

John 5:1-15

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 01] Are you like Jesus? I make no apology for repeatedly reminding you, as I hope I remind myself, that this is God's purpose for you as a believer, as a disciple of Jesus, that you would be like Jesus. I remember it just comes to mind just even as I say that. A couple of weeks ago, was it, we had the end of the holiday club service here on a Sunday morning, and the children had been learning about Daniel, and I was asked to say something that would kind of sum things up, and I was encouraged in doing that, that I would not only talk about Daniel, but bring in Jesus. It's always good to speak about Jesus. And so the manner which I did that, if you remember, was I said a few things, but the final thing I said was, Daniel is an example for us to follow, and Jesus is a Savior for us to trust in, and made that contrast between Daniel as an example and Jesus as a Savior, and that's a legitimate contrast. But there is a danger in it if we imagine that Jesus is not also an example for us to follow, for He is. He Himself exhorts us and encourages us to follow His example.

We are, as Paul makes very clear, we are, we have been predestined to be conformed to the image of Jesus, and we are presently, though it may not seem to be so, we are presently being transformed into the likeness of Jesus. That is happening, even though, as I say, sometimes we may look in the mirror and say, well, it doesn't seem to be happening very quickly.

This is something that God is doing. God is transforming us into the likeness of His Son. And it's a good thing that God is doing it, because that allows us to be confident that it will happen. But that doesn't mean that we are passive in this work of God. We are called to imitate Jesus. Jesus calls us as His disciples to follow His example. And what I want us to do this evening, just for a brief time, is to return to the pool called Bethesda, where we were this morning. But this time we're going to do so with this very particular purpose, that we would look at the incident and look especially at Jesus and what Jesus did, and look at it from that perspective, in that light that we would imitate Jesus. I want us to learn to minister like the Master, to serve like the Savior, to love like the Lord. Is that something you want to do? Do you want to minister, to serve, to love like Jesus? And if you do, and I hope that is indeed something that you want to do, you might ask the question, it would be a reasonable question, well that's something that

I would like to do, I want to do that, but what can I do? What can I do that would allow me to minister like the Master? Well, let's answer that question as we look at this occasion when Jesus healed this man by the pool at Bethesda. What can you do? Let me say that the first thing you can do is that you can be there. What does that mean, you can be there? Well, let's remind ourselves about what the man said there in verse 7 when Jesus posed the question, do you want to get well? Sir, the invalid replied, I have no one to help me. I have no one to help me. Now, we made reference to that this morning, and as I read this passage, and as I pondered on the message that there is in this passage, it was this, it were these words of the man that I was drawn back to. There's much here that I might have been drawn to, and maybe had I read it in other circumstances, I would have been drawn to, but on this occasion, these were the words that particularly struck me, and that I was drawn to.

These words of this man, I have no one to help me. They were honest words, and they were very sad words. His affliction, whatever it was precisely, and whatever its cause, we touched on that a little this morning, and we will actually return to it this evening, but whatever the affliction was precisely, and indeed whatever the cause was, perhaps his biggest problem is that he was alone. There was nobody to help, but then Jesus came along. Jesus was there. He was there for this man.

[5 : 15] And the truth that we're drawing from this isn't very complicated, but it is important. You can also be there. Where? In amongst those for whom this is their very present reality. I have no one to help me.

I have no one to help me. Sometimes we imagine that, well, we'd like to serve, we'd like to witness, we'd like to be more effective in reaching others with the gospel, but nobody seems very interested.

Everybody seems very self-satisfied, and they don't seem to need any help. Well, those of whom this is true, those who, even if they're reluctant to recognize that this is their situation, those for whom it is true that they would say, or if they were being honest, would have to say, I have no one to help me.

They are those who will welcome somebody who will be there to help them. If we are to minister like the master, we need to be willing to be there for those who have nobody.

And I wonder if we are. Now, the question might be asked, a practical question. We might have no difficulty in assenting to what's been said so far. Yes, of course, that's important. We need to be there. We need to be willing to help those who have nobody to help them.

