

THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL OPPOSITION"

(John 5:1-18)

9.20.20

INTRODUCTION

In this political season (and I guess nowadays, when isn't it "political season?"), there is one thing that politicians know how to do really well - they know how to choose their audiences. In other words, they go to places to whip up support where they know they already have support - which makes great sense: Nobody wants to go and speak to a hostile crowd. Nobody wants to go where your enemies have a "clean shot" at you. I mean, cheering crowds are a whole lot more fun to face than jeering crowds, right?

Well, in our story today, we'll see Jesus literally "walking into the lions' den" where His enemies are concerned. But, instead of trying to be quiet and not draw any attention to Himself, Jesus does just the opposite - stirring the pot of all that His opposition hates about Him. Sounds like fun, huh? But before we start, let's seek the Lord in a **word of prayer**.

TEXT- John 5:1-18

Sometime later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals - John 5:1.

Up until this time, we have seen Jesus mostly ministering in the province of Galilee - His hometown of Nazareth, the neighboring village of Cana and, along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Capernaum, His unofficial headquarters. But now He has traveled south, to Judea and into Jerusalem - a distance of some 85 miles - all on foot (just think of walking from here to Cologne, MN). His reason was to celebrate "one of the Jewish festivals." John never lets us know which festival it is, though, because that's not the reason He is telling this story. What is relevant for John was that the festival is what brought Jesus from Galilee to Judea, and to this particular story, which took place on the Sabbath.

Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic (the everyday language that Jesus and His disciples spoke) is called Bethesda (meaning "house of mercy") and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades - John 5:2.

Now this part of the story has been greatly helped by modern archaeology. Excavations over the years have discovered that, while there were several pools located near the Temple area, only one has been found by the ancient Sheep Gate and it has five (5) porches, exactly as John described. Essentially these "covered colonnades" were walkways with rows of columns supporting the roof and open on the side facing the pool. There would have been a colonnade on each of a pool's four sides and another between the two pools that actually made up this particular complex. And incidentally, this particular gate was dubbed the "Sheep Gate" partly because sheep to be sacrificed as prescribed by the Law for the various religious commemorations were brought in through this gate due to its proximity to the Temple.

Here a great number of disabled people used to lie - the blind, the lame, the paralyzed- John 5:3(4).

Now if you are using an NIV translation for this story, or any other relatively modern translation, you may notice the number for verse 4 in brackets. We can also thank

archaeology for this. When the *KJV* came out in 1611, the manuscripts they had access to went back only about 600 years. Since that time, however, Biblical scholars and translators have gained access to far earlier manuscripts - and here's the deal: The closer you can get to the time the original autographs were written, the more accurate they are likely to be - less time for any additions or revisions to creep in - and this is a great example: Manuscripts have been found containing this section of John's gospel that are centuries older than what the King James scholars had. These older manuscripts do not have verse 4, suggesting that, while maybe well-intentioned, verse 4 was nevertheless not in John's original document. It had possibly been inserted to explain the mythology that is part of the context of the story; this addition reads (starting with an addition to verse 3): *-and they* (referring to the "disabled people" laying there) *waited for the moving of the waters.* [And then verse 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.* In truth, the stirring of the waters was likely caused by springs that in the process of feeding the pools stirred the water - essentially causing the water to bubble or otherwise be briefly agitated. OK; back to the story.

One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years - John 5:5.

It's interesting that John includes the information of how long this guy had been in this condition. Almost four decades was an incredible length of time during this period of history. Many people's whole lives didn't make it 38 years. But John is also including it to give us an important context: This guy being disabled for that long a period of time would have likely made him quite the regular at this place; most everybody would have known him, or known of him, and certainly been very used to seeing him. So, any change to his status, so to speak, would have been a real attention-getter. Being healed from his condition, and no longer spending all his time there, would have told anybody familiar with him that this healing was the real deal.

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?" - John 5:6.

We begin to get the picture of the sovereignty of Christ being illustrated here. The fact is, there were likely a good number of people at this place at that time, yet Jesus zeroes in on this one guy. The Greek helps us come to that conclusion; the idea that Jesus "learned" how long this guy had been in his condition speaks to supernatural knowledge. This guy was chosen for Christ's sovereign purpose. For Jesus' plans, this guy was perfect.

That all being said, Jesus strikes up a conversation with him in a really interesting way: "Do you want to get well?" Now on the face of it, that seems like - OK, I'm just going to say it - a really dumb question. Laying there for 38 years and You ask him if he wants to get well? Are you kidding me?

