

“GET UP! PICK UP YOUR MAT AND WALK”

John 5:1-16

Key Verse: 5:8

“Then Jesus said to him, ‘Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.’”

Today we begin a new section of John’s gospel. In 1:19-4:54, we learned that Jesus is the Savior of the world. In 5:1-12:50 John presents Jesus’ witness to the Jews, beginning with a healing on the Sabbath in Jerusalem. Everyone wants to live a dynamic, powerful, spirit-filled life. But so often people do not. There may be many reasons for this. Problems, small or large, arise which we cannot solve and this frustrates us. What may seem small to one person is a life problem to another person. The problem is that everyone has a problem. And no one can fully understand another’s heart-breaking struggle with their own problem. So, in some sense, we all feel misunderstood, abandoned and powerless. Another reason is that we suffer from character flaws and bad habits. For example, some people suffer from a hot temper. Although they work hard to build up relationships, after blowing up one time they destroy everything they have built up. Then they fall into frustration and powerlessness, thinking, “I am useless. I am destined to fail.” Another reason may be found in the environment. When people lose in fierce competition at school or at work, it is hard to stay positive. Rather, we tend to become negative and fatalistic. The fundamental reason that we do not live powerful lives is because of sin. Sin cuts off our source of life and makes us weak and powerless. How can we get out of this powerlessness? Can we overcome it by visiting the gym diligently to exercise, or by reading many books and becoming very knowledgeable? These are helpful for our bodies and minds, but they cannot fundamentally solve our powerlessness problem. We need to listen to Jesus’ voice. Jesus alone can give us the power to live a dynamic, spirit-filled life.

In today’s passage Jesus intentionally visited a man who had been an invalid for 38 years so that by healing him, Jesus might display his power to heal any person and to give new life. Jesus said three things to him: **“Do you want to get well?”** **“Get up! Pick up your mat and walk”** and **“See you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.”** These words can enable us to begin a new life and to progress in this new life. Let’s listen to Jesus’ words.

“GET UP! PICK UP YOUR MAT AND WALK”

First, “Do you want to get well?” (1-6). After performing his second sign at Cana in Galilee, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals (1). There was a festive mood in Jerusalem, as we experience on Independence Day in America. This draws our nation together to celebrate freedom, and to thank God for it. We like to have backyard barbecues, fireworks, and parades. Most people enjoy these festivities as a pleasant break in their routines of life. However, during the festivities in Jerusalem, there was a group of people who felt ostracized, abandoned, and sorrowful. Verse 2 says, “Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades.” There are many gates to the city of Jerusalem. When the walls were rebuilt in the time of Nehemiah, the Sheep Gate was the first to be constructed and it was built by the high priest himself (Neh 3:1). It was through this gate that the sacrificial lambs were brought into the city.

Beside the Sheep Gate was the pool of Bethesda. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie — the blind, the lame, the paralyzed (3). “Bethesda” means “house of mercy.” People gathered there and waited for God’s mercy. In India, many sick and disabled people gather along the Ganges River seeking healing by bathing in the water. Each one has a serious problem and they groan in their pains. Their despair, loneliness, self-pity, and powerlessness are palpable. Disabled people gathered at Bethesda in the slim hope that they would receive healing. They waited for the moving of the waters, believing that the angel of the Lord did it, and that whoever was first into the pool would receive healing (4). Only one person could be healed and they did not know when the angel of the Lord would come. Because of this they became competitors who were always on edge. Even though they really wanted to help each other, they could not, because at the root, each one was selfish. The philosopher Thomas Hobbs (1588-1679) described the selfish world: “It is everyone against everyone.” It is the humanist dilemma.

In some sense, the scene at the pool of Bethesda is a caricature of the world we live in. Spiritually speaking, people are blind because they are too proud to accept Jesus as their Savior. They are lame; they cannot walk according to the truth of God. They are paralyzed, for they have lost spiritual discernment of what is right and wrong, and drift along according to the trend of the world. We all have serious problems physically, mentally or spiritually.

“GET UP! PICK UP YOUR MAT AND WALK”

We are so competitive. But only a few people make a success. After doing so, they become proud. Most people fail and fall into despair. At prestigious universities, tragic events regularly occur when students are overwhelmed by stress after feeling defeated in fierce competition. Despite our maladies, we struggle hard to have hope. But it is a vague hope for a miracle that we are not sure will come. It does not inspire us to live dynamically. Generally, people hope to live better by having a better family life, a better career, a better house and a better social environment. But usually it does not happen as we expect. Rather, we often feel that things are getting worse and worse. In this way one year passes, two years pass, ten years pass, and thirty eight years pass. It seems there is no real hope that we can count on. But Jesus came into a world that was like the pool of Bethesda to give us life, direction and hope. Jesus is our true hope.

