

May 8, 2011

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

Healing in the House of Mercy

John 5:1 – 16

This is a puzzling story. At first blush, it is hard to see why John included it in his gospel. After all, he had plenty of other material from which to choose, so why choose this one? Nearly all the other healing miracles Jesus did were for people who came to Him. In fact Scripture tells us over and over that Jesus healed all who came to Him who were sick and in need of healing. But here, no one comes to Him – He goes to them. And He only heals one guy in the crowd of sick, blind, lame and withered people. Furthermore, He heals one man, then dodges the crowd and disappears. When John says Jesus 'slipped away' he uses a word that literally means 'to bend the head aside' – or in other words, to evade. But then later on He finds the guy He healed, while he is in the temple, and warns him to stop sinning so that nothing worse would happen to him. And the guy is probably left wondering what could be worse than laying on a mat all by yourself for 38 years. Finally, we have this man who was fully restored to health, peaching on the man who healed him to the authorities. He rats Jesus out to the Pharisees. And John says that they were mad because Jesus was healing on the Sabbath. It is a puzzling story.

But I think as you ponder this as I have pondered it, you will begin to see why John tells this story. And I think the purpose of this story is fairly simple and straightforward. I believe John meant to illustrate **the impotence of religion without Christ, and the unexpected mercy of God**. The impotence of man and the power of God. The contrast from chapter four to chapter five is striking. On the one hand in chapter four we have those people, mainly Samaritans, with one court official (who by the way was probably not Jewish) whose son was dying, who were Savior-seekers – and the Jews of Galilee who merely sign-seekers. Now Jesus comes to Jerusalem where devout, God-fearing Jews were as thick as fleas on a mangy dog. You would think Jesus would find God-lovers in Jerusalem of all places, you think He would find true religion, but all He finds are sick people and posers.

Religion in and of itself is not a bad word. In fact James tells us that there is such a thing as true religion – which implies that there is such a thing as false religion. The 19th-century Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard identified two kinds of religion—Religion A and Religion B. Religion A is “faith” in name only. It is what Paul called '**holding to a form of godliness, while denying its power**' 2 Timothy 3:5 It's the practice of attending church, of striving for moral perfection, being a 'good person', **without genuine faith in the living Lord**. Religion B, on the other hand, is a life-transforming, destiny-changing experience. It's a definite commitment to the crucified and risen Savior, which establishes an ongoing personal relationship between a forgiven sinner and a gracious God. Religion A is the reason why for many years C. S. Lewis had such great difficulty in becoming a Christian. The outward shell had blinded him to the inward reality. According to his brother Warren, his conversion was “**no sudden plunge into a new life, but rather a slow, steady convalescence from a deep-seated spiritual illness—an illness that had its origins in our childhood, in the dry husks of religion offered by the semi-political churchgoing of Ulster, and the similar dull emptiness of compulsory church during our school days.**”

The story of the life of Jesus is full of these encounters with outwardly religious and inwardly hollow men, who claimed a spirituality they did not possess. And so He comes to Jerusalem: *After these things there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem by the sheep gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew Bethesda, having five porticoes. In these lay a multitude of those who were sick, blind, lame, and withered,* John 5:1-3 Now we are not told which feast Jesus was attending here – evidently John didn't think which feast it was contributed to the point of the story so we don't know. We do know that in chapter 6, we hear of the second Passover Jesus attended, so this might have been the feast of Pentecost which is celebrated fifty days after Passover; and Jesus had just attended a Passover according to John in chapter four.

But John does include the detail that there is a pool in Jerusalem, called Bethesda, situated close to the sheep gate and had some distinctive architecture – five porticos – or covered walkways. The sheep gate **[picture]** is the entrance to the sheep-market in the northeast corner of the temple area where the sacrificial lambs were brought before they were sacrificed in the temple, and this is where the pool was located. I think John is trying to help us see the connection between those sacrificial lambs and Jesus, the Lamb of God, and those people who were flocking to this pool for healing.

