

John Chapter 5

Summary – Jesus is in Jerusalem during the Passover feast, a celebration of God’s grace and of his people’s release from the oppression of Egypt. It is the Sabbath, and Jesus has encountered a man who for 38 years has sought release from his infirmity at the pool of Bethesda. Bethesda means “house of mercy.” Every day for those 38 years he has sought relief at this pool of healing, hoping that someone might carry him down to the healing waters to free him of his burden. He has come to the place that God has designated not only for healing, but for mercy. The pool of Bethesda is an alms-house, a place where charity may be found. And for 38 years this man has enjoyed the perfunctory charity of receiving money, but not assistance. Not a single man, woman, or child has helped this man reach the healing waters. Every time he tried by himself, he was cut off by someone else who pushed him aside that they might get there first.

And now God’s provision has come to him: Jesus has found him beside the waters. Instead of carrying him to the waters to be healed, he heals him directly, because Jesus is our fountain of mercy and of healing (Zech 13:1; Jn 12:40). He has come with healing under his wings (Mal 4:2) and his healing isn’t just for a season, but for all seasons. He asks whether this man wants to be healed, and the man explains the source of his faith and his hope. And so, with compassion, Jesus commands this man to pick up his mat and walk. And when he does, the invalid is healed. He has no idea who the man is who has commanded him to walk; but for 38 years he has awaited God’s provision, no differently than Abraham awaited it with regard to Isaac. His trust was not in Jesus’ name, or in his knowledge of Jesus’ miraculous powers of healing, but in God. And so Jesus teaches us here, unlike every other passage in which faith is commanded, that we are to believe *the One who sent him*, not just believe in him. And that’s exactly who this man has believed for 38 years, and why he has now realized his daily petition.

The Pharisees aren’t concerned with his healing. Instead they ask him why he is carrying his mat on the Sabbath. Their focus is on the Sabbath law and not on the principles underlying the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a day in which we are freed from our work and our adherence to rules of employment, and legal procedures. We have been granted a full day of rest in which to celebrate God, and exercise mercy. Only Jesus is doing what the Sabbath requires. The former invalid replies that some man told him to pick it up, but he doesn’t know who – he was probably too excited to ask. Some suggest this is a panhandler who sat at poolside for 38 years living off the dole. But that makes no sense in the context of the verse. Why would he give up his livelihood for a total stranger? No, this was a man expecting a miracle. He waited patiently for it, and now acted on his faith at the beckoning of a man he was sure was sent by God – the first one to look at him with compassion and caring in 38 years. And his healing was complete, body and soul.

Jesus meets him again sharing with him the joy of his recovery. “See, you are well again!” And then, unlike any other instance of healing, he says, “Stop sinning, or something worse may befall you.” We are not given the man’s response to this warning, only that he could now identify Jesus and so he shares his discovery with the Pharisees, thinking perhaps they would want to know this man. Instead they seek Jesus’ death. They set themselves up as judges of the one whom God appointed to judge *them*. Jesus offers four testimonies as to his identity: John the Baptist has testified of him; his works testify that he has been sent by God; Moses testified of him in Gen 3:15 and Deut. 18:15-16; and the Father has testified of him in all the prophecies of the OT

(some 300 of them). Moreover, the very law that the Pharisees are relying on to accuse him will accuse them instead, because they refused to believe the testimonies concerning him.

Seeking the Narrow Path – We have a natural tendency to want things in black and white, either-or paths to success, neat formulas by which to determine truth, biblical or otherwise: five rules to reach perfection, three steps to lose weight, ten ways to fulfill our destiny. But the Bible is not always clear-cut. Was this man an invalid who became sinful or did he become an invalid because of his sin? Was he giving an excuse to Jesus or a factual reason for his continuing debility? Was he merely a panhandler, or a sincere seeker of healing? Jesus indicates only that his infirmity involved sin. The disciples are convinced that his sin caused his infirmity. Shortly after this healing, Jesus heals a blind man and his disciples ask, based on the invalid at the pool, whether his blindness was caused by his own sin or that of his parents? Jesus says it was caused by neither. So much for having a rule that sin is the cause of sickness and infirmity.