Verse 5 says, **“One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years.”** We don’t know the full extent of this man’s condition, but it was clear that he could not walk and depended on others to move around. If he had lived in America in these times, he could have used an automatic wheelchair and taken advantage of many privileges for the handicapped. But in his time, it was impossible to move without others’ help. At first, he could receive favors from his family members and friends. But one by one they left him until there was no one to help him. He spent most of his time lying down on a mat. He must have been thin and gaunt, with many sores on his body, and emitted an offensive odor. It must have been hard to look at him, or be around him. He had been in this condition for 38 years. That is a long time. Thirty-eight years ago it was 1975. Gerald Ford was president. America was in the cold war period. People on the cutting edge of technology used the latest electric typewriter. Phones were wall-mounted rotary dial devices. There were no personal computers or Internet. The point is that the world changes rapidly. But this man had not improved. In fact, he had gotten progressively worse year after year. He was like a bruised reed or a smoldering wick whose life was nearly snuffed out. No one wanted to visit him, talk with him, or try to understand him. But Jesus visited him. Among all the people at the pool Jesus was interested in him. Jesus is full of grace.

What did Jesus do? Verse 6 says, **“When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked**

“GET UP! PICK UP YOUR MAT AND WALK”

him, **“Do you want to get well?”**” We can find a progression here. Jesus first saw the man. Jesus observed him very carefully. Sometimes people with good intentions assume to know what another’s problem is without careful observation. They try to help, but only misunderstand, and even hurt others. Through careful observation Jesus learned that the man had been in that condition for a long time. Jesus understood him. Understanding is vital to helping someone. If people are not deeply understood, they feel like objects rather than human beings. Deep understanding comes to those who have genuine compassion for others. After understanding the man, Jesus asked the right question: **“Do you want to get well?”** Jesus understood that this man had lost the desire to be healed. So Jesus kindled in him a holy desire to be healed. A most dreadful tendency is unconscious acquiescence to sickness or to evil. Sometimes we find ourselves in a place with a terrible smell. As time goes by, however, we become familiar with the smell and begin to lose sensitivity to it. Likewise, when we sin, at first we feel great condemnation and guilt. As we continue sinning, we feel this pain less and less. We become comfortable with our sinsickness of pride, selfishness, laziness, lust, greed and so on. We need a desire to be healed. If we have no desire to be healed, even the best medicine may be ineffective. This is why Jesus planted in the man’s heart the desire to be healed. Spiritually speaking we all need to be healed of our sinsickness. Jesus really wants to restore the image of God in us. So he asks: **“Do you want to get well?”**

Second, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk” (7-9a). When Jesus asked, **“Do you want to get well?”** the man could have answered, “Yes, sir! I really want to get well.” But he said, **“Sir, 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”** (7). These words reveal his spiritual condition. His first thought was about who would help him. Of course, he needed help from others. But most of all he needed help from God. Those who depend on men instead of God are never happy. Their demand for help is insatiable. If they don’t receive the most high quality care, they complain. It is really difficult to help people like this. However, those who depend on God can do many things, even with a crippled body. Nick Vujicic was born without arms and legs, but with two small feet, and two toes on the left foot. As a youth he was bullied and became very depressed. Then he began to cry out to God for help. At first, he prayed that God would give him arms and legs. Then, through his

“GET UP! PICK UP YOUR MAT AND WALK”

mother's counseling he realized that there are many crippled people in the world who do great things despite their handicap. He began to realize that God had a purpose in making him the way he was. Then he began to thank God for his life and sought to become a blessing to others. In the course of time, he learned to write with two toes on his left foot and a special grip that slides onto his big toe. He knows how to use a computer and can type up to 43 words per minute using the “heel and toe” method. He has also learned to throw tennis balls, play drum pedals, get a glass of water, comb his hair, brush his teeth, answer the phone and shave, in addition to participating in golf, swimming, soccer, and sky-diving. He keeps a pair of shoes in his closet to be ready in case God gives him legs. He has married and has one son. He has traveled the world and become a blessing to many by sharing his faith in God and his personal testimony. The man at the pool could have been like Mr. Vujicic. He could have become a shepherd for all of the needy people at the pool. Instead, he was disappointed that no one helped him. He lived with a sense of defeat after losing the competition to enter the water repeatedly. A sense of defeat can paralyze anyone. For example, in raising disciples of Jesus we face many difficulties and make mistakes. Then criticism follows. Though we may try again and again, gradually our resolve weakens. Finally we fall into a sense of defeat, thinking that even if we try hard, our labor will be in vain. This sense of defeat can also paralyze our family life, academic life, social life and work. In this way we become spiritual invalids. We should overcome the sense of defeat by listening to Jesus' words.

