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**SERMONS
I LIKE
TO
PREACH**
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DAVID ROPER

The Blind Men And the Elephant

Matthew 4:1-11

John Godfrey Saxe, who lived in the 1800s, was editor of the Burlington (Vermont) *Sentinel*, and one of the most popular poets of his day. One of his poems, “The Blind Men and the Elephant,” has remained popular:

It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.

The *First* approached the Elephant,
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,
At once begin to bawl:
“God bless me! But the Elephant
Is very like a wall!”

The *Second*, feeling of the tusk,
Cried, “Ho! what have we here
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me ‘tis mighty clear
This wonder of an Elephant
Is very like a spear!”

The *Third* approached the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,
Thus boldly up and spake:
“I see,” quoth he, “the Elephant
Is very like a snake!”

The *Fourth* reached out an eager hand,
And felt about the knee.
“What most this wondrous beast is like
Is mighty plain,” quoth he;
“‘Tis clear enough the Elephant
Is very like a tree!”

The *Fifth*, who chanced to touch the ear,
Said, “E’en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most;
Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an Elephant
Is very like a fan!”

The *Sixth* no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Than, seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
“I see,” quoth he, “the Elephant
Is very like a rope.”

And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!

Stay with me as I belabor the point made by the poem, for here our lesson will start. Imagine the first blind man as he approaches the elephant, puts his hand against the animal’s side, and decides that the beast looks like a wall. The second grabs a tusk and is convinced that the elephant resembles a spear. The third feels of the trunk and concludes that this is a snakelike creature. The fourth finds a knee and says that the elephant “is very like a tree.” The fifth touches an ear and is convinced that the beast has to be like a fan. The sixth, discovering the tail, pro-

¹John Godfrey Saxe, “The Blind Men and the Elephant,” *Childcraft*, vol. 2, *Storytelling and Other Poems* (Chicago: Field Enterprises Educational Corporation, 1961), 122-23.

claims that the elephant is like a rope.

Does the elephant really look a wall? Part of him does, but no one who can see an elephant would conclude that the elephant as a whole looks like a wall. The same is true with the conclusions that the elephant resembles a spear, a snake, a tree, a fan, or a rope. How fitting, then, are the closing lines of the body of the poem: “. . . each was partly in the right, And all were in the wrong!”

This poem is known to many where I live, but most do not realize that Saxe was not writing to amuse school boys and girls. Rather, he was voicing a religious concern—for he added this application:

MORAL:

So oft in theologic wars,
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean,
And prate about an Elephant
*Not one of them has seen!*²

Saxe was disturbed by the religious division he saw about him—and the tendency of religious leaders to pontificate regarding matters about which they knew nothing.

THE BLIND FOLLY OF TAKING ONLY A PART

We must admit that much confusion and division *do* exist in the religious world—even as they did in Jesus’ day. Jesus identified a major source of religious confusion when He spoke of “blind guides” (Matthew 23:16, 24), leaders whose eyes had been closed to the truth by prejudice (13:15).

In no sphere is spiritual blindness more obvious (and dangerous) than where salvation is concerned. Regarding the matter of salvation, it is common for men to make the same kind of mistake that the blind men of Indostan made.

Will

For instance, one man opens his Bible and puts his finger on Ephesians 1:11: “We have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will.” This pas-

²Ibid. (Emphasis his.)

sage refers to the sovereignty of God and emphasizes the importance of His will. This blind searcher, however, makes a fatal mistake: He ignores other biblical teachings on the subject of salvation and adds the word “only” to the word “will.” “In the matter of salvation,” he says, “the will of God is supreme. God has predestined those who will be saved and those who will be lost. Before I was born, God predetermined my eternal destination; I have no choice in the matter. Regarding salvation and damnation, it is God’s *will only!*”

Love

A second man speaks up, “No, no! When I opened my Bible, I came upon Romans 5:8, which emphasizes that God is a God of love: ‘But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.’³ Can you imagine a God of love predestining anyone to go to hell? Never! It is obvious to me that everyone will be saved, because salvation is by God’s *love only!*”

Faith

A third student chimes in, “Both of you are wrong. The final decision of whether we are saved or lost is not made by God. I know this because when my Bible fell open, I was staring at Acts 16:30, 31: ‘After he brought them out, he said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved, you and your household.”’⁴ Obviously, the inquirer was a free moral agent, able to decide for himself whether or not he would be saved. Notice also that all the man had to do to be saved was believe. He did not have to do anything else. He certainly did not have to be baptized! We are saved on the basis of *faith only!*”

Baptism

A fourth man gets red in the face at the last announcement. “Wait a minute!” he protests. “Don’t disparage baptism! I came across 1 Peter 3:21, which says that baptism saves us: ‘And corresponding to that [that is, Noah’s deliverance], baptism now saves you—not the removal

³See also 1 John 4:8, 16.

