

Message #37

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A NEW CHRISTIAN DEALS WITH SKEPTICS

JOHN 9:13-34

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Antony Flew (PROJECTOR ON--- ANTONY FLEW) acquired a fair amount of fame, as philosophers go, before his death in 2010. He was the son of a Methodist minister in London. But by age 15, he decided that he was an atheist. During WW II he studied Japanese at the University of London and then became an RAF intelligence officer. After the war, he got his degree in philosophy from Oxford. He spent the rest of his academic career teaching in British universities and writing books. He also had a number of public debates where he represented a skeptical view about the existence of God against Christians who took the opposite position.

As an undergraduate, Antony Flew was a regular attendee at meetings of the Socratic Club, founded by C. S. Lewis. He was there exposed to the testimony of this famous Christian writer and to his arguments for the truth of Christianity. Flew called Lewis **“an eminently reasonable man.”** He also called Lewis **“by far the most powerful of Christian apologists for the sixty or more years following his founding of that club.”** Despite the persuasiveness of C. S. Lewis, he remained a skeptic--- for most of his life.

(PROJECTOR OFF) According to national surveys, there is a growing number of skeptics in our society. How are we Christians to deal with them? We will see what the passage before us today has to offer.

We have come to the sixth of seven signs around which the Apostle John organizes his biographical material about Jesus. His purpose is to show that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. The fact that John spends the entire ninth chapter describing the miracle of healing of the blind man and its aftermath suggests that he saw it as especially noteworthy.

We saw last week from the first part of #9 that Jesus and His disciples were on the temple compound in Jerusalem, probably at the end of the Feast of Tabernacles. Jesus seemed to take the initiative in addressing this blind beggar, who knew nothing about Jesus. After denying the presupposition of the disciples that the blind man's condition was the result of someone's particular sin, Jesus put mud on his

eyes and sent him off to the pool of Siloam to wash it off. The result was that he could see perfectly. The man's friends and associates were stunned. Today we encounter the reaction of the religious leaders to this miracle.

I.

In vv. 13-17 of John #9, which is found on p. 895 of the black Bibles under many of the chairs, we find that SKEPTICS HAVE PRECONCEIVED IDEAS. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. SKEPTICS HAVE PRECONCEIVED IDEAS.) These skeptics do believe in God, but they are skeptical about Jesus and His claims.

According to v. 13, **"They [i.e., the friends and neighbors of the blind man] brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind."** The Pharisees, remember, were religious Jews who were traditionalists and legalists. They had developed detailed applications of the Old Testament law to current situations. Jesus charged that their interpretations were often wrong and at odds with the intent of the Old Testament law. Most of the rabbis were Pharisees. They were perhaps also the dominant group on the Sanhedrin, the high council of Judaism, which had much civil authority as well as religious authority. Probably the Pharisees in this story were rabbis. Some, or all, of them were probably members of the Sanhedrin.

The friends and neighbors of the blind man wanted to get the perspective of these religious leaders on what had happened to the blind man. The neighbors knew about his background, and his transformation was obvious. The Pharisees had made their opinion about Jesus known to the people of Jerusalem. So these associates of the blind man probably had an honest desire to know from the religious leaders what they should make of this.

Verse 14: **"Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes."** Here is an additional side note from the Apostle John about the facts of this case. We might get the impression from John's Gospel and the other Gospels that a disproportionate number of the miracles that Jesus did were performed on the Sabbath. Whether that was actually the case, or whether the Gospel authors were simply noting these healing miracles because of the controversy they caused, we do not know. But clearly this contributes to the tension in the story. The healing of the lame man at the pool of Bethesda in #5 also happened on a Sabbath, and the perceived violations of Sabbath laws also got the religious leaders worked up on that occasion.

