

PICK UP YOUR MAT

John 5:5-16

Holistic health is a relatively new field of health practice. Not only do the practitioners stress physical health but also emotional well being. All of us should realize we cannot separate our lives into separate compartments because one part affects another. Unfortunately, many of the holistic health advocates are also advocates of Eastern religions and encourage such things as transcendental meditation and practicing yoga. This is an example of trying to accomplish something good using the wrong means. We humans are very complex beings. We do need to take care of the physical, mental (intellectual and emotional), and spiritual parts of our being. Most of us think the role of the church in our lives is primarily involved with our spiritual well-being; however, if we look to Jesus for direction, then we need to see the church also involved in physical and mental well being. A lot of the ministry of Jesus concentrated on physical needs of people and He helped them develop the right emotional environment in which to function. We can see elements of this in the situation in which Jesus was involved during one of His visits to Jerusalem.

Compassion Expressed – 5:5-9a

⁵ A man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. ⁶ 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?” ⁷ 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.” ⁸ Jesus said to him, “Get up, pick up your pallet and walk.” ⁹ Immediately the man became well, and picked up his pallet and *began* to walk. John 5:1-9a (NASB95)

Most of the ministry of Jesus took place in the area around the Sea of Galilee. He would go up to Jerusalem for special festivals such as Passover and at other times when there were needs. In the same way, we may need to interrupt our routine to be at another place for a particular ministry need.

You can picture in your mind the scene there. This pool which was called Bethesda was apparently spring-fed and many people in the area believed that there was healing power in the water at certain times. These times were associated with turbulent activity in the water. The people believed an angel was responsible for the movement of the water and the first person to get into the pool during such times would be healed of whatever infirmity he had. [Commentaries point out that the part of the angel disturbing the water is not in the more reliable ancient manuscripts and that the disturbance was likely caused by intermittent flow of a siphon spring that fed water to Jerusalem.]

Whatever the explanations, people had been healed at this place based on what they believed. If there had not been some incidents of healing, then people would not have continued to come there. There were many people who came regularly to the five porches that were around the pool. In a sense the scene there was a parable of the world and the condition of many people who are afflicted by various maladies in their lives and are looking for something to bring them relief. As many of us know, when we have chronic problems that hinder our ability to live a relatively normal life that we will do whatever we believe will or might help us.

There are places even today where people go expecting to receive healing from various infirmities. Lourdes in France and Guadalupe Hidalgo in Mexico are two of the better-known shrines. Some are healed or experience improvement from their ailments. Usually, such healing is thought to be related to the person saying the right prayers or thinking the right thoughts or something that they must do.

It may just be coincidental that Jesus had just come from an encounter where He had declared that He was the provider of Living Water and now He is seen at a place where there was water that seemed to be alive and was thought to possess healing power. Viewing these two occurrences together, then we could conclude that the Living Water that Jesus provides which is to flow out from every believer has the potential to bring healing to those who are in need.

The infirm man whom Jesus encountered was thinking he had to do something for his healing to become a reality. But he was not able to help himself. This is the condition of the world that is lost in sin. There is no way for them to help themselves out of the condition in which they are in. Most of the time people think they must do something to bring about wholeness.

There are a couple of suspicious “coincidences” in this account that tie this event to previous statements by John and to events in the Old Testament. The first of these is the fact that this encounter with the lame man was near the Sheep Gate. The obvious connection of this proximity is that John the Baptist had pointed out that Jesus was the Lamb of God. The second coincidence is the fact that this man had been in his debilitated condition for 38 years. This number of years is identical with the time the Israelites spent wandering aimlessly in the wilderness after they refused to go into the Promised Land when they were given the initial opportunity. We see this in Deuteronomy 2:14 which reads “Now the time that it took for us to come from Kadesh-barnea until we crossed over the brook Zered was thirty-eight years, until all the generation of the men of war perished from within the camp, as the LORD had sworn to them.” Some commentators see this man as a picture of the nation. Spiritually speaking, Israel was a nation of impotent people, waiting hopelessly for something to happen.

All of us would answer the question, “Will you be made whole?” in the affirmative. However, it would be a “Yes, but...” response. “I would be made whole, but I can't do this and I can't do that” is typically what we say. Such a response may indicate that we are still operating from our own strength or (actually) our lack of strength. Some have suggested that the man's infirmity was either a ruse (in order to get people to feel compassion for him and give him alms) or psychosomatic and all he needed was for someone to provide the motivation to “get over it.” There are studies that show a large percentage of all psychiatric problems are caused by guilt, resentment, and fear and the resulting effects of such problems do affect us physically. Illnesses can provide a convenient escape from reality and responsibility as in the case of children who become physically ill the day of a big test at school.

It is obvious that the man conveniently sidestepped the question Jesus posed. Instead he gave an excuse as to why he was not well. He essentially said, “I am in this condition because I don't have any friends.” This could prompt another question of why don't you have any friends? Could it be because of resentment, fear and guilt that interfere with establishing good relationship among people? Whatever was going on with this man, it was producing an abnormal life condition that needed a solution. Jesus demonstrated that His power was sufficient to bring healing to the man's condition regardless of the root cause.

We need to be listening to Jesus who tells us to “rise up and walk.” We experience wholeness at the point where we stop depending on our own selves and looking at the reason why we can't do something, but simply trust in the Word of God. Many times we don't experience such healing because we don't simply step out in faith. We want to think about it, examine it, analyze it, or rationalize it to the point that we do nothing and, consequently, do not experience wholeness.

