

John 9:1 As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3 "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. 4 As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. 5 While I am in the world, I am the light of the world." 6 Having said this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. 7 "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means Sent). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing. ... 13 They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. 14 Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath. 15 Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. "He put mud on my eyes," the man replied, "and I washed, and now I see." 16 Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." But others asked, "How can a sinner do such miraculous signs?" So they were divided. 17 Finally they turned again to the blind man, "What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened." The man replied, "He is a prophet." ... 24 A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God," they said. "We know this man is a sinner." 25 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!" ... 32 "Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. 33 If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." 34 To this they replied, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they threw him out. 35 Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" 36 "Who is he, sir?" the man asked. "Tell me so that I may believe in him." 37 Jesus said, "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you." 38 Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him. 39 Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind."

John 9 – March 23rd 2014 – Fields of Battle: Karma vs. Grace

How many of you have heard something like this: "Get involved. Help your neighbors. Volunteer to serve the needy. It'll bring you good karma!" or "You better not do that... It'll come back to haunt you. The bad karma will catch up with you." "What goes around comes around." "You get what you deserve."

"Karma" has worked its way into the cultural fabric and context that surrounds us.

This shouldn't catch us by surprise, really, as students of the Bible. The word "karma" doesn't appear in John ch.9. But did you see how this concept - which is certainly trending & trendy in our day - runs through this section? Think back to what the disciples asked at the outset of the chapter: *"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"*

There was a common belief in Jesus' time that basically assumed: do good, and you'll receive good from God in your life; do bad – like a particularly bad sin, and you'll get a "fairly balanced" bad consequence in your life.

Look at vs.34. The Pharisees echo this commonly held error. Their condemnation rang with judgment: *"You were steeped in sin at birth!"* In other words: "Your blindness is proof of how contemptible you are ~ God's judgment on your sin has hung on you since day one of your life."

As ones who look to God's Word as the final word on what we believe, we are brought crystal clarity. Jesus in vs.3 explains: our God does not operate based on "karma."

And this is important for us to explore, because...you know how wide-spread such errant thinking is today, just as it was then.

In fact, there are some related ideas today that have found their way into many Christian circles. Have you heard of “health and wealth” theology? The basic premise is: “If I just get right with God and live a good enough life, God will bless me with... well, wealth and health and the like.” Here’s a few quotes that reflect how *this* thinking plays out:

I know, too, even when my plans don't work out, even when things don't go my way, because I'm honoring God and striving to keep the right attitude, God will make it up to me.” (p. 218 *Becoming A Better You*, Joel Osteen) & “You get God's attention when you put actions behind your faith.” (p. 356) There are a lot of “if”s in health and wealth theology: “If you will trust God each day and live according to His plan for your life, you will be happier, healthier, and you'll rise higher than you ever imagined possible.” (p. 375)

Or how about this idea, which you may have heard expressed by someone: “If you just pray hard enough, if you just have a strong enough faith, God will bless you.” Same fundamental principles as karma: if I’m good, God will bless me.

Let’s dig deeper.

At a quick glance you might think these philosophies relate only to the opening and the closing scenes in John ch.9. But consider how it really permeates through the heart of what we see here.

Take the Pharisees. As you dig through more of the New Testament, you’ll see what is at the root of their actions. They believed that they actually did enough good to get God’s approval. They carefully polished their lives to achieve perfection in their eyes. Puffed up with pride, they were quick to condemn those who did not reflect their image of “perfection.”

But Jesus compared them to whitewashed tombs. Their souls were rotting away inside with unrepentant sin, like their unapologetic slander & judgment of others - as with this man who was born blind. And not just toward him! What did they judge about Jesus? They call him a sinner! They rejected that he was from God. They turned a blind eye to all the evidence given otherwise. And instead of putting their faith in him, they put all their faith in their manmade religion: “Do enough good, and you’ll receive a good verdict from God.” It’s all a merit system.

Karma and health/wealth theology are ultimately forms of legalism too. They all are of a similar strain: systems in which you earn reward or punishment, based on what you do.

