

Belief & Unbelief

Sermon in Finnish by Ari Savuoja, 18 October 2020

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John 9:24-38

A second time the Pharisees summoned the man who had been blind. 'Give glory to God by telling the truth,' they said. 'We know this man is a sinner.'

He replied, 'Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!'

Then they asked him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?'

He answered, 'I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?'

Then they hurled insults at him and said, 'You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from.'

The man answered, 'Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.'

To this they replied, 'You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!' And they threw him out.

Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?'

'Who is he, sir?' the man asked. 'Tell me so that I may believe in him.'

Jesus said, 'You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.'

Then the man said, 'Lord, I believe,' and he worshipped him.

This is the holy gospel - Praise be to you, Christ.

There are books which are printed for blind people. There is no ink on the pages but only thousands of very little spots, bulges or dots. Have you ever tried to read the braille of the blind or visually impaired? I have tried. I closed my eyes and felt the dots, but those dots on the paper all felt like equally shapeless clumps. I marvelled at how a blind person's other senses go beyond those of people with normal visual senses. In addition to the sense of touch, the hearing of the blind is more sensitive than that of the sighted.

The main character in today's gospel is a blind man who seemed to have a very good sense of hearing. It seems that it was easy for the blind man to believe in Jesus, for he was able to fully focus on the teachings of Jesus.

His advantage was that he was not distracted by what he saw through his eyes. He could, in fact, focus better than others on listening to the teachings of Jesus.

And it also seems that the blind man understood the spiritual message of Jesus – at least better than the Pharisees, the spiritual leaders of that time.

In the situation that we are told, the Pharisees do see with their physical eyes, but are blind to the spiritual teaching of Jesus. They do not want to understand the testimony of the man who was healed from his blindness through Jesus by the power of God. The Pharisees ask the man again about the healing, but it doesn't fit in their worldview that someone looking human — Jesus — is doing things that belong to God. Thus it can be said that the Pharisees' physical ability to see, nevertheless made them spiritually blind to the fact that Jesus is the Son of God.

When nothing else finally helps, the Pharisees use mental and physical violence against the man: they allow themselves to tell this healed man what he is basically: that he is a sinner. Eventually, they drove the man out of the house in which they had gathered. The Pharisees' pride and selfishness prevented themselves from seeing and admitting that they were wrong. And according to their teachings, even touching a sinner would make them unclean.

The saddest thing about all this is that the Pharisees were probably not intentionally mean and evil. Vice versa: They thought they were doing a great service to God and to the holy will of God, which was and still is readable before our eyes in the Bible, too.

Today's topic is given and entitled "belief and unbelief" according to the service book of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church. The Pharisees thought they believed correctly. They thought that sinners – violators of God's will - are unbelievers. The Pharisees thought they were the only true believers.

In my life I have had the experience – and others have shared this too – that belief is not born of making to believe. Sure, some kind of superficial belief may arise in your mind by obedience or imitation, but then you have not yet taken faith to your heart; faith has not become personal, but only memorised.

Faith is an attitude and conviction of a person. Personal faith requires reasonable grounds for it to be healthy. Faith that blindly believes everything heard and seen, is usually misleading. Also, randomly choosing what to believe in, does not stand one's ground.

When you are looking for reasonable grounds for your faith, it is not wrong to doubt and critically evaluate what and for what reason you believe. The Pharisees, however, lacked this kind of criticism. They just stubbornly believed what they had once learned.

Please note that doubt or doubting is not the same thing as unbelief, although sometimes these words are used in the same sense. Unbelief in the true sense is a person's active attitude and conscious choice: it is a decision like "I don't want to believe," or "I cannot believe" – for one reason or another.

However, let's face it, everyone has doubts! Without doubts, faith is weak because it has not been tested. In the first epistle of Peter, we are comforted: *"You have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ."* (1 Peter 1:6b-7, ESV)

It is, therefore, God's will that our faith be tested, tested and strengthened. But the truth is that no trial feels good and easy at the time when we are tested.

You may know the saying, "Everyone has his or her own belief and is blessed by that". This is the case if we are talking about the Christian faith, but not any faith is the Christian faith. The object of faith is crucial!

What is essential in our lives, then, is not faith in itself, but faith in Jesus and the promises of the Bible. True Christian faith is not blind faith, but is born of hearing, hearing the word of God, as shown by the blind man who was healed by Jesus. He heard the word of God, Jesus' words, and believed in them.

How do you and I respond today to Jesus' call to believe in Him?

Let's pray: We thank you, dear Jesus, for coming into the world so that the blind may see. We acknowledge that we are often spiritually blind and stubborn as the Pharisees, but we ask for your mercy. We ask that You give us the right eye cream, that we may properly see what is invisible. Give us the courage to seek and doubt, and to face trials and test our faith – trusting you, that you will take care of us at all times, and according to your good will, you will strengthen our faith, and once take us to see you face to face. Amen.