

STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS
Our Conscience
HEALING THE BLIND MEN

July 31, 2011
7th Sunday after Pentecost
Revision F

GOSPEL: Matthew 9:27-35

EPISTLE: Romans 15:1-7

Today's Gospel lesson is not used in the West at all. Today's Epistle lesson is used in the West for the second Sunday in Advent from verse 4 to 13 only.

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Introduction: Jews and Gentiles in Rome

The Church in Rome was a diverse group of Jews and Gentiles living in a turbulent culture. About 49 AD Emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome (Acts 18:2), even though he had previously treated the Jews with favor. Priscilla and Aquila, Jews and members of the Seventy, then moved to Corinth where they met Paul. By the time Paul wrote his Epistle to the Romans in 55 AD, Claudius' wife (Nero's mother) had poisoned¹ him, and Priscilla and Aquila were back in Rome with the Church meeting in their house (Romans 16:3-5).

For Jews living in a Gentile culture, it was especially difficult to follow the Mosaic Law dietary rules. How could one find kosher meat when some of the meat sold in the marketplace had even been offered to idols? And one may not know which was which! It was enough to turn some Jews into vegetarians.

For Jews coming into the Church, it was hard to accept Gentile customs. Paul addressed this in Romans 14. He said that while there may be nothing unclean (i.e. nothing non-kosher) of itself; yet to him who considers it unclean, to him it is unclean (Romans 14:14). The Gentile believers needed to show love for the Jewish believers rather than destroy with their food the one for whom Christ died (Romans 14:15). On the other hand, the Jew who held onto the old dietary

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¹ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, XX, viii, 1-2.

rituals may not be as strong in the Faith as someone who realizes the proper place of food. But still, others were not to pass judgment on him. For it is to his own Master (the Lord Jesus) that he stands or falls (Romans 14:4, 10). The Lord had said that it's not what goes into a man's mouth that defiles a man (makes him unclean) but what comes out of his mouth (Matthew 15:11).

The Apostle Peter had a vision from the Lord (Acts 10:9-16) to indicate that the Gentiles should be equal partakers (Acts 10:44-48) of the New Covenant as the Jews. Yet it was difficult for Peter to convince the Jews in Jerusalem to accept this (Acts 11:1-18). Finally they did (Acts 11:18) probably due largely to the influence of Bishop James, the Lord's brother.

Peter's vision and the Gentile Pentecost occurred in the late 30's AD. In about 48 AD following the Council of Jerusalem, James and the Apostles and presbyters in Jerusalem drafted a letter (Acts 15:13-29) to be circulated among the Gentile Churches informing them officially that they did not have to follow the Mosaic Law in all its details. Just abstain from:

- Things polluted by idols
- Sexual immorality
- Things containing blood, such as things strangled.

This was for their own benefit since:

- Someone eating meat offered to idols is a partaker of the altar of the idols (1 Corinthians 10:18ff)
- Sexual immorality joins Christ to the harlot (1 Corinthians 6:15-20)
- One needs to discern the body and blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:26-30).

While this applied to Gentiles, no such relaxation is recorded as applying to Jewish believers in Jerusalem. In 57 AD when Paul returned from his third missionary journey (or shortly after writing the Epistle to the Romans in 55 AD), he immediately went to meet with Bishop James in Jerusalem (Acts 21:18). There were a great number of Jewish believers in Jerusalem who were all zealous to keep the Mosaic Law (Acts 21:20) and they had been informed (probably by the Jewish leaders, definitely not by James), that Paul taught Jews abroad that they didn't have to follow the Mosaic Law (Acts 21:21, 28-31). Paul had written to the Corinthians in 55 AD, "Was anyone called while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Was anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised" (1 Corinthians 7:18). To someone who was zealous to follow the Mosaic Law to the letter, Paul's statements may have been misinterpreted.

To prove to the Jews in Jerusalem that their concept of Paul was not accurate, James and the Jerusalem presbyters instructed Paul to follow the Nazarite Laws (which Paul had been doing) together with four other men in the Jerusalem Church (Acts 21:22-25, Numbers 6:1-21). That way everyone would see that Paul, himself, kept the Mosaic Law and that the rumors were misleading. We might note that Christians were still considered a branch of Judaism at that time.

