

Message #17

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John

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THE LAME MAN AND THREE CHOICES

JOHN 5:1-18

I.

Augustine, the famous fourth century church leader, wrote at the beginning (PROJECTOR ON--- AUGUSTINE QUOTE) of his *Confessions*, **“You have made us for yourself, O God, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”** The history of humanity gives evidence that this is indeed true. We humans have a religious bent. We seem to have an innate need to connect with the divine. There have been many different understandings of God and many different ways by which people have tried to connect to Him. The human tendency has been to earn our way to God, to try to be deserving enough to be accepted by Him. (PROJECTOR OFF)

M. L. grew up with a Catholic background. He had a sensitive nature and a fear of God. He joined a Catholic order and exercised great effort to be acceptable to this holy God. He spent considerable time in confession to the head of his order. On one occasion he spent six consecutive hours confessing sins to this priest. This was very frustrating to his spiritual leader. M. L. would confess negative thoughts about one of his fellow priests, or his impatience with something, or his poor attitude toward prayer or his pride at having nothing else to confess. At one point his spiritual leader blurted out, **“Look here, if you expect Christ to forgive you, come in with something to forgive--- parricide, blasphemy, adultery--- instead of all these peccadilloes.”** (Metaxas, *Martin Luther*, p. 47)

The passage before us today describes something of the frustration that religion can produce. But it also reveals something about how we can connect with the God who is truly there.

We have been studying the Gospel According to John on Sunday mornings. We have seen that the Apostle John organized his biography of Jesus around seven sign miracles, with the intention of showing that Jesus was, and is, the Son of God. We have looked at the first miracle, which involved turning water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana in Galilee. Then in #4 we saw the Jesus healed the son of a royal Jewish official. Now in #5 Jesus is back in Jerusalem where He performs another miracle.

II.

Thus in vv 1-9 of #5 we find that JESUS CHOOSES TO SHOW MERCY TO ONE WHO IS NEEDY. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. JESUS CHOOSES TO SHOW MERCY...) Verse 1 reads, **“After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.”** The events in the public ministry of Jesus in the first four chapters of John’s Gospel seemed to follow in chronological order. Now there is a break in that chronological description. After an indefinite period of time, Jesus went to Jerusalem for one of the feasts. The particular feast is apparently unimportant. Remember also that, because Jerusalem was on a hill, Jewish pilgrims were always described as going up to Jerusalem, no matter the direction from which they came.

Verse 2: **“Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades.”** (BETHESDA POOL 1) This pool was just inside the north wall of the first century city of Jerusalem. It was just to the north of the temple compound. This is a reconstruction of what it may have looked like in the location in which we are certain that it was. The colonnades were apparently roofed porches on the four sides of the pool. It appears that there were actually two pools, which were separated by the fifth roofed porch.

(BETHESDA POOL 2) This is what the area looks like today. Some of our translations have slightly different names for the pool, or pools. Because of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and one of them that comes from the first century AD and mentions this pool, we are quite certain that the Aramaic name was indeed Bethesda. Aramaic, closely related to Hebrew, was the first language of most of the Jews in Judea in the first century. “Bethesda” means “house of outpouring,” or perhaps, “house of mercy.” (PROJECTOR OFF)

According to the first part of v. 3, **“In these lay a multitude of invalids--- blind, lame, and paralyzed.”** The place looked like an emergency room, or the waiting room of a hospital. Why were all of these people hanging out here? Some translations have a longer v. 3 and a v. 4. Others have these verses included in a footnote. The earliest manuscripts of the New Testament do not have these added verses. Most commentators believe that these verses were what is called a “gloss.” Early copyists of the New Testament sometimes included additional explanations on the sides or bottoms of their copies of the New Testament. The suspicion is that this gloss got included in the text of some of the copies of the Gospel of John, but it was not part of John’s original manuscript. Verse 7 makes reference to this traditional belief. There is no dispute that v. 7 is part of the original text.

So this gloss adds to v. 3: **“...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.”** I take it that this was a religious superstition.

Perhaps this pool was like a hot springs. Perhaps the water had a high mineral content and had some therapeutic value. Perhaps it was fed by a spring that intermittently fed into the pool and created a stirring when it did. So a religious tradition developed that an angel was involved, and healing was provided to the first person in the pool. In a similar way today there are TV preachers who offer miracle spring water to people who need healing. These people were trusting in a religious superstition.

Verse 5: **“One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years.”** How Jesus learned this man’s history we are not told. Someone may have told Jesus about it. As with the woman at the well, Jesus may have gained this information supernaturally. He might have asked the man about his disability. As we shall see, his disability seemed to involve some kind of paralysis or lameness.

