

JOHN 5:1-18—LIVING THE JESUS LIFE

INTRO: What does following Jesus mean for our lives? How does following Jesus affect our relationships with people? Does following Jesus cost us anything? These are fundamental questions we need to ask ourselves. The wellbeing of the church depends on our answers to these questions.

Today's passage, **John 5:1-18**, points us to the answers to these questions. This passage concerns Jesus' healing of a sick, lame man. It goes on to tell us the man's reaction to being healed and the reaction of the Jewish leaders. In this specific event, there are broader principles that apply to us and our walk with the Lord. **[READ]**

PROP: This passage is telling us: **To follow Jesus means to live like him, regardless of the circumstances and regardless of the consequences.**

O/S: We will see this as we see (1) what happened here (2) the controversy that resulted, and (3) how this relates to us.

I. What happened. vv. 1-4 set the scene for us. At the end of chapter 4, Jesus was in Galilee, which is in the northern part of Israel. v. 1 tells us that **“there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.”** There were three feasts in which all Jewish men were required to go to the temple in Jerusalem. Our passage does not tell us which feast this was. But it does explain why Jesus left Galilee to go to Jerusalem.

As a footnote, that little phrase—“Jesus went up to Jerusalem”—shows us why we can trust our Bibles. The reason is that, typically we in the northern hemisphere think of going “up” as going north and going “down” as going south. Now Jerusalem is south of Galilee, but John is quite correct to say that Jesus went “up” to Jerusalem, because Capernaum in Galilee is actually about 700 feet below sea level whereas Jerusalem is about 2500 feet above sea level. John knew his geography. It is one of those little indications that the biblical writers knew what they were talking about.

vv. 2-4 tell us what was going on at the pool of Bethesda. This pool was located in the northeast part of Jerusalem, not too far from where the temple was located. Remember, Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, and until the 19th century, there was no archaeological evidence for the Pool of Bethesda. It was excavated beginning in 1888 and found to be exactly as described in this passage. Again, we can trust our Bible.

The last part of v. 3 and all of v. 4 concerning the angel stirring up the water is not in the oldest manuscripts. V. 7 clearly shows that the water was stirred up from time to time, and the context indicates that people really were healed there. Vv. 3b-4 were probably added to explain what the people *believed* was the cause of the stirring up of the water, although we are not sure if that was the actual cause. The name of the pool means “pool of mercy” or “pool of grace.” And mercy and grace are exactly what Jesus showed to the sick man, as vv. 7-9 tell us.

vv. 5-9 introduce us to the sick man. The man had been in his condition for 38 years. What I find very interesting is Jesus' question to the man in v. 6—**“Do you wish to get well?”** and the man's answer in v. 7. You might think that it would be obvious that the man wanted to be healed—since he was there at the pool of Bethesda. But it's actually not that obvious. Why not? This man had been coming to this pool for 38 years. But he never did anything to make sure he got in first when the angel stirred up the water. For example, he never had a friend or family member with him who could have carried or tossed him into the water. He did not camp out right next to the pool where he could beat others into it.

Maybe, because of his illness, he was a beggar, like the blind man in John 9 whom Jesus healed. If that was the case, perhaps he realized that if he got healed, then he could no longer beg but would have to get a real job. Or maybe, 38 years of disappointment had broken his spirit. Perhaps he had lost the desire to actively try to get healed and had become passive and self-pitying. Jesus does not ask meaningless questions. His question suggests that he perceived something about this man's mental or spiritual condition not apparent on the surface.

Look at the man's answer in v. 7. He does *not* say, **“Oh yes, I want to get well more than anything! Can you help me?”** Instead, he does not even directly answer Jesus' question but just reports what has happened. In essence, what the man was saying was that his own efforts have failed. On his own, he was helpless. Yet that is enough for Jesus. So in v. 8 he tells the man, **“Get up, pick up your pallet and walk,”** and the man immediately was healed and got up, picked up his pallet, and walked. This leads us to:

II. The controversy that resulted. v. 9 tells us that it was the Sabbath when Jesus healed the man. In the 10 Commandments it says that on the Sabbath **“you shall not do any work.”** But what happened is that the Jewish leaders had developed all kinds of rules and regulations to define what was “work.” For example, you could not kindle a fire—that was “work.” You could not walk more than a kilometer—that was “work.” And you could not carry something that you could not wear—that also was considered “work.” That is why the Jewish leaders in v. 10 accused the man of breaking the Sabbath by carrying his pallet.

