

I played golf this week. I love golf...and I hate golf. Golf is a game that seduces you. I mean you can be a bad golfer like me but make just enough good shots to think you can actually play the game and should keep at it. But then you go out and play worse than you did the last time. Or you can be a really good golfer and yet there's always something you can improve on. So whether you're good or bad, you're never completely content because there's always something more out there; you're always chasing that carrot. Maybe that's why Mark Twain called golf nothing more than a "long walk spoiled."

In some ways, the Christian life is like playing golf. Whether you feel you're good or bad at it, there's always something more. You never quite feel like you've got it nailed down. You're always a work in progress.

We're in this series called, "Worth It: Listening to the Voice that Matters Most." We've learned in this series when we come to Jesus and put our faith and trust in him; we gain a whole new identity. We become saints who've been chosen by God, redeemed by the Son, and sealed by the Holy Spirit. We learned last week we're even united with Christ in his death and resurrection. Christ is our life; our lives are now hidden with Christ who's seated at the right hand of God. But we know that even though all of that's true of us, we're still very much a work in progress. And sometimes that process is frustrating. Like golf, sometimes we feel like we're not making any progress at all.

Jesus Heals a Blind Man in Two Stages

I'd like us to look at a story that illustrates this, found only in Mark's Gospel. It's a story that's absolutely unique among all the stories we have about Jesus.

They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, "Do you see anything?" He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around." Once more, Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Jesus sent him home, saying, "Don't even go into the village." Mark 8:22-26

Why is this story absolutely unique in its own right?

- It's not unique because of the miracle. We know from the other Gospels Jesus healed several blind people during his three-year ministry.

- Nor is it unique in that this man was brought to Jesus by his friends; several people came to him with the help of others.

- Nor is it unique because of the methods Jesus used. While it seems awfully strange for Jesus to spit in this man's eyes, Jesus also used his spit in the healing of a deaf man in chapter 7.

- Finally, it's not unique because of this command to go straight home instead of entering the village and telling everyone about what just happened. On several occasions, Jesus instructed those healed to keep a lid on what he'd done.

None of these things are what make this miracle unique. The unique thing about this miracle is it took place in two stages. In every other miracle Jesus performed, there was an instantaneous healing. Sometimes it took place by his touch, at other times it took place by his command, but it always took place immediately. But here Jesus begins by spitting on the man's eyes. And then, as if he wasn't sure of the outcome, he asks him, "Do you see anything?" It's almost like Jesus isn't sure if the miracle really took, and so he has to check with his patient. The man replies, "I see people; they look like trees walking around." In other words, his sight is only partially restored. Everything is very blurry. And then Jesus again lays his hands on the man's eyes, after which he's able to not just see but to see everything clearly. This guy didn't get his sight back; he got 20-20 vision!

Why A Two-Stage Healing?

The question is, why didn't Jesus get it right the first time? I've heard a couple of explanations for this.

- Some say this reveals the humanity of Jesus. Jesus wanted to heal him instantaneously and tried to, but somehow, he couldn't. Perhaps he was tired, or maybe this was a particularly stubborn case of blindness. I can't accept that theory. Jesus was the Son of God and had the power to deal with any situation.

- Others say it wasn't Jesus' power that was lacking, but it was the faith of the blind man that was lacking. Certainly, faith is important, but there's really nothing in the story itself to suggest this man's faith was lacking. Neither of these theories are adequate.

Rather, this two-staged healing is a deliberate act on the part of Jesus. No doubt, he's trying to teach the blind man something, but more importantly, there are lessons in this for the disciples and for us.

In order to understand what's going on, we have to look at the surrounding passages (context). Earlier in chapter 8, Jesus fed 4,000 people with just seven loaves of bread and a few small fish. It was an amazing miracle, and the disciples not only had a front-row seat, but they were the ones who passed out the food.

And then quite soon after that Jesus and his disciples jumped in a boat and traveled to the other side of the lake. On the way, the disciples realize they only brought one loaf of bread, and they started to freak out. Listen to what Jesus says to them,

“Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?” (Mark 8:17-18a)

Jesus bemoans the fact the disciples had eyes but didn't see. You might say, they were still blind. And it's no coincidence the next story is about this blind man who personifies the spiritual blindness of the disciples.

But we also should look at the story immediately following the healing of this blind man. Jesus is alone with his disciples and asks,

“Who do people say I am?”

They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.” Mark 8:27b-30

Peter was right. Peter's eyesight was getting better. He was like the blind man who after Jesus spat and laid hands on him the first time, he saw but didn't see clearly yet. More clarity was needed. What was it that Peter and the disciples didn't see yet?

