people. Remember, he has already fed 5,000. This is the second time they have watched Jesus miraculously feed a multitude of people. After the miracle, He has an interaction with the Pharisees. Jesus and the disciples get into the boat. He is talking to them about the leaven of the Pharisees and giving them some important kingdom principles, but they are not listening to Him. They are distracted. In 8:16 we learn they are not listening because “they began to discuss with one another the fact that they had no bread.”

I do not know everything the disciples *should* have known by this point, but one thing seems certain: they should have known that coming up with bread is not a problem for Jesus. If Jesus can do anything, He can come up with bread. He has already miraculously provided for 5,000, then for 4,000. Jesus multiplies bread well. There are 13 people in the boat, and 12 of them could not concentrate on what Jesus was saying because they were so worried about the fact that they do not have enough bread for their short trip. This is shocking. How could they be worried about bread?

The following verses show that Jesus was obviously not pleased with their lack of understanding. He actually unleashes on them in verse 17 with a series of eight questions. *Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart? Having eyes, do you not see? Having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember how many baskets full of broken pieces you picked up when I broke the five loaves for the five thousand? When I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many large baskets full of broken pieces did you pick up?* Then, in verse 21, He looks at them

and says, “*Do you not yet understand?*” When we read this question, we can almost feel the intensity, the echo of that question ringing in the air, and a daunting silence that followed.

The answer to Jesus’ final question is clearly, “NO.” They do not yet understand. They do not understand who He is. They appear to be completely blinded to the reality that they were in the boat with the promised Messiah.

It is at this very moment, as the question is still echoing, that the text moves immediately to this strange healing story. Back to that in a moment, but first we come to that climactic moment in verses 27–30. It says that Jesus was going out with his disciples about 25 miles to Caesarea Philippi. On the way Jesus was discussing something with them. If you mark in your Bible, circle that little phrase *on the way*. It becomes quite significant. This phrase is never used in Mark until 8:27. From 8:27 to the end of chapter 12, it is used nine different times. We will see why in a moment.

As they are walking, Jesus says to them in verse 27, “Who are people saying that I am?” They answer, “Some say you are John the Baptist, others say you are Elijah. Some even think you are one of the prophets.” It is interesting to note that the disciples do not say that some think He is the Messiah. Most people were not thinking He was the Messiah. This was not one of the opinions expressed in chapter 3. They were looking for something different than this in a Messiah. They believed the Messiah was going to be a superhero who would come and destroy what they felt was their most oppressive enemy—the Romans. They were not looking for a servant who would die because they failed to see that their worst enemy was the wrath of God, and the sin that was confronting them. They wanted a military leader, not a suffering Savior. They were not expecting a Messiah like Jesus.

Jesus gets a little more pointed in verse 29. After asking who everyone else says He is, Jesus says, “Who do *you* say that I am?” Then, out of the blue, right after Jesus unleashes eight questions to oblivious disciples who clearly do not understand who He is, Peter completely shocks us. Peter, without any hesitation, declares, “You are the Christ.” This is a huge statement, not just for Peter but for any Jew. When Peter declared his belief that Jesus was the Christ, he declared his belief that Jesus was the Promised One from Genesis 3:15. Peter was essentially saying, “We believe that you are the anointed One, the anointed prophet, the anointed priest, and the anointed king. We believe that every prophet, priest and king in the Old Testament was simply a type of the One who was to come. And you are the One! You are the One for whom all of us have been waiting. We believe you are the Messiah.” This is an incredible moment! It seems that Peter, as the representative of the disciples, actually finally begins to see. It is almost as if the veil is lifted. All of a sudden, the disciples see Jesus!

Immediately after Peter’s declaration, in verse 30, Jesus warns them not to tell anyone about Him. This seems like an odd time to tell them that. Why would He not want them to tell when they finally understand that He is in fact the promised Messiah? What happens next answers that question.

Look what happens in verses 31–33, right after Peter makes his declaration, and Jesus warns them not to tell. Verses 31–32 say, “And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he was stating the matter plainly.”

Do you know the reason verse 31 says, “He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer”? It is because Jesus had never talked to them about suffering before this time. It is not until they finally realize that He is the Christ that Jesus begins to tell them He is going to suffer, be rejected and die. He states this three times in Mark 8, 9, and 10. In Mark 8–10, He is not trying to get them to understand that He is the Messiah; He is trying to get them to understand what kind of Messiah He is.

