

# Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

## THE LOVE THAT SURPASSES ALL AUTHORITY

Mark 1:21-28

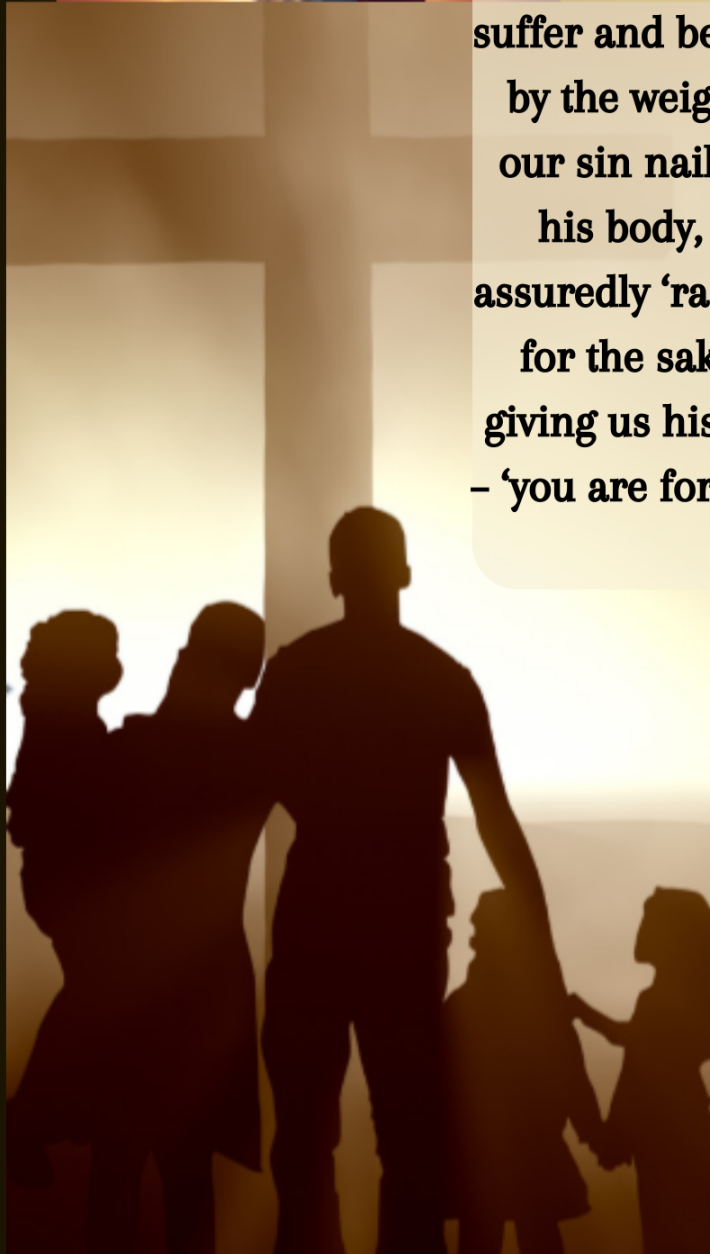
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Analysis by Matthew DeLoera

*21They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. 22They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24 and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." 25But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" 26And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." 28At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.*



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*From Canva*

*“Jesus ...moved toward something even more radical and involuntary – to the cross, to suffer and be killed by the weight of our sin nailed to his body, yet assuredly ‘raised’ ... for the sake of giving us his word – ‘you are forgiven.’”*

## **DIAGNOSIS: By Whose Authority?**

### **Step 1 – Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): *Authorized***

Just when they thought they knew what to expect at synagogue, the assembly was “astounded” not just to hear this stranger (Jesus) teaching (can just anyone walk in off the street and teach?), but also “as one having authority.” His manner was nothing like the scribes’, as of trained authorities explaining doctrines, handing on old traditions, and insisting that it all really is “relevant” after all. His was an entirely new kind of proclamation, radiant with “might”, “power,” and “capability” (*exousia*). Perhaps folks even heard such a bold declaration as “this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (v. 21)

And if all this wasn’t already more than enough surprise for one sabbath, as if to further legitimize Jesus’ authority, in walked someone with “an unclean spirit” that Jesus rebukes as proof-point. Nevertheless, the assembly still questions what to make of all that they have seen and heard – “What is this?”