This man was hoping for a cure from the water. In a similar way, people in Cana were hoping for some kind of purification from the water pots at the wedding in Cana. But that water could provide no permanent cleansing. The woman at the well in Samaria was focused on the water from Jacob’s well. But Jesus pointed out that it could provide no permanent quenching of thirst. Likewise the water at Bethesda could really provide no permanent healing.

According to v. 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?’”** With a multitude of people hanging out in this place, hoping to be healed, why did Jesus pick out this guy? Was he worse off than everyone else in the place? Verse 3 says that there were blind people hanging out here. If I had to choose between being blind and being lame, I would rather have my eyesight. Was he more deserving of help than everyone else? From what transpires, that seems doubtful to me. It seems more likely that this was the sovereign, gracious choice of Jesus for reasons that are unknown to us.

It is also interesting that Jesus asks the guy if he wants to be healed. Why did He do that? Perhaps Jesus was just preparing him for the miracle that was about to happen. Perhaps He was wanting to focus the guy’s attention on his hopeless situation.

His question does prompt a response from the guy, explaining his hopeless situation. Verse 7 says, **“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.’”** The man’s hope was in a religious tradition, a superstition. But he had no one to help him get into the water. He apparently had no care giver. He perhaps had no family. Maybe he was not a very likeable guy. One commentator says that he was in a prison without bars.

In the view of Jewish religious leaders this kind of suffering was deserved. For their theological explanation for physical suffering was that it was always the result of sin, if not the sin of the individual, the sin of the individual's parents. So these handicapped individuals often did not get a lot of sympathy from the religious establishment. In this man's particular case, Jesus will later trace his condition to some earlier sin on his part. That sin does not keep Jesus from showing mercy to him.

Look at Jesus' response in vv. 8 & 9: **"Jesus said to him, 'Get up, take up your bed, and walk.' And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked."** There have been Christians who have looked at healings in the Bible and have tried to develop formulas for Christians today that would provide them with physical healing. Usually faith in God is an essential part of these formulas.

How do you come up with a formula for healing out of this incident? The guy doesn't know who Jesus is. He doesn't even know His name. If you look carefully at the text, you will see that he is healed even before he tries to get up. It is Jesus who chooses to show mercy to one who is needy.

Notice also that the man's healing is instant and complete. He has no need for physical therapy. He needs no exercise of muscles that have wasted away. He has no need to develop balance. He is well and whole.

It is a picture of what Jesus does to us spiritually. It is a picture of His choice of us Christians to make us spiritually well. In Ephesians #1 vv. 3 & 4 (EPHESIANS 1:3) the Apostle Paul writes, **"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, (EPHESIANS 1:4) even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him..."**

In the second chapter of this same New Testament epistle (EPHESIANS 2:4) Paul writes, **"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, (EPHESIANS 2:5) even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ--- by grace you have been saved--- (EPHESIANS 2:6) and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus..."** Like the lame man in our story, we are naturally incapable and unable to save ourselves. But God shows mercy to us who are needy. It is only reasonable that we should respond with gratitude and worship and service.

III.

In vv. 9-12 and 16-18 we are introduced to another set of major characters in this story. They are simply referred to as “the Jews.” They are the religious leaders of Jerusalem. In this section we find that **RELIGIOUS LEADERS CHOOSE MAN-MADE RULES OVER THE TRUE GOD**. (III. RELIGIOUS LEADERS CHOOSE...)

In the last clause of v. 9 we have this brief observation: **“Now that day was the Sabbath.”** Thus we have the introduction to the point of tension in the story. This will be a primary point of conflict with the religious establishment. We have already seen that Jesus kicked money-changers and animal merchants out of the temple compound. They were tied into a corrupt religious monopoly that ran the temple. That action did not endear Jesus to the religious establishment. Now He is challenging their rules concerning the Sabbath.

Verse 10 tells us, **“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.’”** This small straw mat was considered a burden, and good Jews were not permitted to carry burdens on the Sabbath.

The original Sabbath law was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. The relevant part of the Fourth Commandment (EXODUS 20:10) read like this: **“...but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates.”**

The natural question is: What constitutes work? The Old Testament provides additional explanations. (NUMBERS 15:32) In Numbers #15 v. 32 we are told, **“While the people of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day.”** The guy is apprehended, and the situation is taken to the Lord, who tells the people to stone the guy.

In Exodus #35 v. 3 (EXODUS 35:3) Moses gives the children of Israel the additional instruction, **“You shall kindle no fire in all your dwelling places on the Sabbath day.”** Today Orthodox Jews interpret that to mean that they cannot turn on a light switch on the Sabbath.

In Jeremiah #17 (JEREMIAH 17:21) the people of God were told in vv. 21 & 22, **“Thus says the Lord: Take care for the sake of your lives, and do not bear a burden on the Sabbath day or bring it in by the gates**

of Jerusalem. (JEREMIAH 17:22) And do not carry a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath or do any work, but keep the Sabbath day holy, as I commanded your fathers.” So the religious leaders determined that this meant that a recently healed guy could not walk away with his rolled up mattress. Jesus seemed to have a different interpretation. He seemed to understand this prohibition to relate to employment work. People were not to be involved in commerce on the Sabbath. Carrying a small mattress did not seem to violate the spirit of the Sabbath law.