The Pharisees were very strict in their interpretation of the Sabbath commandment prohibiting work on that day. Their rules that applied to this case included a prohibition against healing on the Sabbath unless one's life was in danger. Clearly the blind man's life was not in danger. Also there was to be no kneading on the Sabbath. This would most often relate to a woman's work of kneading dough in the kitchen. But earlier in this chapter we are told that Jesus spit into dirt on the ground and made it into a concoction that He applied to the blind man's eyes. This would qualify as kneading. Some rabbis also said that applying any kind of ointment to one's face was work and thus violated the Sabbath commandment.

Back in #5 Jesus defended His healing of the lame man (JOHN 5:17) with these words: **"But Jesus answered them, 'My Father is working until now, and I am working.'"** It seems as if Jesus is claiming His right as God to work on the Sabbath.

In Mark #2 the Pharisees criticized Jesus for allowing His disciples to pick and eat grains of wheat while they are walking through a grainfield on the Sabbath. Jesus appealed to a situation where David needed bread and took it from the tabernacle. Jesus said that the Sabbath was supposed to benefit the needs of men. (MARK 2:28) Then He added, **"So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."** Jesus seems to claim the right to do what is needed on the Sabbath.

The story continues in v. 15 (PROJECTOR OFF), **"So the Pharisees again asked him how he had received his sight. And he said to them, 'He put mud on my eyes, and I washed, and I see.'"** The Pharisees had apparently heard an initial report from the friends about this guy's healing. Maybe a couple of the Pharisees had interviewed him in preparation for having a larger group meet with this man. Notice that they at least seem to acknowledge that a healing has taken place. The man formerly blind gives the simple facts of the case. John could be distilling the longer remarks of this man, but the story is pretty simple--- I was blind; He put mud on my eyes; I followed His directions to wash them off in the pool of Siloam; now I see.

The story continues in v. 16, **"Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God; for he does not keep the Sabbath.' But others said, 'How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?' And there was a division among them."** There are two examples of a method of logical reasoning called syllogism present in this verse. (PROJECTOR ON--- SYLLOGISM 1) The reasoning of the Pharisees goes like this: The major premise of the Pharisees is that "People from God keep the Sabbath." The minor premise is this: "Jesus does not keep the Sabbath." The conclusion is "Jesus is not from God."

This is a valid form of logical reasoning. But the soundness of the conclusion is only as good as the premises behind it. The Pharisees are assuming that their understanding of the Sabbath is the same as God's. If that is not true, and there are major reasons to question that understanding, then the conclusion is not necessarily correct. In the healing of the lame man in #5, Jesus merely pronounced that the man was well. Was that really work for Jesus? The Pharisees ruled that lighting a lamp or blowing out a lamp or pulling out a hair from one's head on the Sabbath were all examples of work and therefore sins against God. How could they know that with such certainty that such trivial actions were violations of the Sabbath in God's eyes?

There was a second group among the Pharisees, seemingly in the minority, that was promoting a second syllogism. (SYLLOGISM 2) Their argument went like this. The major premise is that only God can open eyes of the blind. The minor premise is that Jesus opened the eyes of the blind. Their conclusion was: Jesus is from God.

Which is the stronger argument? The first group could perhaps argue that there might be other explanations for opening the eyes of the blind. Perhaps demonic power could accomplish that. Earlier the Pharisees were forced to recognize that Jesus had done other miracles. They attributed His power to demons. The minority group could have replied by pointing out the prophecies that we looked at last week that said that the Messiah would heal the blind. So they could have used the syllogism: The prophet Isaiah said that the Messiah will have the unique ability to heal the blind. Jesus has healed the blind. Therefore, Jesus is the Messiah.

Certainly the Pharisees were skeptics in regard to the claims of Jesus. They had preconceived ideas about what the Messiah should be like and what a messenger from God would be like. He would follow their rules concerning the Messiah, and He would treat them with respect. Jesus did not fit their preconceived ideas.

There are obviously skeptics in our world today who are not only skeptical about the claims of Jesus but also about the existence of God Himself. Many of them have preconceived ideas about the universe. The syllogistic reasoning of some of them goes like this (SYLLOGISM 3): Major premise: Only the material world exists. Minor premise: God is immaterial. Conclusion: God does not exist.