### **Step 2 – Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): *Skeptical***

It’s hard to imagine that the crowd isn’t also wondering, “Is he right?” That the assembly is questioning should not surprise us. In fact, such questions remain utterly necessary in such a world as this. In the face of disease or disaster, humans, even at the highest levels of power, have always despaired for some authority to explain and advise life-saving wisdom (i.e., the manner of the scribes) to hang onto said power. But there have always been and always will be many different “authorities” and

conflicting answers. Which one should we trust, or risk peril? And even once we sign on, are we ever really sure that we've chosen rightly? After all, authorities can change their minds, science is a moving target, and people say a lot of things about God. So, as we hear ever bolder proclamations and promises, despite facts and reason, we feel increasingly skeptical and unsure. If we're not responsible enough to "do our own research" (and who has time for that anyway?) we can only blame ourselves for our own misfortune. Or are we even more afraid of hearing "I told you so"? We can muster grit and determination, and we admire come-back stories. There's a certain honor in these. But losing face is a real killer.

However, we also know a way to soothe ourselves amid all this questioning and uncertainty, not just regarding the chaos of our lives, but especially regarding God's part in all of it. We take refuge in having our own authority – our right to choose (i.e., our "free will") what to believe or where to put our trust.

### **Step 3 – Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): *Powerless***

Right or wrong, no one, not even God, can take that personal authority and free will away from us, right? Here, doubt and skepticism are recast from weaknesses to strengths, with just enough power to convince ourselves that we're not as utterly powerless as we really are. Sure, we may testify that "by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him." (Small Catechism, Creed, Third Article) Yet whose heart doesn't still bristle at such suggestion to the contrary? Perhaps it's because we're not convinced that this God who seems to take as much as give, who seems to watch more than act, who lets innocent folks be demon-possessed at all, is particularly trustworthy. But God always gets the last authoritative word.



*From Canva*

## **PROGNOSIS: By Love's Own Authority**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): *Forgiven***

In this light, there's a striking irony in this miracle of Jesus casting out a demon. Though we (and let us hope some of the synagogue assembly in our lection) easily praise Jesus for gracious healing, we don't seem much fazed by the fact that the patient never asked for cure. We do not know if he was lucid to realize anything was being done to him, nor that he even came to synagogue of his own volition. We make a lot of assumptions, don't we? Nevertheless, we jump right to the result – that this one is now free by and in Jesus Christ. It's funny how easily

the end justifies the means that formerly so offended us. Yet, Jesus was not done, but swiftly (*euthus*, Mark's byword) moved toward something even more radical and involuntary – to the cross, to suffer and be killed by the weight of our sin nailed to his body, yet assuredly “raised” (Mark 16:6) for the sake of giving us his word – “you are forgiven.” This was nothing for which we ever asked, let alone anything we could ever have conceived, and done before we were ever conscious of it. And, what if this is precisely WHY it's the only thing that actually softens our brittle and hardened hearts, precisely what no flavor of human authority will ever have any power to do.

#### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): *Freed***

So, perhaps the word “authority” falls short of what's really happening in this lesson, and even why the assembly struggles to make sense of what Jesus has done. Jesus' “authority” is so radically different from all the other & “authorities” in our lives, which wield laws (with attending laws and consequences) or reason to conform or convince us. Rather, Jesus' “authority” is bound up in the affecting power of his love for us, which frees us to trust him, to take him at his Word – our final authority in his love.

#### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): *Enfleshed***

And because we trust, we get to love others without fear of consequence or betrayal. After all, we know what it did to Jesus, so why should we be surprised by anything else? We know full well what Jesus did to us, we no longer feel the need to justify ourselves or to prove anything to anyone, let alone pose as any sort of “authority”. Rather, we feel free to trust that Jesus' love will assuredly speak for itself through the earthen vessels of our bodies, and all of this is pure gift for the sake of our neighbors. “It shall not return to me empty, but it shall

accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” (Isa 55:11) Of course, Jesus never promised that this kind of new creation would ever be easy, especially when folks have known us through all our missteps and imperfections. After all, for all that Jesus said and did, the assembly still went away asking “What is this?” And yet, “for while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.” (2 Cor 4:11)

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# **Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A**

## **Polite Disagreement?**

**Matthew 21:23-32**

**Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Analysis by Peter Keyel**

*23 When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” 24 Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. 25 Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us,*

*'Why then did you not believe him?' 26 But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." 27 So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.*

*28 "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' 29 He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. 30 The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. 31 Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.*





*The Pharisees Question Jesus – James Tissot – [From Wikimedia Commons](#)*

*This new life flips the old life on its head. Faith looks past the sins and into the new life.*

**Author's Note:** The parable of the wicked tenants follows, wherein the wicked tenants murder the landlord's son sent to collect from them.

## **Diagnosis: I Fight Authority, Authority Always Wins**

### ***Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Trapped***

Jesus waltzes into the Temple and starts teaching. He's not a priest. He's not a scribe. He wasn't invited to the Temple by any chief priests and scribes. It's not surprising that the priests and scribes want to know what he's doing and why. Instead of throwing him out, they give them the benefit of the

doubt and ask Jesus why he thinks he should be teaching in the Temple.

Instead, Jesus traps them with a question along the lines of "Have you stopped beating your wife?"

Everyone knows the question is rigged so the priests and scribes will lose no matter how they answer. They try to avoid the trap with a humble answer. It lets Jesus dodge the question, but it could have been worse.

### ***Step 2: Advance Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Humiliated***

The infuriating part is that Jesus doesn't relent. His teaching takes aim at the priests and scribes, and now he goes on the offense. The next parable is aimed at humiliating them. The priests and scribes spend their lives in holy vocation, and Jesus is telling the crowds (via questioning them) that they're defying God. In fact, Jesus is saying that the corrupt tax collectors and prostitutes are more deserving than they are, despite still being tax collectors and prostitutes.

All because they disagreed with John's approach and claims. Can't even disagree with crazy locust-eating homeless dudes without getting accosted by riff-raff duped into thinking he was a prophet. Smh.

This is all humiliating. Even worse than this is happening in the Temple. Perhaps if they'd had more presence of mind, they might have asked which part of the Torah instructed one to humiliate people who disagree with you. Or thrown him out when they had the chance instead of engaging in dialogue.

