

## “My Father is Working”

### The Sixteenth in a series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

*Texts: John 5:1-18; Exodus 31:12-18*

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You would imagine that if someone who had been lame (and an invalid) for thirty-eight years was miraculously healed, there would be great rejoicing. You might also imagine that the man who was healed, as well as those who witnessed the healing, would be praising God for his mercy and compassion. Yet when Jesus heals such a man in Jerusalem, the man directs those persecuting Jesus (the Jewish religious leadership) where to find him, and says not a word in gratitude or thanksgiving for all that God had done. And then those who witness their own Messiah healing the sick as a sign that the long-expected messianic age was now underway, accuse Jesus of being a law-breaker for healing this man on the Sabbath. But such a sad state of affairs is what we find in our text. Human sin is not only the root cause of all our sickness and suffering, but such sin blinds us to the grace of God and causes us to hold fast to our own humanly devised traditions and self-righteous judgments. Here we begin to see what Jesus meant when he said people love darkness rather than light because our deeds are evil.

We are continuing our series on the Gospel of John and we have made our way as far as John 5. The scene now shifts from Galilee back to Jerusalem when Jesus returns the city to celebrate a feast of the Jews. Although Jesus was not truly honored by the Galileans while in Galilee (they did not truly understand who he was, nor what he came to do) nevertheless, they gladly welcomed back the miracle-worker who had created such a stir through his signs and wonders in Jerusalem and in Galilee. Jesus was Israel's Messiah who came to usher in a new age of salvation from the guilt and power of sin—the signs and wonders were proof. But the Jews throughout Judea and Galilee, it seems, were not concerned with the question as to whether or not Jesus might be the long-expected Messiah. As we have seen, to this point in John's Gospel, the Jews do not seem very concerned with the reality that human sin was the reason for the diseases and demons which plagued them. They cannot see beyond the effect to the cause.

As the knowledge of Jesus' miracles spread throughout both the Galilee and Judea, so too did the size of the crowds who followed him, as well as the scrutiny of his ministry by the Jewish religious leadership. This becomes clear as we look at the structure of these early chapters of John, where we see two important things beginning to emerge. The first thing to notice is that Jesus performs signs and wonders to confirm his identity as Israel's Messiah and the Son of God, who, as his miracles attest, is that one promised throughout the Old Testament. Jesus does not perform signs and wonders to create faith or attract crowds—although, we have seen, large numbers of people begin following Jesus for all the wrong reasons. The miracles confirm faith and the truth of the word our Lord preaches. Yet, those who are in need seek Jesus because they are desperate, not because they care about Jesus' true identity.

Although Jesus has performed many miracles which are not reported, John has recounted three of these miraculous signs so far, two in Galilee (Jesus turning water into wine in Cana, and Jesus healing the Galilean official's son) and one in Jerusalem (when Jesus cleansed the temple). In John 5, John recounts a fourth sign—the healing of a lame man in Jerusalem. All told, there will be seven of these signs in John's Gospel, symbolic of Jesus' entire messianic mission and only representative of the large number of miracles which Jesus performed, and which John says cannot be counted.

The second thing we should notice is the rapidly increasing tension between Jesus and the Jewish religious leadership. The Jews have already challenged Jesus when he cast the merchants and money-

changers from the temple and dared to call their temple, “his” Father’s house. Jesus himself had become aware that as John the Baptist’s work as messianic forerunner began to diminish, and Jesus began to attract more attention and followers, the Jewish leaders become very interested in his doings and travels. As we will see, the Jewish religious leadership’s concerns about Jesus greatly intensify in chapter 5 when Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath, and then calls God “my Father” which is why the Jewish leadership accuses him of blasphemy (vv. 16-18).

As we turn to our text in John 5 (vv. 1-18), John sets the scene for the miraculous healing which follows. “*After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.*” We have no idea how much time has elapsed between the healing of the Galilean official’s son (at the end of chapter 4) and Jesus’ return to Jerusalem. John does not tell us what feast of the Jews to which he is referring, so if this is the Passover, then a full year has elapsed since the events recorded in chapters 2-4. Speculation abounds as to whether or not this particular feast is the Passover, the Feast of tabernacles, or even Purim (the feast based upon the Jews deliverance from Persia as recounted in the Book of Esther). Since John doesn’t tell us, the feast itself is not germane to the story and John’s mention of a feast only serves to explain why Jesus was back in Jerusalem when this fourth miraculous sign took place. The fourth of Jesus’ signs, in turn, serves to increase the tension between Jesus and the denominational headquarters in Jerusalem when Jesus violates Jewish tradition and speaks of God in a way the Jews consider blasphemous.

