

# The Paralytic Man

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**Sermon Series:**  
**Following Jesus**  
**Around**

**John 5:1-9**

*A wonderful way to connect with Jesus is to read a chapter of the Gospel of John every day and just follow Jesus around.*

As Bob Griffin said earlier, during the upcoming season of Lent, the six weeks before Easter, we will again enjoy the WOW experience—VPC’s WithOut Walls—in which we will join in small groups that meet each of those six weeks to connect deeply with one another and our Lord. These WOW groups will be a wonderful way to learn more about following Jesus around in your own life. I urge you to sign up!

For the last few weeks, we have been following Jesus around through the stories in the Gospel of John, watching what Jesus does, hearing what Jesus says. We saw his encounter with Nicodemus, who wanted to know the meaning of being born again—born from above as God’s child. There was the woman at the well, to whom Jesus introduced himself and led her to believe in him. Last week, Pete explained the marvelous way Jesus balanced justice and mercy when confronted by the woman caught in adultery. A wonderful way to connect with Jesus is to read a chapter of the Gospel of John every day and just follow Jesus around.

“After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha [or Bethesda], which has five porti-

coes” (John 5:1-2 NSRV). Jesus is in Jerusalem for a feast; perhaps the feast of Passover or the feast of Pentecost. He makes his way to a pool of water near the wall that surrounded Jerusalem, the pool known as Bethesda. Now Bethesda is a wonderful name. It literally means “House of Mercy” and, over the centuries, the name Bethesda has often been used to name places of healing, such as the Bethesda Naval Hospital. I remember my mother used to take me there when I was a boy. It is a place of healing, a house of mercy.

Around this pool of water were five porticoes—five porches or landings. There may have been some kind of roof over these porches. “In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralysed” (John 5:3 NSRV). Lying all over those five porches were hundreds of people who were sick, blind, lame, or dealing with a variety of disabilities. Rumor had it that every now and then an angel of the Lord stirred up the waters in that pool, and the first person to get into the roiling water would be cured. And so people waited for the stirring of the water as the last desperate hope of a suffering fellowship.

“One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, ‘Do you want to be made well?’” (John 5:5-6 NSRV). Well that seems to be an odd ques-

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tion, “Do you want to get well?” If you are sick, what would your answer be? Over the years, my own body has had one thing or another wrong with it, and if I were asked the question, “Do you want to get well?” the answer is YES! Lots and lots of people came to Jesus for healing—Peter’s mother-in-law, an official whose son was dying, another official whose daughter was near death, a leper, a paralyzed man, and all of them wanted to get well. So, why even ask that question, “Do you want to get well?”

We don’t know what the man’s affliction was—various translations describe him as an invalid or with infirmity, with an ailment, as one who is ill. Whatever it was, we learn that this man has been sick for thirty-eight years. Again, why even ask, “Do you want to get well?” Well, one possibility is that after thirty-eight years, the man really didn’t want to get well. Maybe he is used to being sick, even makes his emotional living from it—getting an emotional high from the “how are you?” and the “I’m so sorry” and even the “I’m praying for you.” He certainly made his financial living from his affliction by begging or someone bringing him food. If he was to get well, he would have to go to work.

It’s also possible that the man had been sick so long that he had lost all hope and in listless despair just lay there day after day waiting for death to come. Some of us face affliction for which we would be immensely grateful if that affliction were removed. On the other

hand, it is possible for us to have some weakness, woundedness, dependency or addiction that we have come to tolerate and which could be removed if we would seek help, but we have come to emotionally depend on it in some way or another. It’s possible to have coped with some affliction, some suffering in your life for such a long time that you simply feel hopeless. In fact, such a feeling could arise from a physical ailment but also from the exhaustion of handling too much stress for too long or from a grieving that never seems to end or coping with some situation such as a job loss or depression or divorce. It’s actually easy to feel like that man Jesus was talking too felt—feeling very alone, even if you are surrounded by people, feeling no one notices, no one cares. You can reach the point where you quit reaching out for help from anyone. It is possible that this invalid Jesus is talking too was a soul so weary that no one noticed him anymore. In a sense, he would have no longer felt real and had just given up.