[6 : 45] But a practical question, and a very reasonable question, might be, well, where are these people that I need to be there for? Where in Aberdeen are the pools called Bethesda?

Well, it might be the street or block of flats where you live. It might be the school gates where you pick up your wee one. It might be the badminton club or the night class that you go along to.

It might be there that there is somebody who has nobody who can help them. You will find lonely and isolated people in the most unlikely of places.

But then, of course, there are those who are more hidden and hard to find behind closed doors, out of sight and out of mind.

And to help such, we do need to make a more intentional effort to find and to help such. I got an email this week from one of the folks who works at Bethany here in Aberdeen.

[7 : 52] And he was explaining about a project that they have, Passing the Baton for older people. Some of you who are familiar with the work of Bethany will perhaps be familiar with Passing the Baton as a project that began in helping those who were maybe coming out of homelessness into having a home and seeking employment.

And just somebody to be alongside them in that process, a friend. Well, that same idea is one that's being developed in relation to older people in our city, in the high-rise blocks or whatever they happen to be, who are isolated and lonely and alone.

And the purpose is to connect such folk with people who are ready and willing to help. We're talking about people like this man who said, I have no one to help me.

How can we minister like Jesus? Well, we can be there. But what else can we say as we would follow the example of Jesus? I think a second thing that we can say is this.

You can see and learn. Again, we return to the passage and what it says of Jesus as He met this man and ministered to this man. We read in verse 6, When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time.

[9 : 16] We need to see. When we think of the occasion that's recorded for us here in John's Gospel, was Jesus the only man who saw this man lying by the pool at Bethesda?

Well, obviously, he wasn't. Hundreds of people would see him on a daily basis, I imagine. Maybe more than hundreds. But very many people saw this man every day.

But only Jesus saw him with concern and compassion. Only Jesus saw his sadness. And I know this is very difficult.

We're not very good at this. But if we are to minister like the Master, we need to see like Jesus sees. We need to see and we need to learn.

Now, this morning we just made reference to this verb and suggested that perhaps here the verb to know would be more appropriate in relation to Jesus.

[10 : 21] When Jesus saw and knew that he had been there. Either verb is fine. But we suggested that in the case of Jesus, he didn't need to inquire in order to establish the circumstances of this man, though he may have done so.

But that he simply knew. Now, obviously, that's not true of us. We can't just know somebody's circumstances. We do need to learn. We see. We have some idea that perhaps they are in need.

But then we need to go further. We need to learn. We need to establish. We need to inquire. We need to do some groundwork. We need to get to know the person, perhaps. And only as we do and establish a closer relationship, a relationship of trust, then we will learn what their circumstances are.

The reality is that it's unlikely that somebody we've never met before, in that sense different to the example we have here in the gospel, will simply offer this recognition.

I have no one to help me. We may meet such, but it's not likely that we will. But as we see and as we learn and as we seek to get to know the person, then we will have that opportunity.

[11 : 37] You need to see and you need to learn. We can intentionally and sensitively inquire as to people's circumstances with a view to helping.

And while we do not have divine insight, we can pray to the one who has that he would grant us a measure of divine insight and understanding that we would know what to say and how to inquire in a way that's appropriate and will allow us to then help.

What else might we say as we would think about what Jesus did and as we do endeavor to follow his example? Well, let me suggest this in third place.

You can help somebody even if you can't help everybody. Again, imagine the pool called Bethesda there in Jerusalem.

We're told in the passage that a great number of disabled people used to lie there. A great number. I don't know what that means. Does it mean 20 or 50 or 100? I don't know, but a lot of people were located there in this hope that they might find healing there in the pool.

[12 : 54] A great number of people. But of all these people and with many needs and desperate suffering, how many of them did Jesus help that day?

Well, on that day, he helped one. He helped one of them. Now, of course, it's not that Jesus was incapable of helping more. It's not that Jesus lacked the resources to do so.

It's not that on other occasions, on other days, he helped many, multitudes. But on this day, he helped one. Now, of course, for us, the situation is different.