The pool was called Bethesda, which means, 'House of Mercy' or 'House of Graceful Waters' – and it had what John describes as five porticos. **[pictures]** These were colonnaded, covered walkways, alongside the pool, where people had shelter from the elements as they took the cure. Until the 19th century, there was no evidence outside of John's Gospel for the existence of this pool. Scholars argued that the gospel was written later, probably by someone without first-hand knowledge of the city of Jerusalem, and that the 'pool' had only a metaphorical meaning, rather than historical, significance. Then in the 19th century, archaeologists discovered the remains of a pool exactly matching the description in John's Gospel, thus confirming the historical accuracy of John's account. It is always comforting, is it not, when men finally prove what God has said all along?

In any case, there were a lot of people – a multitude John says – of sick, blind, lame, and withered people, that were there to take the waters, so to speak. In most of your translations, the end of verse three and all of verse four gives us the reason these people were here: *waiting for the moving of the waters; 4 for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool and stirred up the water; whoever then first, after the stirring up of the water, stepped in was made well from whatever disease with which he was afflicted.* But a little explanation here is necessary. This portion is not included in many translations because it really isn't supported by the actual text. The best texts, the closest ones we have to the source, do not include this little section. It was most likely added later as an explanatory note on why these people were here, and to explain what the man meant when he said in verse 7: *Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up.*

What he was referring to when he talked about the water being stirred up was a local legend that had arisen. This pool was fed by an intermittent spring that caused the water in the pool to bubble up and boil as it were, when the spring ran, and it occurred at random intervals. So the story grew up that it was an angel that stirred the waters and when he did, the first guy in got healed. So naturally all the sick people who had no hope of any other cure would congregate around this pool. And obviously it was a case of the survival of the fittest. Can you imagine the carnage when the water started boiling? I doubt if these people were very polite to one another then. And this poor guy couldn't even do it on his own and he didn't have anyone to help him – which is why he had been there thirty-eight years. By the way, when I was in Israel last year, there were still some people hanging around that pool. **[pictures]**

The fact that this was only a legend is one good reason later translations which were based on earlier copies of the gospel which didn't include this bit, left it out. It also doesn't make sense that God would orchestrate a sort of first-come-first-served healing ministry – first one in wins. It is also anti-biblical that angels are instrumental in healing. That doesn't happen in the Bible. God heals – and oftentimes, while He works through human agencies, He never uses angels to bring healing. So essentially, this man was looking for a little magic because he evidently believes the legend about the angel. This brings up a serious point about miracles. Genuine miracles are always rooted in the word of God and when you hear fantastic tales of angels healing people, don't believe it. Bob Jone, a so-called prophet in the current charismania movement known as the Third Wave describes being visited by an angel who said that his name was "The Winds of Change," and that great changes were coming to the church. Bob said that **'this is a high-ranking angel over all the ones assigned to healing, breakthrough and revival unto harvest.'** To that I would say, read your Bible Bob – there is no such thing!

In any case, when Jesus gets to the pool of Bethesda: *A man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he had already been a long time in that condition, He said to him, "Do you wish to get well?"* John 5:5-6 What a strange question to ask this man! He is obviously sick, Jesus knew he had been there a long time, he can't even move himself to get to the water, and Jesus says, 'Do you want to be healed?' What that question implies is that the man had somehow gotten used to his sickness. In fact he may have used his illness as a kind of excuse for laying around. The fact that Jesus asked the question indicates that there is something about his illness that is self-serving and self-indulgent. Go down to verse 14 after the man is healed: *Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "Behold, you have become well; do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you."* John 5:14 Literally Jesus tells him **'Do not continue to sin so that something worse is not visited on you.'**

You might have pictured this man as a helpless victim of his illness, but Jesus reads it differently. He implies that the man's sickness is due to his continuing sin, and He heals him and says, 'Stop doing that – stop sinning.' Now we understand from the Bible that not all sin is due to sickness – but some is. That is why we have the word in James 5: *'...and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.'* James 5:15 We aren't told what the sin is but we know that he hasn't given it up. And yet, and yet...the Lord heals him.