See how these views fester with prejudice and false judgments. If I believe in health/wealth theology and I encounter a neighbor who lost his job, what will I think about him? If I believe in karma and I encounter a woman who miscarried her child, what will I think about her? These manmade philosophies feed superiority: they compel people to feel good about themselves, because they are obviously not as bad as “them” (the ones who had that hand dealt to them by God).

This is a point of temptation I want you to see.

When something good is going on in my life, how strong is the pull from deep within to think, “God must be pretty happy with me, if he’s blessing me like this”?

And what about the opposite: when personal tragedy strikes, how often is our gut reaction to curl up and look inside, “What did I do to deserve this? What did I do wrong? I thought I was a faithful believer? I thought. . .”

I once met a woman whose husband had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. Her church told her that if she prayed hard enough and her faith was strong enough, her husband would get better. She prayed and prayed. She later retold her story with great pain, “I knew the sincerity of my prayers and my faith!” If what they had been teaching her were true, then she certainly would have had “the right” to have her prayers answered. But her husband died, and she was left with a baby girl who would never know her dad. So she went on in life with her daughter. And Bitterness and Despair accompanied her too, until she encountered the Truth.

If someone buys into this “earn favor” type view, it can lead to tremendous burden and hopelessness. Think how such a person feels, if they sincerely try hard to do what is right/good, and things don’t improve in their life. Some have given up on God in despair. Others continue to chase after a way, *any way*, to do enough good, thinking eventually they’ll strike upon the right formula to earn God’s goodness in return.

In one way or another, what do all such thoughts come back to, at their core? They express a view that bases reward *or* punishment on what I do. And where would that view always leave us in the end? In hell.

Thank the Lord, he doesn’t operate based on a system of karma: do good, get good; do bad, get an equally deserving bad outcome. Because I know me. And you know you. Though on the surface, others might look at us and say: they’re good people. We each know how many ways: we’re not as good as we may appear. And appearance to others isn’t what matters anyway. Once Jesus, in an exchange with a young man, concluded: “No one is good – except God alone.”

Our God has brought us to see that.

Thank the Lord, we don’t have to get what we deserve. Our God operates by Grace. Jesus, God the Son, came to live and to speak Truth and Grace into a world full of messed up ideas and broken people. He agreed to take the violence and the pride and the arrogance and the pain of the world upon His own shoulders. He willingly accepted the punishment our evil thoughts, words, and behavior earned from our just God. In the ultimate act of anti-karma, since “*the wages of sin is death*,” Jesus came and took the death of hell we deserved. All so that the gift of God – eternal life – is given to all who trust in Jesus. Jesus says to you and me and to all people: “Repent and believe the good news: I give you as a gift what you could never earn. I am the Way for you to be right with God. Take my righteousness. I am your Life.” That’s grace. Grace means: all who trust in Jesus alone get what we don’t deserve. Instead, we get what Jesus has earned.

The evidence of grace as the only basis for being right with God is stretched across the length of the Bible...

I hear Jesus praying from the cross, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing.” That is not karma. No hidden innuendo that you’ll get what is coming to you, or you’ll need to

make up for your wrong later to balance everything out. What Jesus speaks – what he offers – is grace. Pure. Simple.

I hear Jesus comforting the repentant, death-row inmate who hung next to him, “Today, you will be with me in paradise.” In response to the deeds that admittedly deserved this punishment (& on the heels of a plea to Jesus, King of Heaven, to save), Jesus doesn’t tell him: “You’ll have plenty of time to make up for what you’ve done. I’ll carry over your debt to the afterlife.” Jesus says what can only be captured in the word “grace.”

There is no other way!

Thank the Lord for his grace, which sought out each one of us – as he sought out the blind man – and opened our eyes to God’s truth.

Where eyes haven’t yet been opened to God’s grace, hearts remain in utter darkness. People grope around for some meaning, some rule to life. The darkness spills out in concepts like karma. *It masquerades as an angel of light who proclaims false hope.* It rattles in our ears as the New Age claim of enlightenment. How filled with irony. Jesus explains: those who claim to see a way to God that is anything other than grace are blind.

So watch out ~ watch that as your world keeps offering you the hopelessness & darkness of their dying thoughts, you keep looking to the Light. . . The Word. Your Life: Jesus. “*See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ*” (Col. 2:8). The grace of our Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen. (Revelation 22)