The wonderful preacher Bruce Theilemann used to tell of a time he was seated in a restaurant. Bruce said, “At the table next to me were a mother and a father and a child, and the waitress came, and she was starched and stiff and obviously knew what she was about, and she asked the father what he wanted, and he ordered, and she asked the mother what she wanted, and she ordered, and then she spoke to the little boy, and the mother said, “HE would like a child-sized order of chicken à la king.”

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“Would you like a hamburger?” she said to the little boy.

“Yeah, I’d like a hamburger very much.”

“He would like a child-sized order of chicken à la king.”

“What would you like to have on your hamburger. Would you like to have a lot of ketchup on it—a little bit of mustard and onions?”

“No, I don’t want any onions. But I’d like the ketchup and....”

“Miss, evidently, you didn’t understand. He’d like a child-sized order of chicken à la king.”

“Do you want a Coke to go along with your hamburger and French fries, too?”

“Yeah, I’d like that.”

And with that, the waitress turned, and she walked away. And then it was that the little boy looked up at his mother and said, “Gee, mommy, she thinks I’m real.”

Wow! It feels so good to have someone actually pay genuine attention to you, to treat you as real. Let me tell you something. Jesus Christ thinks that you are real. With all of the stuff going on in your life, you may wonder, Does anyone notice, does anyone care, will anyone help? The answer is yes, because to Jesus Christ you are very real and he pays full attention to your needs, just as Jesus paid attention to the invalid by the Pool of Bethesda. Bruce Thielemann concluded his story by saying, “It’s at the moment that we pay attention to someone that our love slides down the beam of that

attention right into their heart.” You can be sure that the love of Jesus Christ is sliding down that beam of his attention right into your weary heart right now!

Now, when Jesus says, “Do you want to get well?” the man does not immediately answer, “Yes,” but makes an excuse. “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 making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me’” (John 5:7 NSRV). You can almost hear the sniff. Does this man want to get well? I don’t think so. Mind you, he has found no one, perhaps has never asked anyone for help in thirty-eight years. Does he want to get well? I don’t think so.

Now, consider what is about to happen. The man does not know who Jesus is, doesn’t have faith in Jesus because he doesn’t even know Jesus’ name. In contrast, the story of a royal official who came to ask Jesus to heal his son, that official wasn’t exercising blind faith, trusting Jesus with no reason to trust him. He had mind faith because he knew with his mind he had sufficient reason to trust Jesus. He knew of the miracle of water turned into wine and knew that Jesus could heal his son. But now, at the Pool of Bethesda, Jesus is speaking to an invalid who didn’t know who Jesus was. Therefore, the man had no faith – not blind faith, not mind faith. He just lies there making excuses, which tells us that this is a man injured in both mind and spirit. You might be inclined to feel less than compassion for such a self-pitying

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man, but if you have ever really suffered you know very well how tied together our physical and mental health can be.

So, what happens as Jesus speaks to this fellow who has no idea who Jesus is? Zap! Jesus heals him outright. “Jesus said to him, ‘Stand up, take your mat and walk.’ At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a sabbath.” (John 5:8-9 NSRV). Jesus evidently quietly slips away. The man is standing there holding his mat, probably a bit shocked, dazed, feeling a healthy body for the first time in thirty eight years, and up come the Pharisees. Amazingly, the Pharisees are able to miss the blessings of God so focused are they on their home-made rules for holiness. It’s the Sabbath, Saturday. Hey, buddy, it is not permitted for you to carry your mat on the Sabbath. Whoa, says the man, it isn’t my fault. The man who healed me, he is the one who said, take up your mat and walk. Turns out, not only was that man sick in body and hopeless in spirit. He was also a jerk—not a very nice man. He shifts the blame for his healing (as if you could blame someone for healing you) to Jesus. That would be like you lying by the road after a car accident bleeding to death, finding your life saved by a compassionate doctor who stops to help you and then suing the doctor for practicing medicine without your permission. Later, Jesus comes to him again in the pool. “See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more,

so that nothing worse happens to you.” So the man falls at Jesus’ feet in faith and gratitude, right? Nope. He leaves Jesus and finds the Pharisees and points out Jesus - He did it...he is the one...and the Jews begin to persecute Jesus.