⁴Other passages that could be used here include John 3:16 and Romans 10:9, 10.

of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.’ Obviously, baptism is the key element in our salvation. Notice that the passage does not mention faith, which must mean that faith is not absolutely necessary. This is important to know, because little babies are born with Adam’s sin upon their souls. It must be washed away if they are to be saved. Since candidates for baptism do not have to believe first, we can baptize little babies. When we do, the water washes away Adam’s sin just like the flood cleansed the world in Noah’s day. Without a doubt, salvation is by *baptism only!*”

Works

A fifth man has stood it as long as he can. He begins to scream, “None of you know what you’re talking about it. You are full of religious mumbo-jumbo.⁵ The important thing is being a good person. Romans 2:6 speaks of God and says that He ‘will render to every man according to his deeds.’⁶ Did you hear that? ‘According to his deeds,’ not according to his being baptized or submitting to any other ecclesiastical ceremony, not even according to how much he believes. Everybody knows that if we have done more good works than bad works, we will go to heaven! Salvation is by *works only!*”

Grace

Our sixth (and last) student almost has a heart attack. “By works? By works? How can you say that? The most important passage in all the New Testament is Ephesians 2:8, 9: ‘For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast.’ We cannot earn our salvation; it is by grace; it is God’s gift to us. Incidentally, since nothing we do contributes to our being saved, nothing we do afterward can contribute to our being lost.⁷ The claim that a child of God can be lost is an insult to God’s grace; it says that God’s grace is in-

⁵That is, nonsense.

⁶If you wish, you can continue reading for several more verses as the importance of works is emphasized.

⁷Passages can be introduced here to explain their misuse by those who teach “once in grace, always in grace.” One such would be John 10:28, 29. If these passages are introduced, be sure you explain them before the lesson is over.

adequate! Grace: That’s what is important. Salvation is by *grace only!*”

THE BASIC WISDOM OF TAKING THE WHOLE

Other positions on the subject of salvation could be noted, but six—corresponding with the six blind men of Indostan—will be sufficient for this illustration. We can see why some people claim that “you can prove anything by the Bible.” We can understand why some are confused and prefer to remain in ignorance. “After all,” they say, “if all the learned religious scholars cannot agree on what God’s Word teaches, how can we possibly discover what the truth is?”

What is the problem? Many in the religious world make the same mistake the blind men made as they approached the elephant: They take a part instead of the whole, and then draw unwarranted conclusions from that single part.

Paul emphasized that “God is not a God of confusion” (1 Corinthians 14:33). When we reach different conclusions from our study of the Bible, it is not God’s fault, nor is it the fault of the Word He has given us. Rather, it is man’s fault, and one of the common mistakes made is the isolation of Scriptures.

A classic illustration of the importance of taking all that God has said on a subject is found in the account of Jesus’ temptation. Jesus told the devil, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on *every* word that proceeds out of the mouth of God’” (Matthew 4:4; emphasis mine). A little later, the devil quoted a passage from Psalm 91: “For it is written, ‘He will give His angels charge concerning You’; and ‘On their hands they will bear You up, lest You strike Your foot against a stone’” (Matthew 4:6). Jesus’ response was, “*On the other hand*, it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test’” (v. 7; emphasis mine). In other words, “Devil, you have quoted one passage on the subject, but not *all* the Bible has to say on the subject!”

If we would understand God’s will on any topic, we must learn to take all that God has said on the matter. The psalmist said, “. . . O Lord, . . . *all* Thy commandments are truth” (Psalm 119:151; emphasis mine). Jesus told His disciples to teach men “to observe *all* that I commanded you” (Matthew 28:20; emphasis mine). Paul wrote that “*all* Scripture is inspired by God and profitable

for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be . . . equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16, 17; emphasis mine).

The principle of taking all—not part—of God’s revelation is taught throughout the Scriptures. God told Moses, “You shall speak *all* that I command you” (Exodus 7:2a; emphasis mine). Later, when Moses “recounted to the people *all* the words of the Lord and *all* the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, ‘*All* the words which the Lord has spoken we will do!’” (Exodus 24:3; emphasis mine; see also 19:8; 39:32). The prophet Jeremiah was also told to speak to the people “all which I command you” (Jeremiah 1:17). In the New Testament, the apostle Paul emphasized that he did not shrink from declaring “anything that was profitable” (Acts 20:20), but rather taught “the *whole* purpose of God” (v. 27; emphasis mine).

