

100 Days in John, Pt. 7
A Good Question
John 5: 1-18

**First Presbyterian Church
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Mr. Perry taught biology and was one of my best teachers in school—and definitely the toughest. Mr. Perry would subtract five points from your semester total if he heard you refer to an insect as a ‘bug’ in class and would grade his fill in the blank tests this way: right answer, plus one. No answer, zero. Wrong answer, minus TWO.

Mr. Perry went to The Ohio State University and told the story of heading out to an important football game on a road trip with some buddies. Well, the game went well, and the weekend went SO well that they staggered back onto campus Monday afternoon, thereby missing a Chemistry 101 mid-term that had happened that morning. The sophomore amongst this group of freshmen, said, “No worries. Just come with me.” The sad-faced quartet went to the professor’s office, incredibly polite and apologetic. “Sir, what can we do to make up for what happened? We left in plenty of time from East Lansing, but we had blowout on the way home, and there weren’t any tire stores open on Sunday. Now our rotten luck might destroy our grades this semester. Could you find it in your heart to give us an opportunity to make up the test?”

The professor, surprisingly, was moved. “Sure boys, something like that could happen to anyone. I’ll tell you what. Come back here at 8 AM tomorrow morning, and I’ll give you a makeup exam.” Thanking their lucky stars, Mr. Perry and friends stayed up late into the night cramming on all the chemistry knowledge they had ignored the previous six weeks. Tired but happy, they trudged into the professor’s office at the appointed time to receive their test, surprised to find that they were escorted to four separate rooms, where as they turned the exam over, one question stared back at them: “WHICH TIRE?”

The right question has a great deal of power. The Lenten guides this year focus on coming to ask Jesus, but we will find Jesus has things to ask of us as well. The first words Jesus speaks in John’s gospel are a question (1:38). The last words Jesus speaks in John’s gospel are a question (21:23). In fact, it’s worth looking in all the

gospels at how often Jesus responds to a question with a question of his own, but that's a sermon for another day.

In John's gospel, we've already seen that Jesus is the fulfillment of the old symbols of Judaism, and he fulfills them with abundance. (John 2:1-12, 4:11-14) We've also seen Jesus turning over the tables in the temple, restoring and challenging the religious rituals that had confused and even prevented God's covenant purposes for his people (2:13-22). Over the next several chapters in John, we'll see Jesus purifying and fulfilling with abundance many of the Jewish festivals: Passover (chs. 6, 13-14), Tabernacles (chs.7-9), and Hanukkah (ch. 10).¹ But the first and most important feast or festival is taken up here – the weekly 'feast' of the Sabbath (5:1, 9). On the Sabbath, the good question Jesus asks a man paralyzed for thirty-eight years is: "Do you want to be healed?"

Now, as I kid, I used to read Mad Magazine, and it had a column called "Snappy Answers to Stupid Questions." Other than feeding my fifth-grade sarcasm, it didn't do me much good. But this does sound like one of those questions, right? Of *course* he wants to be healed! Well, not so fast. We're going to take a look at this good question, and how it applies to the Sabbath, both then and now. This passage is far less famous than Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus or the Samaritan woman at the well, in large part because we're put off by the paralyzed man and how this account unfolds. But we'll discover here three ways we can misunderstand or abuse the Sabbath, and how Jesus fulfills abundantly what true Sabbath brings.

The Pool – Sabbath as MEANS

Let's pick up the account where this poor man, an invalid for thirty-eight years, is waiting with multitudes of others in need, brought with varying levels of love or indifference by others to a place, where, it was believed, an angel stirred the waters, and if you got there fast enough, you had a shot at getting healed. It's not mentioned where this belief came from, or how valid it was, but where desperation lives, possible superstition isn't far behind. Jesus comes up, completely unexpected and unannounced. "Do you want to be healed?" Notice what happens. "Dude, you're just in time! Maybe you can get me down to the water where the action is! Can you pull me ahead of those other saps?" The paralytic has no idea who is speaking to him, but he's had his attention and hope fixed so long on getting to that pool, that he only sees the questioner as a means to an end. And how often do we

¹ See Gary Burge, *Jesus and the Jewish Festivals*, (Zondervan, 2012)

do the same thing? We see the Lord as a useful prop to get us to what we really put our hope and security in. In other words, what we really worship.