The Lord had said to Photina, the Samaritan woman, that the day was coming when people will worship the Father neither on Mt. Gerizim in Samaria nor on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem (John 4:21). Salvation is of the Jews (John 4:22), and this is what Bishop James was teaching in

Jerusalem using the illustrations of the Mosaic Law rituals. But the Father was also seeking true worshippers who would worship Him in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24). The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem were resisting James on this count – which led to his martyrdom in about 62 AD. Paul said “the way into the Holy of Holies was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle (in Jerusalem) was still standing” (Hebrews 9:8). With the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD, people had no alternative but to worship the Father in spirit and truth at some location outside Jerusalem (John 4:24). Thus, Jewish Christians worldwide were forced into a significant re-appraisal of the situation in the late first century. At the time Paul wrote Romans, however, Jewish Christians abroad trying to hold onto the Mosaic Law practices could be easily weakened in the Faith by the “liberty” of their Gentile brothers (1 Corinthians 8:9).

Epistle: Romans 15:1-7

The Epistle lesson speaks of some Christians who are strong versus others who are feeble. The feeble ones may very well be those who have one foot still in Judaism and are having difficulty with the changes that occurred when Messiah came. There are a number of Greek words that refer to different aspects of strength and weakness as follows:¹

GREEK WORD	MEANING	STRONG'S REF. #
Dunatos	Powerful, capable (compare English dynasty, dynamo)	1415
Ischuros	Forcible, powerful, characterized by force	2478
Kratos	Vigor, greatness	2904
Stereoo	Make solid, confirm	4732
Arrhaphos	Not healthy	732
Astheneia	Feebleness (physical or mental)	769
Kakos echo	Badly held (i.e. not well)	2560 & 2192
Kamno	To labor and get tired	2577
Malakia	Softness, lack of toughness	3119
Nosema	A sickness	3553
Paralutikos	Paralyzed	3885
Puresso	On fire (i.e. with a fever)	4445
Exoutheneo	To belittle as nothing	1848

The Epistle lesson opens (Romans 15:1) with Paul encouraging the Romans who are strong (i.e. *dunatos*) to bear with the feebleness (i.e. *astheneia*) of the not-strong (i.e. *adunatos*) and not just to please themselves. We might ask, “Is this just a nice thing to do – condescending to put up with someone – or is there more to it than that?” Let us look at some examples from the life of Paul and the life of Christ.

Paul was criticized (2 Corinthians 10:10) for being feeble (Greek: *astheneia*) when he was present bodily and for having speech that was belittled as nothing (Greek: *exoutheneo*).

¹ Each of these words has several related words for the different parts of speech: noun, verb, adjective, etc.

Today, he would be characterized as having a weak personality. Yet his epistles were weighty and powerful (*ischuros*) according to his critics, and the Apostle Peter referred to this just before his martyrdom (2 Peter 3:15-16). Of course the stone, which the builders rejected (i.e. the Lord Jesus), was also belittled as nothing (*exoutheneo* Acts 4:11). Some in the Roman Church were also belittling their brothers as nothing (*exoutheneo* Romans 14:10). Paul's actions seem to be intentional. He said, "Now I beseech you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I, who in presence am humble among you, but being absent am bold toward you" (2 Corinthians 10:1). Paul went on to say that he had a thorn in the flesh that he asked the Lord to remove (2 Corinthians 12:7-8). Instead, the Lord replied (2 Corinthians 12:9), "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength (*dunatos*) is perfect in feebleness (*astheneia*)." This thorn in the flesh was given to Paul in order that he might not get too exalted in his own eyes or in the eyes of others (2 Corinthians 12:7). And Paul actually boasted in the feebleness (*astheneia*) created by the thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12:5). For, says Paul, whenever I am feeble (*astheneia*), then I am strong (*dunatos*) (2 Corinthians 12:10).

On the Sundays of the Adoration of the Cross and the Sundays surrounding the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, we consider Paul's words from 1 Corinthians: "For the Word (Greek: *logos*) of the cross is moronic to those who are perishing, but to those being saved, it is the power or strength (*dunatos*) of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18). Paul continues (1 Corinthians 1:27): "but the moronic things of the world God has chosen in order that He may shame the wise men, and the feeble things (*astheneia*) of the world God chose in order that He may shame the powerful things" (*ischuros*).

