

## **Do you want to be well? (John 5:1-18) – Encounters with Jesus 12: The Disabled Man**

*We are all concerned to have good well-being. Jesus wants to bless us with the greatest well being possible, but will our attitudes get in the way, like the man in this encounter recorded in John 5:1-18?*

### **Do you want to be well?**

"Do you want to be well?"

It's the question Jesus asks the sick man in our story.

That may sound like a strange question to ask. After all, who wouldn't want to be well? Surely, the answer is, 'of course!'

But, we could dig deeper. We could ask, 'What do you think it means to be 'well'?' Does it mean to have no life threatening illnesses? No aches and pains or health issues that prevent you from working? Does it mean to be fit enough to run 5k or fit into an old pair of jeans.

Or is wellness, to do with more than our medical needs. Is it to do with having enough money to live the kind of lifestyle you want? Or having a happy family, with good relationships? Or being in the perfect job? All of these issues are connected with what we sometimes call today our wellbeing.

And this leads to another question: 'What do you think will make you well?' Is it having more money? Having the operation you really need? A new job? Meeting the right romantic partner? These are all possible solutions, but are any of them enough to make us truly well?

In the passage from John, we are looking at today, Jesus asks the man: "Do you want to be well?"

### **Encounters with Jesus**

Throughout John's gospel, we are shown many different people encountering Jesus. Some lead to faith, others not. Some involve miracles, others do not.

In the previous encounter at the end of chapter 4, one we looked at last week, the royal official who went to Jesus wanting his son healed, came away with what he wanted, but also gained a deeper faith in Jesus.

In a couple of weeks, we will look at a story in many ways similar to this one about a man born blind, who is healed by Jesus, but then challenged by the Jewish authorities. In that story, the man who was blind, ends up with deep insight into who Jesus is.

This encounter, however, is in stark contrast to both of those. In this story, a man encounters Jesus and experiences a powerful healing. But in the end rather than embracing faith in Jesus, he seems to reject Jesus and hand him over to his enemies.

This shows us that not every encounter with Jesus lead to faith.

There are two things we can learn from that.

- **Prevents False Expectations**

Firstly, for those of us who as Christians long for others to come to a real faith in Jesus, it prevents us having a false expectation that every one we tell about Jesus will come to faith. Sadly, many who start of interested to learn about Jesus, soon give up and turn away. This is not surprise us, when we see that some in the gospel who met Jesus face to face and even experienced amazing miracles did not follow Jesus.

- **Presents a Mirror for those Encountering Jesus**

Secondly, this stories shows us some of the unhelpful attitudes that may lead people away from Jesus. For those of you who are considering following Jesus, but are not yet sure, it can prompt you to think whether you have these unhelpful attitudes. Whilst for those of us seeking to help others to faith, it can show us some of the false attitudes in them that may need challenging.

So, I think this story demonstrates three false attitudes that may prevent people receiving the true blessing Jesus wants to give them.

### **He conceives of himself as a victim - vs. 7**

The first false attitude, is that this man sees himself as a victim.

Jesus has gone back to Jerusalem for another festival and has gone to a place known as the pool of Bethesda by the 'Sheep Gate'. John describes the pool in great detail and in recent years, archaeologists have actually uncovered the remains of this pool in Jerusalem.

It was a place that people came to in order to find healing. From what the man says later, the understanding was that the first person to get into the pool when the water was 'stirred up,' would be healed. So, this man and many other disabled people were waiting around the pool, hoping to be healed.

It is hear that Jesus sees him and found out that he had been unwell for 38 years - literally a lifetime.

And Jesus asks him that strange question: "Do you want to be well?"

But the man does not respond: 'Of course!' He doesn't catch on to the offer hinted at in Jesus's question: "Do you want me to make you well?"

Rather, the man tells Jesus why he has failed to be healed: No-one will help him into the water and someone else always gets there first. The man sees himself as a victim. A victim of his disability, a victim because there is no-one around to help. He focuses on the problems, rather than looking for new solutions.

He has so identified himself with his stuck situation, that he cannot imagine ever being different, ever moving beyond being the victim.

Sadly, I think this is true of many people today. Whatever woe it is that has beset them, many people seem almost determined to focus on the things that prevent them being made well, rather than listening out for what might help them break free from their circumstances. They are stuck in the mentality of a victim.

Jesus's response to the man is to make him well in a way that completely undercuts his whole understanding of the situation. Ignoring the problems, the fact there is no-one to help him into the pool and the fact that someone always gets there first, he simply says to the man, 'Get up, take up your mat and walk!' And the man is healed!

- **Accept God's Salvation**

If you are someone who is stuck in victimhood, who can only see the problems that are preventing you moving on in life. Then stop looking at the problems and start looking to God and his offer of salvation.

God can help. Sometimes he brings healing of the things that you think are your worst problem, in amazing and even miraculous ways. Other times, he will leave you with those problems, but give you the strength and new attitude of mind to cope with and deal with them.

Whatever your situation, God can change you from identifying yourself as a victim of the problems of this world to discover a new identity as a child of God.