What should this say to us? I think the most powerful thing this says is that **God is sovereign – and He will have mercy on whom He will have mercy.** It says that healing is not up to us who will, but to God who has mercy. There is a huge percentage of Christians today who buy into the teaching that it is always God's will to heal. They point to the fact that Jesus healed 'all who came to Him' and say therefore His will is that all are healed. But we only have to look at this one story, never mind the overwhelming evidence to the contrary in the rest of the Bible, to see that this is a logical fallacy. It doesn't follow. If it were God's will that everyone is healed – then why did Jesus slip into this crowded pool, identify and heal one man and then disappear. This guy might not even have been the one there who was in the worst condition. There was a multitude of sick, blind, lame and withered people at that pool.

'Oh' someone will say, 'It is God's will that everyone is healed, but not everyone has faith to be healed'. Okay, let's look at this guy. *The sick man answered Him, "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, but while I am coming, another steps down before me."* John 5:7 I don't know about you, but I don't see any faith there. I see whining, I see excuses, I see self-pity – but I don't see faith. God is not dependent on my faith or your faith to do what He wants to do. He calls us to have faith, we must have faith to believe, without faith it is impossible to please God – but He is in no way constrained by our lack of faith to do what He purposes to do. And I believe His purpose here with this man was to demonstrate the impotence of man's efforts to save himself – that is the impotence of religion without Christ.

And the writer John, lays out significant details that tell us more about this story. Bethesda, the House of mercy, was by the sheep gate, which led into the sheep-market where the sacrificial lambs were held. And it is only through the mercy of God and the sacrifice of the Lamb of God that we can be healed of the deadly disease of sin. Less well-known is the fact that five in the Bible is often referred to as indicating grace or favor, and the fact that John includes this detail of five porticos in his gospel shouldn't be lost on us. Because the grace of God is the power of God to do in and through us what we could never do ourselves. And this whole story is about God's tremendous grace toward underserving sinners. Furthermore, this man had been sick for thirty-eight years. And interestingly enough, from the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai until crossing the Jordan into Canaan, Israel wandered in the desert for thirty-eight years. I think John is saying something about the condition of current Israel – they thought they were healthy, but in reality they were sick, blind, lame and withered – and they didn't really want to get well.

I think that is what John intends us to understand because the rest of this passage focuses on the condition of the religious heart. *Jesus said to him, "Get up, pick up your pallet and walk." Immediately the man became well, and picked up his pallet and began to walk. Now it was the Sabbath on that day.* John 5:8-9 It seems that everywhere Jesus went, He deliberately upset the religious people around Him. And if there is one thing that Jews then and Jews now are religious about – it is the Sabbath. We have talked a bit about this before, but I want to bring out a couple of other points here. One is that with the religious mindset, rules are paramount. That is, if we keep the rules, God must bless us. And Jesus is blasting the idea that keeping rules will get us to God or bring His blessing on us. In Luke, when Jesus is asked by a young man what he must do to inherit eternal life; instead of answering 'Believe in Me', Jesus gives him another rule to keep. And the guy is finally overwhelmed with rule-keeping, and walks away from eternal life. The whole system of Judaism was built on keeping the rules so that God was compelled to accept you.

This gives rise to all sorts of weird and wacky things. In addition to all the man-made laws of the Sabbath in Jesus's day – there have been continual modifications and additions along the way. For example: Cooking in most all forms (boiling, roasting, baking, frying, etc.) is forbidden on the Sabbath, in particular when the temperature is raised above 113 degrees Fahrenheit. If the hot water tap is accidentally left on, it cannot be turned off on the Sabbath. Escaping gas can be turned off, but not in the normal way. One must turn off the tap of a gas burner with the back of the hand or the elbow. One cannot squeeze a lemon into a glass of ice tea, but one can squeeze lemon on a piece of fish. One cannot bathe with a bar of soap on the Sabbath, but liquid detergent is acceptable. The effect of such rigorous rule-keeping is to worship the rule and despise the rule-maker. The religious mindset would rather keep the rules than love the one who said '**Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy**'.

