

John 5:1-16 The Healing at the Pool of Bethesda

5 Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. **2** Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. **3** Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. ^{[4] (see below)} **5** One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. **6** When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?”

7 “Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.”

8 Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” **9** At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, **10** and so the Jewish leaders said to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat.”

11 But he replied, “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Pick up your mat and walk.’”

12 So they asked him, “Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?”

13 The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there.

14 Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, “See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.” **15** The man went away and told the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who had made him well.

The Authority of the Son

16 So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders began to persecute him.

(4: paralyzed—and they waited for the moving of the waters. ⁴ From time to time an angel of the Lord would come down and stir up the waters. The first one into the pool after each such disturbance would be cured of whatever disease they had.) Almost certainly a later addition.)

1. Context

These three chapters of John (5-7) record the shift from mere reservation and hesitation about Jesus to outright and sometimes official opposition. The first point of controversy is the Sabbath, which leads to a Christological issue (who is Jesus claiming to be?) arising out of the dispute, then a discourse about Jesus' relationship with his Father, and the Scriptures that bear witness to him.

Festivals

The next few chapters are sometimes known as John's "festival cycle":

- The Sabbath Festival in Jerusalem (ch.5)
- The Passover Festival in Galilee (ch.6)
- The Tabernacles Festival in Jerusalem (chs.7-8)
- Case Study: A Blind Man and Light (ch.9)
- The Hanukkah Festival in Jerusalem.

These festivals were extremely important in first century Judaism. Leviticus 23 has a list and stresses their importance. The cycle of festivals was old (Purim and Hanukkah were the newest, but already centuries old in Jesus' day). The liturgies of the temple and the responsibility of Jewish families was well established. Three times each year Jewish families were expected to travel to Jerusalem for worship (Passover in spring, Pentecost seven weeks later, Tabernacles in autumn), thanking God for the harvest of crop and herd, and remembering great episodes from Israel's history.

Q: What holidays or remembrances are important to your family and why? What does it signify?

Judicial Settings

These conflicts lead to a type of judicial setting, which are common in John. Jesus is examined by Nicodemus, the woman at the well, and the Jewish leaders (chs.6, 8, 9). Jesus must produce witness for his case (John the Baptist, God, followers, healed men in chs. 5 & 9), and he produces evidence that may substantiate his claims (particularly his works cf. 5:36). In the final scenes of the gospel, Jesus appears before Pilate and the high priest in a climactic judicial sequence in which he is found innocent (18:38) but nevertheless is killed.

The judicial background sets a template for the meaning of John 5, as shown by this chapter outline:

The Crime (5:1-15)

- A man at Bethesda is healed on the Sabbath
- The man is interrogated
- The criminal (Jesus) is identified

The Decision to Prosecute (5:16-18)

- First basis: Jesus violates the Sabbath
- Second basis: Jesus is making divine claims

Jesus Goes to Trial (5:19-47)

- Jesus describes his “criminal” work
- Jesus brings witnesses in his defense
- Jesus prosecutes his opponents (!)
- Jesus identifies their crimes
- Jesus challenges their ability to appeal

“This episode serves a literary role for John that exceeds its particular setting in Jesus’ historic life, showing us the kind of accusation and rejection Jesus experienced, his defense, and above all, the genuine spiritual jeopardy his opponents are in.”

NIV App Comm.

Q: What are the biggest dangers, or “spiritual jeopardy” American Christians are in? Are they internal or external? (You can answer in terms of individuals or the Christian church in America)

2. Text

v2 John writes, “There **is** in Jerusalem...” which led some commentators to believe that he wrote his gospel prior to the siege and destruction of Jerusalem, but this has been widely discredited, and we believe that he is using the present tense to refer to past events (the “historic present”).

v3a “a great number of disabled people used to lie...” – imperfect tense describing that was customary.

v3b-4 Viewed by most commentators as later additions to explain the moving of the waters in v7, reflecting popular belief about the cause of the water's disturbance (could have been intermittent springs). Jesus does not comment about the validity of the superstition one way or another.

v5 The man was either paralyzed, lame or extremely weak.

v6 Jesus learned of the man's condition, either by inquiry or supernatural knowledge.