Christ Did Not Come to Please Himself

In their relationship with weak brothers, Paul encouraged the Romans to "please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification" (Romans 15:2). We are to do this just as Christ did not please Himself (Romans 15:3). To demonstrate this, Paul mentioned the example of Christ: "The reproaches of those who reproached You (i.e. the Father) fell on Me" (Psalm 69:9). Christ had the strength to avoid this reproach; He could have called for twelve legions of angels to avoid His crucifixion (Matthew 26:53). He didn't have to stay on the cross while others mocked Him: "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross" (Matthew 27:40-42).

So how does this help the relationship between those who are strong and those who are feeble? The question needs to be directed inward to consider what is real strength and what is real feebleness. If the Apostle Paul's humble, gentle personal demeanor was really Apostolic strength (interpreted by some as worldly feebleness), and if the Lord God dying on the Cross was really the Power of God conquering death and Satan, and if the Lord intentionally chooses the feeble things of the world, perhaps most peoples' perception of strength vs. feebleness is turned around. And if turned around, then perhaps we ought to look at those who appear feeble a little differently.

For example, our culture tends to focus on the interests and attitudes of young men and women to the neglect of the elderly. Yet the elderly, especially those who are physically feeble, often have considerably more insight into the things of God than the young men and women that drive the norms of society. Similarly, our society tends to shun those who are overly sensitive and easily offended. But sometimes, sensitive people are also sensitive to the things of God.

In His mission in becoming Incarnate, Christ had to put up with a lot from people who treated Him disrespectfully. He didn't come to please Himself, but out of His love for mankind. John Chrysostom stated² it this way:

“For our Lord Jesus was both spit upon and beaten with rods by pitiful slaves; not only did he not count it inappropriate, but he even exulted and called the thing glory. In discoursing with a harlot, when the by-standers all accused Him (Luke 7:37-39), He counted it wonderful, not disgraceful, and allowed her to kiss His feet, wash His body with her tears, and wipe them with her hair; and all this amid a company of spectators who were His enemies”.

Paul had earlier said, “Let no one seek his own good, but each one the others' good” (1 Corinthians 10:24). Here Paul repeats that aspect of love: “love does not seek its own way” (1 Corinthians 13:5). John Chrysostom gave³ a good analogy,

“For your own profit lies in the profit of your neighbor, and his in yours. This is as if one had his own gold buried in the house of his neighbor. Should he refuse to go and there look for it and dig it up, he will never see it. So likewise, he that will not seek his own profit in the advantage of his neighbor will not attain the crowns due to this”.

The context in which Paul wrote the above was a church where self-centeredness was prevalent. At the love feast⁴ that accompanied the Lord's Supper, “each one took his own supper ahead of others, and one was hungry and another was drunk” (1 Corinthians 11:21). During the worship, many spoke in tongues, just edifying themselves (1 Corinthians 14:4); Paul encouraged them to seek to edify the Church instead of just themselves (1 Corinthians 14:12). Paul also stated, “Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned (i.e. in martyrdom), and have not love, I am nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:3).

John Cassian stated⁵ that the stronger person is the one who is able to put up with the reproaches of the weak. A weak man will never support another weak man, but it takes a strong man to support the weak. By doing so, the strong man gains a lot by his virtue of patience.

“You must certainly know that he plays a stronger part who subjects his own will to his brother's, than he who is found to be the more tenacious in defending and clinging to his own decisions. For the former, by bearing and putting up with his neighbor, gains the character of being strong and vigorous. The latter gains that of being weak and sickly, who must be pampered and petted, so that sometimes for the sake of his peace and quiet, it is a good thing to relax something even in necessary matters. In this he hasn't lost anything of his own perfection, though by yielding he has given up something of his intended strictness; on the contrary he may be sure that he has gained much more by his virtue of long-suffering and patience. For this is the Apostle's command: ‘You who are strong should bear the infirmities of the weak’ (Romans 15:1); and: ‘Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ’ (Galatians 6:2). For a

² John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Corinthians, XXXIII, 2.

³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Corinthians, XXXIII, 3.

