

John 9: Does God Hear Sinners?

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"We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing and does His will, He hears him" John 9:31

One of the remarkable events in the Gospel of John is the healing of the blind man in John 9. It is remarkable because most of the chapter is the conversation with the blind man, not Jesus. It is also remarkable because the blind man makes some very astute theological observations. He sees that: Jesus is (the) Prophet, that Jesus worked the Messiah's promises (miracles that ONLY the Messiah was prophesied to perform), and that while he did not know Jesus personally, it was clear that Jesus could not be a sinner (this in light of the miracle being performed on a Sabbath). John 9:30 indicates that these observations are based on an understanding that the blind man has from the Old Testament: GOD DOES NOT HEAR SINNERS.

When the blind man states this, he is stating an old covenant truth:

Isaiah 59:1-2 Behold, the LORD'S hand is not so short that it cannot save; nor is His ear so dull that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear.

Proverbs 15:29 The LORD is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous.

Micah 3:4 Then they will cry to the LORD, but He will not hear them; He will even hide His face from them at that time, because they have been evil in their deeds.

Zechariah 7:12-13 "They made their hearts like flint so that they could not hear the law and the words which the LORD of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets; therefore great wrath came from the LORD of hosts. And just as He called and they would not listen, so they called and I would not listen," says the LORD of hosts

Do not think that this was merely part of the Old Testament; the Blind Man is pointing to a new covenant truth as well:

1 Peter 3:12 For the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers; but the face of the LORD is against those who do evil."

When we consider this, there are several issues that come to mind. First, are there not examples of God hearing sinners? What about Cornelius (Acts 10:31) or the people of Nineveh (Jonah 3:8-10)? How is it possible that an all-knowing God cannot hear something? To understand this we ought to define the terms that the blind man used.

What did he mean when he said "hear"? It does NOT mean God literally cannot hear them. Consider that God is a God of knowledge (1 Samuel 2:3) and that He knows all things (1 John 3:20). Indeed, we are told that every word that every man speaks is heard (and recorded) by God for the day of judgment (Matthew 12:36). For God to "hear" means to "listen". We would say it means to honor or regard, or to grant our petition or request (particularly, the forgiveness of sins; contextually, to work miracles).

What did he mean when he said “Sinner”? A Sinner is one in the condition (ownership) of sin. The term is often mistakenly used to describe our propensity to sin (as many Christians sometimes describe themselves as still being sinners, they mean that they still stumble in sin from time to time). This is not the Biblical meaning, since being a sinner is necessarily devoid of righteousness (2 Corinthians 6:14-16) and a Christian has been liberated from the ownership and nationality of sin (Colossians 1:13). The Blind Man is telling us that absolute truth: one CANNOT be a Sinner and Godly at once (1 John 1:6).

What did he mean when he said “God-fearing / worshipper of God”? We might describe this from the Scripture as one who acts with reverence towards God (Deuteronomy 8:6) by obedience. Consider that for one to be heard by God requires obedient action first. Men like Cornelius acted righteously first, then they were heard by God. The people of Nineveh repented first, then they were heard by God. Obedience (it is now to the Gospel) comes first.

We need to understand that the Blind Man was suggesting that God does hear Saints (those who are sanctified). We point out that effective prayers require righteous conduct (James 5:16). We also should say that effective prayers require Holy relationships. We are holy by being priests and the temple of God (1 Peter 2:5, 1 Corinthians 6:19). We are told that having been sanctified in obedience to the Gospel of Christ (baptism, 1 Corinthians 6:11), we become temples to the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). We can consider the work of the Holy Spirit in prayer (Romans 8:26) as being damaged by sin; as Peter says, our prayers are hindered by our conduct (1 Peter 3:7).

Considering the Sinner’s prayer, it is clear now that the blind man’s theology was completely accurate. God does not regard a Sinner’s prayer. The Sinner must obey the Gospel to have confidence that God listens and honors his prayer; the Sinner must become a Saint. Even the Saint must repent if they have sinned to be heard by God (Acts 8:22).