The Bible is not written like an encyclopedia, with all subjects beginning with an “A” in one place, all topics starting with “B” together, and so on.⁸ Rather, to borrow an expression from Isaiah, the style is “a little here” and “a little there” (Isaiah 28:10, 13). Some of what the Word says concerning a given topic is found in one place and some in another. God has given *us* the task of bringing together all that He has revealed about a specific subject. (Two of God’s greatest gifts are the Bible and the mind. God expects us to apply the second of those gifts to the first.)

A sure indication that a passage has been isolated is the addition of the word “only” where the text does not have the word. For instance, I had one of the modern blind men in my narrative conclude that we are saved by “faith only.” The phrase “faith only” is found but once in the KJV, and the passage reads, “Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by *faith only*” (James 2:24; emphasis mine). The NASB has “faith alone.” We must be careful in using words like “only” and “alone”!

THE BEAUTIFUL RESULT OF ACCEPTING IT ALL

We have talked about the wrong approach to

⁸Aren’t you glad that God did not reveal His will that way? As a rule, encyclopedias do not make for interesting reading but the Bible, as it is written, is a delight to read.

the Scriptures; now let us demonstrate the right approach—still focusing on the subject of salvation. We could look at dozens of contributing factors, but for our purposes, we will confine ourselves to the six factors noted earlier.

The six can be grouped under two headings: *God’s part* in salvation and *man’s part*. This distinction is important. If we read only passages on God’s part in salvation, we could reach the conclusion that everything depends on God. On the other hand, if we read only passages dealing with man’s part, we might conclude that it is all up to us. When we study everything the Bible says about salvation, we will learn that God has a part and that we have a part.

Will

Under “God’s part,” we find the *will* of God—an expression of His sovereignty. In Ephesians 3:11, we read of “the eternal purpose” of God, “which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord.” The previous verse stresses that the church was part of that eternal plan. Since the church is the body of the saved (Ephesians 1:22, 23; 5:23, 25), God did indeed have in mind to save some before He ever laid the foundations of the earth. This is not the same, however, as saying that God made an arbitrary decision about specific individuals He would save and specific individuals He would condemn. To make such a decision would indicate that God is a respecter of persons, but “God is not one to show partiality” (Acts 10:34). Rather, “in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him” (v. 35). Man’s will is also involved in the matter of salvation.

The first man in our illustration used Ephesians 1:11 as his text. Look at what Paul said two verses later: “In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise” (v. 13). Paul said that after they “believed,” they were then “sealed.” If verse 11 taught that God predestines specific individuals to be saved or lost, they would first have to have been sealed by God to enable them to believe.

In fact, if the will of God were only the factor in salvation, no one would be lost. God “is patient toward you, not wishing for [willing that, KJV] any to perish” (2 Peter 3:9). The invitation

of the Lord is to all men: "And the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who hears say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty come; . . ." (Revelation 22:17). In the end, each of us decides whether or not he will accept that invitation—and thereby place himself within the will and purposes of God.

Love

We next consider the *love* of God. What a wondrous word! "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). In the words of the passage found by the second man, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Without a doubt, we are saved by the love of God. Does this mean that all will be saved? No, as John 3:16 indicates, love is a gift—and a gift can be accepted or rejected.⁹

The Bible teaches plainly that not all men will be saved. Jesus spoke of two ways that men travel: One is a "narrow" way "that leads to life, and few are those who find it" (Matthew 7:14); the other is a "broad" way "that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it" (v. 13). According to Jesus, more will be lost than will be saved.

Each of us makes the decision concerning which road he or she will travel. The challenge to us is the challenge Joshua gave the people of Israel: "Choose for yourselves today whom you will serve" (Joshua 24:15b; emphasis mine). Each of us must "work out" our own "salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12).

Grace

This is not to say that we earn our salvation by our works. Rather, when we respond to God's love, we are saved by His *grace*. I do not know of a more precious truth than that expressed in Ephesians 2:8: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God." We can never do enough to merit salvation. "Grace" means that God supplies what

⁹You may want to add an illustration of a rejected gift. As the parent of three girls, I use the illustration of parents who occasionally have to tell their daughters, for one reason or another, "You cannot accept that gift from that boy; you must return it."

we cannot supply. "Grace" means that God does not give us what we deserve, but what we need.¹⁰

At the same time, Ephesians 2:8 declares that salvation is not by "grace only": "For by grace you have been saved *through faith*; . . ." Once more we note that we have a part in our salvation. "The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men" (Titus 2:11; emphasis mine); but, as already noted, not all will be saved. We conclude, therefore, that we can accept or reject God's grace.