We just can't help everybody. We don't have the resources, be it the time, be it the emotional resources, be it the spiritual resources. We simply can't do it.

And we're not expected to help everybody. But there is a sea of need out there. And in the measure that we see the need, you know, it can be overwhelming.

[13 : 54] And we almost think, well, where do we begin? Where do I begin? Where to start? What can I do? And the simple lesson, I suppose, that we're drawing.

Simple, but again, I think important as we take it to heart and we do something about it. But you can help somebody, even if you can't help everybody.

You can't help everybody, but you can help somebody. This is betraying my age a bit. And not only my age, but my dubious musical taste. But I think it was Dana who used to sing, One Day at a Time, Sweet Jesus.

Well, maybe a prayer that we could pray. One needy soul at a time, sweet Jesus. I can't handle more. I'm not able to help more, but one at a time is something I want to do and something I can do.

Put in my path. Help me to find that one who has nobody to help them. What else can we draw from the example of Jesus as he helped, as he healed this lame man by the pool?

[15 : 08] I think another lesson that we can draw from the way Jesus ministered, certainly on this occasion, is this, that you can take the initiative. One striking feature of this miracle that distinguishes it from many of the healing miracles recorded in the Gospels is, as far as we can tell, the complete absence.

In fact, I think we can be more, we can be less cautious. The complete absence of any kind of request from the one who was suffering. He asks for nothing of Jesus.

He expects nothing from Jesus. Now, the reason for that isn't that complicated. He didn't know who Jesus was. He didn't know Jesus from Adam. So, you know, he wasn't likely to expect a great deal from this complete stranger.

And so, there is no request for help from the part of this man. And so, if this man is to be helped, then the initiative must be from Jesus.

Jesus isn't responding. On other occasions, he did. A blind man would cry out, asking for help. Others would come, or friends would bring somebody. We know the stories.

[16 : 16] But on this occasion, the initiative was and had to be all of Jesus. And I think there's a challenge there for us also.

If we're going to wait for people to come to our door, be it the door of our home or the door of our church, asking for help, we might be waiting for a very long time.

People generally, and perhaps even more so in our culture, don't ask for help. People are reluctant to ask for help. They're reluctant to reveal their need, their vulnerability.

And they certainly don't ask for help from people they don't know or have no trust in. We need to be willing to take the initiative. Now, that requires wisdom. It requires sensitivity.

It does involve a measure of personal risk. We may be rebuffed. We may be rejected. But we can't just wait passively, soothing our conscience with the assurance that we're willing to help if anybody would only just ask.

[17 : 23] Jesus took the initiative. He saw this man, and he took the initiative to help him. A couple more things that I want us just to notice and draw from this passage as we see it in this light of seeking to follow the example of Jesus.

Let me suggest this, that as we would seek to help those in need, those like this man who had no one to help, you can help, you can love, regardless of the cause of their affliction.

Now, this is something we looked at this morning as well, this matter of the cause and what the passage would suggest might have been the cause of this man's affliction, especially in the light of what Jesus says to him when he finds him in the temple.

Subsequently, stop sinning or something worse may happen to you. Now, we don't want to go over that ground. But certainly, he can repeat the conclusion we came to, at least tentatively, that it would seem that personal sin was at least partly responsible for the man's affliction.

But the question that I want to focus in on in the light of that is, does that mean that this man was not deserving of help from Jesus? Well, possibly, it possibly does mean that he wasn't deserving of help from Jesus, but it certainly didn't mean that Jesus was unwilling to help him.

[18 : 48] Jesus didn't say, ah, ah, but I know this man. I know why he's suffering. I know the reason for his affliction. I know the secrets in his past. I know the sin that he fell into or the sinful lifestyle that he was party to or whatever it was.

We don't know. But Jesus knew. He didn't say, ah, well, he's not getting my help. I shall look for more deserving sinners, or I shall look for those who are more deserving of my love.

No, that wasn't the attitude that Jesus took. When Jesus saw that sea of humanity around the pool at Bethesda, he didn't immediately in his mind categorize the victims as deserving or undeserving and say, well, here's a list of folk I'm going to help, but I'm certainly not helping these ones.