Lift your eyes from the problems you face in life to Jesus who can offer you so much more.

### **He conforms to human expectations - vs. 10-13**

So, the man is made well. He takes up his mat and walk. But for some reason, in the crowded place he and Jesus are separated and the man just wanders off carrying his mat.

At this point, John mentions that the day this happened was a Sabbath, the day in the 10 commandments, when Jewish people were commanded not to work, but to rest.

Then he tells us that the man comes across some Jewish leaders, who challenge him for carrying a mat on the Sabbath.

They say, 'The Law forbids you to carry a mat.' Now, the Jewish leaders of the time had gone to great lengths to decide what you could and couldn't do on the Sabbath. They had written down lots of different rules and regulations for what was allowed and what wasn't allowed. Their starting point was to keep the commandment not to work on the Sabbath, but what they had ended up with were a set of restrictive rules and regulations that had nothing to do with the fundamental principle.

Clearly, if you were carrying goods into Jerusalem to sell them on a Sabbath, then that kind of carrying was breaking the Sabbath. But carrying your mat was not!

Actually, what this mat was, was a powerful symbol of the life changing power of God, expressed through Jesus. A power that had transformed this man's life for good and showed the wonderful grace of God breaking in to the world.

But all the Jewish leaders saw was an infringement of their misguided human rules and expectations.

The man had a choice, would he focus on what Jesus had done for him or would he conform to the human expectation these Jewish leaders were putting on him. Sadly, he chooses the latter.

What he says, puts the blame on Jesus for his infringement. 'I was only doing what he told me to do!' In other words, what I care about is not being in trouble myself, but I don't care what they do to the one who healed me!

Later on when Jesus finds him in the temple, we discover even more fully how this man has chosen sides. After meeting Jesus and discovering the identity of the person who had healed him, he actively goes away to tell the Jewish authorities who it was. More eager to impress them than follow Jesus, the one who has saved him from 38 years of sickness!

As John 5 goes on the debate, between Jesus and the Jewish leaders escalates. It moves from a debate about carrying mats on the Sabbath, to whether it is right to heal on the Sabbath - they say, "No!", Jesus later on in chapter 7, says if it is OK to circumcise babies on the Sabbath (which they said it was), then why is it wrong to heal people?

But in John 5:17, Jesus takes the debate even deeper. He says, His Father is working, so He is working. The miracle Jesus has performed he says in the following verses, was only possible, because God had empowered him to do it. It was a sign of who Jesus was. A sign given by God himself. If they are going to reject him, then in truth they are rejecting God himself.

- **Be Loyal to your Saviour**

If we are to receive the full blessings that Jesus can give us, then we have a choice of sides to make. For this man it was a choice between the man who had freely healed him and the people who insisted he followed all the rules in the way they interpreted them!

It was a choice between conforming to the pressures of the human society around him or remaining loyal to the one who had blessed him in a way no-one else could. Sadly, the man chose to conform to the pressures of human society.

It was a choice between thinking that getting right with God was about following a detailed set of rules and regulation or of trusting and following the one whom God sent, being loyal to Jesus. Sadly, the man chose to follow the regulations.

We too face the same choices today. Which will we choose.

**He contents himself with a small blessing** - vs. 14-15

So, the man starts off conceiving of himself as a victim, then although Jesus heals him chooses to conform to human expectations, but there is something else that is wrong about his attitude: He contents himself with a small blessing.

Having been made well, Jesus finds the man in the temple courts and says something quite profound to him:

"See, you are well again, stop sinning or something worse may happen."

We have seen that this man's sin was actually his disloyalty to Jesus. Having been made well by Jesus, he no longer sees the need to follow Jesus or trust him.

But, Jesus is clear, unless he changes his attitude something worse will happen. Or putting it another way around, he will miss out on something much better.

Jesus has made it so this man can now walk, but the thrust of the gospel as we saw last week is this:

"But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:31)

Although the man can now walk, unless he decided to accept Jesus and decide to be loyal to him, he would miss out on the more important gift that Jesus has to offer: the gift of eternal life.

- **Follow Jesus for Eternal Salvation**

So, many people come to church or turn to prayer to try and gain small blessings from God. Perhaps you are one. Maybe you come to church, because it is good for your wellbeing. Indeed, according to research who regularly attend church:

- more optimistic
- have lower rates of depression
- five times less likely to kill themselves
- have a greater purpose in life
- are less likely to divorce
- and live longer.

Or maybe you are praying to God for a particular blessing:

- to be healed
- for improved family relationships
- a better job

All those things are good and important and God does answer our prayers for these small blessings in amazing ways.

But we need to listen to this warning. Let's not be content with any of these smaller blessings and forget the far more important blessing for those who stay loyal to Jesus: the gift of eternal life.

### **Are we like this man?**

In the end, this encounter with Jesus, meant that this man gained an amazing healing, but missed out on God's greater gift of eternal life.

Let's not make the same mistake. Rather let's keep follow Jesus for the greater blessing he longs to give to us, not seeing ourselves as victims and not conforming to human expectations of those around us, but staying loyal to the one who can bless us more than anyone else.