Furthermore, we can accept God's grace and then later reject it. Some do not understand that we continue to be free moral agents after we become Christians. Thus Paul urged men to "*continue* in the grace of God" (Acts 13:43; emphasis mine), and Peter said that we need to "*grow* in the grace . . . of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18a; emphasis mine).

The Bible says plainly that children of God can "fall from grace" (see Galatians 5:4). Jesus said, "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned" (John 15:6). Paul told the Christians at Corinth, "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12). Peter spoke of those who had "escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ," and added that if they were "again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first" (2 Peter 2:20). The Lord told indifferent Christians, "So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth" (Revelation 3:16).

Faith

That brings us to *man's part* in salvation. The foundation of all we do is *faith*. I thank God that Ephesians 2:8 says we are saved "by grace . . . *through faith*." (Emphasis mine.) Sometimes, people try to convince me that the Bible teaches that we are saved by "faith only" without obedience (specifically, without baptism), and they inundate me with passages that teach salvation by faith: John 3:16; Acts 16:31; Romans 10:9, 10; and others. They are surprised when I respond

¹⁰See the sermon on "Amazing Grace" in this issue.

to each verse with “That’s right” or “Amen!” or “Thank God!”

I probably believe in salvation by faith more strongly than some who quote the passages. As time goes by, I am more and more aware that if my salvation were based on perfect obedience, I would have no hope. I thank the Lord that He looks at my faith instead of my stumbling efforts to obey His will.

You may wonder, if I believe in salvation by faith, where I disagree with those I have mentioned. I do not believe in salvation by faith *only*. James emphasized that salvation is “not by faith only.” Paul stressed the importance of the “*obedience of faith*” (Romans 1:5; 16:26; emphasis mine). He said that “in Christ Jesus” that which is important is “faith *working* through love” (Galatians 5:6; emphasis mine).

The third man tried to use Acts 16:31 to prove that the jailer and his household is by “faith only.” If he had read further, he would see that “immediately he [the jailer] was baptized, he and all his household” (v. 33), after *which* he “rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household” (v. 34b). His obedience demonstrated his faith.

Baptism

Saving faith leads to confession (Romans 10:9, 10), repentance (Acts 2:37, 38), and, yes, to baptism (Mark 16:15, 16). Today baptism is a controversial subject, but in New Testament times it was not. The Lord had said plainly that it was to be done.

And He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned” (Mark 16:15, 16).

Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?” And Peter said to them, “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:37, 38).

“And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name” (Acts 22:16).

Since the Lord commanded baptism, those who believed in Him and desired to follow Him were

baptized (immersed in water), no questions asked.

The subject of baptism is a good example of the common practice of failing to take all the Bible says on the subject of salvation. I have noted that the usual approach of those who try to prove that baptism is not essential is to quote all the passages that teach salvation by faith. When they finish with their list, I say (as kindly as I can), “I agree with all those passages, but none of these said anything about baptism one way or the other. If you would know what the Bible teaches about baptism, you should read the passages on baptism, not the passages on faith. After all, if you wanted to know what the word ‘cat’ meant, you would not check the word ‘dog’ in the dictionary. You would check the word ‘cat.’”

When you look honestly at the passages on baptism in the New Testament, especially those that mention the purpose of baptism, you will have to conclude that God made baptism part of His plan for your salvation and mine.¹¹ Understand, however, that we are not talking about salvation by “baptism only.” There is no magic in the water; the Bible knows nothing of “baptismal regeneration.” Baptism has meaning and efficacy only when it is an expression of faith in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus (Romans 6:3–6, 17, 18). Thus, the Bible knows nothing of the baptism of babies who do not and cannot believe in Jesus. Further, baptism is “for the forgiveness of your sins.” Since babies have no sins to be forgiven of (Matthew 18:3; 19:14),¹² they are not scriptural candidates for baptism.

Works

The last factor we consider is “works.” One man referred to Romans 2:6 which stressed that God “will render to every man according to his deeds,” while another pointed out that our salvation is “not as a result of works, that no one should boast” (Ephesians 2:9). How can we reconcile these two passages (both of which are

¹¹If you wish, you can return to the passage on baptism noted in the first part of the sermon (1 Peter 3:20, 21) and notice what it does and does not teach regarding baptism.

