

## “Faith-Forming Conversations” (Part 2)

John 9

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Apparently I should mention our church softball team in my sermons more often, as Bill’s Bombers went from two stinging defeats last week to two rousing victories this week – *and* we added five new players to our team! In the first game, we took a two-run lead in the first inning, added *nine* runs in the third, and one more in each of the next three innings to wind up with a decisive 14-7 victory. In the second game our opponents took a six-run lead in the first. We rallied in the second inning but failed to close the gap. By the middle of the third inning we were losing 14-7. Then we got a whole bunch of hits, bringing us to a 15-14 lead by the end of the fourth. During the fifth they scored two and we scored one, tying the game at 16. Technically we were out of time but the ump told us to take one final inning. The opposing team reached third but failed to score. Then Greg reached first, Camille got him to second, Logan’s friend Brandon got him to third, and then with a beautiful switch-hit, Pattie brought Greg home, and the Bombers went wild. Over the course of the evening C. Pinches batted in A. Pinches, returning his brother’s favor from last week; we discovered that Issie has an *incredibly* upbeat attitude, that at least three-quarters of the Subject family are *quite* good at this sport, and that when you get mama and daughter Pattie and Torrie playing together, you are in for a *lot* of laughs. It was a riotously fun even, even if Peter was running nonstop commentary in my ear while I was trying to keep score! Next games are on Wednesday at Hayes Park. We would *love* to have you join us!

Now as much as I’d like to keep writing baseball commentary all summer – believe me, it’s a *lot* easier than writing a sermon! – I do have some things I need to talk about. Like, evangelism. We made two strides this week: after some thought and prayer and conversation with a couple colleagues, I decided to start sending out a weekly sports-themed devotional to all the members of the Bombers – so all the non-church-goers on our team are at least getting *some* words from us that have to do with Jesus and the Christian life – and Peter was wearing a baseball cap proudly displaying: “I ♥ Jesus.” We may not be having *spiritual conversations* yet, but we are taking some steps in the right direction!

Last week we started talking about the blind man in John 9, and I introduced you to Engel’s Scale of Evangelism. The Engel scale is a helpful reminder that coming to faith in Jesus Christ is a *process* that unfolds over time and involves a series of steps or decisions along the way. The man born blind is an example of someone who makes that journey. At the beginning of John 9, he is blind, he has no faith in Jesus and no inclination to follow Jesus. Even after Jesus heals him from his blindness, Jesus is still *just a man* to him – “that man they call Jesus” is how he refers to him. He has gained his sight, but he still has

no faith; he is not a believer. But by the end of the chapter, he is bowing down before Jesus, saying, “Lord, I believe.” He moves from about -9 on Engel’s scale to 0, the point of decision for Jesus. The Holy Spirit works in his life, through a series of spiritual conversations – conversations about *Jesus*.

It’s important to note that *just because Jesus does something good for somebody, doesn’t necessarily mean that will result in faith*. The story could have ended at verse 12: the man has been healed, but he doesn’t have the foggiest clue who Jesus is, and he doesn’t seem to care. There’s a really important lesson here. We reach out to people in all sorts of ways: mission projects, back-to-school backpacks, Christmas baskets, Relay for Life, Crop Walk, Walk for Warmth, the food bank – there are a *lot* of things we do to help people. *But none of that is necessarily going to lead a non-Christian to faith in Jesus*. It is perfectly possible for a person to receive a gift that Jesus offers, or that the church offers in Jesus’ name, and for that gift to make *not one iota of difference* in that person’s spiritual life. The blind man is a case in point. *Jesus healed him from his blindness – but that didn’t lead him to faith*. It was the *conversations that followed afterward* that made the difference. We can give and give to people in the name of Jesus – with food and clothing and baskets and lots of other things – but unless there are some significant *conversations* going on about *who Jesus is* and *why he matters*, then those gifts are just *acts of service*, not all that different from what secular organizations do. The big challenge for us is learning how to *talk* with our non-Christian friends and acquaintances about who Jesus is and why he matters.

What happened in the blind man’s case was this: he found himself at the center of a controversy. It turns out that the day Jesus healed him was a Sabbath day. The Pharisees aren’t happy. *Jesus worked on the Sabbath!* He shouldn’t have done that! “This man isn’t from God,” some of them say, “because he breaks the Sabbath law.” Others are saying, “How can a sinner do miraculous signs like these?” So the Pharisees interrogate the man who had formerly been blind. “What do you have to say about him, since he healed your eyes?” The man replies, “He’s a prophet.” This is the man’s *first step toward faith*. Not long before, he perceived Jesus as just a *man*. Now, when he is given an opportunity to think back and reflect on what has happened to him, he comes to the realization that Jesus is a *prophet*, like Elijah or Elisha of old – prophets who healed people. The man doesn’t yet see Jesus as “Son of God” or “Savior” or “Lord,” but recognizing Jesus as a prophet is an important step forward.