⁴ In the 1st Century, Churches imitated the original Lord's Supper, and served it with a meal. Because of problems such as occurred at Corinth, this was changed so that people might be able to discern the Lord's body and blood better.

⁵ John Cassian, The First Conference of Abbot Joseph, XVI, 23-24.

weak man will never support a weak man, nor can one who is suffering in the same way, bear or cure one in feeble health. One who is himself not subject to infirmity brings remedies to one in weak health”.

“We must note too the fact that the nature of the weak is always such that they are quick and ready to offer reproaches and sow the seeds of quarrels, while they themselves cannot bear to be touched by the shadow of the very slightest wrong. While they are riding roughshod over us and flinging about wanton charges, they are not able to bear even the slightest and most trivial ones themselves. And so according to the opinion of the Elders, love cannot last firm and unbroken except among men of the same purpose and goodness. For at some time or other it is sure to be broken, however carefully it may be guarded by one of them”.

John Chrysostom commented⁶ on this by calling us to a greater citizenship. Those who show love to us in return, when we show love to them, in essence, pay us back. The ones that we are especially called to are those who cannot pay us back.

“But you are called to a greater citizenship, and are enrolled in the books of Heaven, and are liable to greater laws. For the reward is greater then, when one draws to himself a person not inclined to show love. For if He bids us invite to supper those that cannot make us any recompense, that what goes for recompense may be the greater. Much more ought we to do this in regard to friendship. Now he that is loved and loves in return, pays you recompense. But he that is loved and does not love in return, has made God a debtor to you in another sense. And besides, when he loves you, it is easy for him to do so, because you’ve shown kindness to him. But when he doesn’t love you, then he stands in need of your assistance. Don’t make the difficulty a cause for listlessness. And do not say, because he is sick that is the reason I take no care of him (for the dulling of love is indeed a sickness), but be sure to warm again that which has become chilled. But suppose he will not be warmed, what then? Continue to do your own part. What if he grows more perverse? He is but generating for you so much greater return, and shows you to be so much the greater imitator of Christ. For if the loving one another was to be the characteristic of disciples (John 13:35), consider how great the loving of one that hates us must be. For your Master loved those that hated Him, and called them to Him; and the weaker they were, the greater the care He showed them. For He said, (Matthew 9:12), “They that are whole need not a physician, but they that are sick”.

Our Conscience Helps Us

A key element in the discussion of strength-feebleness in the Faith is one’s conscience. Some people have a weak conscience. In Paul’s day, there were some Jewish-Christians that were struggling with the dietary laws (Leviticus 11) of the Mosaic Law and had a weak conscience with regard to food (1 Corinthians 8:7).

⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans, XXVII, v. 7.

This term, conscience, has been somewhat abused in our society. The Greek word “*suneidesis*” (translated conscience) denotes seeing in union with someone else – in this case, God. It’s a glimpse where we see (perhaps briefly) what God sees. If we join ourselves with demons and speak lies in hypocrisy, our conscience can become seared as with a hot iron (1 Timothy 4:2). To one who is thus defiled, his conscience gets defiled also (Titus 1:15). Yet one’s conscience can still convict someone who is intent on doing evil (John 8:9). Even people who have no knowledge of God from the Scriptures can see (in glimpses) what God sees via their conscience (Romans 2:15).

However, we need to be careful with our conscience since our conscience may be feeble in some matters. Paul wrote a lot about peoples’ conscience being feeble in regard to food offered to idols (1 Corinthians 8:7-13, 10:23-33). Paul also wrote about one’s conscience being cleansed from dead works to serve the Living God (Hebrews 9:14). The aim, of course is to have a pure conscience (1 Timothy 3:9, 2 Timothy 1:3) and a good conscience (1 Timothy 1:5, 19; Hebrews 13:18; 1 Peter 3:16, 21).

