

7 Signs that Jesus Reveals Himself Most Clearly to the Oppressed

By **christena cleveland** on November 3, 2014

About a year ago, I was invited to speak at a conference in the Southeast. The conference theme was “Just Jesus” and the speakers were asked to focus on the life and mission of Jesus. I was initially excited by the invitation but when I discovered that 24 of the 27 speakers (88%) were influential white males, my excitement fizzled. Puzzled, I asked the lead organizer why influential white males made up the majority of speakers for a conference on Jesus, a homeless guy who almost exclusively hung out with oppressed people. He responded by saying, “Hey, I don’t see color. I don’t think it really matters. All that matters is that everyone is focused on Jesus, that’s what this conference is about.” (I’m not even going to tell you what he said about women. It’s far more dishonoring.)

But here’s the problem with the organizer’s “Race doesn’t matter; only Jesus matters” creed: Jesus sees color.

And gender.

And class.

And other status markers.

You can’t separate Jesus from those factors because Jesus walked and lived and ministered in a world that was marred by social inequality. And scripture shows us time and again that when Jesus chose to reveal himself, he almost always did so to and through the oppressed people in his society.

Jesus is all about dismantling unequal power structures. If Jesus were planning a “Just Jesus” conference today, I’m pretty sure his speaker line-up would not be 88% white male.

THE SEVEN SIGNS IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

This past summer, I studied the Seven Signs in the gospel of John with a group of friends. These are the miracles John identifies as the ones that especially reveal who Jesus is a God of Glory, Prophet, Healer, Victor over Death and more. Further, these are the signs that suggest that Jesus came to make all things new – to create a reality in which not just rich, racially-privileged, gender-privileged, powerful people get to participate but *all* people get to participate.

One thing we noticed as we progressed through the Seven Signs was that Jesus most clearly and intimately revealed himself to the oppressed people. In every single sign, the powerful people, the ones who belonged to privileged social groups, were left in the dark, needing to rely on the oppressed people to fill them in on who Jesus was and what he was doing. The people who were on the front row of the miracles – the miracles that said everything about who Jesus was and what he was about – were the oppressed people: the servants, the sick people, the homeless people, the children and the women.



1. **Jesus turned water into wine (in front of the servants) - John 2:1-11.** Jesus performed his first public miracle, not in front of the bride and groom, not in front of the distinguished guests at the wedding, but in front of the servants. John wrote *"This miraculous sign at Cana in Galilee was the first time*

Jesus revealed his glory” (v. 11). Jesus chose mere servants to be the first humans to witness his deity and to tell of it. The powerful people (e.g., the banquet master and guests) learned of it secondhand.

2. **Jesus healed a powerful man’s son (in front of the powerful man’s servants) - John 4:46-54.** The government official (who no doubt had heard about the miracle in Cana) begged Jesus to heal his deathly ill son. Jesus kindly sent him home, telling him his son would live. But Jesus didn’t wait until the man returned home before Jesus performed the miracle. No, he performed it while the man was still traveling home, and while the boy was still in the care of the man’s servants. Again, the servants bore witness to Jesus’ miraculous power and the powerful man heard about it secondhand.
3. **Jesus healed a paralytic homeless man (and empowered him to preach) – John 5:1-18.** Here, it seems that Jesus waded through the crowd of sick people to find the most powerless among them, so that he might reveal himself. Jesus sought out a man who had been sick for 38 years and had likely acquired a bit of *learned helplessness*. (When Jesus asks him if he wants to be healed, the man responds by saying, “*I can’t.*” – a sign of learned helplessness if there ever was one.) This man, both psychologically and physically, was in last place among a group of sick homeless people that were already in society’s last place. Yet, Jesus chose to reveal himself to this man by healing him. The man went to the Jewish leaders and bore witness to Jesus’ miracle.
4. **Jesus fed 5000 (with a powerless boy’s offering of five loaves and two fish) - John 6:5-14.** In a crowd of thousands, I’m guessing that this little boy wasn’t the only one who had snacks. But Jesus chose to use this boy’s snacks to reveal himself. Jesus took the offering of one of the least powerful people in the crowd, and used it to perform a miracle that elevated *everyone’s* belief. John wrote, “*When people saw him do this miraculous sign, they exclaimed, ‘Surely he is the Prophet we have been expecting!’*” (v. 14).
5. **Jesus healed a blind homeless man (and empowered him to preach and expose the powerful people’s spiritual blindness) - John 9.** Not only did Jesus heal a blind man who had been kicked to the curb by the society and even his parents, but Jesus did it in a way that exposed the spiritual blindness of the powerful religious leaders. First, Jesus empowers the blind man by healing him (and thus making him “spiritually clean” in the eyes of the law,

and no longer an outcast). Then, when the once-blind, now-empowered man tried to bear witness of Jesus to the powerful Pharisees, they were unable to see Jesus because they were blinded by their rage that a once-blind man was now so empowered that he actually thought he could tell them about the Messiah. John wrote, *“The Pharisees said to the man, ‘You were born a sinner! Are you trying to teach us?’ And they threw him out of the synagogue”* (v. 35). But unlike the powerful religious leaders, the once-blind man walked away with a revelation of who Jesus really was. *“Yes, Lord, I believe!” the man said. And he worshiped Jesus*” (v. 38).