Right after Peter makes his great confession, Jesus began to teach them that he must be rejected, suffer, and be killed. But Peter would have none of that. He pulled Jesus aside and rebuked him! That's when Jesus looked Peter in the eyes and said, “Get behind me, Satan.” Peter saw, but he still didn't see clearly. Like the blind man, his vision was blurred. He saw Christ as a wonder-working Messiah, which he was, but he hadn't yet come to see how pain, suffering, and rejection were part of the equation. For that clear vision, Peter and the rest of these men would need another touch from the Lord. They saw he was the Messiah, but they didn't see that the Messiah must suffer.

We Are All A Work In Progress

So, what do we learn from this? And what does this have to do with our identity in Christ? Again, we've learned in this series when we come to Jesus and place our faith and trust in him; we gain a whole new identity. We're holy ones. We're chosen, redeemed, and sealed. We died with Christ and have been raised up with him to new life.

But even though all of that's true of us, we're still very much a work in progress. We see, but we don't see clearly yet. Like the disciples, we can be very close to Jesus, but still not see him clearly. We can go to church for decades, and still see people that look like trees walking. The sad thing is, sometimes we're content with that. You see, Jesus wants to transform our spiritual eyesight. But sometimes we're content with just a little improvement. I mean, after the initial partial healing, the blind man may have thought now he could get a job, have a family, live a productive life. He could have walked away, content with partial eyesight: “Wow! I can see better than I used to. I may not see things very clearly, but at least I can see! See ya' later, Jesus. Thanks for your help!”

But, you see, the work God is doing in our lives is ongoing, and most of us need to change a lot more than we think. We may be satisfied with a little improvement, but God is after complete transformation.

- We're satisfied by getting out of a single bad relationship, but God wants to bring our entire sexuality under his lordship.
- We want to overcome a single addiction, but God wants to go deeper and help us see why we started using in the first place.
- We realize we're overworking and try to reprioritize our schedules, but God wants to show us we're deriving far too much of our sense of significance from our work.
- We want just to get rid of our anger, but God wants to teach us how to love and forgive, even our enemies.

God wants to transform our lives into the image of Jesus, not just improve us. Have you ever been at a restaurant and seen a mom trying to clean her three-year-old's face with a napkin? Three-year-olds have a way of getting most of what they're trying to eat smeared onto their face: cheese, meat, ketchup — all mixed with a runny nose. Nevertheless, I've never seen a three-year-old who loves to have their faces wiped. So, mom has to take one hand and hold the kid's head so he can't squirm away, and with the other hand, she has to wipe this moving target. Kids hate it. “Stop! Why are you doing this to me? No!” But moms never stop until that face is clean.

And neither does God. I've experienced it time and time again. I think I've dealt with an issue, and I don't think I need to be cleaned up anymore. And God is like, “I still see a lot of food stuck on your face. I know you don't like this, but stop pulling away

and let me work on you some more." And it seems to always take longer than I think it should.

We have to learn this is a lifelong process, and spiritual sight comes in stages. Think of the man who was responsible for writing this gospel. He was a young man from Jerusalem, called John Mark. John Mark went with his uncle Barnabas and the Apostle Paul on their first missionary journey. But, before that journey ended, he returned to Jerusalem. In Paul's mind, this was desertion! He refused to bring Mark with him the next time around because it was clear he couldn't take the heat. At this point, I think Mark had been touched by Jesus just enough to see him as high and lifted up, but the idea of costly discipleship was outside his field of vision. For that, he needed a second touch. He got it, too. At the end of Paul's life, Paul wrote a letter to Timothy requesting that Mark come to Rome because he was "useful" to him in service.

Sometimes, this second touch comes as what was head knowledge, all of a sudden, moves down about a foot into the realm of our hearts. We can know all the facts about Christianity; we can pass the tests, but somehow it still needs to be internalized.

Sometimes this second touch comes as that which is in our head and heart moves to our hands. We may know all the answers, and we feel the Lord in our hearts, but that still hasn't translated into actions.

Following Jesus is more than just knowing the facts, and it's more than just having warm and fuzzy feelings about Jesus. It's also about doing and living and obeying. In an old book of sermons, the author wrote,

"The faith of the head is the faith that is dead; the faith of the heart is better in part; but the faith of the hand is the faith that will stand, and the faith that will do must include the first two."

But this process doesn't always happen at once. Our growth, our ability to see often comes in stages. And you know, this ought to make us very patient with one another. I mean the church of God is full of saints (holy ones), but we don't always act like saints. None of us sees with 20-20 vision yet, and so we need to have a lot of patience with each other. Every once in a while, I hear about someone who leaves our church. I find out they left because someone said or did something that hurt or offended them. But if we're all a work in progress, it really shouldn't surprise us when someone does that. One of our highest held values here at CPC is grace. Here's what we believe:

The church is a place where lost, hurting, and broken people are free to be authentic while yearning for and moving toward continued growth. Jesus came to seek the lost, heal the broken-hearted, and transform lives to reflect His glory. Transformation doesn't happen overnight with any of us; it takes place in an environment of both grace and truth – grace that frees us to be

transparent about our hurts and failures, and truth that encourages us to continue to walk in obedience to Him.