Just prior to the Epistle Lesson, Paul gave a series of discussions that contrast someone who is feeble (*astheneia*) in the Faith (Romans 14:1, 2), or who is made feeble (*astheneia*) by the carelessness of someone else (Romans 14:21). This can happen if someone’s feeble (*astheneia*) conscience gets wounded (1 Corinthians 8:12). The two illustrations in Romans 14 are:

- Eating meat vs. eating vegetables (Romans 14:2)
- Keeping the Jewish feast days (Romans 14:5-6)

Paul’s admonitions were:

- Receive the one who is feeble (*astheneia*) and don’t judge him (Romans 14:1-4, 10-12)
- Whether feeble or strong, we each answer to God (Romans 14:4-8)
- Do not put a stumbling block in your brother’s way (Romans 14:13-16)
- As we treat the least of our brothers, so we treat Christ (Romans 14:17-19, compare Matthew 25:31-46)
- Whatever things we don’t do out of faith is sin (Romans 14:23).

The text of the Epistle lesson is the concluding statement of Romans 14. If someone is feeble (*astheneia*) and can’t bring himself to eat meat (it may be from the altar of an idol!) or can’t bring himself to break away from Old Covenant practices, bear with him. After all, Christ put up with the Twelve Apostles (Romans 15:7) and they started out pretty feeble also. And Christ puts up with us even though we seem pretty feeble at times. And just as we have hope through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures, so we are told to be like-minded toward one another (Romans 15:4-5), and to receive one another as Christ received us (Romans 15:7). Doing so makes for unity in the body of Christ (Romans 15:6) and righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17). John Chrysostom pointed out⁷ that in doing so and not pleasing ourselves, God gets the glory and not us – which is as it should be.

⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans, XXVII,

The Scriptures Were Written for Our Admonition

Paul stated, “For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures⁸ might have hope” (Romans 15:4). John Chrysostom connected⁹ Paul’s words to those of Christ, “Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure *things* new and old” (Matthew 13:52).

Chrysostom used¹⁰ the example of the paralytic (John 5:1-6) to point out that the Scriptures are a treasury of medicines for all purposes.

“The divine oracles are a treasury of all manner of medicines, so that whether it be needful to quench pride, to lull desire to sleep, to tread under foot the love of money, to despise pain, to inspire confidence, to gain patience, from them one may find abundant resource. For what man of those who struggle with long poverty or who are nailed to a grievous disease, will not, when he reads the passage before us (John 5:1-6), receive much comfort? This man had been a paralytic for 38 years, and saw each year others delivered, and himself bound by his disease. He did not fall back into despair, even though despondency for the past, and hopelessness for the future were sufficient to overcome him. Hear what he says, and learn the greatness of his sufferings. When Christ had said, ‘Do you want to be made well?’, he said, ‘Yes, Lord, but I have no man, when the water is stirred, to put me into the pool’ (John 5:7). What can be more pitiful than these words? What can be sadder than these circumstances? Do you see a heart crushed through long sickness? Do you see all violence subdued? He uttered no blasphemous word; he didn’t curse his birthday; he was not angry at the question. He didn’t say, ‘Have You come to make a mockery of us, that You ask whether I desire to be made well?’ But he replied gently, and with great mildness, ‘Yes, Lord’. He didn’t know Who it was that asked him, nor that He would heal him, but still he mildly relates all the circumstances and asks nothing further, as though he were speaking to a physician, and desired merely to tell the story of his sufferings”.

Gregory the Great wrote¹¹ to Natalis, Bishop of Salons, encouraging him to read the Scriptures more, even during the height of persecution. The Scriptures help us to know what we ought to do during times of persecution.

“You say that you are unable to read because of the pressure of tribulations upon you. I think that this is no excuse, since Paul says, ‘Whatever things are written are written for our instruction, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope’ (Romans 15:4). If, then, Holy Scripture has been prepared for our comfort, we ought to read it so much the more as we find ourselves more wearied under the burden of tribulations. We should not rely only on that sentence, which you quote in your letter, wherein the Lord said, ‘When they deliver you up, take no thought how or what you shall speak, for it shall be given you in that hour what you shall speak; for it is not you that speak,

⁸ For Paul, the “Scriptures” were the Old Testament.

⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Timothy, XIII, v. 16.

¹⁰ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXXVII, 1.

¹¹ Gregory the Great, Epistles, II, 52.

but the Spirit of your Father that speaks in you ‘(Matthew 10:19). I say that Holy Scriptures have been given us in vain, if, being filled with the Spirit, we have no need of any other words, such as the Scriptures. But, dearest brother, trusting in God without doubt is one thing, when we are straightened in a time of persecution. What we ought to do when the Church is at peace is another. For it is our duty, through this same Spirit, to learn by reading now what we may be able to show forth also in suffering, should cause arise”.