There are other variations of this argument. But the underlying idea and assumption is that all that goes on in the world must have a physical explanation. Most of us would question that. Why should we not

consider evidence that the supernatural exists? Can physical laws alone explain how the universe came into existence? (PROJECTOR OFF)

The minority group in v. 16 may have included Nicodemus, the Pharisee and teacher mentioned in #3 who acknowledged that Jesus could not do these miracles unless God was with Him. But this minority group is not heard from again in our story. The skeptical view predominates.

Verse 17: **“So they said again to the blind man, ‘What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?’ He said, ‘He is a prophet.’”** In the face of some amount of disagreement among these Pharisees, they ask for the man’s opinion. In v. 11 he called Jesus simply a man. Now he describes Jesus as a prophet. At this point, this is the best that he can figure out about Jesus and his encounter with Him.

As a result of his encounter with the Pharisees, the blind man is discovering that they are skeptical and have preconceived ideas about Jesus that make it difficult for them to accept his story. Such is the reality that we Christians encounter with the skeptics in our world. Some of the people around us presuppose that the supernatural is impossible. So we should expect such reactions. As we have opportunity, we need to address those presuppositions. How do you know that the supernatural is impossible? Is it not more reasonable to consider the possibility that something exists apart from the physical world that we can see? At the same time, to be fair, we must recognize that we also have our preconceived ideas.

II.

Then, from vv. 18-23, we find that SKEPTICS OFTEN PRESSURE PEOPLE TO CONFORM TO THEIR VIEWS. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. SKEPTICS OFTEN PRESSURE PEOPLE TO...) According to v. 18, **“The 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...”** The Apostle John, remember, uses the term “the Jews” to refer to the religious leaders who are opposed to Jesus and His claims. Here the reference is specifically to the Pharisees who are dealing with the blind man.

Because this transformation of the blind man and Jesus’ alleged involvement with it do not fit the preconceived ideas of the Pharisees, they have a hard time accepting the testimony of this guy who claims to have been blind. So they call in his parents. They are looking for some other explanation for this event. Perhaps the guy was not really blind, or at least not blind since birth.

In a similar way, some religious skeptics today exclude the possibility of the supernatural. So claims of the miraculous must have another explanation. Stories about the virgin birth of Jesus and the resurrection are not possible. Those supposed events happened a long time ago. Surely there are reasonable alternatives to the religious explanations that involve the supernatural.

We also learn from v. 18 that the blind man has parents who are living. Perhaps they are poor and not able to support their son. Perhaps that is why he is a beggar.

Verse 19: **“...and [the Pharisees] asked them, ‘Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?’”** Apparently they have heard reports from the parents that the story about the blind man’s background is true. But they want to hear this directly from them. They are desperately seeking some explanation for their son’s transformation. It is tough for them to believe that Jesus is responsible for this.

The story continues in vv. 20 & 21: **“His parents answered, ‘We know that this is our son and that he was born blind. But how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.’”** We get the sense that the parents are uncomfortable in dealing with these religious leaders. It is hard to believe that they have not heard their son tell them about the involvement of Jesus in his healing. They are not demonstrating a lot of courage and support for their son. They try to pass the buck back to him.

To be of age means for a male to be at least thirteen years old. I get the impression that the blind man is a fair amount older than that. But we are not really told how old he is.

Verses 22 & 23 explain the reason for the reluctance of the parents to say much about their son: **“(His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be the Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue.) Therefore his parents said, ‘He is of age; ask him.’”** “Christ” is the Greek word for the Hebrew “Messiah.” Apparently the Sanhedrin had already decreed that followers of the Messiah were to be kicked out of their synagogues.

The synagogue had developed into a central feature of Judaism during the time that the Jews were forced into captivity several centuries earlier. Religious Jews, even in Jerusalem, were organized into communities centered upon local synagogues.