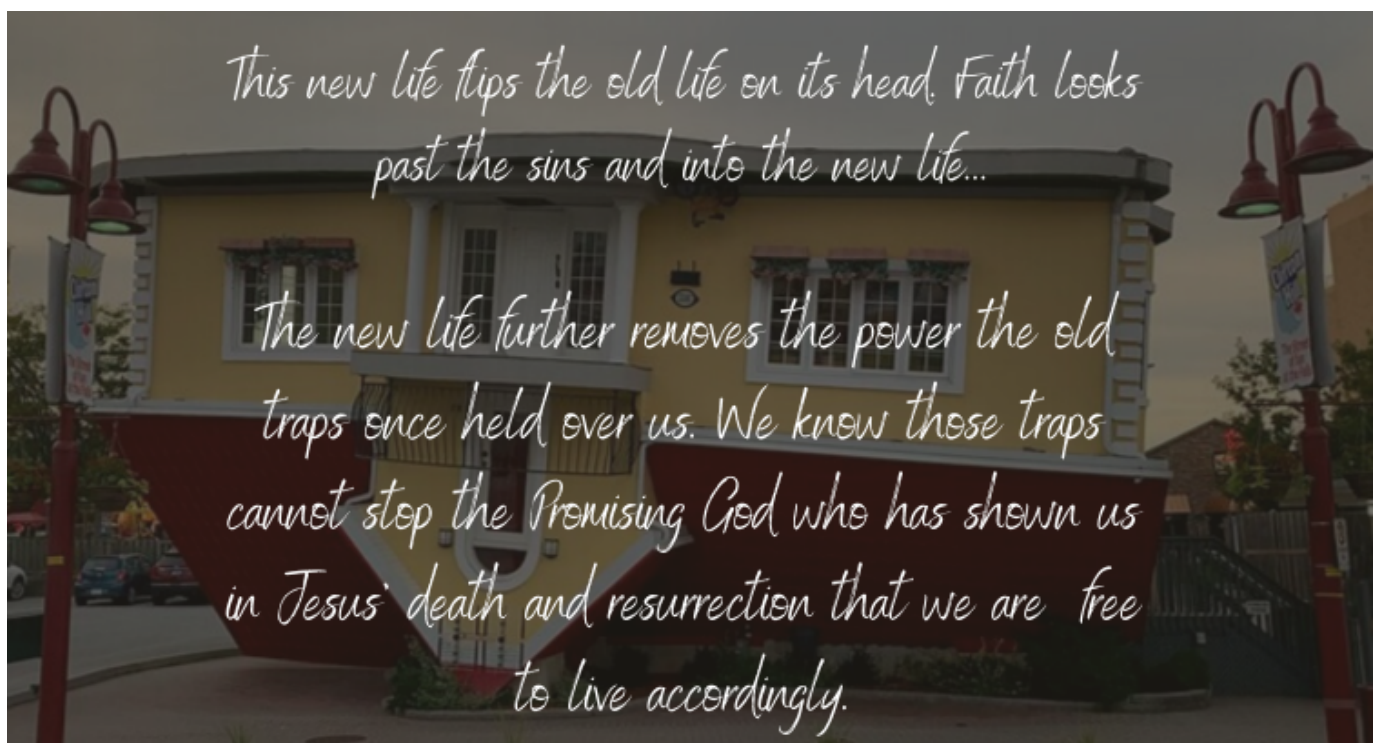
### ***Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Kill***

Jesus still doesn't relent. After slandering them as unrighteous for disagreeing with John, Jesus' next parable accuses them of

murder-by-proxy. While that pericope warrants its own text study (next week!), it cuts to the bone of where this disagreement is going: murder because Jesus claims to be God. This final pericope answers the initial question the priests and scribes asked about whose authority Jesus taught by, all while ridiculing the priests and scribes in their own Temple.

Jesus could have answered the authority question more succinctly: "God's authority, just like John was given. And by-the-way, God thinks you're the worst pretenders to God's authority in millennia. You're doing so bad at this, even the thieving tax collectors and whores are better at it than you."

Well, killing this pretender claiming to be God and threatening their authority may be a necessary idea after all. Not ideal, but life requires compromises. Good thing there are Romans around to do the dirty work. On the off-chance the priests and scribes are wrong, God will punish those idolators instead.



*Upside Down House – Niagra Falls. [From Wikimedia Commons](#)*

## **Prognosis: I Fight Authority, Authority Always Wins**

### ***Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Live***

When Jesus dies on the cross, it looks like the priests and scribes were right after all. But something unexpected happens on the third day. Jesus rises from the dead. God's answer to the challenge of God's authority is NOT fire and brimstone on the Romans, Jews or any of the others who are wrong. Instead, it is resurrection of the one who was right. This is a change from the expectations, and represents a new way of doing things, centered on life instead of death.