Clement of Alexandria stated¹² that the achievements of the ancients, such as the martyrs, are images for our correction. When persecution comes, studies along with some of the other virtues are often neglected. Those who aren’t prepared by study of the Scriptures may become distraught. Poverty can also be a type of persecution that distracts us from the Lord.

“Job, through excellence of faith, put the Tempter to shame and blessed his Creator when he fell from rich to poor, from honor to dishonor, from being good-looking to unsightly, and from healthy to sick. He bore what came second, just as what came first, most clearly teaching that it is possible to make an excellent use of all circumstances. Ancient achievements are proposed as images for our correction. The apostle shows this when he says, ‘So that my bonds in Christ have become recognized in all the palace; and several of the brethren in the Lord, growing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word of God without fear’ (Philippians 1:13-14). Martyrs’ testimonies are examples of conversion gloriously sanctified. ‘For the things the Scripture speaks were written for our instruction, that we, through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures, might have the hope’ (Romans 15:4). When pain is present, the soul appears to decline from it, and to seek release. At that moment it slackens from studies, and the other virtues also are neglected. And yet we do not say that it is virtue itself, which suffers, for virtue is not affected by disease, but it is pressured by disease. If he, who has not yet attained the habit of self-command, is not a courageous man, he is distraught; and the inability to endure is equivalent to fleeing from it”.

“The same holds true also in the case of poverty. For it compels the soul to desist from necessary things, I mean contemplation and from pure sinlessness, forcing him, who has not wholly dedicated himself to God in love, to occupy himself with provisions. Health and abundance of necessities keep the soul free and unimpeded, and capable of making a good use of what is at hand. ‘For’, says the apostle, ‘such shall have trouble in the flesh. But I spare you. I would have you without anxiety, that you may serve the Lord without distraction’” (1 Corinthians 7:28, 35).

¹² Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, IV, 5.

HEALING THE BLIND MEN

July 31, 2011
7th Sunday after Pentecost
Revision F

Gospel: Matthew 9:27-35

Today's Gospel lesson begins by focusing on two men who were not very well off physically, but who were strong in the Faith. The two blind men, whose only lot in life was begging, kept crying out as they followed Jesus (i.e. following the noise of the crowd), "Son of David, have mercy on us!" (Matthew 9:27). This expression indicates that they recognized Jesus as Messiah. John Chrysostom stated¹³ that the prophets also used the term "Son of David" when addressing the king, whom they wished to honor and declare great (compare Isaiah 37:35). Jesus allowed the blind men to continue crying out to Him along the way as He traveled to the house He was to stay at that evening.

The blind men had confident faith that Jesus was able to restore their sight (Matthew 9:28). As Jesus healed the two blind men, he said, "According to your faith, let it be done to you" (Matthew 9:29). This miracle followed immediately the raising of Jairus' daughter (Matthew 9:18-26, Mark 5:21-43, Luke 8:40-56) where Jairus, the synagogue ruler, was a little shakier in his faith and had to be encouraged by Jesus (Mark 5:35-36).

According to Our Faith

We might ask, why did Jesus put the blind men off for so long? The two blind men had followed Jesus from Jairus' house (Matthew 9:25-26) to the house where He was staying (Matthew 9:28). This must have been quite an ordeal for two blind men. He didn't even address their request until He was within the privacy of the house. Thus He drew out their faith like He did that of the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:25-30).

John Chrysostom stated¹⁴ that Jesus was "teaching us utterly to repel the glory that comes from the multitude. Because the house was close by, he led them there to heal them in private. And this is evident from the fact that He charged them to tell no one" (Matthew 9:30).

"But this is no light charge against the Jewish leaders. These two men, though their eyes were struck out, received the Faith by hearing alone; but the Jewish leaders, beholding the miracles and having their sight to witness what was happening, do just the contrary".

Chrysostom compared¹⁵ the faith the Lord asked of the blind men with the faith He asked of the paralytic, where He did not ask for any faith. But the paralytic acquired faith afterward.