“Jesus, you’re just in time! Can you pull me into that job I want? Oh, hey, Jesus, thanks for showing up! Would you take this oblong piece of pigskin and pull it over that bar over there? You’re the greatest!” My favorite prayer through about three years of middle school was, “O God – please make Mari Jo Schaeffer want to go out with me.”

Are you using your Sabbath life as a means to an end, looking over the shoulder of the One who asks, “Do you want to be healed?” toward that ‘pool’ that we believe holds the answer to our deepest need? The winning numbers to Powerball? A starting position on the travel team? A painless passing from this life to the next? The answer to what you’re really longing for is standing before you with a good question: do you want to be healed?

After thirty-eight years of pursuing an answer in the wrong place, and with clearly no reason based on merit or even requesting it, our hero is completely healed by a word from Jesus. It had nothing to do with the pool at all! “Rise, take up your mat and walk.” The man takes Jesus at his word, and his life is transformed!

The Law – Sabbath as MINUTIAE

This draws our attention to another group in the story. Rather than rejoice at the healing power of God on remarkable display in the heart of Jerusalem, others are scandalized that this man who couldn’t walk since the Reagan administration is carrying a mat. This isn’t a violation of any rule about working on Sabbath from the Old Testament; rather, it was going against the hundreds of rules set up to try to avoid breaking the original rules, a set of regulations called the *Mishnah*. For example, you couldn’t ask a neighbor to borrow some olive oil; that would be ‘doing business,’ but you could take it without saying anything, trusting she would not mind. Today in many places in Israel on the Sabbath, you can walk into an elevator, but pushing a button is considered work, so the doors open on every floor. The original desire to keep the Sabbath free from work is certainly praiseworthy, but frequently the barnacles of minutiae crust over the heart of God’s healing purposes. It becomes all too easy in our zeal for obedience to get into a game of one-upmanship over our own versions of *Mishnah*. What determines where we worship? Is it over the authority of God’s word, or a clear presentation of being saved by grace alone through Christ alone by faith alone? Or is it something else?

“If everyone isn’t using the King James version, it’s a perversion of God’s intended meaning.” “I don’t care what Psalm 150 says. You can either have cymbals or me in the sanctuary – pick one!” I had four different people tell me in a church I visited one morning that “we don’t have to wear ties here.” Translation: lose the neckwear, friend! And – dare I say it? The biggest factor in where people decide to worship in the current decade isn’t Christology: it’s how we handle masking. We never covered that in systematic theology class! “Do you want to be healed” looks like a better question all the time!

The Sabbath and our SIN

Sabbath as a means to an end or arguing over minutiae far removed from the healing purposes of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The sabbath police continue to press their case in unmasking Jesus, who has slipped away in the crowd. “Who is this fellow who said to you, ‘pick up your mat and walk?’ This brings us to the most difficult part of today’s passage. We find Jesus coming back to the formerly paralyzed man, and declaring to him, “See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.” (5:14) What is going on here? What is Jesus talking about? And what could the formerly paralyzed man have done to deserve such a rebuke? All sorts of theories have been put forward, but in the interest of time, let me cut to the chase: *the more important factor isn’t what the man has done; it’s that Jesus has the right to judge him - and everyone else.* Most of the rest of chapter 5 addresses that. This goes hand in hand with the explosive comment Jesus makes in verse 17: “My Father is working until now, and I am working.” While we’re told at the opening of Genesis 2 that God rested on the seventh day, it was understood that God still did two things on the Sabbath: he orders life and death while upholding the universe, and he judges good and evil. (Psalm 121:4). We’re quite happy about this when Jesus *forgives* sin on the sabbath (Mark 2:5-12), but when he calls us out on our sin. . . awkward!

The text causes me to ask: when is the last time in worship or in prayer or in reading Scripture that you sensed Jesus say to you, “sin no more, lest something worse happen to you?” We have a remarkable ability when we “look down the long well of history (at Jesus Christ) to see our own face reflected at the bottom.” (George Tyrell) It’s just more comfortable to quietly hope and then believe that the Lord of the universe happens to hold all my views and preferences and is working all things together for my good in a way that looks good to me NOW. I’ve been a part of denominations that make multiple policy statements in the name of the

church that inerrantly line up with the left wing of the Democratic party, and I've been in sanctuaries where it's assumed that God's been voting Republican for millennia. It's worth sharing this from historian Larry Hurtado, from his work *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* about the five elements of community that made it so attractive, yet counter-cultural.