But let's think about that again. Jesus doesn't ask dumb questions. In fact, nobody ever asked smarter questions than Christ did. He was perpetually destroying the questions His enemies thought so clever. So, why does He ask what seems like such an obvious question here? There may be a few reasons:

- 1) It is possible that, after so long a time, this guy had simply given up all hope of ever being healed.
- 2) In some ancient cultures, beggars could arguably make a better living by maintaining their needy position. Jesus is offering a life-changing experience - in a way, asking him, "Would you like your life to be changed? Completely, all things new?" All of a sudden, he's going to have to figure out some other way to make money besides begging.
- 3) It is also possible that, as difficult as his life was, at least it was familiar to him. A new life meant a new way of being. That by itself can be scary - sometimes scary enough that people will hold onto the old ways; even if the old ways are difficult, at least they're not strange.

"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." Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked - John 5:7-9a.

The guy has no idea who he's talking to. He only sees a stranger - granted, somebody who seems to care about his circumstances but nothing more. He may have experienced many people like this. That's probably the reason for his response to Jesus - not faith, not even an affirmation of how nice it would be to be healed. Instead, he just lists the obstacles that fate seems to have placed in his path. But Jesus is undeterred.

And, in a moment, what an incredible event! After years of helplessness, a body broken by weak and atrophied bones and muscles, in an instant he is completely restored to perfect health - simply by the power of Jesus' words. The prophet Isaiah had prophesied - 700 years before this moment - the kinds of things that would be happening when the Messiah arrived: ***Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy - Isaiah 35:5-6a.*** Jesus was by His works declaring the fulfillment of God's promises of an "anointed one" - in Jesus, that "Anointed One," that "Messiah," had finally arrived!

But notice something else really cool, and it involves words that are never said. This guy never asks Jesus for help. Mary approached her Son in Cana, as did the royal official, pleading with Jesus to heal a son who was desperately ill in Capernaum. A man with leprosy asked for His help, as did the man who asked by the actions of literally being brought to Jesus' feet as he was let down through a hole in a roof. Yet here, while the man explains his dilemma, he never specifically requests aid or healing of any kind. In fact, he doesn't even seem to possess the least amount of faith - usually a requisite for Christ to heal. But how could he? He doesn't seem to have even the slightest idea of who this is that is talking with him. Yet Jesus heals him anyway. What is so cool is that it is such a clear presentation of an incredibly important point that Christ made throughout His ministry, and that we are commanded to follow: He started from a position of compassion. His starting point was love. This guy didn't have to earn any special favor; it is doubtful he could have done anything anyway. And yet he received Christ's loving compassion.

Remember when Jesus met with Nicodemus? He heard these famous words: **"God so loved the world" - Jesus Christ, John 3:16a.** Love is God's starting point. Love is what makes grace grace. Love is what makes salvation possible. Love is what made Jesus Christ incarnate. Love is behind what Paul said so well to the Romans: **God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us - Paul, Romans 5:8.** Love is behind what he said so well to the Ephesians: **[I]t is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - Paul, Ephesians 2:8.** If love is not God's starting point, there is no grace, no salvation, no Savior.

So, this guy gets wondrously, miraculously healed. And just to see what happened following Christ's command - "he picked up his mat and walked" - shows the absolute completeness of the cure. And it also shows that Jesus had the absolute ability, simply in the power of His word, to enable the impossible to become possible. This was indeed a "Radical Rabbi."

But then things start to get just a bit intense: **The day on which this [miracle] took place was a Sabbath, 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" - John 5:9b-10.**

"It is the Sabbath." There was a lot of weight in those words, and we need to understand where all that "weight" came from.

The Sabbath was created and commanded as a part of the Ten Commandments that God gave the nation of Israel; the fourth commandment says: **"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy" - God speaking, Exodus 20:8.**

Now a "sabbath" was a radical notion, that one would work six days and then take the next day off - no working as one did during the rest of the week but rather a day of "rest." Now certainly there were exceptions to this rest that were allowed - any action that was considered absolutely necessary, any action that was seen as an act of mercy and, of course, the activity of worship. Anything else? It can wait. God cared not only for the spiritual condition of His people but for their physical condition as well. As He later said: **"Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and so that the slave born in your household and the foreigner living among you may be refreshed" - God speaking, Exodus 23:12.** Do you get what He's saying? God's essentially telling the Israelites - and us, for that matter - that He could do more with us in six days than we ourselves could accomplish in seven. Wow - all that and being able to "recharge our batteries" at the same time. What a deal!

But there was more. You see, not only had God been serious in giving this commandment (even using Himself with "creation week" as a model) but, as it was a command, He considered it very deliberate if somebody chose to disregard it, a rebelling against His rule over Israel and His desire that they reflect their status as God's covenant people, a people of His own choosing. As God would later state it when a man was once caught gathering wood on the Sabbath: **"The man must die. The whole assembly must stone him outside the camp" - God speaking, Numbers 15:35.** Doing it outside the camp underscored his being cut off from the covenant people. And he was executed for disobeying God's word and

rebellious against His lordship over Israel. So yes - the Sabbath was a big deal.

