

**Unblinded By the Light**  
**John 9:1-38**  
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I once knew a guy named Neil who was set up on a blind date. He was a musician, and he planned to take his date to a concert. After he had already moved forward with these plans—at least somewhat past the point of no return—Neil learned that his blind date was actually blind. This feels like the set-up for a standard sitcom plot, but this was real life. I don't really know how this information didn't come out during the initial set-up, and it's a good thing he hadn't planned something like a game of paintball for their blind date, but at any rate, this is how Neil told the story.

The problem was that the concert he had booked for his truly blind date was Ray Charles. And while The Legend put on a good show, Neil's date felt like she was sort of being mocked by Neil's concert choice. He always said it was a particularly awkward and uncomfortable evening.

There was not a second date.

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The ninth chapter of John tells the story of another of Jesus' miracles or signs, the sign of healing a man born blind, but Jesus isn't really the main character in this story. Jesus only appears in the first seven and final four verses of today's scripture reading. The more prominent character in this story is an unnamed man who is basically identified only as "a man blind from birth."

Like Neil's date, we don't know anything else about this man other than the fact that he is blind. Despite the fact that he is the main character throughout this chapter, with his ups and downs and relationships constituting the bulk of the plot of this story, we don't really learn much about him other than the fact that he was blind and now is not. We don't know what he likes or dislikes, his nationality or his faith. We know only his blindness.

In fact, even the community surrounding him doesn't seem to know him by anything other than his blindness. Once he has regained his sight, those who live nearby don't even recognize him, debating whether or not he is the Man Born Blind even as he insists to them that he is. They do not recognize his face or his voice; they only know him for his blindness...and once that blindness is gone, they do not know him.

Before even getting into the meat of this passage, this is a point worth lingering over. This is a story about a man who is known by only one characteristic. The man encounters several groups of people throughout this story—the disciples, his neighbors, the Pharisees, even his parents—and only one, Jesus, ever sees him as something other than the Man Born Blind, as something more complete, more human. It is a sobering reminder of how we often fail to understand someone else as a complex human being capable of myriad depths. From the very beginning, we learn that this is a story where those with eyesight are the truly blind.

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The story of the Man Born Blind is an allegory, with each character or group of characters representing some quality. When we examine those representations, we gain an understanding for how these qualities typically react to one another in our own world, and in the end the overall story also presents a moral for us to contemplate.

If we were to characterize the Man Born Blind, to describe the actual traits of his personality and not just his vision, one of the first words we might gravitate toward would be “honest.” This man is exceedingly honest, whether he is presenting himself for inspection, retelling the events that led to him regaining his vision, or even delivering blunt truths to the Pharisees. Because he is honest, this is a character we can trust and respect. Because he is typically at odds with the different groups that he encounters in this passage, we know that his honesty puts him in the right and their flaws put them in the wrong, again for the purposes of the allegory. And because, with the exception of Jesus, he only encounters groups, we can read their qualities as indicative of people in general. They do not represent only the rich or the powerful, only the broken or lowly, only the pious or earthly. They represent us.

First, this man meets the disciples, who represent judgment. It’s not the sneering, cliquish judgment that is so often stereotyped among teenagers but exists far more insidiously among adults. Rather, the judgment of the disciples is in their assuming. They see this man, take in one detail about him, and immediately assume that they understand his character. The disciples say, “He is blind, so either he is a sinner or his parents are sinners, end of story.” It is the same kind of judgment we make when we see a political bumper sticker and assume that we know everything about the person driving the car. We make judgments like this based on attire, physicality, professions, speech patterns, sexuality, alma maters, and faith identities. The world we live in moves faster than it ever has before. We make decisions more quickly than we ever have before. And we have less time for people than we ever have before. If the disciples, in their time, displayed this sort of assuming judgment, then we in our time have certainly come to embody it wholly.