¹²For more on this, see the discussion regarding what an “alien sinner” is in the sermon “Memories of Home” in this issue.

from Paul's pen)? Do works have any place in our salvation; and if they do, what is it?

Listen carefully to this statement and think it through: "You cannot be saved on the basis of works, but neither can you be saved without works." "You cannot be saved on the basis of works": None of us can ever do enough to earn a nanosecond in heaven; if we are saved, it will be by the mercy and grace of God. On the other hand, we cannot be saved without works, because works express our faith. "For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead" (James 2:26). Thus taught Jesus (Matthew 7:21; Luke 6:46; John 14:15); thus taught Paul (Galatians 5:6; Romans 1:5; 16:26); thus taught John (1 John 5:2, 3); thus teaches all the Bible (Hebrews 5:8, 9; Revelation 22:14).

Jesus therefore tells us that if we will "be faithful until death," He will give us "the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10).

CONCLUSION

The story of the blind men and the elephant may make us smile, but the Lord does not find anything humorous about spiritual blindness. Jesus said that "if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit" (Matthew 15:14b). God's prayer for the spiritually blind is that of Elisha from long ago: "O Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see" (2 Kings 6:17a).

In the long ago, Jesus healed physical blindness,¹³ and He can heal spiritual blindness today—if we will let him. I pray that even today you will open your eyes to God's truth—and obey it while you have time and opportunity. ❖

NOTES FOR THE PREACHER

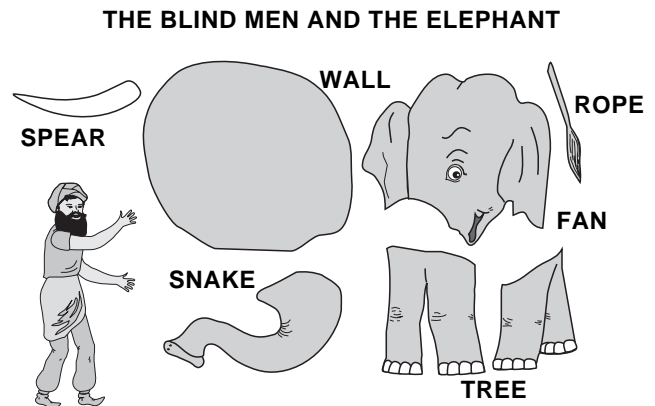
James D. Willeford preached on "The Blind Men and the Elephant," March 14, 1954, on the "Herald of Truth" radio program. At the close of the transcript for that program, brother Willeford gave credit to Joe Malone "for the arrangement of this sermon." That was my introduction to this lesson.

¹³Here are a few passages from one Gospel Account on Jesus' healing the blind: Matthew 9:27–29; 11:5; 12:22; 15:30, 31; 20:30–34; 21:14.

As far as I know, brother Malone originated the idea for this lesson—and nobody ever preached it as he did. A skilled artist and sports cartoonist, he drew the elephant as he preached. With each stroke of the chalk, he made a biblical application. Brother Joe has since gone to his reward, but you can still see him do his drawings in a series of video lessons produced by the White's Ferry Road church of Christ in Monroe, Louisiana.

Since I do not have brother Malone's artistic prowess, I opted for a flannelboard presentation. My daughter Cindy drew an elephant for me, and I borrowed from many sources to come up with the other odds and ends.

At the beginning of the sermon, I put the title at the top of the board. After reading the poem, I put a representation of a blind man from Indostan in the lower left-hand corner of the board. Then, as I talk about the different parts of the elephant, I put the parts on the board—with the blind men's impressions beside each one. The side of the elephant is put in the spot where it will remain, but the other pieces are scattered around the board.

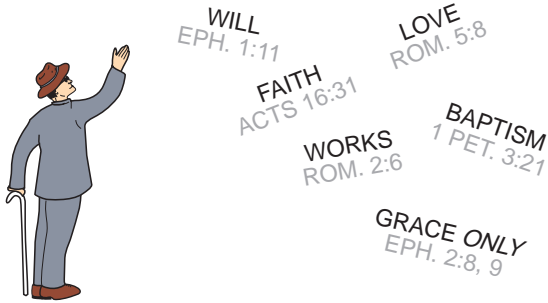


As I stress that the elephant does not really look like a wall, a spear, etc., I assemble the elephant, at the same time removing the words "WALL," "SPEAR," etc.

