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Matthew 20:29 - 20:34



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg explores the differences between the accounts of Jesus healing blind men mentioned in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Though there are variations in the details, Steve points out that they don't necessarily contradict each other and that it's important to recognize that not every difference or variation in the story indicates a contradiction. The story of Jesus healing the blind men remains a powerful example of faith and mercy.

Transcript

We come next to a story in Matthew chapter 20 that has occasioned some difficulty because the same story when found in Mark has different features. And the differences in their features have led some to conclude that there is a contradiction between the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Mark in terms of how this story took place. I will read the passage to you first in Matthew, then I'll read it to you in Mark, and we will note some of the differences and see how it is that they perhaps should be resolved.

In Matthew chapter 20, verses 29 through 34, Now as they departed from Jericho, a great multitude followed him. And behold, two blind men sitting by the road, when they heard that Jesus was passing by, cried out, saying, Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David. Then the multitude warned them that they should be quiet, but they cried out all the more, saying, Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David.

So Jesus stood still and called them and said, What do you want me to do for you? And they said to him, Lord, that our eyes may be opened. So Jesus had compassion and touched their eyes, and immediately their eyes received sight, and they followed him. Now the same story is found over in Mark chapter 10, and as we read it, I think you will see there are some differences in the way that Mark tells the story.

It says in Mark 10, 46, Then they came to Jericho. And as he went out of Jericho with his disciples and a great multitude, blind Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, sat by the road begging. And when he had heard it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.

And many warned him to be quiet, but he cried out all the more, Son of David, have

mercy on me. So Jesus stood still and commanded him to be called. Then they called the blind man, saying to him, Be of good cheer, rise, he is calling you.

And throwing aside his garment, he rose and came to Jesus. And Jesus answered and said to him, What do you want me to do for you? The blind man said to him, Rabboni, which means my rabbi, my master, that I might receive my sight. Then Jesus said to him, Go your way, your faith has made you well.

And immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus on the road. Now, here we have some differences. On the one hand, it says in Matthew that as they departed from Jericho, a great multitude followed and two blind men sitting by the road.

Okay, now there's two blind men. And yet, when you read of it in Mark, you read of only one blind man. And his name is given, Bartimaeus.

Now, there's nothing really particularly troublesome about the fact that his name is given. And it's not really his name, because Bartimaeus simply means son of Timaeus. And Mark in 10.46 calls him blind Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus.

So, Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, is saying the same thing twice. It's not clear what the man's given name was. But he was the son of somebody named Timaeus.

Now, this man sat by the road begging. The story is also found in Luke, by the way. And there's one difference there.

And that Luke chapter 18 records that this miracle occurred as Jesus was that Jesus encountered these men as he was entering Jericho. Now, there's a slight problem here. Matthew and Mark speaks of Jesus doing this miracle as he leaves Jericho.

Luke tells of encountering these blind men as he's entering Jericho. So, that's one difference in these stories. Another, as we've observed, is that Matthew mentions two blind men, where both Mark and Luke mention only one.

And, of course, Mark gives us the name of one of them. Now, there is sufficient here to concern us with the harmony of these accounts. Let's deal first of all with the issue of Mark and Luke mentioning only one blind man, and Matthew mentions two.

This has troubled some people, and some have thought it was even a contradiction. There are other cases like this in the Gospels. For example, we have Mark and Luke telling us about a man of the tombs that Jesus encountered and had a legion of demons, and Jesus cast the demons out of him.

In the same story in Matthew, it mentions there were two demon-possessed men in those tombs who apparently were delivered. Likewise, as you read the various Gospel accounts of the resurrection appearances, when the women came to the tombs, two of

the Gospels mention that there was an angel there that met them and gave them a message. But the other two Gospels mention there were two angels there.

Now, all these cases are similar, are they not? You've got the man of the tombs, you've got the blind man, you've got the angel of the tomb. You've got a case where, you know, one writer tells us there was an angel, there was a blind man, there was a demon-possessed man. Another writer tells you there were two angels, there were two blind men, there were two demon-possessed men.