None of us has 20-20 vision yet. We're a bunch of folks with partial sight. And so, we bump into each other. We expect that to happen. And when it does happen, we should own up to it. Instead of leaving a fellowship of believers, we should do what Paul says, *"Speaking the truth in love..."* Why? So we will *"grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ"* (Ephesians 4:15).

Jesus Will Finish The Work He Began In Us

The good news is this story also proclaims the day will come when we "see everything clearly" as this man did in our story. Jesus is absolutely committed to finishing the work he began in you. This is one of the most life-altering truths in all of Scripture. In fact, it's scandalous. If I were to write the script, it would be quite different. I'd write it so I had to earn this. I'd write it in such a way that God does something for me, and I have to do something for him in return. But the amazing and scandalous truth of the gospel is that God will finish the work he began in us.

If you doubt that, let me give you a few verses to chew on. One of my all-time favorites is Philippians 1:6. Listen to how The Message translates this verse.

"There has never been the slightest doubt in my mind that the God who started this great work in you would keep at it and bring it to a flourishing finish on the very day Christ Jesus returns."
Philippians 1:6

How about that? The One who started a great work in you will bring it to a flourishing finish! My Dad used to say, "If you start a job, finish it!" Every job Jesus begins, he finishes! And not only does he finish it; he also brings it to a flourishing finish!

Look at what Paul says in 1 Corinthians.

"... you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He (God) will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." 1 Cor. 1:7-9

Who will keep you firm in your faith to the end? God will. Why? Because God is faithful. And if he called you into fellowship with his Son, he'll complete the purpose for which he called you. And what will that look like? You'll be "blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." In other words, you'll have perfect eyesight.

Okay, just one more. This one is from the writing of the apostle John. He wrote in his first letter,

"Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

Notice the word “see.” When we see him; we’ll be like him. Just seeing him will transform us into his image. Now you might think that means you can just coast. But look what John says in the very next verse, “*All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure*” (1 John 3:3). So, God will make us pure and holy, and that hope actually motivates us to pursue purity and holiness now. You might say, we work out what God is working in our lives.

I think the hardest time to trust that God will really finish his work in us is when we’re fighting sin and not making a lot of progress. Sometimes these are called besetting sins — sins that are stubborn; sins that are hard to dislodge from our lives. It might be a habit like overeating or over-drinking. It might be an attitude like pride or resentment. We know it’s wrong, and we try and try to deal with it, but we’re weak, and we keep falling into the thing. It’s easy in those times to feel like we’re under God’s condemnation, but even then, we’re not. God is still at work in us. It’s important were honest with him in this process. We need to ask ourselves, “How badly do I really want to get rid of this sin?” There’s a tendency for us to kid ourselves about this. We may need to face the fact that we commit the sin because deep down, we want to do that sin more than we want to obey Christ. Sometimes we need to ask God to change our desires. He can do that too. You and I are a work in progress, but God is absolutely committed to finishing the work he started in us.

In November of 2008, one of the greatest masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance was restored to its original splendor and returned to its home at the world-renowned gallery in Florence. The *Madonna del Cardellino* was painted by Raphael in 1505 for the wedding of his friend. It portrays Jesus’ mother, Mary, with two children who are playing with a bird. The children symbolize John the Baptist and his young cousin Jesus. The Goldfinch that feeds among the thorns represents Christ’s future suffering.

But something happened to this painting. Forty years after it was created, there was an earthquake in the house where it was kept, and the painting was shattered into pieces. So another artist took long iron nails and tried to patch the pieces together. Then he tried to paint over it to conceal the breaks and make it look whole again. But over the years, there were so many layers of paint added and so much dust and grime over it that the original colors and art were completely obscured.

The contemporary restoration project fixed the shattered areas and removed layers of paint and dirt to get the colors back. It

was a team effort. It took fifty people ten years of working on this painting, and the result is stunning. The cracks are gone. Centuries of brown film and grime are gone. The dulling veneers and patches were stripped away, and the finished product glows with all of the rich colors of the original work. Given how badly it was damaged, the restoration of Raphael’s painting is more amazing than the painting itself. The original was splendid, but the miracle of restoration compounds the beauty.

I’m sure you can see the profound parallel with our own restoration. God is creating a masterpiece of restoration in each of our lives. Yes, the beautiful design of who God created us to be was marred by sin; and layers of grime and dirt have collected. Maybe we thought we could paint over the damage, but it didn’t work, and the patches we applied just made things worse. Maybe you’ve experienced earthquakes that have shattered you, but the good news of the gospel is Jesus has the power to make all things new and he’ll finish the work he began in you.

Complete and perfect clarity, 20-20 vision, will come, but it won’t come until we’re face to face with him. In the meantime, the work of restoration continues, and we can trust that “God who started this great work in you will keep at it and bring it to a flourishing finish on the very day Christ Jesus returns.”

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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