Since John is likely writing to people throughout Asia Minor and northern Palestine at some point after the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, it is necessary for him to explain where the following incident takes place. So, we read in verses 2-3 “*now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. In these lay a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed.*” The Sheep Gate is a small opening in the north wall of Jerusalem, a bit to the west of the corner of the wall.<sup>1</sup> Dating to the time of Nehemiah’s reconstruction of the city walls, this is the gate through which the sheep and other animals used in the sacrifices would have been taken into the city.

Bethesda means “house of outpouring” and was a place with two pools and five colonnades (a long series of columns) believed to be located near (or underneath) the present site of the Church of Saint Anne. The pools were fed by two reservoirs (the pools of Solomon) and a spring would occasionally bubble up from below, stirring the water in the pools. If you are wondering where verse 4 went, the manuscript evidence clearly shows us that this verse is not in the best or earliest manuscripts and was probably a scribe’s marginal note explaining why the water in the pools was occasionally disturbed. At some point later on, someone copying the manuscript inserted the marginal note into the text thinking it was part of the original. The gloss (v. 4) reads that the invalids were “*waiting for the moving of the water; for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred the water: whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was healed of whatever disease he had.*”

People believed the water in these pools had healing properties (like certain hot springs are thought to have today). Many chronically ill folk congregated near the pools because the water brought relief to their symptoms, or because they thought the water had healing properties.<sup>2</sup> Of those who gathered regularly, “*one man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years.*” We are not told the exact nature of his illness, only that he had difficulty walking and moving about. John’s account implies that

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<sup>1</sup> Carson, The Gospel According to John, 241.

<sup>2</sup> Carson, The Gospel According to John, 242.

he was a regular at the pools, and that people who passed by would have been well-familiar with him.

But after thirty-eight years of seeking healing at these pools (which may be symbolic/ironic in light of the fact that Israel spent thirty-eight unnecessary years wandering in the wilderness) the man finds no cure. Whatever relief the water provided it was temporary and did not deal with the root cause of the man's infirmity. Among those at the pools that day Jesus happened to be there was this particular invalid. As we read in verse 6, "*When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, 'Do you want to be healed?'*" Jesus sees the man, recognizes that he was a regular at the pools and chooses him from among the larger group, asking a very direct question of the man, "*do you want to be healed?'*"

Of course, the man wants to be healed—Jesus knew that. But the invalid has come to these pools for some thirty-eight years, and as we would expect of someone in this situation, he probably has fallen into a routine, and lost much of a proper perspective on his circumstances. The man does not know who Jesus is and answers him from the short-sighted expectation of his daily routine. "*The sick man answered him, 'Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me.'*"

According to local legend (as evidenced by the scribal gloss in verse 4), those at the pool thought that the first person to get in the water when the water was stirred up by the spring from below would be healed. This man could not walk and so when people saw the water moving and made their way into the water, this man could never make it in time to be healed (or so he thought). When Jesus asked him if he wanted to be healed, the invalid mistakenly thought Jesus was offering to carry him down into the water so that he might be the first one in, so that he might at last receive the full healing benefits of the water. But as we will see in what follows, the man's confusion is an indication that he is so resigned to his condition that he has trouble understanding the nature of the miraculous healing which soon follows.

According to verse 8, "*Jesus said to him, 'Get up, take up your bed, and walk.'*" Jesus speaks directly to the man using words which anticipate his power to raise the dead—as we will see in the next section of John 5:25-29, when Jesus says, "*truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.*" That a man who has been an invalid for thirty-eight years will get up and walk, is an important sign that Jesus can and will raise the dead when he gives the gift of eternal life in this age (regeneration), and in the bodily resurrection at the end of the age.

Jesus also commands the man to pick up his bed (i.e., a bedroll) and walk, which is exactly what happens in verse 9. "*And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked.*" The one who has the power of life speaks, and instantly, the man who has been an invalid for thirty-eight years is completely healed. The fact that he walks and picks up his bedroll is proof that a complete healing has taken place. But the instantaneous, and public nature of Jesus' miracle is only part of the story. As we read in the last clause of verse 9, "*now that day was the Sabbath.*" Both the miraculous nature of the healing and the fact that it took place on Sabbath renew an on-going confrontation between Jesus and the Jews.

What follows in verses 10-18 is truly shocking and heart-breaking because we begin to see the depths of Israel's apostasy and unbelief. Jesus heals a man who has been an invalid for thirty-eight years—yet we

read not one word of praise for God, or one word of thanks for this man's deliverance. Instead, we learn in verse 10 of how upset the Jews are because this occurred on the Sabbath. "*So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, 'It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed.'*" Not a word of praise, thanksgiving, or compassion. Instead we hear, "this is not lawful!"