Because they've got into that predicament by themselves. They can sort themselves out. That wasn't the attitude that Jesus took, and nor should it be the attitude that we take.

We must love those who suffer regardless of the cause of their suffering. What a terrible predicament we would be in if God were to deal with us on the basis of how deserving we were of his help.

[20 : 01] It doesn't bear thinking where that would leave us. Now, does that mean the fact that we must love people regardless of why they are in the place that they are, however difficult that might be and however much personal responsibility they might have, does the fact that we should love them regardless of that, does that mean that we are indifferent or uninterested in the causes of their suffering?

Well, by no means. We are, and we should be interested in the causes. Jesus was interested in the cause of this man's affliction, and he deals with it very robustly as he meets him again there in the verse that we read towards the end of the passage there in verse 14.

But the cause does not condition our help. Some of you may have been picking up on a news item that there was this week regarding the rather unfortunate declarations of Michael Gove with regard to people who were making use or are making use of food banks.

Now, I have to say, as I read everything that he said, I think maybe he's been somewhat harshly dealt with by those who are seeking to make political capital from what he said.

But basically what he said was something along the lines of, well, lots of these people, you know, the reason they're using food banks is because of bad decisions that they've made in their lives, and the implications seem to be if they could just get their act together, then they wouldn't need to be using these food banks.

[21 : 31] So I'm paraphrasing, and maybe unfairly also. But the point is, there was this idea that somehow the attitude that we should have to somebody must be determined by the cause of their predicament.

And if it's their own fault, well, there's less onus on us to help. Now, maybe there's some merit in that in terms of how the state deals. I'm not going to enter into that.

But in terms of ourselves as individuals, we must love regardless. We're not disinterested. It's important. It may be very important. If we're to help somebody in a more meaningful way, it may be very important to establish the cause of their affliction.

And we must, or it may well be very important to do so. But our love for them is not conditioned by that. That's really the point that I'm trying to make. In fact, on the subject of food banks, next weekend, we will be giving, if all being well, folk the opportunity to volunteer to help in a food bank that will operate here in Bonacord on Wednesday afternoons.

We hope by next weekend to have more details on that in terms of a start date and what it would involve. And when we do become involved in that, it's very relevant for us to consider what attitude do we have towards a family who have nothing to eat or not enough to eat?

[23 : 00] Do we first examine and explore if they only have themselves to blame? Or do we give them something to eat and then seek to sensitively establish the big picture and the root causes?

You can love regardless. That's really the point that I'm making. The final thing I want to say as we seek to follow the example of Jesus, and it is this.

You can do something. Now, this is perhaps blindingly obvious in all that we've said, but Jesus does something. And it's interesting that Jesus is concerned to do something in a very holistic way.

What I mean by that is that He attends both to the man's immediate physical needs. He was lame. He wasn't able to move. He wasn't able to walk.

And He attends to that. And He heals him wonderfully and immediately and completely. But then He also, sometime later, He looks to tackle the man's underlying spiritual malaise.

[24 : 05] So, He does something on both these fronts in the life of this man. That, again, it's a very obvious point, but that is something that we can draw for ourselves. We need to minister like the master, conscious of the multifaceted needs of those around us.

Now, it may be that in any given individual, we may only be able to help in one particular way. It may be that we only have opportunity to help in terms of their material needs. And that's not a bad thing if that's all we're able to do.

But over the peace, as we would seek to reach and to help and to minister to folks, we have to have this holistic, this balanced ministry towards both physical and spiritual needs.

Now, in terms of how we work out the implications of this principle and how it will play out in different circumstances or with different people, well, that's a job for you to work on yourself.

But let me finish with this. What will happen when you minister like the master? Will it all be plain sailing as you serve your way to heaven?

[25 : 18] Will those you help be wonderfully converted and grow into winsome, fruitful Christians? Well, that might happen. But what about the man who was healed by Jesus?