When I begin to talk about the six modern-day men, I put a representation of a modern blind man near the bottom of the board, to the right of the elephant. The passages that the six men found are scattered on the right side of the board, with a keyword above each one ("WILL," "LOVE," etc.). A separate piece with the word "ONLY," lettered in red, is added to each key-

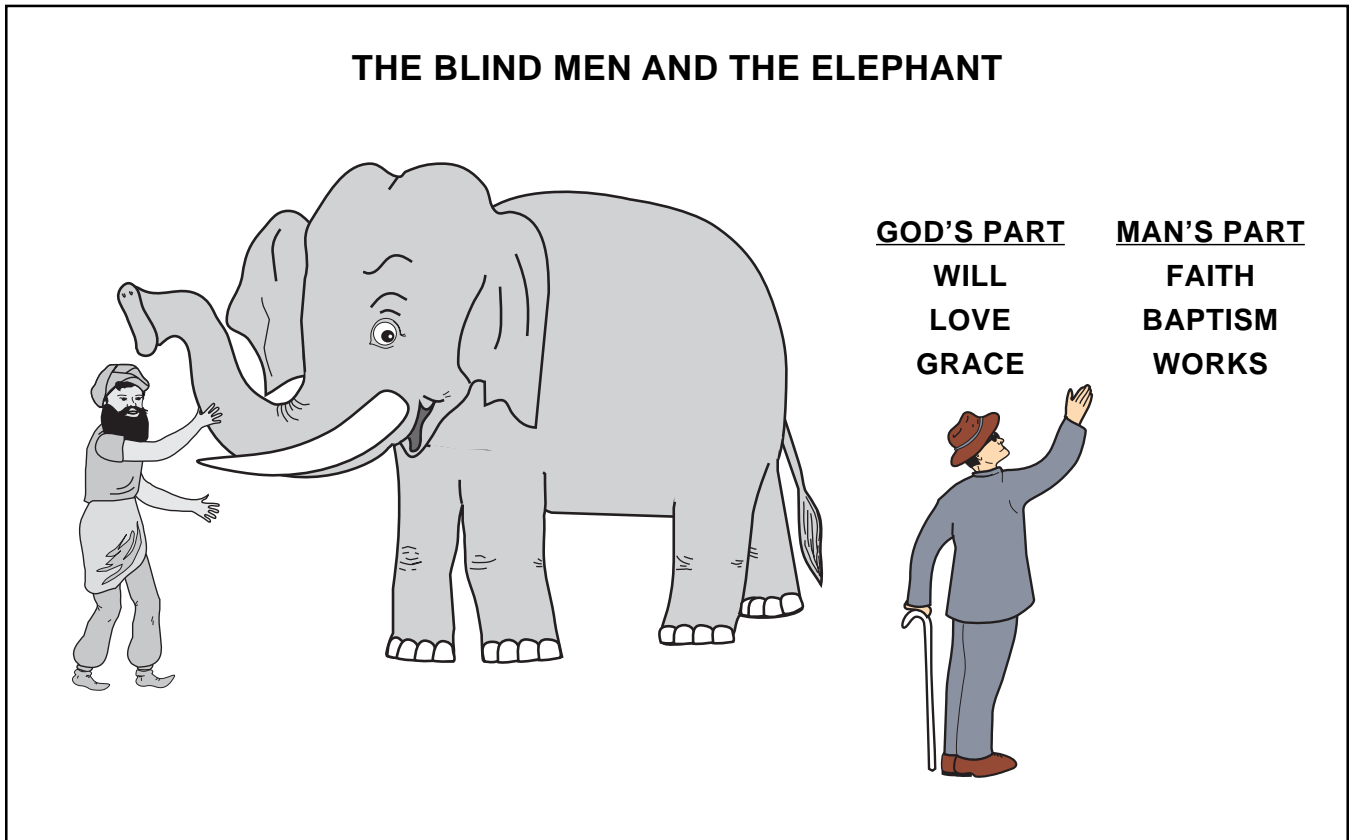
word as it is discussed.

THE BLIND MEN AND THE ELEPHANT



For the final part of the sermon, the Scripture pieces are removed, the words "GOD'S PART" and "MAN'S PART" are put on the board, and the keywords are assembled under these headings. At the close of the lesson, the board looks like the diagram below.

If you have some artistic ability, you may want to try illustrating this sermon by drawing on a chalkboard or a large piece of paper. The lesson could also be adapted for an overhead projector: The pieces could be drawn on clear vinyl (which will lie flat on the hot projector surface), or overlays could be made.



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