Throughout the gospels there are a number of instances when Jesus supposedly "works" on the Sabbath, and these instances provoke anger so intense that it leads to the desire on the part of the Jewish leadership to have Jesus executed and put to death as a lawbreaker. Yes, the Jews of Jesus' day were taking seriously the words of Exodus 31:12-14 (part of our Old Testament lesson). "*And the Lord said to Moses, 'You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, 'Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people.'*"

The Jews were angry because as they interpreted the commandment, there were thirty-nine types of work (associated with someone's job) which must not be done on the Sabbath. One of these was carrying anything from one place to another. The man whom Jesus healed moved his bedroll as a sign that he was healed and now able-bodied. Such activity may not have been work at all when viewed against the biblical commandment. But moving his bedroll was considered work because of Jewish tradition which distorted the original commandment, and which barred him from doing such a thing.<sup>3</sup> The Jews viewed the man as a law-breaker because he merely did what Jesus (the original author of Sabbath commandment) told him to do. There is very little zeal here on the part of the Jews to honor God by obeying his commandments. But let someone defy their traditions . . .

That the man doesn't really grasp the nature of what has just happened—other than for the first time in thirty-eight years he can walk and is able to carry his own bedroll—becomes clear in what follows. "*But he answered them, 'The man who healed me, that man said to me, 'Take up your bed, and walk.'*" Intentionally or otherwise, the man who has been healed deflects any judgment and punishment which might be directed at him, by pointing out that Jesus is the one who told him to walk and take up his bedroll. The man does not even know who Jesus is, he shows no gratitude, nor does he fully understand the significance of what has just happened. But he knows enough to plead his innocence.

The messianic age is beginning to dawn. Because of this, the time has come for Jesus to fulfill all the commandments of God—including the Sabbath commandment. With the Sabbath commandment, Jesus will completely reinterpret it, as to how it is to be obeyed and understood as a sign of the gospel and a foretaste of our heavenly rest. Jesus was not lax about obeying the Sabbath command as some interpreters have argued. Jesus was not a libertine or an antinomian who thinks nothing of violating the Sabbath in order to institute Sunday (the first day of the week) as the Christian Sabbath. Rather, Jesus came to fulfill the commandments of God. The issue raised by John is the way in which Jewish legalism had distorted the original Sabbath commandment.

The Jews were not satisfied with the answer given by the man who had been healed—"Jesus made me do it." According to verses 12-13, "*they asked him, 'Who is the man who said to you, 'Take up your bed and walk'? Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, as there was a crowd in the place.'*" Not quite sure what had happened, the man did not give very much helpful

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<sup>3</sup> Carson, The Gospel According to John, 244.

information to his interrogators, probably out of bewilderment at being lame one moment, and healed the next by a mysterious stranger who told him to get up and walk. And now the man himself is being accused of breaking the Sabbath command. For their part, the Jews were quite worried that the only thing worse than a man violating the law by carrying his bedroll on the Sabbath, is that someone with authority told him to do so. That one who tells others to break the law is guiltier than the law-breaker.

This incident quickly becomes a theological comedy of errors. All the invalid knows is he can walk. He has no idea who healed him, nor does he understand the significance of Israel's own long-expected Messiah appearing at the spot where he had gone for thirty-eight years and choosing him out of a crowd to miraculously heal him. The Jews, on the other hand, are so zealous to defend their tradition (and their misinterpretation of the Sabbath commandment), that they completely overlook the fact that a sick man has been healed, and that his thirty-eight years of suffering is over, and his life has been completely restored to him. Only YHWH could have done this, yet all the Jewish authorities care about is that someone is not obeying their traditions. In chapter 9, Jesus will speak of Israel's spiritual blindness and that is certainly the case here.

At some point later (John doesn't say how long, but it does not seem that much time has elapsed), "*Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, 'See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.'*" The temple was just to the south of the pools of Bethesda. When Jesus and the man crossed paths again, Jesus speaks to him, connecting the fact that the man has been healed with the forgiveness of sin, as seen in the command for the man not to sin again. While these verses have provoked much discussion, it is unavoidable that the man's personal sin is directly tied to his ailment, and that he needs to stop this particular sin, or else face worse. This raises a number of difficult issues.

As we have seen throughout John's Gospel, there are two levels of meaning to be found in an incident like this. In the foreground of the story is the man who has been healed. He has done something which brought about his condition, and now that he has been healed by Jesus, he is told not to do it again. We have no idea what this might be, and why he must not repeat it. And might not Jesus be referring to the final judgment when he warns the man of something much worse? Because God has had mercy upon him, he has been instantaneously and dramatically healed. He should give thanks and repent. Somehow this is tied to a past sin. But why was this man healed and not another? What had he done that he was not supposed to do again? We never do find out. But in John 9:1-3 we get a brief hint at an explanation, beyond which we cannot go. "*As he passed by, [Jesus] saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'it was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.'*" At the end of the day we cannot pry into those things God chooses not to tell us. We do not know what this man had done, only that he must repent, or face something worse than being an invalid.