### ***Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Glorified***

This new life flips the old life on its head. Faith looks past the sins and into the new life. Where the priests may have felt humiliated at being told they were doing it all wrong by not listening to John, they missed the Good News that Jesus gave them. Even when criticizing them, Jesus describes the chief priests and scribes as God's sons, and says they are going to the kingdom of God. Yes, other sinners are going first. But does it matter who is first to eternity?

Faith enables them to grab hold of the promises Jesus makes and creates the best in them. All the sinners, including the tax collectors, prostitutes, priests, and scribes, are glorified by this faith, separate from their works.

### ***Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Freed***

Where does this faith lead? Into the kingdom of God. We are given the opportunity to reflect our belief in that kingdom with our outward works. We are not trapped by the words of others,

and do not need to fear labels others apply, even when accurate. We can acknowledge that we are sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, etc. The new life further removes the power the old traps once held over us. We know those traps cannot stop the Promising God who has shown us in Jesus' death and resurrection that we are free to live accordingly.

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## Fourth Sunday in Lent

### Pride Becomes Blindness, Blindness Becomes Servanthood

**John 9:1-41**

**Fourth Sunday in Lent**

**Analysis by James Squire**

*1As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. 4We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. 5As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." 6When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, 7saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. 8The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" 9Some were saying, "It is he." 0thers were saying, "No, but it is someone*

like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." 10But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" 11He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." 12They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know." 13They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. 14Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. 15Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." 16Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. 17So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet." 18The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight 19and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" 20His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 21but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." 22His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. 23Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." 24So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." 25He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." 26They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" 27He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" 28Then they reviled him,



saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. 29We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." 30The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. 31We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. 32Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. 33If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." 34They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out. 35Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" 36He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." 37Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." 38He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. 39Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." 40Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" 41Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

Author's Note: Jo-Ann Brant, a Johannine scholar at Goshen College, who says that "Essentially, the story of the man with blindness serves as a miniature version of the larger story of Jesus. The narrative of the healed man parallels Jesus' narrative in many ways, including the following: the crowd questions his identity (9:8-9), he asserts 'I am' (9:9), he speaks frankly and logically throughout but is treated as an invalid witness (9:18), he is accused of being a sinner, and he combats the Pharisees with sarcasm and truth (9:34). This story within the story heightens the ironic punchline of the episode—that those who think they can see are blind to the truth

while the one who was blind (and a sinner and accused of being an invalid witness) is the one who sees.” We are also meant to see “how followers of Jesus might go on after he has left the stage of earth: like the healed man, they should imitate Jesus as a bold witness to the truth despite opposition.”



By Eustache Le Sueur – Christ Healing the Blind Man, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4204876>

*The Pharisees have no satisfactory answer to their ultimate dilemma: a blind man can now see because of Jesus' intervention. "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" All the evasion cannot make this question go away.*



*This simple miracle punctures the authority of the Pharisees in this story, and they show no signs of acknowledging their own blindness.*

## **DIAGNOSIS: Blind Leader**

### ***Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Leadership by Gatekeeping***

*A man has his sight restored on the Sabbath by a rival to us, the existing religious authorities, and the healed man dares to lecture us about it. He does not know his proper place. Unauthorized healing is prohibited in our establishment. Moreover, no straight answer is provided by any respectable witness to get to the bottom of this mystery. The man's own parents are elusive and secretive. No one is respecting us. And our rival is not taking responsibility for his effrontery. He is not even showing himself, except to talk trash about us after the healing. Why is everyone blind to our authority?*

Spitting on authority is generally a form of blindness, but authority figures can also be blind to the truth they are charged with safeguarding. "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs" fades, and the authorities' glaring need to be the final stamp of approval on any good thing that happens takes center stage. Leaders have a tendency to become gatekeepers rather than servants, making it necessary sometimes for renegades to intervene.