"But why did Jesus not require faith of the paralytic (John 5:5-9), as He did in the case of the blind men, when He said, 'Do you believe that I am able to do this?' (Matthew 9:28) It was because the paralytic did not yet know who He was (John 5:12-13). For persons who had seen His power exerted on others, He

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¹³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, XXXII, 1.

¹⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, XXXII,

¹⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXXVII, 2.

might say this to them. Those, who had not yet learned who He was, but who were to know afterwards by means of signs, end up acquiring faith after the miracles”.

Irenaeus noted¹⁶ that there is a correlation between our faith and our free will. We have to want it, like the blind men, and this part is under our own power. If we reject it, like the Jewish leaders, it is not forced upon us.

“Not merely in works, but also in faith, has God preserved the will of man free and under his own control, saying, ‘According to your faith let it be to you’ (Matthew 9:29). He thus shows that there is a faith especially belonging to man, since he has an opinion especially his own. And again, ‘All things are possible to him who believes’ (Mark 9:23); and, ‘Go your way; as you have believed, so let it be done for you’ (Matthew 8:13). Now all such expressions demonstrate that man is in his own power with respect to faith. And for this reason, ‘He that believes in Him has eternal life, while he who does not believe the Son shall not see eternal life, but the wrath of God shall remain on him’ (John 3:36). In the same manner therefore the Lord both showed to Jerusalem His own goodness, and indicated that man is in his own free will and his own power. ‘How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Therefore your house shall be left to you desolate’” (Matthew 23:37-38).

Clement of Alexandria stated¹⁷ that the reward that we receive at the Resurrection is in proportion to our faith now. The darkness of ignorance blinds us to the truth of faith, but the illumination we receive is the knowledge of faith.

Jerome stated¹⁸ that just as the Lord seldom found a strong faith, such as the centurion (Matthew 8:10) or the woman with the flow of blood for twelve years (Matthew 9:22), so it was in his day. Instead of a faith that cleanses his heart and clings to the Cross, he often found his mind drifting onto base thoughts, the mere mention of which would make him blush. From this point of view, he felt that if it were done unto him according to his faith, he would perish. Thus this life is a struggle from beginning to end.

“Let every one commune with his own heart, and he will find throughout the whole of life how rare a thing it is to find a soul so faithful that it does nothing through the love of glory, nothing on account of the petty gossip of men. For he who fasts does not as an immediate consequence fast unto God, nor does he who holds out his hand to a poor man, lend to the Lord. Vice is next-door neighbor to virtue. It is hard to rest content with God alone for judge”.

¹⁶ Irenaeus, Against Heresies, IV, xxxvii, 5.

¹⁷ Clement of Alexandria, The Instructor, I, 6.

¹⁸ Jerome, “The Dialogue Against the Luciferians”, 15, Treatises.

Healing by the Power of Beelzebul?

The Pharisees accused Jesus of using the power of demons to do what He did (Matthew 9:34). On another occasion, they said that He cast out demons by Ba'alzebul¹⁹, the ruler of the demons (Luke 11:15).

One might wonder why they thought that Jesus was using demonic power to do what He did. Why did that occur to them? We can see their reasoning from the historical context. At another occasion, Jesus had claimed to be the Light of the world (John 8:12), and God, Who had come down from heaven (John 8:23-30, 3:13, 6:51-58). This is very similar to what Simon²⁰ Magus (Acts 8:9-23) said about himself 50 miles away in Samaria. Four years later, when Peter encountered Simon Magus, everyone in Samaria believed that Simon was “the great power of God” (Acts 8:10) because of all the incredible “miracles” that he had performed. Simon, who had been a follower of John the Baptist, learned sorcery in Egypt and used illusions and magic tricks to make it seem that he was performing miracles. The Jewish leaders were unable to see through Simon’s “miracles”, and assumed that he and Jesus were both in league with demons. About a year later, Jewish leaders again accused Jesus of casting out demons by Beelzebul. They said to Him, “Do we not say rightly that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?” (John 8:48) Jesus said this was blasphemy on their part (Matthew 12:24-37, Luke 11:15-26).

John Chrysostom noted²¹ Jesus’ response to the blasphemy of the Jewish leaders. He showed them that He knew what they were thinking, but He didn’t rebuke them harshly. He left it to their conscience to convict them. His aim was to bring them to the truth, and He showed great kindness to His enemies in doing so.