However, by the time Jesus arrived, what actually constituted "work" on the Sabbath had gone from being a command to being a catalogue. Oral traditions on the original law that had been handed down over the centuries had now become virtually the equivalent of the Mosaic law itself. What had begun with 10 commandments had by the time of Christ become hundreds, if not thousands, of rules and regulations to live by. But because this was human traditions instead of God's word, conflict between Christ and the Jewish leadership was pretty much guaranteed. Now this was not doctrinal disagreement, but rather Christ's refusal to acknowledge their oral traditions. By the time Jesus was here, there were some 39 listed categories of activities that were considered "work," and therefore a breaking of the law if done on the Sabbath. Here were some of them: plowing, sowing, harvesting, constructing or tearing down buildings, spinning, weaving, sewing, hunting, butchering, hammering, cooking, baking, writing, making a fire or putting one out - plus others as well. Some were reasonable understandings from the Law, but others were, to put it politely, just a bit over the top. For instance, the Pharisees had declared rules, based on their interpretation of Scriptures, as to how far one could walk without it being deemed a "journey" and, therefore, work. They came to the conclusion of approximately 3,000 feet; anything farther walked on the Sabbath was breaking the law. Archaeologists have even found stones set outside some excavated cities and towns that marked the boundaries of how far one could lawfully walk on the Sabbath. In fact, oral traditions carried so much weight that there is a story from some 200 years before the time of Christ that approximately 1,000 Jews - men, women and children - were attacked by Macedonian forces. Because this attack occurred on the Sabbath, they refused to defend themselves because doing so was considered "work" according to those oral traditions; as a result, all 1,000 people were killed. This oral tradition was changed by the high priest Mattathias shortly thereafter.

But bottom line: Faith had moved from being about relationship to God to nothing more than a human list of "dos and don'ts." And, as this story seems to point out, apparently one of the "don'ts" of the Sabbath was taking one's mat out for a walk. So, they stopped this newly - healed man with their question.

But he replied, "The Man who made me well said to me, 'Pick up your mat and walk. "' So they asked him, "Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?" The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there - John 5:11-13.

A couple of interesting takeaways. First of all, with all the word of mouth that Jesus had been getting, obviously not everybody knew who He was. Second, I'm not sure how many other miracle workers there were at the time, but I gotta think that list was pretty small, yet the Pharisees still asked about who this healed guy had seen. And third, they totally blow by the healing, the fact that 38 years of this guy being paralyzed was over. You would think that would be a cause of at least some celebration but, no; instead, "Who told you breaking the Sabbath this way was OK?" Talk about missing the forest for the trees.

And what an interesting take on the same guy: This healed man sees Jesus as the one who made him well. The Pharisees only see Jesus as one who encourages people to break the Sabbath.

Later Jesus found him (the man who was healed) at the temple and said to him, "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you" - John 5:14.

You certainly get the sense that this man was in the condition he was due to some ongoing sin against God that eventually caused paralysis to be used to literally stop him in his tracks. Those words from Jesus must have been hard to hear so quickly after his 38 years of suffering had finally ended. But it doubtless also put him on notice to take a hard look at his life - how he had lived it, what his priorities were, and how he was going to live going forward. And "something worse" doesn't necessarily mean suffering in this life; what would be worse would be eternally suffering for sins in hell. You see, Jesus didn't heal him (or anybody else, for that matter) just to create headlines. Jesus healed lives physically as a means of healing lives spiritually. He still works that way. He does nothing without connecting it to a relationship with him - and not just for this life, but for the eternal life of which every human being is already living.

The man went away and told the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who had made him well. So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders began to persecute Him - John 5:15-16.

Now the initial reason for the official anger directed at Christ is not immediately because of His healing on the Sabbath, but rather that Jesus had told this man: "Take up your mat and walk." You can't do that on the Sabbath; doesn't Jesus know that? But once they understood that He had performed a healing on the Sabbath, then He too was a lawbreaker. "Doctor stuff" was often considered illegal because it would have meant carrying medicines and journeying to the patient - carrying burdens and making journeys both prohibited on the Sabbath; after all, "rules are rules." If such efforts were not being called on to specifically save a man's life, then they were unnecessary - and therefore "work." Obviously even a divine miracle could be overlooked in favor of upholding Sabbath law. And when the text says that the Jewish leaders began to "persecute" Jesus, the Greek tells us that they began a concerted effort of going after Him; they aggressively went against Him - with their questions, with their plots, with their twisting of His words - in order to ultimately break His ministry. In other words, they didn't just begin to oppose Him, but rather they began to attack Him - in every way possible.