Was it a rebuke when Jesus “condemned” this man for his sin? Was it a rebuke when he told the adulteress to “go and sin no more”? Or was it the same caution, encouraging each to preserve their healing by being obedient from that point forward? Grace and mercy are ours for the asking, but obedience is not therefore optional. We have a misperception in today’s church that our salvation somehow exempts us from obedience. James rejects such an idea as does Paul (Rom 6:1). The proof of our faith, which cannot be seen, is our works, which can and should be seen. They are part of our “testimony,” just as Christ said his own works testified that he was sent by God. It isn’t either grace or works. It’s both – but works cannot save us. Only grace can do that. Works are simply the evidence of the grace which comes to us through faith.

The healing at the pool of Bethesda (at God’s “hospital”) is not just for physical ailments. It is a picture of the One who heals our soul. And the healing isn’t just for this life, but for the next. A dead man was raised at this pool, and the day will come when his body too will be raised. In between, he must no longer allow sin to characterize him, or be the pattern and habit of his life. Otherwise, something worse may befall him (see next page for the effects of sin in a believer’s life). The Pharisees honestly and sincerely believed they were protecting their people from the effects of sin, and there was good reason for their fear (see the verses below). But for pride they turned the law into an end in itself, and made themselves law-makers instead of law-givers.

Background – Pertinent verses concerning the Sabbath

Old Testament:

Gen 2:2-3; Ex 16:4-5, 23-30; Ex 20:8-11; Ex 23:12; Ex 31:13-17; Ex 35:2-3; Lev 16:29-31 (*Day of Atonement*); Lev 23:1-3,27-32; Lev 26:33-35; Num 15:32-40; Neh 10:31; 13:15-22; Isa 1:13-20; Isa 56:2-7; Isa 58:1-14; Jer 17:21-27; Ezek 20:12-22; Ezek 23:38-39; Amos 8:4-9.

New Testament:

Picking Grain – Matt 12:1-8; Mark 2:23-28;
Luke 6:1-5
Healing shriveled hand – Matt 12:9-16; Luke
6:6-11
Healing crippled woman – Luke 13:10-17
Healing man with dropsy – Luke 14:1-6

Healing invalid at Bethesda – John 5:1-18
Defense of healing on Sabbath – John 7:21-26;
Mark 2:27
Healing the blind man – John 9:1-16
Freedom of the Sabbath – Col 2:16-17
Entering God’s rest – Heb 4

The Effects of Sin in the Life of a Believer

O miserable man, what a deformed monster sin has made you! God made you “little lower than the angels”; sin has made you little better than the devils – Joseph Alleine

First we practice sin, then defend it, then boast of it – Thomas Manton

Sin is the dare of God’s justice, the rape of his mercy, the jeer of his patience, the slight of his power, and the contempt of his love – John Bunyan

If Christians were afraid of worldliness as much as they are of holiness, they would set the world on fire – Anonymous

Once a person has committed a sin a single time, and then a second time, it appears to him that it is permitted – Babylonian Talmud

Don’t say that you have royal blood in your veins, and are born of God, unless you can prove your pedigree by daring to be holy – William Gurnall

Be holy, for I am holy – God (Lev 11:44-45; 1Pet 1:16)

Twenty Reasons Not to Sin – Michael L. Brown¹

1. Sin does not satisfy
2. Sin leads to more sin – sin always drags the human character and the human will down. Sin never lifts us up.
3. Sin leads to worse sins
4. Sin enslaves
5. Sin degrades and humiliates
6. Sin steals joy
7. Sin steals our confidence before God
8. The wages of sin is death
9. God will punish sinners – in this world and the world to come
10. Sin hurts the Lord and grieves the Spirit
11. Sin hurts the sinner
12. Sin hurts the sinner’s family and friends
13. Sin brings reproach to the sinner, the church, and the name of the Lord
14. Sin makes light of the blood of Jesus
15. Sin puts the sinner on the side of the devil, demons, and the world
16. Sin sets the sinner against God, the Church, holiness, life, blessing, and victory – We are one Body. When you sin, you work against your brothers and sisters in Christ
17. Sin saps the anointing of God
18. Sin steals time
19. Sin has eternal consequences, for the elect as well as the unregenerate
20. Your sin will always find you out (Num 32:23)

¹ Brown, Michael L., *Go and Sin No More*, (Regal Books, Div. of Gospel Light, Ventura CA, 1999), pp. 19-92.