The Pharisees by the third or fourth century AD, perhaps earlier, had developed 39 classes of prohibited activities on the Sabbath. These prohibitions went into great detail, sometimes to the point of ridiculousness. Jews were prohibited to put vinegar directly on a tooth to relieve pain. But it was OK if it was taken with food. Jews were not to walk on the grass on the Sabbath. For that might be considered to be thrashing, and thrashing was prohibited.

Some rabbis said that the Fourth Commandment outweighs all others. In fact, when all Israel properly keeps the Sabbath, the Messiah will come.

In other places in the Gospels Jesus is criticized for healing on the Sabbath. Here he is criticized for telling a healed man to carry his mat. The religious leaders have been exposed to the healing miracles of Jesus. The Old Testament said that these were signs of the coming of the Lord. In Isaiah #35 (ISAIAH 35:5) the prophet declared, **“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; (ISAIAH 35:6) then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.”** The religious establishment is choosing to focus on their man-made rules to the neglect of the recognition of the true God who was walking among them. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The story continues in vv. 11 and 12 of our text: **“But he answered them, ‘The man who healed me, that man said to me, ‘Take up your bed, and walk.’” They asked him, ‘Who is the man who said to you, ‘Take up your bed and walk’?”** The guy doesn’t know who did it. He does not even know the name of his healer. Again the Jews show no interest in the remarkable healing of this poor man. They are concerned only about the violation of their rules.

Skip down to v. 16, where the focus on the religious leaders is continued. **“And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath.”** Note the plural form of “things.” This was not the only miracle that Jesus did on the Sabbath. Perhaps in his first public visit to Jerusalem on the Passover some of his healing miracles were also done on the Sabbath. It seems as though Jesus is intentionally provoking a reaction from the religious leaders. The form of their

persecution is not specifically described. It would seem that at this point it is persecution only of a verbal nature.

In vv. 17 & 18 we read, **“But Jesus answered them, ‘My Father is working until now, and I am working.’ 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, thus making himself equal with God.”**

Jewish rabbis generally recognized that God was still at work on the Sabbath in maintaining His creation. The problem here for the Jews was that Jesus was identifying Himself with God. In corporate prayers Jews in Old Testament times occasionally referred to God as “our Father.” But there is little if any evidence that Jewish leaders ever referred to God as “my Father.” Jesus here is staking a claim that He has a special relationship with God as His Father. In doing that, He is claiming the prerogative of God to work on the Sabbath.

So the Jewish leadership has a problem here not only with the supposed healer and rabbi telling someone to carry his mat on the Sabbath but also in claiming equality with God. That was blasphemy in their minds.

Notice also that there are some cults who claim that Jesus never claimed to be God. He was apparently claiming to be God here. His enemies acknowledged that. They just didn’t believe Him. He couldn’t be believed, because He didn’t follow their rules. Thus they wanted to kill Him.

All religions have rules. The Bible has rules and guidelines and standards of conduct. But Christianity is unique in that it says that human efforts to follow rules can never bring us into a right relationship with God. Even some claiming to be Christians don’t get it. M. L. chose to follow rules to win God’s acceptance. He prayed and fasted and confessed to try to win God’s approval. But still his heart could not find rest. At the end of the day, his approach toward God was not much different than that of the Jewish leaders in our story.

IV.

In vv. 13-15 we find that A NEEDY MAN CHOOSES MAN-MADE RELIGION OVER JESUS. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. A NEEDY MAN CHOOSES...) According to v. 13, **“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.”**

There are three main characters in this drama who make three choices. Jesus chooses to show mercy to this guy. The Jewish leaders choose their rules over Jesus. Now we shall see what choice this guy makes.

In v. 3 we saw that there was a multitude of handicapped, sick and needy people who were hanging around by the pools of Bethesda. Also we were told that there was a feast going on in Jerusalem. So this meant that there were crowds of people in Jerusalem and in Bethesda. After healing this guy, Jesus chose to blend back into the crowds. So the healed lame man did not even know who was responsible for the miracle done to him.

Verse 14: **“Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, ‘See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.’”** Keep in mind that there would have been thousands of people thronging the temple during any feast. So it is remarkable that Jesus would be able to track him down. I suspect that there was supernatural knowledge involved in doing that. There was divine GPS tracking device at work.

Why did Jesus seek this guy out? We are not told. I suspect that Jesus was giving this guy an opportunity to exercise faith in the true God, to know the One who had healed him. He clearly was also giving him a warning about sin.