First, let’s look at the man. What was his response to Jesus when Jesus healed him? The man didn’t fall down and worship Jesus, like the man who Jesus healed in **John 9**. The man here did not thank Jesus, or even ask him his name. He just got up and walked away.

Look at the man’s response to the Jewish leaders. When they accused him of breaking the Sabbath, he did *not* jump up and down and tell them, **“I’ve been coming here for 38 years trying to get healed. And today a man performed a miracle! He healed me with only his word! This is the greatest day of my life!”**

In v. 14, when Jesus found the man in the temple and told the man who he was, the man then went back to the Jewish leaders and reported Jesus’ identity to them. He did this even though he knew the Jewish leaders were angry about what had happened. He was not *praising* Jesus. In effect, the man was trying to put the *blame* for what had happened on Jesus. Very strange. We will get back to this later.

That led to the controversy between the Jewish leaders and Jesus. One of the Sabbath regulations was that a doctor could not try to heal someone on the Sabbath unless the person’s life was at stake. Jesus healed the man even though his life was not at stake. In v. 16, the Jewish leaders were angry with Jesus for healing the man on the Sabbath and also for telling him to carry his pallet. Both were in violation of Sabbath regulations.

But vv. 17-18 raised their anger to the boiling point—now they wanted to kill him. The reason is that Jesus answered their criticism of him by saying, **“My Father is working until now, and I myself am working.”** v. 18 tells us that, by this response, **“not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but by calling God his father, he was making himself equal with God.”**

Let us take a look at this. The Bible says that God created the world and everything in it in six days and then rested from his work of creation on the seventh day. But Jesus pointed out that **“My Father is working until now.”** IOW, every day—every second, even on the Sabbath—God is continually at work: sustaining the universe; giving good gifts to people like sun, rain, life, health, food. He doesn’t stop his work just because it is the Sabbath. When Jesus then said **“and I Myself am working,”** he was equating what he was doing with what the Father is doing.

Elsewhere Jesus said, “I am the Lord of the Sabbath.” IOW, whatever Jesus says and does on the Sabbath—including when he let his disciples pick grain and eat it on the Sabbath, or when he healed on the Sabbath, or told this man to carry his pallet on the Sabbath—all of that is perfectly all right because Jesus is greater than the Sabbath. Also, the Jews called God **“our Father,”** no one had ever called God **“My Father.”** That indicated a unique, personal relationship with the Father that no one else had. It is no wonder that the Jewish leaders considered this blasphemy and wanted to kill him.

III. How does this relate to us. There are at least four principles this passage teaches that apply to us.

First, remember that v. 3 said that there were a multitude of sick people near the pool—yet Jesus only healed the one man. Many of us may be surrounded by multitudes of people in need: people who are sick; people who are poor; people who need a job; people who are alone and need companionship; people who have dementia or other disabilities; people who have all kinds of needs. Sometimes the amount of people’ problems may overwhelm us. We may think, **“I can’t make any difference anyway,”** so we do nothing.

Related to that is the fact that most of us are so busy most of the time. We’ve got work, family, all kinds of other things to do. So when it comes to living the Jesus life and actually making a difference in the lives of other people, we end up doing nothing. We focus our lives almost exclusively on ourselves. It’s kind of like what Yogi Berra said about a restaurant many years ago, **“It’s so crowded that no one goes there any more.”**

Our first principle for living the Jesus life is that, we may not have the resources, or time, or ability to help all the needs that surround us—but we can help some. This is far more important than we realize. A lot of people think that, at the judgment, the only thing Jesus will ask us is, **“Did you accept me into your heart as your personal savior?”** It’s not going to be like that at all. Our entire lives will be reviewed. In **Matthew 25**, Jesus talked about the judgment and compared it to the sheep and the goats. **[SHEEP AND GOATS + What is the difference between the sheep and the goats?]** How we treat people in need—clothing those who need clothes, feeding those who are hungry, visiting those who need companionship because they are sick or in prison, inviting strangers in—demonstrates what we really think about Jesus.