Now, they should have known this. As a matter of fact, in Luke 24 and in 1 Peter 1 we are told that the Old Testament points us to the suffering of the Messiah. But friends, this is all new to them. They do not see this coming. They finally understand He is the Messiah, which is a major breakthrough. But their preconceived notion of what the Messiah would be like did not fit with what Jesus was now saying. This is more than obvious from what Peter does in verse 32. It says, “And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him.” You have to appreciate the boldness of Peter. Even if unbelievably inadvisable, this comment was courageous and filled with sensitivity. He wanted to rebuke Jesus, but he did not want to do it in front of everybody. That would be rude. So he did the kind, gracious thing and took Jesus aside to rebuke Him privately. We do not know what Peter said, but it must have been something like this: “Jesus, look at me. Look me in the eye. I want you to repeat after me: I am the Messiah. I am the Messiah. Jesus, say this after me: I am not defeated. I will not be killed. I will destroy my enemies. I will not be defeated. Come on, Jesus. That’s enough pitiful, sad, defeated talk. Let’s get going here. You are the Messiah. We finally believe it. Let’s go knock out some teeth.” Whatever Peter might have said at that moment, he graciously took Him aside to do it privately.

Jesus does not return the favor. In verse 33, it says, “But turning around and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s.” Wow! This is a harsh statement. Anytime that Jesus calls you Satan, it is a bad day. This is a hard thing that Jesus said.

Why would Jesus respond so strongly to Peter? There is one reason. It is because Jesus is *on the way*. You see, when it says in verse 27 that Jesus is *on the way*, it is not referring to Jesus traveling to Caesarea Philippi. When this phrase is used, it is stated nine times, all the way through chapter 12. Every time it is used, it tells us about a Jesus who is setting his face like flint toward Jerusalem. Jesus has come to die. He is going to die. He is going to accomplish the mission the Father sent Him to accomplish. He is going to be obedient to the will of God, and no one—not even good-hearted Peter—will stop Him from doing what God has sent Him to do. He is a man who

is on His way. He is focused. He knows exactly where He is headed. He is headed to the cross.

It is clear that the reason Jesus says that Peter has his mind set on man's interests and not God's is because Peter had created *his own idea* of who Jesus should be. He had his own idea of who he wanted Jesus to be. The only problem is that his idea of the Messiah was not the right idea of the Messiah. It is not who Jesus was. Peter said, "Jesus, you can't talk like this. It does not fit in with my idea of You." But Jesus did not care about Peter's idea of Him. Jesus had come as a suffering servant, and no one would get in His way. "Peter, if you are trying to get in my way, get behind Me. I will suffer. I will die. I will give my life as a ransom for many." Peter understood that Jesus was the Messiah, but did not understand what He had come to do.

So, what about the story of that blind man? Let me try to answer a few questions about him by asking you some questions. At this moment, did the disciples know that Jesus was the Messiah? Yes, they declared it. And what an amazing moment it is when they finally get the point that Jesus is the Messiah. We see the veil lifted, and they finally see Jesus. But, let me ask you, do they understand what kind of Messiah He is? Not at all. That is clear from Peter's open rebuke. Listen, when we come to the end of verse 33, we realize that the disciples may know that Jesus is the Christ, but they do not have a clue as to what kind of Christ He is. In other words, the disciples finally see Jesus, but they do not see Him clearly.

Let me remind you that, in his Gospel, Mark spends eight chapters trying to answer one question: Who is Jesus? Every chapter and every verse leads up to the climactic moment in 8:29 where he answers it: Jesus is the Christ. The question is answered. He never goes back to this question. The answer is: He is the Christ. Up to this moment, they know He is the Christ, but they do not yet understand what kind of Christ He is. But from this moment on, to the end of the Gospel of Mark, he is trying to answer a new question. The new question is: What kind of Christ is He? That is a question they clearly need to have answered.

And right here, literally at the center of the Gospel of Mark, when Mark is transitioning from one question to another, when the disciples see—but do not see clearly, we have this strange, often over-looked or intentionally skipped story of a man who could see, but not clearly.

Do you know the reason this story is literally at the center of the Gospel of Mark? It is because this story is the *hinge* on which the entire Gospel of Mark swings. The point of the story is simply this: The disciples are at a stage where they see Jesus, but do not see Him clearly. Do you know the reason Jesus tells them not to tell anyone about Him? It is because the last thing Jesus wanted was His disciples going from town to town spreading a shallow, incorrect, and unclear picture of who He was. He knows they see, but they do not see clearly. The last thing He wants is for them to go out and share with people an unclear picture of Jesus—their *idea* of Jesus, not the real Jesus. Just like the blind man from Bethsaida, they see, but they do not see clearly.

You might be thinking to yourself that although this has been an interesting story and a fascinating look at the Gospel of Mark, what in the world does this have to do with me? The reality is that it could have everything to do with you.