In His defense Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at His work to this very day, and I too am working" - John 5:17.

Wow - what a statement! In one sentence Jesus is not only owning up to who did this particular "work" on the Sabbath, but in whose authority He is working - God, His "Father." I would love to have seen the leader's facial expressions when they heard these words. "Does this fellow know what He's saying?" But one look at Christ's expression would have given them no doubt that He knew exactly what He was saying. Not only that - He was going to continue to work, continue to do things despite their perceptions of right

and wrong, despite their vow to persecute Him. And what's more, He was going to continue to claim that authority - to not only working like God but working as God. Jesus had undeniably told them exactly who He was. Essentially, He was telling them: "This is who I Am. Exactly what do you think you can do about it?" The countdown to the cross had begun.

For this reason, they tried all the more to kill Him; not only was He breaking the Sabbath, but He was even calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God - John 5:18.

In their view, Jesus was no more than a man, but a man committing a capital offense by declaring Himself to be equal with God - something no mere mortal could ever think to do. Of course, for Christ, He was just telling them who He was and what He was and giving them opportunity to recognize Him as He truly was. Regardless, because the leadership was unwilling to see Jesus in any other way, their attempts to discredit and ultimately to destroy Him would now be an ongoing theme as His ministry continued.

APPLICATION

Amazing story, huh? So are the lessons - like these:

First, we need to remember that, in our day-to-day interactions with people, whether it be here with this body, or at our jobs or at home with our families or out in the neighborhood or wherever it might be, because Jesus is our example, if love is His starting point, it absolutely has to be ours as well. We need to lose the notion that somehow our favor or affection or anything else has to be earned or somehow deserved by somebody, or that evaluating whether somebody is entitled to our affections and attention is even appropriate - because it's not. We didn't deserve Christ's affections any more than this poor old, paralyzed guy did - yet Jesus gave him the full measure of His love and compassion. How can we do anything less?

Second, Jesus gave His love and compassion to this guy regardless of the final outcome of that love and compassion. The healed invalid telling the Pharisees who it was who had told him to take his mat and walk put Jesus squarely in leadership's crosshairs - beginning an intense odyssey of fighting and backlash that would ultimately lead to the cross. Yet Jesus poured His love and compassion on him anyway. Likewise, no matter how tempting it is to weigh our outreaches to people on what we think they might do with it, Christ's example is that love and compassion are the only "cards" we are to play. We are reaching out in Christ's strength and for His outcome - not ours. We trust Him to take care of the outcomes.

Third, certainly rules have their place. But we can never forget that we are in the relationship business and not the rules business. The Pharisees, who had originally come into being in the middle of the second century BC as essentially a "back to the Bible" movement to bring the nation back to a God-fearing spiritual life, had totally lost their way in what constituted relationship with God. Consequently, they had come to the dead-end conclusion that it was actually possible for fallen people to earn the approval of a perfectly pure and holy God. As a result, anything promoted outside of their rules and regulations was considered heresy - to the point that when the one true God shows up right in front of them, they only consider Him in light of their view, not His. What an

incredible tragedy!

Beyond that, we can never forget that a huge portion of our culture is totally and completely unversed in God, relationship, church, worship, prayer - the list goes on. If we are privileged to have an unsaved person come through our doors, we can never forget that they may literally know nothing of anything we do here. Their behaviors may make us uncomfortable, their dress, their language, their hair, whatever. That's not why they showed up; more specifically, that's not why God brought them here, to learn how to make us all feel comfortable. He directed them to this place to hear and experience the loving, life-changing message of the gospel His good news. That is all that matters that we present.

CONCLUSION

This is a story from almost 30 years ago, but it bears repeating because it shows the ongoing power of rules, in particular continued adherence to Jewish oral traditions, even down to our modern day (this from a Los Angeles Times news item from late April 1992): Tenants let three apartments in a predominately ultra-orthodox Tel Aviv suburb bum while they asked a rabbi whether a telephone call to the fire department on the Sabbath would violate Jewish law. Observant Jews are forbidden to use the phone on the Sabbath because doing so would break an electrical current, which is considered a form of work. They are, however, permitted to break the Sabbath in case of an emergency. In the half hour it took the rabbi to say yes (it was OK to call), the fire spread to two neighboring apartments. No one was injured in the blaze.

The Pharisees let their view of their rules override what God was seeking to do right in front of them. In the same way, we need to continue to pray for the wisdom to see how God is working right in front of us - regardless of whether His work makes sense to us ("That's not how I'd do it"). God simply wants us to come alongside the passion of His Son through the outreach of the gospel. That's what we are called to do. That's what this body is here for. Let's not let our perceptions become the measure by which God is seen. Let our surrender, our joy in being a part of God's Kingdom work, be enough. There's nothing better. Let's pray!