A reasonable conclusion about His warning not to sin any further would be that sin had something to do with his condition of paralysis or lameness. Perhaps the guy was an alcoholic who fell off his bar stool. Maybe he was under the influence when he crashed his chariot. We can only speculate. But whatever the situation was, this was an opportunity that this guy had to turn his life around, to get connected to the God who was really there. What did he do about it?

Verse 15: **“The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him.”** The information that the Apostle John gives us here is limited. My interpretation is that the guy decided to go with man-made religion. The religious leaders had talked to the man after his healing. He knew that they were unhappy with whoever had told him that it was OK to carry his mat on the Sabbath. He knew that they regarded the supposed healer as a lawbreaker. Nothing is said that the lame man thanked Jesus or asked more about his identity or expressed any interest in following Him. It appears that this guy wanted to stay in the good graces of “the Jews.” In effect, he chose man-made religion over Jesus,

the One who had healed him of his infirmity. He didn't have a problem with turning Jesus in.
(PROJECTOR OFF)

It is a similar kind of choice that is offered to all of us. Will we choose man-made religion, with its stress on following certain rules to win God's approval, or will we choose to accept the message presented by the Apostle John in his Gospel--- that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by simply believing in Him we can have eternal life.

The pool of Bethesda is a symbol of man-made religion, of human efforts to win favor with God. Many sick and needy people in the first century gathered around this pool because they accepted a religious superstition that by being first in the pool when the waters stirred, they might experience healing.

An archaeologist by the name of Shimon Gibson (*Biblical Archaeology Review*, Sept./Oct. 2011) argues that at least the southern pool at Bethesda was a mikveh, a public bath that was used by religious worshipers for ritual cleansing. (PROJECTOR ON--- BETHESDA POOL MIKVEH) The steps and landings shown here would fit with what scholars know about large pools that were used as mikvehs. So there were Jews who came here not only with hope for healing based on a religious superstition but also worshipers who came here seeking cleansing from their sin so that they could worship in the temple. But could ritual cleansing ever provide a final cleansing from sin?

Right beside the pools of Bethesda is St. Anne's Church. (ST. ANNE'S CHURCH) I have been to St. Anne's Church. It is a beautiful stone building, administered by the White Fathers of the Catholic Church. It has had restoration work a number of times, but it was originally built in the 1100s AD. There is evidence of worship sites that existed there at even an earlier time.

The church was built to honor and revere St. Anne. Thousands and thousands of worshipers over the centuries have come to St. Anne's Church, hoping that she might provide them with certain kinds of deliverance. Who was St. Anne? An early church document written about 150 AD claimed that Anne was the mother of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Supposedly, according to some traditions, Mary was born at this place. Over the years a religious tradition was made up about Anne. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In the late 1400s a German religious leader by the name of Abbot Trithemius wrote this about St. Anne:
"To St. Anne, God has given the power to aid in every necessity, because Jesus, her Divine Grandchild

according to the flesh, will refuse her no petition, and Mary her glorious daughter, supports her every request. Those who venerate good St. Anne shall want for nothing, either in this life or the next..."

St. Anne became the patron saint for Catholic miners. Out of Anne's womb came the precious mother of Jesus. Miners were hoping for precious metal to come from the womb of the earth as the result of their labors. At the time that Abbot Trithemius was writing about St. Anne, the father of M. L. was working as a miner. Actually he owned several mining enterprises in Germany. He sent his son to law school with hopes that his son would become a lawyer.

But one day M. L. was caught in a very bad thunderstorm as he was returning to his college town. In the midst of his fear he cried out, **"Help me, St. Anne! I will become a monk."** M. L. did survive the storm, and he did become a monk. Did St. Anne really have anything to do with his deliverance? You can draw your own conclusions. St. Anne certainly could not provide rest for the restless heart of M. L.

M. L. was Martin Luther. His spiritual diligence as a monk still did not provide rest for his troubled soul. He was a very bright guy. His spiritual leader eventually sent Martin to teach at a new university he was beginning in Wittenberg, Germany. In this era, Catholic scholars studied philosophers and the writings of other great scholars, but very few really studied the Bible. Martin Luther began to study and teach the Bible. He was especially affected by what he read in the Book of Romans.

Then it happened to him one day while he was sitting on the john. He later wrote, **"At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, 'In it the righteousness of God is revealed,' as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.' There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.' Here I felt that I was altogether born again--- Gospel of John, right?--- and had entered paradise itself through open gates."** (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 34, p.337)

Thus Martin Luther turned away from a works righteousness and chose to trust in the salvation provided by Jesus Christ on the cross and offered to us as a gift. That same gift is available to us today. Will we choose to accept it?

Most of us here have been born again. We also need to be reminded from time to time that our faith is not based upon man-made rules. Rather it is based upon a personal relationship with the living God by faith in Jesus Christ.