The Pharisees then interrogate the man’s parents. The parents know their son has been healed, and they probably know how and by whom, but they are afraid to say *anything* to the Pharisees about Jesus, because anyone who confesses Jesus as the Messiah (the Christ) is being excommunicated from the synagogue. They don’t want that to happen to them, so they tell the Pharisees to talk to their son.

The Pharisees confront the man again, sternly. “Give glory to God. We know this man is a sinner.” They are forcing the man to make a choice: either he will agree that Jesus is a sinner for doing work on the Sabbath, or he will say something about Jesus that could risk his standing in the synagogue. The man doesn’t want to play that game. “I don’t know whether he’s a sinner. Here’s what I do know: I was blind and now I see.” The Pharisees press for details: “What did he do to you? How did he heal your eyes?” The man stands his ground: “I already told you, and you didn’t listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?” Here is the man’s *second step* towards faith – implicitly taking his place with *Jesus’ disciples* rather than with *the Pharisees*. They forced him to make a

choice, and he's made it: a choice for Jesus. No matter what the Pharisees may say, Jesus offers *life*, and the man *wants the life that Jesus offers*. He's making his way towards faith and discipleship.

Then the Pharisees start hurling insults at the man. They mock: "You are his disciple, but we are Moses' disciples. We know that God spoke to Moses, but we don't know where this man is from." The man defends Jesus with vigor: "This is incredible! You don't know where he is from, yet he healed my eyes! We know that God doesn't listen to sinners. God listens to anyone who is devout and does God's will. No one has ever heard of a healing of the eyes of someone born blind. If this man wasn't from God, he couldn't do this." This is the man's *third* step towards faith – recognizing that Jesus *must come from God*, and defending Jesus in the face of those who mock him. But there is a price to be paid: the Pharisees expel him from the synagogue. He is no longer welcome there.

At that point, Jesus comes looking for the man. The man has made some significant choices that are leading him in the direction of Jesus, but the initiative at *this* point is on *God's* side. God is always looking out for the least and the lost – those whose hearts will be open and receptive. Jesus finds the man and asks him the all-important question: "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Notice how much the man has come to believe about Jesus *before* anybody asks him that question. Too often, Christian evangelists pressure people to answer questions like that *before* the ground has been sufficiently watered. The man asks sincerely: "Who is he, sir? I want to believe in him." He is *ready*. His heart is open. The Holy Spirit has been at work. All the conversations up to this point have prepared him for this critical moment of decision. Here at the end, it's just *him and Jesus*. That's where it has to end up, for *everybody*, when they truly come to faith: a *personal encounter with the Son of God*. Jesus says: "You have seen him. In fact, he is the one speaking with you." The man replies, "Lord, I believe," and he bows down before Jesus and worships him. The Kingdom of God has increased by one.

There are four things I want you to remember: (1) Coming to faith is a *process*. It's not something that just happens in an instant. Some *spiritual development* has to occur. (2) The Holy Spirit is fully at work here. No one comes to faith in Jesus Christ without the Holy Spirit working in their hearts. (3) Conversations about Jesus play a crucial role in the process. The man didn't come to faith just because Jesus had done a service for him. He came to faith because people were talking with him about Jesus. In this case, the people who were talking with him about Jesus *didn't even believe in Jesus* – but the conversations were making him *think* about Jesus: his identity, his lordship, his divine origin. Without those conversations, the man *wouldn't have come to faith*. (4) Conversations that lead people to faith often don't happen inside the walls of a church. *Nothing* in John 9 happens in a Christian house of worship. The process of coming to faith quite often happens more *out there* than it does *in here*. Those conversations you are having – or that you *could* be having – with your co-workers and your colleagues and your teammates and your friends in the workplace and over lunch or coffee or on the softball field *matter*. You have the potential to reach *so many people*. Somebody with no faith in Jesus *needs people to talk to*, and they're not necessarily looking for a rabbi, or a priest, or a pastor. They need people like *you*. Next month we're going to look at a story in the New Testament that will illustrate how someone like *you* – an ordinary follower of Jesus – can help someone else come to faith.

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