Yet, on another level, the man Jesus healed at the pool represents all of us. We all have sinned, in Adam, and through our own personal sins. We are all guilty before God. We know that the root cause of all of our troubles in life is that at the core of our being we are sinners who do not deserve anything from God but judgment. We know that we must repent of our own sins and flee to the cross of Christ, stop worrying about the reasons why or why not our neighbor may be suffering, and concentrate upon our own need for forgiveness. And yet, God has been merciful to each of us in so many ways we cannot count them. Sometimes there is a clear cause and effect relationship between a particular sin and the consequences which can follow. Many times there are no obvious connections. Therefore, we cannot say to the sick person, "what did you do?" Nor, can we say to the person who seems to live above it all, "well, you must be living the victorious Christian life." And lest we miss the point, that Jesus healed this

man means that the messianic age has come. In this miracle, we see that Jesus was even then rolling back and undoing the effects of the curse and Adam's fall. Whatever else is going on in this passage, Jesus healed this man to make this point very clear.

Meanwhile, in verse 15, the bewildered man points out Jesus to those Jews who accused him of being a law-breaker. *"The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him."* Jesus is the one who his accusers want. Jesus is the one defying their traditions, which is why we read in verse 16, *"and this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath."* John implies that Jesus had been "working" on the Sabbath for some time and this particular incident was but part of a much larger dispute between Jesus and the Jews about the Sabbath, which is why the Jews had been persecuting him, and manifesting an open hostility toward Jesus, even plotting his death.

John does not tell us what the Jews said to Jesus on this occasion, only what Jesus said to them. *"But Jesus answered them, 'My Father is working until now, and I am working.'"* According to the creation account, God worked for six days but rested on the seventh day. So, the question arises as to whether God also keeps a Sabbath rest. But God's rest on the seventh day refers to his Sabbath enthronement to rule over his work of creation, not that God did nothing on Saturday. The very work of providence itself proves that he does. In this sense then, God cannot violate the Sabbath by working to uphold his creation. In fact, the Jews of Jesus' day were largely in agreement about this. This is, no doubt, why Jesus phrases his answer as he does and speaks of YHWH as *"my Father."* If God does not violate the Sabbath by upholding all that he has made, so too, Jesus does not violate the commandment when he works on the Sabbath. Jesus' point is simple but explosive—whatever God does, **he** does. Jesus is doing the work "my Father" does when our Lord heals on the Sabbath.

That the Jews clearly understood him at this point is clear from John's summary comment in verse 18. *"This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God."* Nice Jewish boys did not say the things Jesus said. If Jesus is not God in human flesh, then the Jews are right, he is a law-breaker and a blasphemer who should be put to death. That is why it is utterly foolish to argue as so many do that Jesus is a great teacher or spiritual leader, when Jesus makes claims to deity such as this. If Jesus not who he says he is, he is dangerous. At best he is deceived, at worst he is a deceiver.

But if Jesus is the Son of God and Israel's Messiah—as in fact proven to be the case by his miracles and his teaching—then Jesus is indeed doing as God would do, advancing his kingdom, overturning the effects of the Fall of our race into sin, and exposing Jewish tradition as the loveless and compassionless legalism which it was. Jesus' identity is now becoming quite clear to both the readers of John and to those Jews whom Jesus encountered while in Jerusalem or in the Galilee. Jesus is the eternal word become flesh, the second person of the Holy Trinity, the Son of God and Savior of the world, and Israel's Messiah. Jesus can say "my Father is working" because God is his Father! And because Jesus is equal with God (being God in human flesh), he can heal on the Sabbath without being a law-breaker. Jesus works on the Sabbath because God works.

As we move into the balance of chapter five the questions of just who Jesus is and the nature of his authority come into out in the open. Jesus has come to his own and his own do not receive him. When he heals a man on the Sabbath—restoring to him his life—the man offers not a word of thanksgiving. The Jews—who should have seen in Jesus' miracles the proof that he was the Messiah and the Son of God—are furious because Jesus rejects their misinterpretation of the Sabbath command. Instead of praising God because Jesus was in their midst, they began seeking to kill their own Messiah. But as we read in John

4:34, Jesus knew full well what it was that he must do and why he will face opposition from the Jewish leaders: “*My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.*” Jesus knew that “My Father” is working, and that he too must work to fulfill all righteousness. And this he does, with his fourth miraculous sign, when, on the Sabbath, he healed a man who had been lame for thirty-eight years, as proof that in his very person, the messianic age was at hand.