### ***Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Only Gatekeepers Are Worthy of Trust***

*Frankly, this man is a sinner whose testimony is not to be trusted. Why else was he born blind? Is this not what we teach, that calamity befalls those who have strayed from the path? A sinner healing a sinner? This is not how things are*

*done. The blind leading the blind, indeed. Who knows what sorcery was involved. God, through Moses, put us in charge, and we will get to the bottom of this if it is the last thing we do. No one gives glory to God except through us—that is our function in this world, to be Moses to these people. This interloper cutting corners is not to be trusted.*

“Power corrupts”—so the trusty saying goes. Leaders believe their own hype. Facts that contradict such hype are rationalized away. (“We know this man is a sinner.” “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?”) Today we call this “confirmation bias.” More importantly, such leaders—especially within the church—impose their own will as if it were God’s.

### ***Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Gatekeepers Suffer Terminal Blindness***

*“Your sin remains.” The nerve of this interloper! We interpret what sin is, not him. If he is going to go around healing people on the Sabbath in defiance of our authority, we will deal with him once and for all. People will know who is in charge here. Interlopers can go to hell.*

Tough talk—if you can back it up. In fact, that is what it comes down to. Who has the real authority from God? The Pharisees have no satisfactory answer to their ultimate dilemma: a blind man can now see because of Jesus’ intervention. “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” All the evasion cannot make this question go away. This simple miracle punctures the authority of the Pharisees in this story, and they show no signs of acknowledging their own blindness.



Jesus healing the blind XIX c. Brashlyan

## **PROGNOSIS: Sighted Servants**

***Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Jesus Pays the Price for Our Blindness***

This interloper, Jesus, has a very interesting way of

demonstrating godly authority. He is not approved by the religious authorities of his day. They exercise their earthly authority to punish him for his offense. Under Roman occupation, this leads to his death because Rome has a vested interest in quelling any possible religious turmoil. He never apologizes for his ministry among them. He never stops butting heads with them, even as they put him on trial. But he also will refuse to marshal an armed insurrection (18:36) to free himself. He will argue all the way to the cross, but he will go there all the same and die. He will meet his apparent end with the declaration: "It is finished" (19:30). Having given sight to the man born blind, he is done in by those who call him blind, but he insists that his mission statement (3:16ff) has been accomplished.

When the tomb is discovered to be empty and Mary is greeted by the risen Jesus (20:16), those who have had their eyes opened by him know that he was right in his dying declaration. Moreover, they know that their sin does not remain. It has been wiped clean just as surely as their eyes have been opened by Jesus (v. 41).

### ***Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Jesus Earns Our Trust through Service***

When our eyes are opened by Jesus, we recognize that we were previously blind. We can see him. Like Mary outside the tomb, we hear his voice and follow him because we know him (10:4). Moreover, when people question us about who opened our eyes, we testify freely (vv. 9-11) without fear of reprisal, because we belong to the Good Shepherd (John 10). If church authorities question us, we testify freely (vv. 15-17) without fear, even when others in the community may not support us fully (vv. 22-23). We cannot be frightened into silence about Jesus because his light cannot be overcome by the darkness in our

world (1:5).

### ***Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Leadership by Healing Service***

Leading in a worldly fashion is quite the burden. If you are not willing to use force, it can be a disaster. If you are, it can easily become a joke. But with eyes opened by Jesus, we follow him and lead according to his example, which means servant leadership of the type exhibited by Jesus in John 9. We risk the ire of power-hungry people who prioritize protocol over service. We may even risk punishment to facilitate Jesus' ministry among those who walk in blindness. We do not seek to ruffle feathers intentionally, but when we see a need, we do what we can to address it, and put up with the fallout if there is any—just as Jesus addressed a need and then dealt with the blowback. Most importantly, we make the story about the one being healed instead of ourselves. Our Good Shepherd is nowhere to be found from verse 8 through verse 34—after the blind man is healed, and until he is “driven out.” The bulk of the story is the blind man living his newfound freedom in the midst of a hostile world, seeing clearly what the so-called leaders cannot. Jesus returns at the end to encourage him and support him. That is the kind of servant Jesus frees us to be.