“They had accused Him of casting out demons by Beelzebul, but He did not rebuke them. He allowed them both to know His power by His more numerous miracles, and to learn His majesty by His teaching. When they continued saying the same, He proceeded to rebuke them, first by showing His Godhead, that He made their secrets public; and secondly, by the very act of casting out the demons with ease”.

“Because of the exceeding impudence of such a suspicion, and because of the fear of the multitude, they didn’t dare make these charges publicly, but they were turning them in their mind. To show them that He knew all that, He did not put down the accusation, nor did He expose their wickedness. He added the refutation, leaving it to the conscience of those that said it to convict them. He was bent on one thing, to do good to them that were sinning, and not to expose them. Surely, if He had wanted to make them ridiculous, there was nothing to hinder Him. He put aside all these things, and had one object only: rendering

¹⁹ Ba'alzebul (Literally *Lord of the flies*) was the god of the Philistines of Ekron that Ahaziah sent messengers to inquire of about concerning his sickness and injury (2 Kings 1:2-16). When Elijah interfered with Ahaziah’s plans, Ahaziah sent three successive companies of soldiers to arrest him. The first two companies were destroyed by fire from heaven, and the third commander begged Elijah to spare his life. Ahaziah never did get to inquire of Ba'alzebul before his death. Other similar names are Ba'alzebel (Lord of the dung), and Ba'alzeboul (Lord of the house).

²⁰ For more information on the Arch Heretic Simon Magus, see Mark Kern, Simon Magus the Heresiarch, St Athanasius Press, 2003.

²¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, XLI, 1.

them less contentious and more truthful, and so to make them more open toward amendment”.

Have Mercy on Us

Following the healing of the blind men, some un-named people brought Jesus a man who was mute and demon-possessed (Matthew 9:32). Jesus cast out the demon and by doing so He cured the muteness. This elicited the response from the crowd, “Nothing like this was ever seen in Israel!” (Matthew 9:33) From a similar crowd reaction in response to an act of faith by a paralytic’s friends (Mark 2:12), there may very well have been an act of faith on the part of those who brought the mute man to Jesus.

We notice that Jesus was very meek as he healed various people. He had just healed Jairus’ daughter privately (Matthew 9:25) and here he healed the two blind men privately, even asking them not to publish the results (Matthew 9:28-30). When the mute demoniac confronted him, He just cast the demon out. In doing this, He was teaching the Twelve and the Seventy how He wanted them to conduct themselves when He sent them out to do the same thing. Immediately following our Gospel lesson, Jesus sent the Twelve out two-by-two to heal the sick, raise the dead and cast out demons all by themselves (Matthew 10:1). He followed that by doing the same thing for the Seventy almost a year later (Luke 10).

For the Lord to conduct Himself in this manner is a good example of strength in weakness. He had emptied Himself at His Incarnation (Philippians 2:7) of the glory He had with the Father (John 17:5). And in His humble human condition, He went about healing parts of His creation that had been broken because of sin. And He asks us to take on the same humility, realizing that glory awaits us also as it did Him.

Jesus healed the two blind men in late 28 AD in Galilee. In early 30 AD, a few months before He was crucified, Jesus healed another pair of blind men near Jericho. They also cried out to Jesus as He passed by, “Son of David, have mercy on us!” (Matthew 20:29-34) Jerome applied²² the wisdom of these blind men to our everyday life.

“Imitate those blind men for whose sake the Savior left His home and heritage and came to Jericho. They were sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death when the light shone upon them (Matthew 4:15-16). When they learned that it was the Lord who was passing by they began to cry out saying: ‘Son of David, have mercy on us’ (Matthew 20:30). You too will have your sight restored, if you cry to Him, and cast away your filthy garments (Mark 10:50) at His call. ‘When you turn and bewail yourself then you shall be saved, and then you shall be able to see where you have been’. Let Him but touch your scars and pass his hands over your eyeballs. Although you may have been born blind from the womb (John 9:1) and although your mother may have conceived you in sin (John 9:2-3), he will purge you with hyssop and you shall be clean, he will wash you and you shall be whiter than snow (Psalm 51:5, 7).

²² Jerome, Letter to Sabinianus, CXLVII, 9.

