

Answering Jesus: Do You Wish to Get Well?

John 5

Morehouse College is an historically black men's college in Atlanta Georgia. This past May, the commencement speaker at Morehouse's graduation was Robert F. Smith. He's the billionaire founder of a private equity firm, Vista Equity Partners. He gave a moving 35-minute speech. He rehearsed the challenges that African Americans have faced and continue to face in this country. He then gave "five rules to live by," things like "Nothing replaces the actual work you do," and "Take thoughtful risks." He ended his speech by announcing that his family had established a grant that would pay off the student loans of every 2019 graduating senior. Smith's gift is estimated at approximately \$40 million.

You're probably imagining what it would have been like to be a graduating senior listening to that commencement speech. But I'd like you to imagine that you were a graduating senior standing in line **before** that graduation ceremony and Robert F. Smith walked up to you. You had no idea who he was, his net worth, or what he was planning to do. He asks you, "Would you like your entire student loan paid off?" Your reply might be something along the lines of, "Well, I owe about \$45,000 and the starting salary of my job will be around \$40,000. I figure it will take me about 20 years to pay off my loan. . ." You might answer that way because you didn't know who he was.

But if you knew who Robert Smith was and what he was capable of doing, when he asks, "Would you like your entire student loan paid off?" you would reply, "Yes, please."

Today we are going to consider an account in John 5 in which Jesus walks up to a man who had been sick for 38 years and ask him, "Do you wish to get well?" Because he didn't know who Jesus was or what He was planning to do, he gave a rather complicated answer about why him "getting well" was rather unlikely. But if he had known who Jesus was and what He was planning to do, he would have simply replied, "Yes, please."

We are in the midst of a sermon series in the gospel of John we've entitled "Answering Jesus." Today's passage poses the question to each of us, "Do you wish to get well?" What would you say is your greatest "felt need"? In other words, if you "got well" in this area of your life, your life would be so much more satisfying. It could be a life-threatening or life-limiting medical issue; perhaps it's some type of addiction; it could be financial (you are forced to think about money way more than you should); perhaps it's a strained relationship that dominates your thoughts and emotions.

What we're going to see is that Jesus really does care about our deepest "felt needs." But we're also going to see that He looks past our felt needs to other deeper issues that we might not even recognize. He wants to "make us well" in deep comprehensive ways.

We begin reading in John 5:1.

1 After these things there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.
2 Now there is in Jerusalem by the sheep gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew Bethesda, having five porticoes.

John mentions a pool (which would have been made of stone) and five porticoes or colonnades (which were rows of columns which supported some type of roof). We can't be sure of the exact configuration of the Pool of Bethesda. But it was likely two rectangular pools which were surrounded by four colonnades, having a fifth colonnade between them.

3 In these lay a multitude of those who were sick, blind, lame, and withered, [waiting for the moving of the waters; 4 for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool and stirred up the water; whoever then first, after the stirring up of the water, stepped in was made well from whatever disease with which he was afflicted.]

If you are reading from the NIV, you don't have the end of verse 3 or any of verse 4 in your translation. The NASB includes them but puts them in brackets to denote that these sentences are not included in the earliest (and best) manuscripts. This is probably an explanation that was added long after John wrote this account to explain the man's mindset. Apparently he and the others lying around the pool of Bethesda believed that its waters brought healing. They believed that periodically the angel of the Lord came down and stirred up the water; then, the first one in the water was "made well" from whatever sickness s/he had.

This scenario put some people at a severe disadvantage. We learn in verse 5 that one man had been ill for 38 years; he was immobile (he couldn't get into the water quickly). He was about the least likely person to get into the water first.

5 A man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. 6 When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he had already been a long time in that condition, He said to him, "Do you wish to get well?"

Jesus asked him a very simple question that should have been met with a very simple answer: "Do you wish to get well?" Jesus healing the sick was one of the signs that the kingdom of God was breaking into this world. When John the Baptist sent messengers to Jesus asking if He were actually the Messiah (Matthew 11:1-6), Jesus response was that His miracles confirmed that He was indeed the Promised One: the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised, and the poor finally get some good news. Healing this man was the very type of thing Jesus did to demonstrate that the kingdom of God was breaking into the kingdoms of this world.

Presumably, if the man knew who Jesus was, he would simply say, "Yes." But notice the answer the man gave:

7 The sick man answered Him, "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, but while I am coming, another steps down before me."

In his mind the question, “Do you wish to get well?” was really the question, “Can you figure out a way to get into the water before everybody else?” He couldn’t conceive of any other solution. He didn’t realize that Jesus could turn water into wine, calm the raging seas, or see into people’s souls (like the Samaritan woman’s). He just thought Jesus was a man who was asking him if he had a plan for rescuing himself.

