

WHEN JESUS HEALED, part 2

A Sermon on John 5:1-18

by Rev. Russell B. Smith

Old Farmer Brown had two horses. He loved his horses a lot; they were fine, strong animals. But Farmer Brown couldn't tell the difference between the two of them. So, he puzzled and puzzled over how to distinguish one from the other. He decided to cut the mane of one very short. This worked for a while, until the mane grew back out, then he was stuck with the same problem again. Next, he decided to trim the tail of one very short. Again, this worked for a while until it grew back out. In his frustration, he was complaining of his predicament to his neighbor. The neighbor said, "Farmer Brown, have you tried measuring the horses to see if one is slightly taller than the other?" Farmer Brown said, "Well, it can't hurt, so I'll give it a try." The next day the neighbor saw farmer Brown and asked him if the experiment had worked, to which Farmer Brown replied, "Yeah. All this time, the white horse was three inches taller than the black horse."

Old Farmer Brown wasn't exactly the sharpest knife in the drawer. We saw last week that Jesus dealt with people who didn't understand why he healed. From the healing story last week, we learned the principle that when Jesus healed he was severe, but hearts were strengthened. This week, John gives us another healing story, and it's a picture in contrast. Last week's healing story ended with people coming to faith; this week's story ends with conflict. As we look at this text, we find that when Jesus healed he was selective, he was schooling, he was snubbed, and he was sovereign.

One of the first principles we find is that when Jesus healed he was *selective*. In John 5:2-5 great multitudes were at the sheep gate, but Jesus only healed one man. Jesus did not choose to heal every person at the gates, only one person. We see this principle acted out many times in the Gospels. The crowds bring their sick and infirm, and Jesus heals many of them, but then he draws away to a lonely place for a while. Jesus did not heal every sick person in Palestine. His actions were, by their very nature, selective.

And look at whom Jesus selected. This gentleman didn't give a straight answer to anyone. He complained to Jesus about his condition. When the Jewish leaders criticized his carrying his pallet, he responded, "Well, he told me to do it." And when Jesus identified himself again later, the man went back to the Jewish leaders to tell them who it was who had healed him – all so that he could escape blame. There is no indication that he came to faith, and judging from what John tells us of the man, he was an ingrate. And yet Jesus selected him.

I don't know if you ever say it, but I sometimes do: "Lord, why did you bless *him*? Why do *they* have all the power?" I look around at all the wealthy

people and superstars who shake their fists at God, yet seem to prosper all the more. Solomon got it right in Ecclesiastes 9:11: “The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor favor to men of skill.”

The truth of the matter is that God gives good things to the just and the unjust, and adversity falls on the just and the unjust. Jesus makes this clear in Matthew 5:45: “He makes the sun rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust.” The difference lies in what they do with the blessing or the adversity. Contrast the whiney and ungrateful response of the man in John 5:1-18 with the response of faith by the nobleman in John 4:43-54. The just responds with faith and thanksgiving. The unjust says, “Well, it’s about time, and by the way, your healing left a scar.” The other week, I was in a particularly grouchy mood and Tammy said “Well, aren’t we in a glass-is-half-empty mood.” And I scowled back, “Yeah, and what’s in the glass doesn’t taste good either.” That was the response of the unjust. When Jesus healed, he was selective, but in his selection, he offered the opportunity for faithful response.

Not only was Jesus selective, but he was schooling. Consider his words to the man he had healed in verse 14: “Sin no more, lest something worse will happen to you.” Many people have difficulty with this verse because it seems to imply that physical ailment is a result of sin. However, we need only apply some simple logic here. This statement does not imply that *all* physical infirmity comes from the afflicted person’s sin. Rather it implies that this particular infirmity came from the afflicted person’s sin. We can all think of instances where sin affects the body – the alcoholic who pickles his liver, the adulterer who picks up diseases, the violent person who is injured in a fight. We all know that sometimes particular sins result in physical infirmity for the sinner. It does not follow that all physical infirmities result from particular sins of the afflicted. When Jesus said, “Sin no more, lest something worse will happen to you,” he spoke to this particular person, implying that at least *his* physical condition did result from his sin.

The point for us is not that we’ll get sick if we sin. The point is that Jesus schools us. He teaches us that sin does have consequences. Those consequences are not limited to the physical – they can be mental and emotional. Jesus teaches that we are to turn our back on our sin and to come to him in faith. He doesn’t just heal for the sake of healing; he heals in order to school us in the greater things of the faith.