We don't know exactly what the procedures were in the time of Jesus for Jews to be expelled from their synagogues. We do know about the procedures from a couple of centuries later. Perhaps some of the procedures were already at work in the time of Jesus. According to the Talmud, there were 24 grounds for excommunication. There were also three levels of punishment. The first level of punishment involved being expelled from the synagogue for one week to one month. The second level involved excommunication for longer than a month. After one month, the offending party was admonished by the synagogue leaders, and the excommunication was extended for an additional month. At the third level, for the most serious offenses, the offender was treated like a leper. He was treated like one who was dead. Other Jews were not to speak to him or to eat with him.

With this kind of threat hanging over the parents of the blind man, we can understand how they were reluctant to offend the Pharisees. Perhaps they were dependent upon the synagogue for financial support. Perhaps the father's job would have been threatened. Still, it is disappointing that the parents did not stand up in a stronger way for their son. Perhaps some of the Jewish members of the Apostle John's audience could relate to this kind of problem.

Certainly the religious skeptics in Jerusalem were placing strong pressure upon their people to conform to their view of Jesus. Christians down through history have faced that pressure. In more recent years that pressure has come from leaders in countries that have Islamic cultures or leaders who are atheistic. Several human rights defenders claim that Christianity is the most persecuted religion in the world. The Center for Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Seminary claims that in the last ten years an average of 100,000 Christians from around the world have been killed for their faith.

In recent days the leaders in China have renewed a crackdown against churches and pastors. Christians are not alone in their persecution. I recently read that an estimated one million Uighers in western China are held in detention because of their Islamic faith.

At times people claiming to be Christians in history have been guilty of persecuting others for their religious faith and even fellow Christians for not agreeing with all of their doctrine. But in western Europe and North America, we enjoy religious freedom today because of Christianity's recognition for the need for freedom of religion and conscience.

However, in recent years Christians in our country have been faced with growing opposition because of the growth of religious skepticism among the cultural elites. Christian groups have been expelled from several college campuses, for example.

Fortunately, not all skeptics are like that. Antony Flew, who was a Libertarian, did not exert undue influence upon people to conform to his views. But many cultural leaders in our day do not share his openness. The issue for us is always whether we will resist this pressure to conform to skeptical views and speak up about the truth.

III.

In the last part of our passage, vv. 24-34, we find that AN EFFECTIVE CHRISTIAN SHARES WHAT HE KNOWS ABOUT JESUS. (III. AN EFFECTIVE CHRISTIAN SHARES...) The story continues in v. 24: **“So for the second time they called the man who had been blind and said to him, ‘Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner.’”** The Pharisees who were favorable toward Jesus have been cowed into silence.

The meaning of the statement about giving glory to God is not immediately obvious. It has an Old Testament background that helps us to understand what the Pharisees meant. When the Israelites under the direction of Joshua attacked Jericho, they were commanded to destroy everything in it and not to take anything. A guy named Achan took several valuable items. His sin was revealed, and he was confronted. (JOSHUA 7:19) In Joshua #7 v. 19 we read, **“Then Joshua said to Achan, ‘My son, give glory to the Lord God of Israel and give praise to him. And tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me.’”**

The Pharisees use that language here in our verse with the intention of getting the blind man to tell the whole story. They have difficulty believing that the guy is telling the whole truth. They have a hard time accepting the notion that Jesus really could have done such an amazing thing. Notice also that they are reluctant to use Jesus’ name. “Jesus” is the Greek equivalent of “Joshua,” which means “salvation.” (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verse 25: **“He answered, ‘Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.’”** The author John in this book describes the importance of eyewitnesses who give testimony to the claims of Jesus. There was John himself, then John the Baptist, God the Father, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman and others. Now we have the simple testimony of this blind beggar.