Jesus loves a helpless, unpleasant man with an outright miracle, a man with no courage, no honor, no integrity, no gratitude. In return for his mercy, Jesus gets nothing but trouble. Some people are givers, some people are takers. This fellow is a taker. Why would Jesus seek out someone so weak in spirit? So weak in spirit he doesn’t get help to be healed for thirty-eight years, so weak he has embraced some sin that has led to his affliction, so weak in spirit than when he is healed, he’d rather grovel before the Jews than give Jesus due credit. When he learns Jesus’ identity he actually tattles on Jesus to the authorities. So, of all the hundreds of suffering people lying around the pool of Bethesda, why did Jesus seek this fellow out?

The answer is gigantic. Jesus wants to communicate something to you and me, that no matter what our inner weakness has been, no matter how we have messed up or how unpleasant we may be, no matter even if we have deliberately turned our backs on Jesus Christ, no matter how weary we may feel, that he will never leave us, will never forsake us, will never give us up, or give up on us. That is God’s unconditional love. The tragedy in this story is not that the man was weak, that he was weary, that he had sinned. The tragedy is that he didn’t appreciate

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the blessing given to him nor bless the one who blessed him. When Jesus said, “Do you want to get well,” Jesus was actually saying, “Will you let me love you?” Whatever is going on in your own life, say to Jesus, “Jesus, I confess the reality of my life to you and I ask you to love me.” Believe me, he will, and he is loving you right now.

Once there lived an elderly schoolteacher by the name of Alice Fisher, who lived in retirement on a small piece of property in the country. On the boundary line between Alice’s backyard and her neighbor’s yard there was an old tree covered with wisteria. Her neighbor, on the other hand, couldn’t stand the tree.” Over the years, the neighbor repeatedly asked Alice to have the tree removed, but Alice refused. One day when she was away, the neighbor cut down her tree, sawed it up for firewood, and put the wood in his own basement. Alice was furious, and nursed her anger for five or six weeks. Then, finally, the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount entered her heart. Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy and so on. She baked a cake and took part of it to her neighbor, only to have the door slammed in her face. Three days later she went back with some cupcakes. This time the door was held ajar a few inches, but the gift refused. Alice’s next offering was a bouquet of flowers from her garden, and this was accepted with hesitant thanks.

Just a week after this last incident, the neighbor died of a heart attack, and his widow, dazed with grief, turned to whom for help? Alice! During those dark days, the schoolteacher was able to minister to an entire family, and to be a tower of strength to them. How grateful she was that she had given in to God’s urging to forget her resentment and to become a peacemaker. Alice Fisher offered love to a man who no more deserved it than the man by the pool of Bethesda.

The real house of mercy isn’t a pool of water. It is the wonder of the heart of Jesus. When our souls are weary, when we are wounded or afflicted or heartbroken and caught in a difficult situation, perhaps of our own making, we can hold Jesus at arm’s length, reject his blessings and ignore his mercies. If you do, Jesus will only keep on loving you, calling you to turn again and find in him rest for your weary soul. Let Jesus love you. You can always know that God is for the broken-hearted. The LORD upholds all who are falling (says Psalm 145), and raises up all who are bowed down. (Psalm 145:14).

Benediction:

Our Lord seeks to reproduce his heart in you, so that you, in your life, become a Pool of Bethesda, a house of mercy to the people God puts into your life, even to those whom you may not consider the nicest of people. And that is the miracle of the Spirit of Jesus in you.