The first thing that he does, well, maybe not the first thing that he does, but one of the first things he does is to grass on Jesus, if that's a fair expression. There are different ways you can interpret what happens in verse 15, but notice when he meets Jesus again and he's exhorted to sin no more.

And, of course, at that point, he establishes who this man was. He didn't know who he was. You know, when he was challenged, well, who was this man who healed you? He said, I don't know. I don't know who he was. But now he does know.

And what does he do? The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. Now, as I say, you can look at that in different ways. You can say, well, why did he do that if he knew that their intentions were not honorable?

They hated Jesus. They obviously wanted to do him some harm. Why would he tell them? Well, maybe he just naively and obviously told them, I don't know. But certainly what we can say is that there's nothing really in the passage that would give us any confidence to conclude that this man came to saving faith.

[26 : 35] He may have done. He may have done. But there's nothing that would allow us to come to that conclusion. If that was true of somebody Jesus healed, well, certainly it will be true of those we seek to minister to in Jesus' name.

There will be many who will go their happy way, or perhaps not so happy way, indifferent to the claims of Christ, indifferent to the offer that is made of the gospel.

What about others? What about those who look on as we seek to minister like the Master? Will society, will the city, will those who see what we're doing, will they look on and be impressed and congratulate us for being such loving and helpful Christians?

Well, they may. But what happened to Jesus? Well, what happened to Jesus is that they persecuted him. They persecuted him. That's what we're told there in verse 16.

Now, this was to do not only with the matter of his healing, but then the things he said concerning the Sabbath and the relationship that he had with the Father. It was a complex picture that led to them persecuting him.

[27 : 43] But the point is that they persecuted him. They didn't congratulate him. They didn't thank him. They didn't give him some civic award for all the good things he was doing. They persecuted him. In fact, this is the first time that we encounter a clear and explicit reference to Jesus being persecuted.

In fact, we can say further, on a human level, and we know that God is behind this, ordering the providence of Jesus' walk and ministry, but on a human level, we can say that what Jesus did that day and what he said that day cost him his life.

They never forgave him. From that point on, death was inevitable. Of course, that was the Father's purpose.

But from a human perspective, this was the outcome of his ministering to this man by the pool at Bethesda. Will we suffer such persecution for ministering like the Master?

Probably not in Aberdeen today, and we're grateful to God for that. But we do need to expect that many will not appreciate Christians living like Christ.

[28 : 50] The world rejected Christ, and the world will reject those who minister like Christ. And that is something we must be very aware of, as we would seek to be like Jesus.

We want to be like Jesus, and it's good. We must be like Jesus. But we must also recognize what that may mean for us, indeed as it does for many of our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world.

Ministering like the Master, may God help us so to minister. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do pray that you would help us by your Spirit to be more like Jesus.

We thank you that you are doing that work in us. And we pray that we would, indeed, be those who gladly cooperate with you in the work that you are doing in our lives.

That you would help us to minister like Jesus. And we pray this in his name. Amen. We'll close our service this evening by singing again.

[29 : 55] And we're going to sing verses that we find in Psalm 119 in the Scottish Psalter. Psalm 119. And we're going to sing verses 1 to 8.

Psalm 119, verses 1 to 8. And we'll sing these verses to the tune. Jackson, hold of that section. Blessed are they that undefiled and straight are in the way, who in the Lord's most holy law do walk and do not stray.

Psalm 119, verses 1 to 8. We'll stand to sing. Amen. Amen. Blessed are they who to answer, his statutes are in fire.

Blessed are they who to answer, his statutes are in fire.

And do you see the living God with their whole heart and mind?

[31 : 30] Such in his ways to walk and do no iniquity.

Thou hast commanded us to keep thy priests and carefully.

O God, that I search to observe, thou wouldst my ways thy way.

Then shall I not be shamed when I present all despair.

Then shall I not be shamed when I present all day.

[33 : 03] For righteousness. That I will keep thy statutes of firmly raised, so tall have I.

O do not, then, most gracious Lord, forsake me utterly.

Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and always. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[34 : 18] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.