Do you want to get well? Seems like a silly question. But there are some people who have become so used to their sickness (and the lack of personal responsibility it enables) that they prefer to be passive and cared for, rather than well and responsible for their own life. This can be true of physical illness, but also emotional sickness, victim mentality etc.

Spiritual change (and healing) can be like rehab – painful and requiring a lot of effort. Not everyone is up for that.

“Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of – throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.”

— C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity

v7 The invalid believes the superstition that the first one into the waters after the disturbance will be healed, and he has no friend to get him there. The man is not presented as particularly bright by John: he tries to avoid difficulties with the authorities by blaming the one who healed him; he is so dull he doesn't even know his healer's name; once he finds out, he reports Jesus to the authorities. What an ingrate!

V8 Jesus speaks words of power and authority, and ...

V9a immediately the man is healed, and healthy enough to walk and carry his mat.

V9b John mentions that the healing took place on the Sabbath, and it is this that sets up the confrontation and discourse that follow.

Sabbath-breaker

The Synoptic Gospels record a number of incidents where Jesus' activity on the Sabbath causes controversy (Mk 2:23-3:6; Lk 13:10-17; 14:1-6; Mt 12:1-14 etc.). All the Gospels report that disputes between Jesus and the Jewish authorities over the Sabbath were so sharp that they feature prominently in the rising desire to kill Jesus. In this story in John, the argument moves to territory of the relation between Jesus and his Father.

The Old Testament does forbid work on the Sabbath? But what counts as work? The assumption in Scripture is simply your normal, customary employment, but according to the Mishnah...

The **Mishnah**, a foundational document in **rabbinic Judaism**, serves as the bedrock for all rabbinic law. It encompasses the **Oral Torah**, a rich tapestry of Jewish traditions passed down orally from generation to generation. The Mishnah was meticulously compiled by **Judah ha-Nasi** during a critical period when the details of Pharisaic oral traditions from the Second Temple era were at risk of fading into oblivion. Written primarily in **Mishnaic Hebrew**, it also contains portions in **Palestinian Western Aramaic**. This seminal work is the precursor to the **Talmud**, which further expounds upon its teachings [1](#) [2](#).



Here are some key points about the Mishnah:

1. **Purpose:** The Mishnah provides comprehensive guidance on virtually every aspect of Jewish religious, social, and family life [3](#).
2. **Structure:** It is organized into **six orders** (sedarim), each containing multiple tractates (masechtot) that delve into specific topics [1](#).
3. **Language:** While most of the Mishnah is in Hebrew, some parts are in Aramaic [1](#).
4. **Methodology:** Unlike the Midrash, which follows the order of the Bible, the Mishnah arranges topics systematically [1](#).

In summary, the Mishnah stands as a testament to the enduring wisdom and legal framework of Jewish tradition, shaping generations of scholars and practitioners alike.

...dominant rabbinic opinion had analyzed the prohibition into 39 classes of work, including taking or carrying anything from one domain to another (except in cases of compassion e.g. carrying a paralytic). So, there is a conflict here. According to OT law, the man was not breaking the Sabbath, since his "occupation" was not carrying mats. But according to the Mishnah, he was breaking the law since carrying is one of the 39 prohibited classes. Clearly Jesus does not feel that he (or the man) should be bound by a rabbinical interpretation that went beyond the original intention of the OT law.

For the Jewish authorities, which of the two facts will they focus on?

- 1) A miraculous and wonderful healing, or
- 2) The comparatively trivial matter of carrying a mat on the Sabbath,

The answer is of course 2). This man would probably have been known to them... their response to "the man who made me well told me to pick up my mat" is not, "Who made you well?" but "Who told you to pick up your mat?" as in, "Who commanded you to be a Sabbath-breaker?"