This is not really a contradiction. Some might think of it as such, but it is not really if you want to think fairly about it. Now, people who are seeking to find problems with the Bible will seize on this and they won't accept any explanation as valid.

But when you think about it, if there was a blind man, that does not mean there were not two blind men. If there was an angel, that does not mean there were not two. A contradiction can only exist when both statements cannot be true.

If both statements can be true, it is not a contradiction. Therefore, can it be true that there was an angel there and that there were two angels there? Of course, of course it can be true. It's just one author giving more detail than the other.

Now, if I would say to you on one occasion, you know, I moved recently from Oregon to Idaho, and then you heard me say to somebody else, my family and I moved from Oregon to Idaho, would you say I had contradicted myself because on one occasion I simply said I moved to Idaho and on the other occasion I said my family and I moved to Idaho? Of course not. You'd recognize that on one occasion I was simply giving more detail than the other. I didn't move alone, but that was not important for me to mention every time I mention it.

I can say I moved or I can say I and my family moved and be equally correct. And likewise, if there were two angels there at the tomb, one could say there were two angels there. And with equal correctness, they could say there was an angel there who said such and such and so and so and not mention whether or not another angel was present or not.

Likewise with these blind men. There were two blind men. We know this because Matthew tells us so.

Only one of them is mentioned in Mark or Luke, but it is not said that there is not another present. Now, why would Mark or Luke only mention one blind man, whereas Matthew told us of two? If Mark and Luke knew there were two, why not just say so? Well, we don't really know why, but there is one possibility. The very fact that Mark gives the man's name is a clue.

And you see, most of the people upon whom miracles were performed, we don't know

their names. The Gospels do not record their names. And it is possible that their names are not recorded because in most cases the disciples in writing the Gospels did not know the names of these people.

These were simply statistics, as it were, in Jesus' healing ministry. Just nameless persons, as far as the apostles knew, who experienced some kind of benefit from Jesus, who was passing by and who did them a favor, but who never became known by name to the apostles. The fact that Bartimaeus, this blind man, is known by name to Mark suggests that he became a part of the church later on, and that the people in the church, including Mark, knew him by name.

It's possible that there were two blind men healed and that one continued with Jesus and became part of the church and was known to the disciples by name and the other did not. You might say, well, that seems crazy that two men would receive the same healing and only one would really follow Jesus and the other would not. How could a person receive his sight back after being blind and not, out of gratitude, follow Jesus? Well, that is a hard question to answer, but we know of another case of ten lepers who all received a healing from Jesus.

He healed all ten of them, but only one of them came back and showed gratitude and glorified him and very possibly became a disciple of his. What happened to the other nine? Well, I don't know. Jesus asked the same question.

He says, where are the other nine? It is a marvelous thing that people can receive great benefits from God and then forget God. They can ask Jesus for things and receive them and then show no loyalty to him. It is entirely possible that of the two blind men, both were healed and one became a disciple of Jesus, the other did not.

The one who did was known by name to the disciples, and that was Bartimaeus. And in telling the story later on, Mark and Luke simply tell us the testimony of Bartimaeus, a man in the church, how that he had been blind and he met Jesus on this occasion and Jesus healed him in this way. And they don't mention that there was another man there who also was blind and was healed.

It is not important to their point. But Matthew simply is giving more detail and telling us there were two blind men there. Now, a slightly greater difficulty is encountered when we find that Matthew and Mark tell us that this miracle occurred as Jesus and his disciples were leaving Jericho.

Now, you know Jericho, of course, from the story in the Old Testament. It was one of the great fortresses in Canaan in the days of Joshua, and it was the first Canaanite city that Joshua and the people of Israel actually conquered. And they did so in a remarkable way, not by battering the walls down, but by blowing trumpets and shouting and God supernaturally causing the walls to fall.

That story is well known to Sunday school children. Well, Jericho was rebuilt and inhabited thousands of years later in the days of Jesus. And it was near this city that this miracle occurred.