Remember that Jesus said the entire Bible is summarized in two commandments: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. The apostle John talked about that in **1 John 4:20**. He said, **“If you say you love God, but don’t love your neighbor, you are a liar! Because it is impossible to love the God whom you have not seen if you don’t love your neighbor whom you have seen.”** The reason is that everyone has been made in the image of God. How we treat God’s image shows what we really think of him. [PICTURE OF NANCY ON MY DESK] In the same way, how we treat people—particularly those in need—shows what we really think of Jesus himself.

The second principle is this: remember in v. 5, who took the initiative: was it the man or Jesus? It was Jesus. He took the initiative to go to the man and deal with his problem. Our second principle for living the Jesus life is this: Jesus did not simply wait for people to come to him; he took the initiative and went to them. So we should too.

So often we are consumed by our own projects, our work, our concerns, and everything else in our lives. As a result, we do not perceive what is really going on around us. Jesus was not like that. We need to open our eyes. We need to be active in looking for people’s needs and then doing something about them. There is a hurting world all around us. There are all kinds of people who need to know that Jesus is alive. He transforms people. He brings peace and hope that cannot come from anyone or anything else. But the only way people will see that Jesus is alive, that he transforms people and gives us peace and hope, is if we show them by what we do and how we live.

We are to live the Jesus life. We should be looking for opportunities to help people in need and act on those opportunities because we love Jesus. The more we love Jesus, the more we will be *like* Jesus—just like the sheep in the sheep and the goats. And the more we are like *him*, the more we will truly love and care about others, just like Jesus did—regardless of the circumstances and regardless of the consequences.

And we don’t have to live the Jesus life alone. Remember: Jesus has told us, **“I am with you always”** and **“I will never leave you or forsake you.”** He has given us his heart, his mind, his Spirit, his word, and his body—the church—to empower us and to help us do everything we are supposed to do. We have no reason to be afraid or even be concerned about what other people may think—particularly since, as **Phil 2:12-13** says, **“it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”** He doesn’t just equip us, he actually does the work in and through us. So what are we waiting for?

Maybe you are thinking of someone’s need right now. That is God putting that person in your mind. Follow up with that. Act on it. Christianity is to be a lived-out faith. Jesus showed us the way. Take the initiative and follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

That leads to the third principle for living the Jesus life, which is this: we need to get to know people well enough so that we can see their real condition. That is why Jesus asked the man in v. 6, **“Do you really want to get well?”** He saw something in that man that was not apparent on the surface. It takes time and effort to develop deeper relationships with people. How well do we really know our neighbors and our co-workers? Do we know them well enough to know significant personal information about them and their families? Do we know their hopes, dreams, problems, struggles, and fears?

If we know people in a deeper way, we may realize that, even though they think their biggest problem is physical or financial, it really isn’t. Their biggest problem may be spiritual. They need to know Jesus and get their lives in tune with him. When that happens, more often than not the other problems will tend to take care of themselves. Even if the other problems remain, by having a deep, dynamic relationship with Jesus, people become equipped with the resources to deal with their problems in a new and constructive way. But how can we expect to give people the help and healing they need if we don’t know them well enough to know their real needs?

This also relates to v. 14, where Jesus told the man, “Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you.” There is *not* always a direct relationship between a specific sin that someone does and illness or some other disaster that happens to the person. Jesus made that clear in **John 9** when he said of the blind man, **“It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents, but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.”**

But sometimes a person’s sin *does* bring on bad consequences. The way v. 14 is worded suggests that there was a connection between this man’s sin and his illness. Once again, Jesus saw something beneath the surface concerning this man.

But notice something else. Jesus did not say to the man, **“You have brought this on yourself by your own misconduct. You deserve what you have gotten.”** Instead, he had compassion on the man and healed him despite the man’s sin. Is that our attitude when we see people suffering from things they have brought on themselves? We all sin. The apostle John said, **“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the**

truth is not in us.” Since that is the case, how can we look down on anyone else? How can we *not* show practical love to others? Their sins may be different from ours, but we all have the same basic problem—and Jesus is the answer to that problem.