This kind of mind is also curiously reluctant to admit anything outside the rules could be attributed to God. Notice what they say here: *So the Jews were saying to the man who was cured, "It is the Sabbath, and it is not permissible for you to carry your pallet." But he answered them, "He who made me well was the one who said to me, 'Pick up your pallet and walk.'"* John 5:10-11

Here's a guy whose been sick for thirty-eight years – a man that has been hanging around this pool – this was someone they were familiar with – they had probably dropped a few coins in his cup and felt good about giving. And now he is standing in front of them, obviously well – and all they can think about are the rules – 'Can't carry anything on the Sabbath!' And instead of being grateful to God for this healing, they want to crucify the guy that told this man to carry his bed on the Sabbath. *They asked him, "Who is the man who said to you, 'Pick up your pallet and walk '?" But the man who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had slipped away while there was a crowd in that place.* John 5:12 – 13

The fact that Jesus healed one man out of probably hundreds there, then disappears without fanfare, only to reappear again to this one man in the temple, speaks to the fact that this was not so much a lesson in healing as it was a lesson on the dangers of religious formalism and the unexpected mercy of God. Because we don't see any belief here, we don't see the man repenting of his sin and turning to Christ, we don't even see thankfulness at his deliverance from sickness. What we see instead is that this man who had experienced the unexpected mercy of God – goes and rats Jesus out to the authorities: *The man went away, and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. For this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because He was doing these things on the Sabbath.* John 5:15-16

On every page of the gospels, Jesus blasts any idea of working your way to God. Every other religion in the world has everything to do with how you perform – whether or not you keep the rules. And if you keep the rules, God, or whatever deity you worship, is duty-bound to accept you. And that idea has infected the Christian faith as well. 'If I do it right, if I go to church, say my prayers, read the Bible, or at least the Daily Bread. If I don't kick the dog or beat the wife, if I don't cheat very much on my income tax and if I try very hard to be kind to my rotten neighbors – then I build up equity in God's acceptance bank and when judgement day comes – I'll get in' God doesn't care very much at all for your performance. Oh to be sure, He wants to work holiness and righteousness into your character and behavior – but just performing doesn't stir Him a bit.

Some of you are performing. And you think you are doing alright. But you don't realize you have been laying beside the pool for thirty-eight years, sick, blind, lame and withered. And Jesus is here this morning to heal you. Not because you deserve it, not because you've earned it, not because you somehow merit His gracious attention – but because of His great mercy and love with which He loved us and gave Himself for us that we might be the righteousness of God in Him. *He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him* 2 Corinthians 5:21

You are in the House of Mercy this morning and Jesus is saying, 'Pick up your bed and walk'. In His sovereign mercy and grace He comes to us, dead in our trespasses and sins and says, 'Rise' – giving us new life. He says, 'Pick up your bed' – giving us new power. He says 'Walk' – transforming our lives so that we can live to the glory of God making our lives fruitful and significant for eternity.

Our merciful and gracious Father,

Melt our hearts by Your majesty and mercy. Show us our ruined, sin-sick selves and the healing that is in Jesus. Wean us from the deadly trust we have in performance. May we see You this morning, Your ability to save, Your arms outstretched, Your heart big for us. Let us confide in Your power to save and love, commit our souls to You without reserve, that we might be through time and eternity living testaments to Your mercy and trophies of Your grace. Help us not only to receive You but to walk in You, depend on You, follow You, and be fully conformed to You. Cause our hearts to unreservedly delight in You through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the healing name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.