But it says in Matthew and Mark that Jesus did the miracle as he was leaving Jericho. The problem arises in comparing that with Luke's version. In Luke 18.35, it says, Then it happened that as he was coming near Jericho, that a certain blind man sat at the road begging.

And hearing a multitude passing by, he asked what it meant. So they told him that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by. And he cried out, saying, Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me.

Then those who went before warned him that he should be quiet. But he cried out all the more, son of David, have mercy on me. So Jesus stood still and commanded him to be brought to him.

And when he had come near, he asked him, saying, what do you want me to do for you? And he said, Lord, that I may receive my sight. Then Jesus said to him, receive your sight. Your faith has saved you.

And immediately he received his sight and followed him, glorifying God and all the people. When they saw it, they gave praise to God. Now notice this.

This man was as Jesus was coming into Jericho, it says. This blind man was sitting by the gate. Now, we've got a bit of a problem because on one hand we've got two Gospels telling us that this miracle was performed as Jesus left Jericho.

And one Gospel tells us this man was sitting at the gate when Jesus entered Jericho. The harmony of these Gospels has been attempted a variety of ways. There are some who have pointed out that there were two Jerichos in the days of Jesus.

I personally do not accept this explanation, but I'll give it since some people think it helps. There was, of course, ancient Jericho, which Joshua had been destroying in the days of Joshua, but then there was a rebuilt Jericho further down the same road. And if this man was positioned between the old Jericho and the other Jericho, then it could be argued that Jesus was leaving one of the Jerichos and entering the other Jericho when he met this man.

So that when the Gospels say as he was leaving Jericho, they mean one of the Jerichos. And when the other Gospel says he was entering Jericho, it means the other one, because the man was positioned between the two. Now, I don't think this is a very likely explanation, because I really think the Gospels would have been more clear on that and stated which Jericho they meant, if there was really a significant difference in the two, and if there were two Jerichos that were inhabited and that Jesus ministered in.

I mean, one can hold this view if they want to, but I don't think it's necessary. I think it's a little easier to suppose this, that the man was seated near Jericho when Jesus entered, and he heard that Jesus was coming. He asked who it was.

He was told it's Jesus of Nazareth passing by. And he started calling out to Jesus, but Jesus perhaps had already gotten beyond earshot and had gone into the city. And, of course, Jesus went through the city and came out the other side.

Now, it's very possible that the man, like Zacchaeus, who was also in that same city, Zacchaeus knew the route that Jesus was taking and went ahead of him so he could climb up in a tree and see him. This blind man may have, or these two blind men may have, had someone guide them through the city so that they could be ahead of Jesus when he came out, and so they could encounter him on his way out, and the miracle could be done then. That's entirely possible because Luke only tells us that this man was sitting by the gate when Jesus entered the city.

It doesn't necessarily insist that Jesus did the miracle at that point. And the other gospel tells us that the miracle was done when Jesus was leaving the city. Thus, I think it probable that the man was outside the city when Jesus was entering and heard of Jesus' coming but did not receive an interview with Jesus at that point.

The man would then have gone through the city or beyond the city and waited for Jesus to come out the other side. And as Jesus was leaving the city, this miracle would have occurred. Now, I cannot be certain that this is the way to harmonize these things because I just don't know.

But I am saying this, that where some people would try to find in a case like this an insoluble difficulty and try to find fault with the Bible, there are more open-minded ways to handle things. And that is, I guess, the difference between me and many unbelievers. I'm much more open-minded than some because I believe that there are possibilities for vindicating the testimony of all the men who recorded Matthew, Mark, and Luke, this story.

You know, the interesting thing about it is that all these Gospels record the same story and they all agree on one thing, and that is that Jesus healed the blind. That a person or persons who were born blind and had no capability of seeing and no possibility of being cured were supernaturally cured by Christ. This they agree on, and they tell the story with a great deal of independence from each other.