In our day Jesus looks us in the eye and asks, “Do you wish to get well?” Instead of saying, “Yes, please, whatever it takes. . .” we often hear that question as, “Can you figure out a way to make yourself well?” That’s not really the question the question Jesus is asking. He isn’t asking us whether or not we have a good plan for rescuing ourselves. He’s asking whether we have simple, childlike trust in Him. Our effort is usually involved in our healing (we’re not passive), but the question Jesus is asking is, “Do you want ME to make you well?”

And sometimes, quite honestly, we don’t want to be made well. A person may have a problem with anger, for example. Anger doesn’t always manifest itself as flying into a rage; sometimes it show up in sarcasm or withdrawal. Deep down, you may not want God to take away your anger because it helps you get what you want. Sometimes we have destructive habits that deep down we really don’t want to get rid of (whether it involves misuse of food or sex or alcohol or drugs). We may feel guilty about it from time to time, but when Jesus asks, “Do you want to be made well?” we have to say, “Mmmmmm, not really.” It’s good to be honest about these things instead of pretending to want to be made well when we really don’t.

Back to John 5. . . Most of the time when Jesus healed someone, He made a comment such as, “Your faith has made you well” (see Matthew 9:22, Mark 10:52, etc.). But Jesus doesn’t commend this man’s faith; we will learn later in this passage that this man didn’t even know who Jesus was. He had no faith. And yet Jesus healed him:

8 Jesus said to him, “Get up, pick up your pallet and walk.” 9 Immediately the man became well, and picked up his pallet and began to walk. Now it was the Sabbath on that day.

Jesus wasn’t constrained by this man’s understanding of how he would be made well. Jesus simply healed him and commanded him to “Get up, pick up your pallet and walk.” And that’s exactly what the man did. Even though he never entertained the possibility that Jesus could heal him outright, Jesus healed him anyway.

We should be encouraged to know that Jesus often brings healing and wholeness into our lives in spite of our lack of faith. And He often does this in ways we never anticipate. This account in John 5 should make us realize that when Jesus asks us, “Do you want to get well?” that we should answer “yes” and then allow Him to “make us well” however **He** wants. Sometimes He brings healing and wholeness instantaneously; I’ve known people that have been healed quickly or instantaneously. I know a guy who says that the moment he trusted Christ his addictions were gone. More commonly, I think, Jesus heals people progressively over a period of time as they seek Him and walk with Him.

John's comment that "it was the Sabbath" is an ominous statement. He is foreshadowing the response of the Jewish authorities. As we'll see, they cared a whole lot more about their rules than this man's wholeness (not the old covenant command to keep the Sabbath holy, but *their* rules that supposedly defined how that was to be done).

10 So the Jews were saying to the man who was cured, "It is the Sabbath, and it is not permissible for you to carry your pallet." 11 But he answered them, "He who made me well was the one who said to me, 'Pick up your pallet and walk.'" 12 They asked him, "Who is the man who said to you, 'Pick up your pallet and walk'?" 13 But the man who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had slipped away while there was a crowd in that place.

This man did not know who had healed him. Notice in verse 14 that Jesus seeks out this man in order to speak to him:

14 Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "Behold, you have become well; do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you."

Jesus first tells him, "Behold, you have become well/healthy. . ." His deepest, most obvious health need had been addressed; he could now walk. But Jesus adds, ". . . do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you." You're probably thinking, "Now there's an encouraging thought. . ." I think that Jesus is saying that if the man continued in a life of sin, the consequences might be worse than being ill for 38 years. Sin has devastating consequences. In chapter 9 Jesus tells His disciples **not to assume** that sickness is caused by sin. The disciples saw a blind man and asked whether his sin or his parents' sin had caused his blindness; Jesus answers "neither." And yet in numerous places we are told sickness or some other trouble is the consequence of sin (see 1 Corinthians 11:27-30). Sin has devastating consequences in our lives.

I think Jesus is telling this man, "You have become well physically. Make sure that you also become well spiritually." In context, Jesus wasn't telling the man, "By your own power independent of God, stop sinning. . ." Rather, in the context of the gospel, Jesus was telling the man, "Become my disciple and learn how to obey God from the heart." In the Gospels, that's how people learn to stop sinning.

What we see here is that Jesus did meet the man's greatest "felt need" by healing him physically. But Jesus continued to pursue him so that he might experience wholeness in a rather comprehensive sense. The same thing is true today. We can usually name our most pressing felt need: I need God to heal a relationship; I need God to heal me emotionally; I need God to provide for me financially. God cares about those things. But He wants to do so much more; He wants to bring us wholeness in ways we cannot anticipate.

This means that we should answer the question, "Do you wish to get well?" by saying something along the lines of, "Yes, because You died and rose again, because You are

the great Physician, because You are the Shepherd of my soul, please make me well in every way that You desire.” In verses 15 through 18 we read this:

15 The man went away, and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. 16 For this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because He was doing these things on the Sabbath. 17 But He answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.” 18 For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.