Not only is their judgment immediate, but it is also permanent. They do not look at the Man Born Blind and ask, “Can anything be done to help him?” They assume that his sin (or his parents’ sin) is irrevocable, that he will always be a blind beggar, and that the most he provides for them is an interesting theological case study. Again, this is also how our assuming judgment works. Deep down, we believe that we know people instantly, and we believe that this judgment is unchangeable.

Jesus corrects their course. By healing the Man Born Blind, Jesus shows the disciples that this man is more than they immediately perceived, more than their judgment assumed. He enlightens them.

The second group this man encounters are his neighbors, the people who fail to recognize him. This group isn’t united in their response to the man, with some of them insisting it must be the familiar beggar and others insisting that it can’t be. This group, as a result, represents confusion. They don’t know how this man could possibly be who he says he is. They are baffled at the possibility that he has gained vision.

I kind of like to picture them as the Keystone Cops. They mean well, but they are so flummoxed by the situation that they can’t even collectively stay on their own two feet. They are moving too quickly—often without enough information, often in the wrong direction, often in different directions—to be effective.

In real life, I've seen this scenario mostly when couples are trying to put together weddings. To be sure, the couple is usually pretty calm, and it's the mass of parents and planners who are getting wound up and firing off in opposite directions. And, sadly, I've also encountered this a fair bit whenever there's a committee trying to handle something. The Keystone Cop confusion is more than a caricature in our world.

The neighbors meet the Man Born Blind. They eventually realize he has gained sight. The right response here is to celebrate, but instead they become fixated on the question of how this happened. They do this not because they hope to replicate his success, not because they have other needs to attend to, but simply because they allow their disbelieving confusion to overwhelm what should have been an incredibly joyous moment.

The neighbors bring this man to the Pharisees, who double down on the judgment and confusion, but who also drag the man's parents into the mix. The first time we read this story, we might expect the parents to be sympathetic to the man, or to exhibit the joy that the neighbors failed to embrace. Instead, the parents represent a reaction of fear. In this case, they are afraid of "the Jewish leaders," afraid of being ostracized or excommunicated.

Their reaction to their fear is most telling for us. Because they are afraid, they distance themselves from their own son. They hang him out on his own. They fear the Pharisees...but this fear wrecks their relationship with their son.

When we are afraid, we become fixated on the thing that we fear. As a result, the other things we value—relationships, self-care, hobbies, callings—become afterthoughts. It becomes far too easy to discard them in order to feed our fear...which is especially amazing when the fear itself isn't even something we'd put on the list of priorities. But that is exactly what the parents do in this allegory, and it is often how humanity functions.

The parents exit the scene, pushing the conflict back between the man and the Pharisees. And while it can certainly be said that the Pharisees exhibit judgment, confusion, and fear as previously shown in this story, they add a new quality as well. They attack.

As we've seen them do before, they first attack with questions. These can be defended as "simply trying to get to the bottom of this"...but in reality they are barbed with poison, slings and arrows lobbed at the opposition. The man, in his honesty, tries to answer their questions at first, but as it becomes apparent that they aren't really interested in honest answers, he pivots to defend with some of the best examples of sarcasm in our entire Bible. When the man asks the Pharisees if they're inquiring about him because maybe they want to become Jesus' disciples, his brilliance and wit are on full display.

At this point, the Pharisees "hurled insults at him," which he deftly navigates, and eventually they throw him out of the temple. But their characterization is sealed. They have come to represent aggressive hostility.

With the man now abandoned by all of these groups, seeing but still isolated and alone, Jesus reenters the scene, this time without his disciples. He plays the same role that he played before: to affirm the man's vision. This time, Jesus does spiritually what he has done physically at the beginning of the chapter. He shows this man that he can see.

The Man Born Blind, in his honesty and in his healing by Jesus, represents the truth. And the others represent how we as humans react to the truth (particularly when it comes from an unexpected source): with judgment, with confusion, with fear, with objectification, and with aggression. Never with acceptance.