And that is, to my mind, an important observation. When you find differences in the stories as you find here, many people consider that a weakness in establishing the veracity of the story. They say, well, look here, Matthew gives different details than Mark, and Luke gives different details too, and this is all contradictory, and so forth, and therefore we reject the story.

Well, that's not the way to really approach it fairly. It would be better to say, wait a minute, we have three witnesses here of an actual healing of the blind. And these witnesses actually give very different details from each other.

So different, in fact, that one gets the impression they hadn't consulted with each other. They hadn't read each other's work. If they had, you would expect them to have made much more effort to resemble each other's accounts, but they didn't make any such effort.

These are three independent witnesses to the story. There is one other difference that is found in the way that this is related, and that is that in Matthew, Jesus simply, well, what it says in verse 34 of Matthew 20, is Jesus had compassion and touched their eyes, and immediately their eyes received sight. In Mark, it does not mention him touching their eyes.

It just mentions Jesus saying, your faith has made you well. Go your way. Now, that does not in itself deny that Jesus touched his eyes.

Again, we have a difference here in the account. One mentions Jesus speaking. The other mentions him touching their eyes.

Is there anything that makes it impossible for both accounts to be true? Of course not. That Jesus would have touched their eyes and said, go your way, your faith has made you well, is entirely reasonable and plausible. Therefore, although these accounts of this particular healing of the blind do present more differences in the various gospel accounts from each other than most of the stories do, they do not present insoluble or insurmountable difficulties.

It's very important for us to know how to evaluate evidence and testimony. And if a person is open-minded, they can generally, in fact, I believe in every case, find ways in which those stories in the gospels that differ from one another in the different accounts can be harmonized without great difficulty and quite justly and plausibly. However, there are those who are looking for an excuse to be unbelievers.

They know that if Christianity is true, it condemns their way of life. If Christianity is true, they are in big trouble with God. And knowing this, they hope very much that Christianity is not true.

And one of the best things they can do to make their conscience feel good about being unbelievers is they can try to discredit Christianity and the records from which Christianity derives its authority, the scriptures. And so there are some who take great delight in finding what they consider to be false in the gospel accounts, what they regard to be contradictions between what one gospel writer says and what another gospel writer says. However, if one is going to do this, they had better be honest enough to

recognize that not every difference, not every variety or variation in the telling of a story is really a contradiction.

And if several different authors tell the same story, and they give it a variety of ways, but they do not contradict each other, then rather than seeing this as an unfortunate situation, we can see it as a fortunate situation that they supplement each other. You see, if Matthew had said, there were two blind men, and Mark said, no, there was only one, there would be a contradiction. But Mark did not say there was only one.

He just said there was one, and there was. And there was another one too. You see, there's no contradiction there.

If both statements could not be true, then we would have to say, well, one of these authors really got it wrong. And if they did get it wrong, that would certainly call into question whether we would still be able to consider the writing of the gospels as inspired writings, the Word of God. But let me even say this much.

Suppose somebody is unconvinced by the comments I've made that seek to harmonize and clarify what would otherwise be viewed as a contradiction by some. I do not believe it's a contradiction, but suppose you do. Suppose you concluded that these gospels do contradict each other and that they therefore cannot be the Word of God.

Well, even from that point of view, you have something else to deal with, and that is that whether they are the Word of God or not, they are three separate and independent witnesses to a story of a man named Jesus encountering the blind, and by a single touch and a word being able to alleviate the condition of blindness. Who can do this? Now, whether you believe the gospels are the Word of God or not, they certainly are testimony of persons who saw and knew. And therefore, we have good witness, three independent witnesses to this story, and we see that Jesus has the power to heal, the power to recover the sight of the blind, and of course when Jesus did this, it was an emblem of the more spiritual aspect of his work, of recovering spiritual sight to people who are spiritually blind.

And sometimes those who are spiritually blind not only miss that point, but make every effort to miss the basic miracle too and to deny that it even happened. We'll continue our study in Matthew when we come back next time.