Jesus' condemnation of religious legalism is as deep and earth-shaking as his healing of sicknesses – indeed, Jesus' critique of legalism is itself his attempted healing of a major sickness. (Bruner, 299)

Their reaction demonstrates the sickness of the current religious system and its distortion of values. They are majoring on the minors and missing the significance of what is happening right in front of them.

vv11-13 The man defends himself by blaming the one who told him to do it. He is ducking the authorities and later tries to ingratiate himself with them (v15) by “outing” Jesus. They are worried, because this is not simply an individual breaking on of the 39 categories, but he has been TOLD to do so. This is trouble!

v14 Jesus finds the man and tells him to “stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.” In this example, the fact that the healing happened on a Sabbath may be coincidental. There are cases, such as the healing of the man with the withered hand, (Matt. 12:9-14) where Jesus seems to be doing it to provoke and challenge the authorities.

Sin and Sickness

Scholars have tried to imply that there is no causation between the man's sin and his sickness, but a plain reading of the text implies that this is indeed the case. There are other examples in the NT where sickness/death are said to be the result of sin:

5 Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. ² With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

³ Then Peter said, “Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? ⁴ Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? **You have not lied just to human beings but to God.**”

⁵ When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. ⁶ Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

⁷ About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?"

"Yes," she said, "that is the price."

⁹ Peter said to her, "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."

¹⁰ At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events. (Acts 5:1-11)

²⁷ So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. **²⁹ For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves.** ³⁰ **That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.** (1 Cor 11:27-30)

¹⁶ If you see any brother or sister commit a sin that does not lead to death, you should pray and God will give them life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. **There is a sin that leads to death.** I am not saying that you should pray about that. (1 John 5:16)

This does not mean that everyone who commits these sins will fall ill or die. It does mean that some instances of suffering ARE the direct result of sin. But not all...

9 As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

³ “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. (John 9:3)

13 Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. ² Jesus answered, “**Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?** ³ **I tell you, no!** But unless you repent, you too will all perish. ⁴ Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—**do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?** ⁵ **I tell you, no!** But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

And of course, we have the book of Job, where his friends are convinced that his troubles must be the result of sin, but they are wrong.

Matthew Henry, the Bible Commentator referring to this particular instance in John said this:

“Christ, who knows all men’s hearts, knew that this man was one of those who must be *frightened* from sin.”

v15 The man, ingratiating himself with the authorities, tells them it was Jesus who made him well – and so

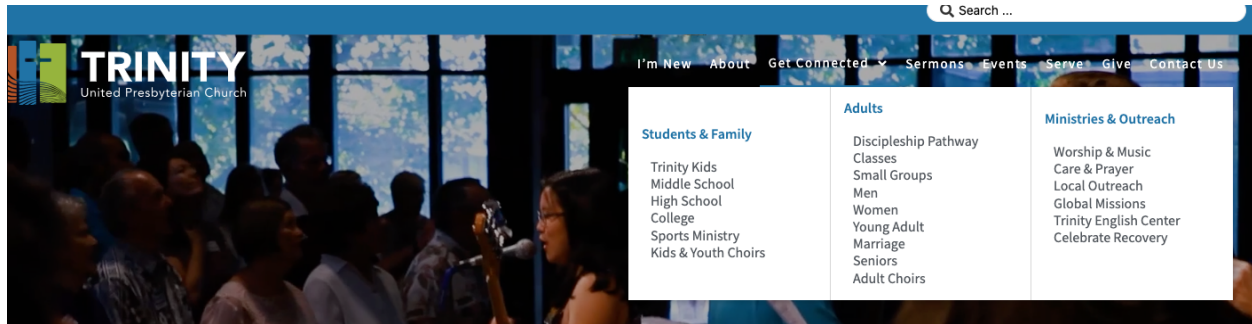
v16

¹⁶ So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders began to persecute him.

the persecution begins.

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