Sadly, we live in a time and a culture in which many churches are filled with people just like the disciples in Mark 8. Our American churches are filled with people who like Jesus, are fascinated with Jesus and are familiar with the things He has done. Yet, they do not know Him, nor do they see Him clearly. Many of them, just like the disciples in Mark 8, have created their own picture of Jesus. As a result we find ourselves surrounded by people who call themselves Christians, yet they fail to see that you cannot inherit the promises of Christ without trusting the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Instead of trusting in Christ, they trust in thousands of personal experiences. Instead of trusting wholly and completely in the atoning, finished work of Christ on the cross, they see Jesus from afar, acknowledge the great things He has done, yet never personally trust His death as the all-sufficient means by which they must be saved. They see Him, but they do not see Him clearly.

We face another problem as well. Our churches are often filled with people who fail to see the inseparable connection between the life that Jesus lived and the life He calls His followers to live.

We see a pattern that emerges as we look at what takes place in Mark 8. Three times this happens: once in chapter 8, once in chapter 9, once in chapter 10. Jesus predicts His suffering for the first time and is rebuked by disciples who do not understand. Then what does Jesus do? Look at verses 34–38. He tells them that He is not just telling them about His life; He is telling them about their lives. Jesus tells them that He is not the only One who must suffer. Anyone who wants to come after Him must deny himself, take up his cross and follow Him. Whoever wishes to save his life must lose it. The only way you are going to save your life is if you lose it.

In chapter 9, we find Jesus once again predicting His suffering. While He is predicting His suffering—by the way, it says while they are “on the way”—the disciples are debating which one is going to be the greatest. They still do not get it. Jesus then stops and tells them that this is not just the road He is going to walk; this is the road they must walk. I am a servant, and you must be a servant as well.

In chapter 10, Jesus predicts His suffering. While He is predicting His suffering, James and John come to Him asking if, in His glory, they can sit on His right and on His left. They still do not get it. Jesus told them it was not His to give them the positions on His right and left, but they must drink the cup that He must drink and must be baptized with His baptism.

In Mark 10:45, he tells them what they do not yet understand. Even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many. How is it, men, that you do not understand that if even the Son of Man does not come to be served, you should not expect to be served

either? Here is the point Jesus is trying to make to His disciples in the latter part of Mark: *The call to discipleship is a call to follow Jesus.*

This is why in chapter 8 He says if you want to be my disciple, you must follow Me. He is saying that you must not only embrace and trust in the death of Jesus Christ; you must also embrace the life and suffering of Jesus Christ. The failure of the disciples is that they do not see Jesus' death, nor do they see His life, clearly. As a result, they do not clearly see what it means for them to trust and follow Jesus. Their blindness to the suffering and rejection of Jesus leads to their blindness to the reality that they must also suffer and be rejected if they want to follow Him.

I do not know where we went wrong, where we took a turn. But somewhere it happened that people in our churches began to believe that you can enter through the small gate and never walk the narrow path, that you can somehow accept His death but never embrace His life. Do you know the saddest part of all? They heard that gospel from the church. Here is what they heard. If you will just repeat after me, and if you will embrace these facts about Jesus' death, you can be sure that no matter what your life looks like, you will spend eternity in heaven with Christ. The problem is that now I stand before people every week who believe their eternity is secure because they affirmed some facts about Jesus' death. Yet they know nothing about embracing his death. They know nothing about embracing His life. They fail to see the inseparable connection between not only entering by faith through the small gate, but by faith walking the narrow path. Oh, how it grieves me beyond measure to know that I am talking to people who will never see their need for Christ because they think they have something they do not actually possess. This is exactly why preaching an unclear picture of Jesus is a dangerous thing to do.

Or could it be that some of you, like Peter, are worshiping a Jesus that does not exist? Could it be that some of you have created your own picture of Jesus that, although nice, is not reality—a Jesus who asks you to *believe* in His death but does not require that you *follow* Him in His death. How sad it would be to embrace a wrong picture of Jesus in life and die and spend eternity separated from Him! I beg you, on Christ's behalf, trust Jesus' death on the cross alone as the payment for your sins and submit to Him as the Lord of your life. Trust His death and embrace His life. Make sure that you not only see Jesus, but that you see him clearly.

My friends, if we do not see Jesus clearly, we do not see Jesus at all. We do not have the freedom to create a Jesus who is more palatable to our way of living and our way of thinking. I cannot help but wonder if there is someone who sees Jesus, but not clearly. You believe that He is in fact the Son of God, the promised Messiah, the One who has come to seek and save the lost. You see Jesus. But the question is: "Do you see Him clearly?"