According to vv. 26 & 27, **“They said to him, ‘What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?’ He 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?’”** This is the fourth time that the religious leaders have asked for an explanation of the miracle. By now the blind man is catching on to their agenda. He realizes that they don’t want to believe his story. So he becomes sarcastic toward them.

Verse 28: **“And they reviled him, saying, ‘You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.’”** “Moses is the great law-giver, and he is our hero and teacher. You, buddy, are a nobody. Don’t make fun of us.”

They continue in v. 29, **“We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where his comes from.”** At the end of #7 the Pharisees said that they knew that Jesus was from Galilee. If they are speaking in spiritual terms rather than geographical terms, then the Pharisees claimed earlier that Jesus was getting his power from demons. So He must be from the devil. Now they profess ignorance as to his origin. Last week we looked at the prophecies in Isaiah which said that the Messiah would heal the blind. These religious leaders are unwilling to recognize that this miracle is a fulfillment of that prophecy.

Verses 30 & 31: **“The man answered, ‘Why, this is an amazing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him.’”** The man previously blind is really sticking it to them. The uneducated sinner is confronting the Ivy League Pharisees with the folly of their own preconceived ideas. He has more wisdom and understanding of the Scriptures than these guys do.

(PSALM 66:18) In Psalm 66 v. 18 the author writes, **“If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.”** Clearly the Lord has listened to the request of this Jesus. This simple beggar is challenging the Pharisees with his own syllogism. (SYLLOGISM 4) It goes like this: Major premise: God does not hear sinners. Minor premise: God heard this man (Jesus). Conclusion: This man (Jesus) is not a sinner. Our man who was formerly blind is using their own logic against them.

The man who has been healed adds in v. 32, **“Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind.”** There were many miracles performed in Biblical history. But there was never one like this. How can you guys fail to recognize that this Jesus must be from God? (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verse 33: **“If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”** This guy is good, isn't he, and he is bold and courageous. I suspect that the Apostle John sees the irony in all of this. The blind man is teaching the spiritually blind.

Verse 34: **“Then answered him ‘You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?’ And they cast him out.”** Teachers don't like to be taught by students, especially when the students have better insight than the teachers do. These guys do not apparently have a good answer for him. They simply return to one of their preconceived ideas, that people with a handicap are being judged for their sin, or their parents' sin. But what are they to do with this guy who is no longer blind?

In frustration these religious leaders kick the man healed of blindness out of the synagogue. They think that they are condemning him to the judgment of God. In reality, they are condemning themselves. For they are rejecting the Son of God who came to save them and to fulfill the prophecies of the Old Testament concerning the Messiah.

This healed man becomes the first follower of Jesus to suffer persecution for his bold stand for the truth. This was probably an encouragement of many of the readers of John's Gospel. Some of them had also been persecuted for their faith. Some of the Jewish Christians may have been expelled from their synagogues. Some of them may have had parents who did not support them for their Christian stand. In the same way, there is encouragement here for us to speak up for Jesus when we have the opportunity, even though we may face some limited amount of opposition.

It was the simple testimony of Christians and their reasonable arguments that eventually affected the thinking of Antony Flew. When he was 81 years old, he shocked fellow colleagues and atheists when he announced that there must be a god. The thing that got to him was the difficulty of believing the part of evolutionary theory that life could come from non-living matter. He told Christian apologist Gary Habermas in an interview, **“This is the creature, the evolution of which a truly comprehensive theory of evolution must give some account. Darwin himself was well aware that he had not produced such an account. It now seems to me that the findings of more than fifty years of DNA research have provided materials for a new and enormously powerful argument to design.”** (Breakpoint, 1/10/2005)

In 2007 Antony Flew wrote a book with a co-author, entitled *There Is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*. Flew died in 2010. As far as we know, he never got to the point of believing in the Christian gospel. But he did come to believe in the existence of a god.

We do not have to be college trained apologists to be effective in sharing the gospel. The man in our story was a blind beggar. But he had a powerful testimony to the religious leaders of his day. What God wants from us is simply to share what we know about Jesus.