So far we have seen that: we may not be able to help everybody, but we can help some. We also have seen that *we* need to take the initiative—don’t expect others to come to us. And we need to get to know people well enough so that we can see their real condition. That leads us to the fourth principle for living the Jesus life.

The fourth principle for living the Jesus life is that we should not be limited either by opposition from others or by our own traditions. Look at the response of the man Jesus healed. In **John 9**, when Jesus healed the blind man, that man believed and “worshipped” Jesus. The man here did not. He didn’t even thank Jesus, but ended up reporting Jesus to the authorities. One of the things the response of the man is telling us is that people will not always respond the way we wish and expect them to when we do good to them.

So what? Look for people’s needs and do good anyway. We are to love even our enemies, pray for them, and do good to them. Jesus said, **“if you only do good to those who love you, what reward do you have? If that is the case, you’re no better than the tax collectors and the Gentiles.”** In fact, even when people were killing him, Jesus said, **“Father, forgive them; they don’t know what they are doing.”**

The response of the Jewish leaders also tells us something. They had before their eyes evidence of a great miracle, restoring to health and wholeness a man who had been ill for 38 years. But they also had evidence that this miracle went against their rules. What did they care about? Only the rules.

They felt they were honoring God by their customs and traditions. But they fell into a trap that many of us can fall into. The question is, **“Do we let our own customs and traditions blind us to what is really most important?”** Here a human being was set free after 38 years. They should have rejoiced and had a party. Instead, they first condemned the man than then condemned Jesus.

Before we condemn the Jewish leaders too much, we need to look to ourselves, both as individuals and as a church. Getting to know people better so that we can know their real condition and help them also means that we need to clearly know our own situation. What do I mean? Every culture has its own customs, and every denomination has its own traditions. There is nothing wrong with customs and traditions. But the biggest problem is how we deal with those whose traditions and customs are different from our own.

This particularly relates to us corporately as a church—so I would like to address something that we, as a corporate body, can do to apply the principles we have been talking about. One of the things I have observed is that most churches, particularly churches of different denominations, have almost nothing to do with each other. Yet, we all face the same problems. There is poverty, there are orphans, there are refugees and immigrants, there are ex-prisoners who cannot find jobs, drug addicts, women in abuse shelters, and a hugely growing population of people suffering from Alzheimer’s and other forms of dementia.

These problems are common to us all. [KIGALI HOSPITAL EXAMPLE] Each one of our churches does not have the resources to deal with all these problems. But, although it is true that my little church can’t do much on its own, if my little church got together with your little church, and with his little church, and with her little church, when we work together we can do a lot.

It goes back to what we talked about earlier. We had talked about taking the time and effort as individuals to get to know our neighbors and our co-workers better. In the same way, we as a church need to know our own people better. Remember the church I mentioned last night that wanted to become more missional. The elders met individually with each member or family and asked them a series of questions, including: **What do you enjoy doing? Where do you see God at work right now? What would you like to see God do in your life over the next 6-12 months? How can we help? How would you like to serve other people? How can we help? and How can we pray for you?**

If we do something like that, the desires of the people for mission will come to the surface. Some people may have a heart for foreign missions and/or teaching, such as what I do in East Africa. Some might have a heart for the poor, or refugees, or people with dementia, or all kinds of things. They have never mentioned it before, but by taking the initiative and going to them, these hopes, desires, and abilities will come out. That leads to something else:

We also need to get to know the people of other churches better. Invite the pastor or member of another church to lunch. What will they say? They’d like a free lunch. As we get to know them, we will probably discover that they may be great men and women of God. We will get to know their problems, needs, and hopes.

Every church has various problems and issues it has to deal with. By getting to know the leaders and people of other churches better, we may discover that they had the same type of problem or issue that we are facing, and they were able to solve it in a good way. Draw on their experience. You don’t have to reinvent the wheel yourself.

Additionally, you may find that there are things we can do to work together, even though we belong to different churches or denominations. Once we get to know the people and leaders of other churches well, when we see the problems that confront all of us jointly, we may be able to get together and develop strategies of how to deal with those problems jointly.