Mark Buchanan makes the interesting observation that for the Jewish authorities “you must never heal on the Sabbath, but you can plot the death of those who do” (*The Rest of God*, p. 108). Since God didn’t take a day off from doing good, Jesus didn’t either. We should all be thankful for that!

As I’ve studied and pondered this passage, Julie Coonrod kept coming to mind. I’ve asked Julie Coonrod to come and share with us this morning her experience with the question, “Do you wish to get well?”

Julie’s Testimony:

Good Morning!

Some of you know my story, in fact some of you are a dear part of my story, for which I will always be grateful. For those who don’t, I was diagnosed with breast cancer last October. Cancer is a scary word especially when it is connected to you, but also just one of the types of trials we might face in life. My prayer is that my story will be encouraging to you in the battle you are facing. My cancer seems to be a bit of a bad one, triple negative, stage 3, found in my breast and lymph nodes but not spread further than that. Of course once diagnosed with cancer, it becomes a bit of an obsession to get well. I remember talking to Jesus about whether He would heal me miraculously or with medicine or not at all. I’m not at the end of my cancer journey yet, but it seems He is using a terrific group of caring and smart doctors, a couple from this church!, to heal me. I’ve had chemo, a couple of surgeries, a summer of radiation, and have one more round of chemo left to go. It’s been a costly journey in many ways: time, effort, money, suffering, disappointments to name just a few. But that’s what you do because the answer to the question “Would you like to get well?” is a very loud YES, please!

That’s the physical part, I do want to be healed, to be well. But there is more than the physical.

One helpful thing for me has been to write updates as a way to process and also keep people in the loop. During an especially hard week of chemo in December I wrote:

Cancer is a dark place. And there are lessons to be learned in the darkness, I don't want to miss a single one. Isaiah 45:3 "And I will give you treasures hidden in the darkness, secret riches. I will do this so you may know that I am the Lord, the God of Israel, the one who calls you by name." I have never spent so much time awake with my eyes closed, darkness also comes in forms of physical pain, disappointments, dependence, and the like. My prayer is that we can open our spiritual eyes and learn what we can thru this journey, like seeing the stars in the night sky, for courage, curiosity, and faith to not miss anything.

I feel like this speaks to the "Go and sin no more" - - wholeness in all areas of life idea.

One of the things that trips me up in the christian life, I'm not sure if it's really a sin or just a lie I believe, is my difficulty believing that God loves me. I'm very confident that He is good, that He provides eternal life, that he loves you . . . but just have trouble thinking that I matter that much to God. That might be a common thing and also something that prevents wholeness in life. One day early on in chemo I had a day that I couldn't really even get off the couch. Scott left for work in the dark and didn't get home until it was dark, you know, those short winter days, and I didn't have the strength to get up and turn the light on, so I just layed there in the dark. I didn't have any interaction with anyone that day, it was a dark day. I decided that I needed to get a plan in place for people to come help me, to visit and you know, just turn my light on for me! I was thinking about how to do that all through the night and what I felt like I heard from God was "Trust me, I'll take care of you, I'll bring the people around when you need them." And, without my organizing it, he has done that for me. Many days I had no plan but it seems that God just put it on someone's heart to contact me. Don't ever underestimate the power and encouragement of following those promptings if it is even just a text or short visit or phone call. One of the treasures I gained was to trust God to care for me, to trust that He really does see me and love me. He loves you too and I think is delighted when we believe him and trust him with that.

I have also experienced prayer in a new way Here is what I wrote from the hospital the day after my mastectomy surgery in June:

I've been thinking about prayer and God's intervention in our lives and how that all works. I would have to say that last weekend was one of suffering with the uncertainty and dread of surgery, probably some of the worst days of this cancer journey for me. I know many of you have prayed, maybe especially lately for the insurance glitch and surgery. And now I have to say that yesterday and today, days that I was completely dreading, may turn out to be the kind of days I look back on to mark the faithfulness and goodness of God. I'm even wondering if it is possible that my scars will remind me less of cancer & loss and instead more of His goodness to me. My healing, comfort and peace seem a miracle, an answer to many prayers. I'm so grateful. Psalm 65:11-12 says, "...even the hard pathways overflow with abundance. The grasslands of the wilderness become a lush pasture, and the hillsides blossom with joy." This feels like what I'm experiencing right now, how can

that be? Only God's love and strength could account for that. Thank you for your prayers that may have moved His hand for me!

I don't want to forget that experience of prayer. Not that I was done with cancer, because I wasn't, but that I was able to have a glimpse of wellness in my soul in the midst of it.

Cancer stinks, it is hard, definitely not a path I would choose for myself or anyone. But suffering has a way of teaching lessons about things like humility and gratitude, the humility to accept with gratitude the many gifts you need to make it through. And about compassion and community, as you become a part of a community of sufferers. And many more.

So the challenge is, as it was to the man by the pool, to live. I hope to live on because my body is healed. More importantly, I want to live in wholeness and wellness of body and soul because of the lessons of discipleship learned along the way.