Not only did Jesus tell the man to arise but He also told him to pick up his bed (pallet)

and walk. It is likely that Jesus added the latter part to provide proof that something had changed in the condition of this person who had been living an abnormal life for thirty-eight years. The act of carrying his pallet also drew attention from the “religious crowd” since doing so was contrary to the Sabbath prohibitions. There is also a good possibility that the man was told to pick up his bed as part of the next step in eventually provoking an open confrontation with the Jewish authorities. Isn’t it strange that few people noticed that he was healed (good and positive news) but many took note of the breaking of the rules? Actually, it is not strange at all since this is apparently what is “normal” for most people. We tend to focus on the bad news and ignore the good news.

Legalism Exposed – 5:9b-13

^{9b} Now it was the Sabbath on that day. ¹⁰ 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.” ¹¹ But he answered them, “He who made me well was the one who said to me, ‘Pick up your pallet and walk.’ ” ¹² They asked him, “Who is the man who said to you, ‘Pick up *your pallet* and walk?’” ¹³ 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 5:9b-13 (NASB95)

When we experience wholeness, some will try to tell us. “Hey, you can’t do that, it violates the rules.” For example, some who don’t have a lot of material possessions think they can’t be happy. Every now and then someone who has nothing materially is completely happy and everyone says, “You can’t be happy, you are poor – you are breaking the rules.” Instead of looking for the reason for such an unusual circumstance, we focus on the violation of that which we thought was a required necessity such as not healing or picking up your bed on the Sabbath.

The Jews were concentrating on one value system to the exclusion of everything else. The observance of the Sabbath was quite important to them and it is (actually) important to us though we often ignore it. Other religions and cultures had days of rest built into their calendars of events. This may have been influenced by the creation account that was generally accepted by many cultures. The way the Israelites observed the Sabbath days, weeks and years had distinctions that were influenced by specific instruction given to them during their journey through the wilderness. The violation of the Sabbath observance was tied directly to the seventy years of exile that the Jews experienced in Babylon. In post exile times, many of the religionists were overly zealous in their “keeping of the Sabbath.” In their zeal to protect the sanctity of the Sabbath, these leaders had gone beyond the point of reasonableness and their focus only on the minutia of the Sabbath laws blinded them to the fact that God cares about each one of us as individuals. Instead of rejoicing with the man over his being healed, they found fault in his failure to observe the ritualistic rules.

Since Jesus did not grandstand in the miracles He performed, the man who was healed did not know the name of the One responsible for healing him. The Jewish leaders wanted to know who had told the man to carry his bed on the Sabbath. These leaders were completely insensitive to the previous condition of the man (no pity) and to the newfound wholeness that he was experiencing (no rejoicing). Such insensitivity shows spiritual deadness and is a natural outcome of being legalistic in following the letter of the law rather than the spirit of the law. You may have noticed some people still operate in this same mode. Many of them are in churches and they are fooling themselves and other religionists. These have a form of godliness but deny the power of it.

Identity Exposed – 5:14-16

¹⁴ 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.” ¹⁵ The man went away, and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him

well. ¹⁶ For this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because He was doing these things on the Sabbath. John 5:14-16 (NASB95)

After the commotion had settled down, Jesus found the man and left him with some sound advice. In effect, Jesus told the man. “Now that you are well (in the physical), straighten out the rest of your life (spiritual and emotional) so that this part of your being doesn't become crippled also.” While we do not want to be guilty of trying to relate every physical illness as being a direct result of some sin in a person's life, there are situations where we can find specific cause and effect relationships. The fact that all mankind starts out life as descendants of Adam and Eve, means that we are all vulnerable to the consequences of living in a less-than-ideal world in which we are subject to diseases and any number of physical maladies.

Every part of our life has needs for wholeness, consequently, we cannot afford to neglect any part and have real health. Many times when we experience problems with our physical well being, we can prevent compounding the problems if we can maintain good spiritual and emotional health. If we fail to maintain the nonphysical well being, then it is very difficult to reestablish physical well being when we do become ill.

One difference compared to other times when people were healed by Jesus is that in this follow-up with the healed man Jesus did NOT tell him to keep the information to himself. We see from John's account that this man who was healed immediately found some people to tell and to give Jesus the credit for what had happened. The response of the Jewish leadership was predictable. They did not prosecute the man for his violation of the Sabbath, but they did set out to persecute Jesus for what He did. As Warren Wiersbe pointed out in *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, the ruling council had the responsibility to investigate and challenge any religious-related activity that was happening in the nation. They had sent people to question John the Baptist and they were ready to question Jesus. The KJV which was translated from a later version of the Greek text includes the statement that they “sought to slay Him.”

At the point of this encounter in which the persecution was taking place, it was apparently limited to verbal abuse and accusations. Jesus could have just ignored this but He chose to raise the confrontation to a more acute level by His statement “My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.” There are at least two controversies that Jesus raised by His statement that was a challenge to the Jewish leaders. The first and immediately obvious was a challenge to their concept of how to observe the Sabbath with regard to work that was appropriate when observing and obeying the fourth commandment. In essence, Jesus raised the question “can a person be at ‘rest’ and ‘work’ at the same time?” The second and perhaps more of a concern for the Jews was His deliberate use of the word MY rather than OUR in reference to the Father was meant to communicate the truth that He was equal to God and that point was immediately picked up by the Jewish leaders and seen as blasphemy which increased their resolve to remove Him by whatever means they could.

As we have seen in the society in which we live today, the mention of Jesus can bring about controversy, criticism and even persecution. In some parts of the world, there are those who actually do “slay” those who are followers of Christ. These barriers must not keep us from being a blessing to others who have physical, mental, and spiritual needs by pointing them to look to Jesus to be the Provider of all our needs for body, soul and spirit. He is the complete Savior for every need.