So, when Jesus healed he was selective and he was schooling. We also see that when Jesus healed he was snubbed. Look John 5:10-12. Jesus performed this wonderful miracle, but look at how the Jewish leaders responded: they confronted the healed man for carrying his bed. First, realize that by this time Rabbinical commentary on the Old Testament Law had defined thirty-nine

categories of effort and exertion that were prohibited on the Sabbath. They set up these thirty-nine categories to remove any of the gray area around the Law. When they saw the man carrying his burden, they automatically defined him as a lawbreaker because he was violating one of these thirty-nine categories. The man replied, “He who made me well said to me take up your bed and walk.” But notice how the leaders responded: it seems as though their hearing was selective. They only heard the command to violate their thirty-nine categories – they didn’t hear about the miracle. They were so concerned with rigid adherence to their code that they missed out on the miracle. This is what leads up to their attitude in verse 16. Jesus wasn’t playing by their rules. They were concerned about rules, but Jesus was concerned about revealing the character of God. They saw a rule breaker, and missed the reality that Jesus was showing mercy toward the undesirable.

Have you ever seen the movie *Dangerous Minds*? Michelle Pfeiffer plays a former marine who takes a job teaching English in a tough inner-city school district. Her unconventional methods cause her to clash with the administration. At one point, one of her students is being chased by a gang member who wants to kill him. She convinces him to lay aside his tough street code of honor and go talk to the principal. When she later goes to the principal’s office to ask how it went, the principal said he sent the boy away. Flabbergasted, she asked why. “Because he barged in here without knocking. We are trying to teach these young people manners.” He sent the boy away for not knocking and never heard about the danger the boy was in. He was more concerned about the rules than about the reality that was before him.

The danger of snubbing the reality of Jesus for the comfort and stability of rules is ever present. This is probably the greatest challenge for evangelical Christians. We have God’s Word and we treasure it. We seek to bring our lives in line with the teaching that is in this book. But the danger is that our faith becomes merely an intellectual exercise. Faith is not about following the rules. It’s about having a personal, progressive relationship with the God who is there. Imagine if the Jewish leaders had said, “You’ve been healed! Praise God! Everybody, let’s celebrate, because by God’s mercy this man has been healed!” Our faith is not about stern determination, though there are times for that. Our faith is primarily about joy. But the joy isn’t on our terms, it’s on Jesus’ terms, and that’s why the religious leaders snubbed him.

So we’ve seen that when Jesus healed he was selective, he was schooling, and he was snubbed. Finally, when Jesus healed he was sovereign. “Sovereign” means “having authority and control.” In John 5:17-18, Jesus recalled the creation story of Genesis 1 and 2. In the creation account, God rested on the seventh day of creation, and this became the foundation for all creation to rest on the seventh day of the week. The one-in-seven pattern was established by God in the beginning. However, the Jewish teachers of the Law

debated just what it meant for God to rest. After all, God still had to be about the work of sustaining creation. God still does lots of work on the Sabbath. The Heidelberg Catechism defines God's providence as "the almighty and ever-present power of God whereby he still upholds, as it were by his own hand, heaven and earth together with all creatures." There it is – God upholds everything in creation, and see how Heidelberg expands this concept: "... and rules in such a way that leaves and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and unfruitful years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, and everything else, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand." Everything that is has to be sustained by God's work of providence. So the Jewish rabbis concluded that while God rested in one sense, there was another sense in which God and God alone was still active on the Sabbath.

Then Jesus said, "My father has been working until now," first making the astounding claim that God was his father, and second bringing up the teaching that God and only God is allowed to work on the Sabbath. Now hear this, "And I have been working." Jesus told them, "Up until now my father has been working, now I am working. My father has been the only one allowed to work on the Sabbath, now I am claiming that right and authority." Right there in the midst of the temple complex, Jesus said, "I am God's Son. I share his authority. You've seen my authority over sickness and disease, hear now my authority over all creation." Jesus boldly and unavoidably declared that he was sovereign over all. He has the sovereign right to be selective, he has the sovereign right to school us, and woe unto those who snub this sovereign king.

The question before us is not: Will Jesus heal us? We all need some kind of healing – physical, mental, or emotional. The question is: How do we respond to the blessing Jesus has given? We have all been blessed in some way or another. Do we respond with praise and thanksgiving? Do we respond with attentiveness to the master? Do we respond by seeking out other people in need of blessing so we can pass it on? Or do we hoard the blessing we receive and crave for more? Do we gratefully accept what God offers freely, or do we grumble and demand that God play by our rules. In a real sense, Christ has selected each one of you to hear his Word, and he has schooled you about eternal truths. Now you must decide if you will snub him or acknowledge him as sovereign. You think about that. Amen.