

# Nit-Pickers, Wound-Lickers, Goodness-Sakers and Fist-Pumpers

*John 9:1-41 | 3/26/2017*

John's story of the healed blind man's reception among his friends, family and the Pharisees suggests that there are four different ways to respond to life. We can be nit-pickers, wound-lickers, goodness-sakers or fist-pumpers. No matter what the situation, there can be four entirely different reactions.

**Nit-Pickers:** Anyone who has ever had a child come home from school with a note proclaiming that the notorious head louse has once again made an appearance knows all about the phrase "nit-picking." Each "nit," or tiny egg of the louse, must be meticulously combed, picked or pulled from the single strand of hair to which it is attached. The fact that this procedure must be carried out on a squealing, enraged, and probably embarrassed six-year-old only makes the task that much more unpleasant. Unfortunately, many people have perfected the art of nit-picking so competently that they feel compelled to demonstrate their skill on every situation in their lives. Nit-pickers are always noting what is wrong with something and someone rather than what is right. They can't enjoy anything, especially anything that has a flaw in it. They notice every little flaw and focus on it. With little sense of humor these pickiness-people are always looking for spiritual or theological or moral "gotchas" to flaunt at others.

An accomplished nit-picker can burst any celebratory balloon. "The wedding was so beautiful; such a shame the groom couldn't have lost a few pounds for the occasion." "Congratulations on your new promotion. But you've still got an awful lot of the ladder to climb, don't you?" "The new sanctuary looks wonderful. Of course, we'll probably never grow enough to fill it or pay for it!" Deflating joy, tarnishing triumphs - that's what nit-pickers do best.

The nit-pickers in John's story of the blind man's healing are the Pharisees at the first inquisition (v.16 ). Instead of rejoicing with the man at the miracle of regained sight, they can only focus on the possible Torah infringements that might have made it possible. No mention of the miracle. In the words of the man whose sight was restored, "Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind." Instead, they focus only on a possible violation of the man-made rules that define them and their sense of moral superiority.

**Wound-Lickers:** Remember getting a mosquito bite or a small scratch when you were a kid and then having to listen to your parents' repeated, "now don't pick at it." Of course, they had to keep telling you because there is something self-destructively fascinating about an open wound. We are drawn to it, we want to mess with it, re-examine it, pull off the scab a little at a time to see how it is healing. But this fixation can easily lead to infection - even to death.

Veterinarians must go to ridiculous-looking extremes to discourage this self-destructive instinct in their patients. In dogs and cats repetitive, damaging wound-licking can undo in a matter of minutes all the work a vet has put in on a patient for days. One of my fellow pastors tells the story of Hannibal, his enormous white kuvasz with a long elegant tail, who demonstrated the risks of wound-licking. A tiny nick on the tip of his tail became infected after repeated enthusiastic tail-waggings constantly slamming it into walls, doors, furniture and people. Three inches of infected tail was amputated and the remainder was carefully stitched up. A week later Hannibal managed to get at the healing wound, licking and gnawing it open. More infection, more surgery followed. Now left with nothing but a four inch stump, Hannibal began to convalesce once more.

But again the wound-licking fixation drove the dog to try and get at the healing stump. His licking caused the bandaged stump to swell and a horrible infection set in that spread throughout his whole system. Only two different kinds of head-gear (a cone and a muzzle), tranquilizers and massive amounts of antibiotics managed to save the dog's life. A tiny wound had nearly destroyed him.

When the Pharisees in John 9:18 recall the healed man's parents as possible witnesses against his previous condition of blindness, they are being wound-lickers. They cannot leave the situation alone, but return to it, trying to expose some imagined wrongfulness. These Pharisees do not even realize that the wound they are re-opening is the gaping hole of their own ignorance and spiritual bankruptcy. Still blind to the miracle, they continue to pick at what they see as a wound to their precious laws.

**Goodness-sakers:** Remember the old story about the mother who had to leave her two young children alone in the house for a few minutes? Before leaving, she sternly ordered the children, "Now don't put beans up your noses while I'm gone!" Left to their own devices it probably would have taken an eternity before those kids would have come up with such a bizarre idea. But since their mother had singled it out as an especially obnoxious act, the children were inspired. Of course, when their mother returned home, she found two children rolling around in pain with beans firmly stuffed up their noses. She inspired them to disobedience.

There is a distinct category of people who inspire similar kinds of contrary behavior in most of us, behavior inspired by their "holier than thou" attitudes, even when they are against our own best interests. These are the "goodness-sakers" - those self-appointed crusaders for the promotion of righteousness. They consider themselves - and let all the rest of us know it - to be super-spiritual. Historian H. G. Wells complained about people he called "the goodness-sakers." These were people who stood around saying, "For goodness sake, why doesn't somebody do something." Or "For goodness sake, look at what they're doing."

Few people can be as infuriating and sin-provoking as goodness-sakers. Smart-aleck remarks and visions of dirty tricks seem to float to the top of our minds all by themselves as we listen to the platitudes and puffed-up piety goodness-sakers blow at us.

The Pharisees in John's story haughtily invoke their relationship to Moses as a sign of their spiritual superiority (v. 28). The healed man, who had shown great self-control up to this point, is at last driven to jab back at these upright, up-tight self-appointed guardians of do-gooding. He asks them sarcastically, "Do you want to become his disciples?" As usual with goodness-sakers, however, they don't even get the point of the sarcasm directed their way.

**Fist-pumpers:** Thank heavens that besides the nit-pickers, wound-lickers and goodness-sakers there are also fist-pumpers. These are the people that celebrate victories and lend support in times of defeat. Fist-pumpers hoot and holler when their child's Little League team wins the big game. But they also give great hugs and "it's O.K." looks when the team loses 10 in a row.

It's not that fist-pumpers don't see all the imperfections in that incredibly garish Christmas sweater Aunt Agnes made or all the imperfections in life itself. It's just that they focus on all the beauty that surrounds the flaws, instead of the flaws themselves. It is amazing how fist-pumpers are absent for so long from John's story of the healed blind man.

Here is a stunning miracle - a man blind since birth suddenly given sight - and no one celebrates. His neighbors are doubtful, his parents are worried about the religious and legal ramifications, while the Pharisees find the whole episode threatening and foreboding. Not until the healed man himself finally realizes who Jesus is and what his presence means do we get the first sign of fist-pumping. Indeed, when Jesus' identity finally sinks in, the man falls on his knees and worships the "Lord" (verse 38). He recognizes Jesus as not only the Messiah, but as God Incarnate. And only God is worthy of worship. Now that's a fist pumper!

So how will you approach life? Looking for every little thing that you think is wrong, like a nit-picker? Obsessively insisting that there must be some way of proving you are right, like the wound-lickers? Touting your own perceived "moral superiority" and rejecting those who may see things a bit differently, like a goodness-saker?

Or pumping your fist in victory, celebrating the goodness, the joy and the triumphs God gives, no matter how big or small? Me? I think I'll try to be a fist-pumper!

*Pastor Keith*