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The primary danger of interpreting an allegory is oversimplification. Our scripture is multifaceted, and there are numerous ways to read this passage. I don't mean to suggest that this is the only explanation, the only way to find meaning in these words. Likewise, I feel somewhat hypocritical castigating the characters in this story for seeing the protagonist only for his blindness and then boiling each of them down to one trait (and a negative trait at that).

But the main danger of oversimplifying an allegory is that we fail to recognize the depth and the reality of the lesson inherent in the story. We fail to believe that real life actually works this way...and so it can become necessary, after seeking truth in an allegory, to contemplate similar, contemporary, real-life stories. And for that, it might be helpful to return to the beginning of this sermon, not to the guy I know named Neil, but to The Genius of Soul himself, Ray Charles.

In his autobiography *Brother Ray*, Charles wrote this about his loss of vision, which began when he was five:

Going blind. Sounds like a fate worse than death, doesn't it? Seems like something which would get a little kid down, make him afraid, and leave him half-crazy and sad. Well, I'm here to tell you that it didn't happen that way—at least not with me.<sup>1</sup>

From the beginning, Charles describes some of the same reactions that the groups in our scripture represent: assumption, confusion, and fear. His expectations for our reactions to his blindness are built in his own experience, in his reality, and they mirror the reactions we read in the disciples, the neighbors, and the parents in John 9.

Charles went to local doctors, his vision continued to deteriorate, and they eventually sent him to a specialist the next town over:

So we went. Just Mama and me. We walked into the office of the doctor there and he looked into my eyes and examined me every which way.

"Is there any hope?" Mama asked.

"Well," the doctor answered, his face glum, his head hanging down, "I don't think so. I'm afraid the boy's going blind."

"I understand," Mama said. She was not afraid; she didn't weep or scream for the Lord's mercy. Mama was a strong woman—a smart woman—and she knew what she had to do.<sup>2</sup>

If we want to be like Jesus, the mother of Brother Ray gives us an awfully clear map to follow.

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Most people who interpret this text notice the connection between the man's blindness and his (potential) sinfulness. This is where the disciples begin. This is the Pharisees' final rejoinder. Even Jesus' return suggests attention paid to the man's spiritual well-being on top of his physical state. It's easy to see where the interpreted connection between blindness and sin comes in.

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<sup>1</sup> Ray Charles & David Ritz, *Brother Ray: Ray Charles' Own Story*, Cambridge MA: Da Capo Press, 15.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid 16.

I think “sin” might be too harsh a word here, which is part of why I think that Jesus pushes back on the disciples’ question in the very beginning. I might suggest that this is really a story about the man’s humanity.

The Man Born Blind is incomplete. His vision leaves him lacking. This is, again, indicative of us all (as the others in the story also have their incompleteness emphasized), but the Man Born Blind is cognizant of his incompleteness. The others in the story, ironically, cannot see him as anything other than a blind man, cannot see him as anything other than someone who is missing something. When Jesus puts the mud on his eyes, Jesus makes him complete...and, in the process, forces everyone else to see him as Jesus sees him, for who he truly is, as an actual person.

We encounter situations like this frequently, encounter people who we see only incompletely. While it might be their blindness, it could just as easily be some other quality or trait, some other label that we stick on the person at the first blush and never really move past. Usually this isn’t mean-spirited, but it is prevalent and dominant. Ray Charles wrote, in charitable tones, “I was the only blind person in Greenville; people didn’t know what to do with me.”<sup>3</sup> When we don’t know what to do with someone, usually we respond from a place of judgment, confusion, trepidation, and even belligerence.

The Man Born Blind had Jesus, and Ray Charles had his mother, Aretha Williams Robinson. She reacted to his blindness with acceptance but not assumption, calmly instead of chaotically, bravely and not fearfully, peacefully and without aggression. And because she did these things, she put him position to become the musical force that he became...and, likely, more. She made him complete. The challenge before us is to do the same, not only with our children but with all that we meet, to see everyone in the light that shines bright enough to make even an imperfect, incomplete human whole again.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.