

Behold!

Matthew 9:9-26

Okay, here's one for the married blokes . . . has this ever happened to you . . .

Your wife says: 'Can you find the cottage cheese in the fridge'.

So, you dutifully go to the fridge and peer in . . . for all of two seconds!

"There is no cottage cheese", you say.

"It's on the second shelf!", she says.

"I can't see it", you say.

At which point she storms over, takes one look at the second shelf and storms back, cottage cheese in hand, muttering something about selective blindness.

I prefer to call it 'learned helplessness'. It's a condition that seems to particularly affect married blokes.

But, anyone can suffer from selective blindness . . . in fact, most of us do . . . including Christians.

This passage of Scripture is directed at those of us who suffer that ailment.

Now, bear with me . . . I have to get a bit technical for a minute. You see, most modern translations of the Bible don't help us much here . . . because most modern translations leave out a little word that was in the original text . . . a word that at first glance doesn't seem very important . . . Matthew uses it so often it could be just a connecting word without much meaning . . . but here, in this passage, I think it's vital. That little word is the word: 'Behold'

Notice the difference between the New International Version and the older Revised Standard Version of these verses:

¹⁰ While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. [NIV]

¹⁰ And as he sat at table in the house, **behold**, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Jesus and his disciples. [RSV]

¹⁸ While he was saying this, a synagogue leader came and knelt before him and said, 'My daughter has just died. [NIV]

¹⁸ While he was thus speaking to them, **behold**, a ruler came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died; [RSV]

²⁰ Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. [NIV]

²⁰ And **behold**, a woman who had suffered from a hemorrhage for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment; [RSV]

‘Behold!’ In modern language we would say ‘Look!’ Look at what’s happening here. Three times . . . Look! Look! Look!

What are we looking at?

‘Behold!’ Matthew says, ‘Tax collectors and sinners’ – the scum of society.

‘Behold!’ Matthew says, ‘A man with a dead child’ – the hopeless of society.

‘Behold!’ Matthew says, ‘A woman with uncontrollable menstrual bleeding’ – the outcasts of society.

We want to jump quickly to focus on Jesus’ wonderful, miraculous healing. So quickly that we don’t have to really see what’s going on here. So quickly that we don’t really have to look at the people. Because these are real people . . . real people who could be living today. Oh, the ailments may be different (but not so different) but not much has changed in 2000 years when it comes to our response to them . . . we don’t want to look, let alone engage with these people.

Look what we do with death . . . keep it out of sight and out of mind as much as possible . . . shuffle the dying off behind closed doors and sanitised walls. We don’t want to deal with death so we ignore it and leave it to the professionals.

Look at the political landscape in this country when it comes to migrants and refugees! “Not in my backyard!” so many people are saying or thinking.

Look how we deal with anyone who is a little bit different from us . . . we build our little McMansions in our you-beaut, manicured housing estates . . . with security gates out the front to make sure only the kind of people we want to mix with are allowed to enter.

No, we don’t want to look . . . what we want is protection . . . separation . . . separation from *them* . . . well, we might catch something! Something might rub off on us . . . because, after all, we’re pretty good people . . . with a good lifestyle . . . we’ve got it together . . . we’re all right . . . dare I say it . . . we’re righteous!

Do we get ourselves into that way of thinking? We’re okay because we don’t do bad things . . . and if we do, no one else can see them, or know what we’re thinking. Or we turn a blind eye to systemic injustice and abuse as if it’s not our problem. Not me! Not in my home! Not in my church!

And, as we allow the walls of prejudice and stereotyping to separate us from others who are different, then we can’t help start to think “I’m better than them”. That’s the only way we can go. Then our selective blindness keeps us blissfully unaware that anything’s amiss . . . and blissfully unaware of how far from the kingdom of God we are.

In terms of human relationships there are degrees of sin . . . there are some sins that are worse than others . . . and we are right to make judgements on those things for the good of society . . . but, when it comes to God, and our relationship with God, there are no degrees of sin. Sin is sin is sin . . . and all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God! So, how can we possibly dare to think we are spiritually superior to anyone else? How can we possibly dare to think we are any less sinful than anyone else? Self-righteousness is simply not an option.

In any case, that rightness of our own doing – that righteousness – is an old way of doing things. It's an outdated way. It's being superseded. There's a new way. A completely different way. Of course, not a new way for God, but a new way for us. That way is Jesus!

God said: "I desire mercy not sacrifice". The old way of sacrifice is completed. It's done. Done by Jesus on the cross. All the barriers have been broken down. Anything that could separate us from God and his love has been overcome by Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus is God's new way of operating . . . Jesus is God's mercy shown to us. Jesus is God with us . . . not distant from us . . . not separated from us . . . God with us no matter who we are, or what we've done.

So, we see God's new way of working as Jesus sits and eats with tax collectors and sinners – the scum of society. Jesus immediately attends to the cry of a hopeless father and touches the corpse of a little girl . . . Jesus allows the touch of an outcast woman to bring healing . . . and what's more, he graciously turns the attention from himself to her: "Your faith has made you well!" This is the new age . . . the new way. It's not about what we have to do anymore . . . it's about what God has done for us. So, we don't rely on rites and rituals and traditions to make us right with God . . . and we don't rely on ourselves . . . our own goodness! Jesus came to call not the righteous, but sinners. That's us! We've heard Jesus' call. Jesus is with us. So, it's a time for a new way of living . . . a new way of thinking . . . a new way of acting.

But, that's not something we can achieve ourselves . . . it's only something Jesus can do for us. *He* has to make us new . . . *he* has to open our eyes to the needs of others and not just our own needs.

So, if you come away from today thinking: "Pastor was talking about me . . . I'm scared of people who are different than me . . . I haven't made much of an effort to be open to new people . . . I'm not much of a Christian . . . but, this week I'm going to try harder . . . this week I'm going to make an effort". If you're thinking that way you're still thinking the old way. Remember it's not what you do, it's what God has done for you. So, the place to start is not to resolve to try harder, but to recognise ourselves in this story. Are we not the tax collectors and sinners sitting at Jesus' feet? Are we not the desperate father with nowhere else to turn? Are we not the woman in need of healing?

They couldn't overcome their condition and neither can we. So, the place to start is to turn to Jesus and say: 'Lord, have mercy on me . . . heal me'. And to do that again and again . . . because again and again we will return to our old self-righteous ways . . . but, again and again Jesus will forgive us and make us new. Each time he makes us new his mercy will grow in us . . . his love will flow a little more from us and without even noticing it . . . without even thinking about it, our eyes will be opened to the needs of others and instead of putting up barriers we will open doors . . . we will open our arms to receive them . . . receive them as fellow sinners in need of the Great Physician.

I still can't guarantee you'll be able to find the cottage cheese, but with Jesus working in and through us we will do much greater things than that.

Amen.

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