6. **Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead (in front of women, while standing in solidarity with women, and revealing deep theology to a woman) - John 11:1-45.** Jesus first revealed that he could conquer death in front of two women, Mary and Martha. But before Jesus did that, he did two very powerful things that are worth mentioning. One, Jesus took the time to stand in solidarity with the oppressed women by participating in their anger and lament. He didn’t just rush to perform the miracle even though he knew that he could and would bring their brother Lazarus back to life. Two, before performing the miracle, Jesus revealed perhaps the most important theological truth about himself to a woman, Martha. *“Jesus told her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never die’*” (v. 25).
7. **Jesus was crucified and resurrected (and revealed himself first to a woman, empowering her to be an evangelist) - John 20:1-18.[i]** Mary Magdalene was the first person to witness the empty tomb. But Jesus also chose to reveal his resurrected self to her in the garden (a biblical metaphor for intimacy) near the tomb. Then he entrusted her with a message for the men, making her the first Christian evangelist (v. 17-18).

In each of these signs, Jesus disrupted the inequitable power structure of his day. Rather than revealing himself most clearly to the powerful and privileged, he revealed himself to the marginalized and oppressed. In doing so, he required the powerful to be humbly dependent upon the powerless if they really wanted access to who Jesus was and what he was doing. These signs (and the way Jesus carried them out) bear witness to the new

equitable reality that Jesus established and is still establishing, a reality that values all voices.

Despite the fact that many of us (think we) know Jesus, we still haven't caught onto and carried out his vision of an equitable, interdependent reality. Like the people of Jesus' day, we still think that the majority and/or most powerful voices with the largest platforms are the ones we should listen to. We still fail to see that in order to truly see Jesus, we must view him through the eyes of an oppressed blind man whose very perspective threatens our precious privilege.

PRIVILEGE AND EGOCENTRICITY

Jesus wants to disrupt our inequitable power structure, but privileged people won't let him. One reason for this is that all humans have an egocentric bias. More often than not, we tend to process information in reference to the self – and when we do, the information is processed more deeply and integrated into our pre-existing knowledge.^[ii] In other words, we prefer information that we can easily apply to our own lives and that is consistent with our pre-existing knowledge. Once we've applied said information to our lives, we think we've done a pretty good job of learning it.

Due to this, many of us who identify with privileged groups exclusively process information about Jesus in relation to our privileged self, our privileged experiences and our privileged social location. It's no wonder that many privileged Christians wrongly believe that our understanding of Jesus needn't heavily rely on oppressed people's understanding of Jesus. We've think we've pretty much got Jesus all figured out.

Further, we place a premium on voices that offer information about Jesus that we can easily process as self-relevant and that is easily integrated into our pre-existing knowledge of the world. And we naturally silence the voices offer perspectives on Jesus that challenge our worldview. We like going to conferences, schools and churches that cater to privileged folks. Privileged folks don't like it when oppressed people get up front and make prophetic statements that threaten our privileged status. Like the Pharisees in the 5th sign, the privileged are often blinded by a commitment to an unequal social order and unable to hear from the voices that are needed most.

But those of us who check our egocentric (and privileged) bias at the door and look closely at Scripture will see that [oppressed folks have an epistemological advantage](#). We'll see that the so-called "theologies of the oppressed" that are often relegated to the

margins should actually be front and center in our conversations about Jesus. We'll conclude that the people in our society with the most power are perhaps the least qualified to talk about Jesus. We'll see that if we truly want to participate in this new, equitable reality that Jesus is creating, we need to allow Jesus to disrupt our inequitable systems that value privileged voices and ignore oppressed voices. And really, should this surprise us?

**Then Jesus turned to his disciples and said,
“God blesses you who are poor,
for the Kingdom of God is yours.
God blesses you who are hungry now,
for you will be satisfied.
God blesses you who weep now,
for in due time you will laugh. Luke 6:20-21**

[i] Scholars disagree on whether the 7th sign is the cross/resurrection or Jesus walking on water ([John 6:16-24](#)). I tend to agree with John Marsh, Steven Smalley and others who have argued for the inclusion of the cross/resurrection and the exclusion of Jesus walking on water.

[ii] Klein & Kihlstrom, 1986; Klein & Loftus, 1988