1. Multi-racial and multi-ethnic. (Eph. 2:11-22)
2. Highly committed to caring for the poor and vulnerable (Luke 10:25-37)
3. Commitment to forgiveness and non-retaliation (Romans 12)
4. Practical help against abortion and infanticide (James 1:27, Ps. 139:13-16)
5. Revolutionary sex ethic of committed monogamy (1 Cor. 6:12-7:5)



Perhaps you agree with everything on this list, but this cuts across the grain of our current political landscape, and *acting* on these commitments is difficult, at least for me. For example, last Sunday I was watching the Super Bowl. On comes an ad with compelling pictures showing competing

demonstrators and violence, and then fades to the message, "Jesus loved the people we hate." "He gets us. All of us." I was thrilled. All right! Score one for the good guys. Thank you for loving my enemies Jesus!

The next day I'm scrolling through my newsfeed and come across this headline from The New Republic, a publication I used to subscribe to: *The "He Gets Us" Jesus Super Bowl Commercial Is Connected to an Anti-Abortion, Anti-LGBTQ Group*. That was clickbait enough for me. "The ad, urging viewers to look beyond their apparently equally valid differences and instead find solidarity through the church, did not come from a group that even pretends to follow such hollow advice." Later the charge was thrown in that by stating "Jesus struggled to make ends meet, too," the ad buyers were "veering toward poverty porn." Not too long ago, I know I would have copied this link, put it on my social media page and said something about how badly Christians get smeared in the public square. But I heard a little verse pop up in the back of my spirit: "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Don't you hate it when that happens?

Christians have been shamed and name called at different times over the centuries. In the early days, we were labeled atheists and cannibals, and today other invective flies. Bigot. Ignorant. Easily led. Turning back to our healed paralytic, he's not willing or able to resist the peer pressure and possible persecution coming his way about carrying his mat on the sabbath. He goes along to get along. Or perhaps he doesn't like being told there's sin in his life. He wouldn't be the first or the last to feel this way.

Jesus has the authority and the right to point out the sin in our lives. If we want to be healed, it must be at a deeper level than just the physical one. If you're in a relationship where your will or opinion is never questioned or corrected, it is either extremely shallow, or one involving a robot or a zombie. Jesus Christ isn't signing up for any of those roles. We don't like it when Jesus tells us something needs to be changed in our lives, but then we're faced with a decision. Nicodemus decides to keep thinking about it. The woman at the well goes away rejoicing – "Come, see the man who told me everything I ever did!" The healed paralytic makes his choice as well. "There's the man causing all this trouble."



The Sabbath and our SALVATION

But stay with me. Here's where Jesus fulfills the true purpose of the Sabbath abundantly. Due to the healed man's identification of "that man" Jesus, we're told the persecution of him begins in earnest (5:16). Christ's response? "My Father is working until now, and I am working." And so, the shoe drops. "This is why his opponents were seeking all the

more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was calling God his own Father." *Jesus' ultimate fulfillment of God's sabbath rest is to be killed - to sacrifice his life for sabbath breakers like us.* When Jesus is paraded before the crowd by Pilate in a purple robe and crown of thorns, even though he is declared by Pilate to be innocent, we hear that seemingly random statement, "Behold the man!" (19:5) that points right back to "who is that man?" in our passage this morning.

To Behold the man may look like what is happening right now at Asbury University, where a chapel service started Feb. 8th is still continuing. One EPC

pastor who arrived there has said, “I was there today for 10 minutes and walked back out because I wasn’t prepared or expected to feel such a presence. I planned to pray for others but found myself profoundly lacking so much that I spent an hour weeping and asking Gd to forgive me and sanctify my life. Revival isn’t what I thought it would be. It’s not a renewal; Its dying to one’s self.”

Do you want to be healed? You need to see and believe in the crucified and risen savior before you. Do you want to be healed? You need to give Christ the right to identify and judge sin in your life. Do you want to be healed? Recognize that his love for you is passionate and powerful enough to be worth any name calling or ostracization that might come your way from others. Do you want to be healed, and receive the perfect rest God promises?

Augustine said, “God made us without our permission but will not save us without our consent.” You’ve heard a good question. What is *your* answer?