Doing this may also stimulate new desires for mission and the development of new missions themselves. What I mean is this: I don't know what the specific issues you all face here in this neck of the woods. I have raised some potential issues that all the churches face together—poverty; refugees; ex-prisoners; people with dementia, etc. As you get to know your own people better, you may find that you have 1 or 2 people whose hearts really go out to people with dementia, and 1 or 2 people whose hearts really go out to ex-prisoners. As you get to know the people in other churches better, they also may have 1 or 2 people whose hearts really go out to people with dementia, and 1 or 2 people whose hearts really go out to ex-prisoners.

Between 3 or 4 or 5 churches, you would have enough people who have already been thinking about these things and whose hearts already are inclined in a particular way. You get *those* people together, and they would be the ones God has already put in place to begin a new, inter-church ministry to ex-prisoners or people with dementia. You have simply facilitated this by being intentional about living the Jesus life

For example, I know of two churches in one town who started working together in a fairly unique way. St. Paul's Church was known as a teaching center, with lots of Bible studies. But they realized that church is more than just Bible study. They always wanted to have an outreach to the poor and needy. So they got all kinds of donations of food and clothing and things like that. But it never really seemed to go anywhere. Then they learned that St. Luke's Church in their town had a food and clothing program that had successfully been operating for years.

So St. Paul's packed up all their food and clothing and sent it over to St. Luke's. The boards of the two churches began meeting together from time-to-time or went on retreats together. They agreed that when people of St. Paul's wanted to work with the poor and needy, they would go to St. Luke's. They'd still be members of St. Paul's but would do their ministry at St. Luke's. And when people at St. Luke's wanted more in-depth Bible studies, they would go to St. Paul's. They were still members of St. Luke's, but they were taking advantage of programs not available at their home church.

Sometimes the lead pastors would preach in each other's church. Now, both of those particular churches happened to be Episcopal churches. But the principle could be applied to like-minded churches of different denominations. In fact, when I was in Zanzibar some years ago, one of the people I was with told me how a church of one denomination contributed money and otherwise helped another church of a different denomination get planted in the same area. They realized that, historically and statistically, when more churches are planted in an area, the different churches tend to spur each other to excellence, and all the churches tend to grow.

Getting to know people is intentional. We all do this naturally with those we like. With our friends, we call them up to get together, have them over for dinner or drinks, invite them to parties, all kinds of things. But what we are talking about here is expanding the circle of the people we know well. So try doing the same kinds of things and see what happens. Who knows? We might end up getting a number of additional good friends out of the deal.

This is more important than most of us realize. In his last big prayer before he died—the “High Priestly Prayer” in **John 17**—Jesus knew he was about to die. So he prayed the thing that was most important to him. What was that? In **John 17:21** he prayed “**that they may be one, so that the world may believe that you sent me.**” Finding unity, working together with believers of other traditions, is of great spiritual importance. Doing this shows that we really know the heart of Jesus and have that same heart ourselves. Doing this may take time and effort. It probably will. But it is worth it.

CONCL: Everything we do is either revealing Jesus to the world, or hiding him. We are called to live the Jesus life. We don't have to do this alone. He has given us the ability to live his kind of life. The Bible says that, when we come to Christ, God takes our heart of stone and gives us a heart of flesh—a heart like his own. According to **1 Cor 2:16**, we also receive the mind of Christ. We receive the Holy Spirit—the same Holy Spirit that led Jesus; we have the Word of God, we have the example of Jesus, including today's passage in **John 5**. And we have his body—each other—the church

Let us draw on these supernatural means of grace he has given us. We have seen that *we* are the ones who need to take the initiative to get to know people beyond the superficial level. We should look for opportunities to do good and act on those opportunities. We should not be put off if people don't react the way we think they should. We should not be limited by our own traditions and customs. In short, we are to live like

Jesus, regardless of the circumstances and regardless of the consequences.

This applies to us both as individuals and corporately as a church. When we start doing these things, there is no limit to what God will do through us. When we start living the Jesus life, we will be transformed, our families will be transformed, and our churches will be transformed. And God will use us and our churches to draw others to himself. He will transform our communities through us and, by his grace, he will transform our nation itself.