How did Jesus help this man? Let's read verse 8. **“Then Jesus said to him, ‘Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.’”** These are words of command that came from Jesus' one-sided grace to heal the man. Here we can see Jesus' heart's desire for this man to get well. Although the man's answer was rather negative, Jesus accepted it, seeing that he had a seed of desire to be healed. He was like a smoldering wick that Jesus could rekindle into a burning fire. Jesus did not want him to remain powerless and dependent, lying on his mat in disappointment, or to remain in a sense of defeat, living a sorrowful life and burdening others. Jesus wanted him to get up and live a powerful life. Jesus wanted him to please God and be a blessing to others. So Jesus commanded him: **“Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.”** God created us to get up and walk, not to lie down in disappointment. Spiritually speaking, many people are lying down, paralyzed by their sins. God sent Jesus to save

“GET UP! PICK UP YOUR MAT AND WALK”

us from our sins. When we were powerless, Christ died for us (Ro 5:6). Jesus’ blood cleanses us from all sin and empowers us to live a new life. We need to listen to Jesus’ word, **“Get up!”** Not only does Jesus want us to get up, but also to pick up our mat and walk. We should not return to our old bad habits and ungodly lifestyle. We should live a new life, a Christ-centered life by the power of the Holy Spirit. So Paul said, **“walk by the Spirit”** (Gal 5:16).

It has always been God’s heart’s desire for his people to live powerful, dynamic lives. When Abraham began his life of faith, he worshiped God with all his heart. He lived by faith in God’s promise. But after having a son Ishmael, his desire to be only a noble father was exposed and he enjoyed his son too much. He lost God’s heart’s desire. At this critical moment God visited him and said, **“I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless”** (Gen 17:1). Then God changed his name from Abram, meaning “noble father,” to Abraham, meaning “father of many nations” (Gen 17:5). God did not want him to live as a petty man, but as a great man of God, a father of many nations.

“Get up! Pick up your mat and walk,” are the life-giving words of the Son of God. When the man heard the voice of Jesus he gained strength. Verse 9 says, “At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.” Jesus’ words have power to give life.

Third, “Stop sinning” (9b-16). The day on which the man was healed was a Sabbath (9b). When he took up his mat and walked joyfully and powerfully, the Jewish religious leaders were not happy. So they asked him to lie down again and be quiet because carrying his mat on the Sabbath was a violation of the Sabbath law. They should have rejoiced and praised God for the man’s healing. But they bound him in the name of the law. The Spirit of the law is love. But they did not have love. They did not know God’s mind. The law without love kills man. When the Jewish religious leaders became legalistic, the whole society was paralyzed by their legalism. They tried to intimidate the healed man. He replied, “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Pick up your mat and walk.’” He did not know who had healed him.

Jesus did not leave the man alone. Later, Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, **“See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse**

“GET UP! PICK UP YOUR MAT AND WALK”

may happen to you” (14). This verse tells us what kind of life we should live after receiving God’s grace. The words **“See, you are well again,”** mean that we should recognize the change Jesus has brought about in our lives. We should not view ourselves as we did in the past, but always in light of the healing Jesus has done in our lives (2 Cor 5:17). Jesus’ word **“Stop sinning,”** meant not to yield in fear to the oppressive power of legalism, but to have faith in Jesus and give thanks to God and live a new life. Otherwise, something worse might happen to him. Here we see that receiving God’s grace is one thing, and maintaining this grace is another. When we struggle to maintain God’s grace we can receive more grace. But if we do not live by faith in Jesus according to the grace he gives, something worse may happen to us. The man went away and told the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who had made him well (15). Because of this, the Jewish leaders began to persecute Jesus (16). It was very costly for Jesus to heal this man. But Jesus really wants us to live powerful new lives by faith in him.

Let’s listen to Jesus’ word, **“Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.”** Let’s live they dynamic life that God wants us to live by faith in Jesus.